



Mount Moriah

Lenny Everson

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by Lenny Everson

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I could start this story by telling you about the woman who claimed to have an alien inside her. Or the CSIS agent, the two guys making bombs, or the teenagers with sex on their minds. It might even be logical to tell you first about the priest who had God speak to him down by the river.

But I won't.

I'll start with a smallish commercial building called the Dayton Block, because that was the centre of action (even more than Mount Moriah). Four stores, five apartments: several tales to tell.

There was nothing about the little block of stores to make it especially memorable to the passer-by or lost tourist. It did, in fact, take up about a third of the city block on Regina Street, no more.

Perhaps, had someone in apartment four made a mistake with a timer or a block of C4, the whole thing would have made the news as a pile of rubble. But the people making the bombs up there were, or had decided they were, fervent disciples of their own beliefs, and were careful. This had so far prevented an accident with their assemblies, although they sometimes got the shakes after an experiment or two.

And they had two weeks to ready the five bombs they planned to use.

There was, an architecture student might have noted, a definite air of the Art Deco about the building. That would not have been wrong; it had been put up in the early 1930s based on a plan and design from a Toronto company, and modeled on similar units in that city. The plan had been drawn up and the blueprints made during the late 1920s.

In those years of planning, there was still money, lots of money and credit, and plenty of optimism. By the time the last bricks were being set into mortar and the name "Dayton Block" was set into concrete along the roofline, the money had disappeared along with the optimism, and it was only the skill of the masons that kept the building up, roofless, during the first years of the depression.

But the city's post office was built across the street, and that saved the building. The government was still paying workers, and the architects and contractors needed a place to stay until the post office was finished.

Someone bought the brick building and finished it, then rented the upstairs rooms by the month to anybody who could afford them. Rent wasn't much, but interest rates and wages were correspondingly low, so there was enough potential income to justify finishing the structure.

The ground floor was divided into storefronts, although the building was only a block away from downtown. But the architects of the post office moved in bringing a sandwich shop, and then a hand laundry. The building brought in, for a few years, enough money to keep going.

As the years passed, the post office – also an art deco design, by the way – continued to justify the Dayton Block's existence. The sandwich and laundry shops merged under one owner and a tailor set up near one corner.

And the four upstairs apartments were divided into eight, to support transients during these hard times, and to house the owner of the sandwich and laundry business and his family. He was Chinese by heritage, although his wife was Malay. They and their five children kept themselves housed and fed until the war came.

There was money during the war, and women and older men in from villages like Baden and Jakobstettle went to working the local factories making, among other things, incendiary bombs to drop onto places in Germany with similar names and onto people in Germany with the same last names as the workers.

The workers ate in the sandwich shop after work and tried not to figure out whether some of their products, dropped from Stirling and Lancaster bombers, had cooked some of their old-country relatives into the schnitzels and sausages they'd grown up on.

After the war, the block declined a bit. The eaves weren't replaced in time, and some water damage resulted. Cockroaches moved into the damp areas, and people who were dreaming of their own little homes going up in the black earth around Waterloo moved out to start families.

There was a thought, by one of the series of owners, of putting in wiring and plumbing to meet the new government standards, but a detailed assessment scotched that idea. Instead, that owner kept detailed figures on income from the building, and expenses. The figures looked good, since he hadn't done much maintenance, and there were always optimists willing to rent out the stores that faced the sidewalk. The rooms upstairs were often empty, except as storage for the shops, and eventually accumulated a museum-like collection from previous entrepreneurs who'd gone bust, leaving a few boxes each behind them.

With the profit and loss figures looking good, the sale of the Dayton Block to another optimist was a foregone conclusion, since sooner or later there was one who knew nothing about the money that would be needed to get the apartments into habitable condition.

By the 1980s the Dayton Block was getting a bit shabby. The post office had moved to a new facility where sorting machines and snotty clerks could work more efficiently, and the art deco building was now used as offices for immigration and welfare and other services that didn't require as much traffic.

As a building declined – and the Dayton Block was in definite decline – its value dropped and the rent on the stores dropped. Those stores, such as a leather-working hobby shop, whose customers came from a distance could survive, but those stores needing constant traffic, such as the convenience store on the corner, changed hands regularly. Most of the new owners were from countries where foot traffic predominated, and their minds somehow associated the constant stream of automobile traffic with customers. It never worked, not with the limited parking around.

The city, during those years, made things worse by making the street a one-way drive. This sped up traffic quite a bit, but old people didn't like faster cars, since their reflexes were slowing,

and women with kids didn't like faster streets since kids tend to dart unpredictably in the wrong directions. Businesses all along such streets suffered, as one might expect.

By the late 80s the Dayton Block was being eyed for a parking lot, but not too seriously, since there wasn't much need for one. But the owner, a Lebanese man, knew that a parking lot required no maintenance, and might someday be sold to some concern that didn't want the hassle of tearing down an old building before putting up a concrete and glass monstrosity. He did loosen a few wires, but the building didn't burn down as he'd hoped – the arcing just interfered with TV reception in the neighbourhood.

At its nadir, in 1986, the block was home to the leather shop, seventh in a succession of tiny convenience stores, a tailor's shop, a dressmaker's shop (owned by the mistress of the tailor who paid half the rent) and the headquarters of the Albanian Communist Party in Canada. Members of the Communist Party, both of them, lived frugally in the one upstairs room that was rented, and ran off newspapers and brochures on an old but well-maintained offset press on the ground floor. In their spare time (of which they had more than you might suppose) they smoked pot, grew herbs on the windowsill, and wrote poetry (in English, since they'd forgotten most of the Albanian their parents had taught them).

They got wonderful letters from the Party in Albania, but no money from that remote land, and endless rejection letters from literary journals to which they'd submitted their poems. Communist ideology, it seems, doesn't make for good poetry. The man was employed by the post office to deliver mail to a few affluent neighbourhoods, and he'd sometimes slip a brochure or poem into the someone's mailbox, but somehow the revolution never gelled in Waterloo.

The woman knitted sweaters, and carefully broke into the boxes in the other rooms, or at least the ones that looked like they'd not been touched for a generation. Aside from one mummified cat, they managed to get only a bit of money for the goods they looted. The cat went for two hundred dollars to an oriental herbalist.

The years passed, and a man with a few smarts, a bit of money, and an inside connection to local government (his wife worked for city planning) bought the Dayton Block. Which, you will remember, is only a third of a block long and sits on a one-way street across from a government building that used to be the post office.

The Lebanese man who'd owned the building had given up waiting for it to burn down, and the city was complaining about the wildlife in the building. And he was looking at some property north of Toronto, but needed just a bit more cash for it.

John M. Brubacher (the "M" to distinguish him from a few other John Brubachers who lived on Mennonite farms outside town) was taking a calculated risk when he bought the building. But he had the odds with him. He got the price down by pointing out the mice, rats, cockroaches, and bats that were enjoying the building, the unsuitability of the upstairs rooms for human habitation, the urgent need for a new roof, foundation bracing, and new plumbing.

And of course, the fact that the electricity was shorting out somewhere in the building.

Finally, he made the man from Lebanon aware that, as everyone knew, the fifty dollars worth of art deco work that had originally gone into the building now meant that the local

architectural-heritage group wouldn't let the building be torn down. He made the Dayton Block seem so sad that the price went down forty percent from the starting point.

The Lebanese owner wept real tears, mostly because he'd been willing to accept a fifty percent discount, and sold it to John M. Brubacher.

Things did happen, of course, and almost all of them in the way Mrs. Brubacher had predicted. The city, aware that one-way streets killed business (although they hadn't a clue why) made the street two-way again. The provincial government, flush with money it pretended it had just before an election, started handing out bundles to people willing to maintain old buildings near the downtowns, to handle immigrants. Someone had been reading Jane Jacobs in detail, it seemed.

The city administration matched the handouts after being hounded by the architectural-heritage group's main yeller at council meetings, so the fifty dollars worth of decoration resulted in many tens of thousands of dollars being put into John M. Brubacher's account to pay for new plumbing and new wiring.

The day after that deal, the fire department put out an electrical fire in the building, much to Brubacher's relief.

Brubacher got his money and his wife got a spiffy bimmer and a cottage on the shores of Lake Huron, in which she could paint pictures of the lake and, when John was busy in town, entertain a young man from Kincardine who would drop over to critique her techniques (painting among them) for hours at a time.

During the six months it took to upgrade the plumbing, replace the wiring, and repair a roof problem that John's building inspector hadn't noticed, the convenience store changed hands again, going to a Jamaican who made very good meat patties. The tailor hung in there, although he lost customers, who complained about dust on the clothing, but the dress shop skipped off to New Hamburg, where it abruptly changed into a garden-supply outlet for upscale tourists. The leathercraft shop stayed there, since its customers seldom noticed anything around them when they were tooling a fine belt. And a bakery took out an option on a store, contingent on the work being finished by the first of January. With a few inspired shortcuts the city might not have been informed about, the work was done by Christmas.

After the work was done there were four apartments above the store. You're curious? Let me tell you about them.

The first of these apartments was taken by two young engineering brothers from the University of Waterloo. Middle-class students on a scholarship, they applied themselves to their courses, to picking up girlfriends, and to an interesting brand of right-wing politics. Mind you, they never brought their girlfriends back to the apartment, because they were also making bombs, which they planned to use in Toronto, on the subway, on April first.

The second apartment was taken by the tailor, who expected his former girlfriend to drive in from New Hamburg on Mondays, when the garden-supply store was closed, and entertain him. This plan went awry when the garden-supply business turned out quite well, and the girlfriend decided she didn't want the tailor's nimble fingers as much as she wanted a lifestyle that

included airline travel and exploring a late-twentyish young woman who worked at the Pro Hardware store in town. You could find them many Mondays at the Waterlot, a fancy restaurant on the edge of the river, planning things best known only to themselves and to an adult-accessories store in Hamilton.

The apartment became available when the tailor, trying to fix a suit through his tears, stuck himself with an unclean needle, developed blood poisoning, and died three weeks later.

His wife attended the funeral, then left for her old family home in Montreal to be with her kids.

Another tailor, this one from Yemen, bought the business without the loss of a single customer. This guy wanted to move his family into apartment 2, the one the first tailor had rented through July, but the first tailor had paid up until then, and everybody thought it easier, from a legal point of view, to keep it empty until July.

Apartment 2 was empty until July. Note that.

Besides, the new tailor was having problems getting his family, one wife and two pre-teen children, into Canada. It seems an unmanned plane, flying over Yemen but directed by a nervous young man in Arkansas, had spotted a car belonging to a known al Qaeda terrorist cell and launched a Hellfire missile at it. Terrorists not being that stupid, the car had been lent to a fellow who just wanted to drive it to town to pick up supplies from the newest Yemeni sensation, a supermarket.

The fellow who died in the car, it was discovered, was not a known terrorist, but the cousin of the second tailor at the Dayton Block store. The connection was tenuous, but so is the CIA, and the Second Tailor's family suddenly found themselves awash in paperwork trying to join him in Canada. CSIS had five suits altered, all to cover the expanding waistlines of aging agents before they decided the Second Tailor was a legitimate tailor and not a terrorist, although they planted a couple of bugs in the shop, and in his apartment on the other side of town, just in case.

So the First Tailor's apartment, apartment 2, was vacant from February, when he died, and would remain unoccupied, except for a large bed and a couple of mirrors on the ceiling, until July.

The First Tailor had had no other family except a sister who lived in Kitchener and worked at a bank. She found out she couldn't sublet the apartment except to students, and for that she'd be liable for damage costs. The First Tailor's will was taking time to probate, so she just left the problem of the apartment, although she whined about it to her husband, who just nodded and had a sudden picture of himself and the woman who taught grade nine French, on that bed someday during banking hours. It was just a vision, never to be realized of course, but he kept in on his mental display like a screen saver, there when no other data was being processed.

Because they had two teenage daughters, they had a few mental pictures of their own, and made sure the key to Apartment 2 was safely hidden. Because they'd never had two teenagers before in their life, they weren't aware just how quickly Barb, the eldest, now sixteen and doing quite well in grade eleven, got her own copy of the key, and, one Saturday, inspected the apartment. She giggled: it was perfect. She could make plans.

Apartment 3 was rented to a rather cheerfully depressed poet named Poe, who drank more than he should. Poets tend toward the depressive side, but this one had a reason to drink and be depressed, his wife having left for Winnipeg with their son six months before, with no intention of ever returning. She'd got religion with some guru and was going to be his second wife.

Poe, who worked in the immigration and citizenship department in the building across the street – once the post office, now a collection of government departments – was planning to write limericks for a living. It wasn't much of a plan, so he decided to produce a darling little book of limericks about cinnamon buns. He would, he figured, visit bakeries and farmer's markets across the province, rating their buns in limericks. He would keep the limericks short enough for Twitter, and they would spread like kudzu and dandelions across the memosphere. He'd had several other plans for his life, but this one seemed the best at the moment, and perhaps it was.

He had a drink to the whole idea.

His apartment, Apartment 3, was almost directly above the Warm Buns Bakery that had opened on the ground floor of the Dayton Block, but he'd never tasted their cinnamon buns. He was going to reserve that for the last, when he'd reviewed, in five-line poems, at least thirty other sources of the buns. The evaluation of the Warm Buns Bakery would grace the last page of the chapbook he planned on producing.

The last apartment on the second floor was Apartment 5. There was no Apartment 4 any longer, it having been incorporated into apartments 3 and 5 during renovations, and for the purposes of not confusing Canada Post, the number was retired. Not that the odd flyer or letter addressed to Apartment 4 didn't end up in the mailboxes of the other apartments anyway.

Heaven and Hell was in Apartment 5. Agnew lived there, except during the day when he worked at Wilfred Laurier University as an audio-visual technician. He kept the equipment there working, having, it turned out, a knack at it.

Agnew had been a priest since he was ten, annoying those around him until he got through bible college in Peterborough and ended up giving sermons in a small Anglican church in Ayr, as well as doing the usual clerical jobs of comforting relatives of the deceased, and visiting people waiting around to die.

It had been a truly awesome experience when Agnew was ten. His discovery of God had set the course for his life, he felt. He read and reread the Bible, learning all about the various aspects of the deity. There was the ruthless God, condemning seven generations of innocents for one parent's sin of wearing wool socks with a linen shirt. Then there was the powerful God, smiting various enemy soldiers and armies, able to flood the Pharaoh's chariots but not willing to knock down a city wall unless a group of people marched around it for days blowing trumpets.

And, finally, the God he liked best, the one who listened to prayers and healed people. Agnew puzzled at this, but figured, heck, if people could mature a bit, so could God, given a few centuries.

He became confident in his career, even smug, as if he knew part of the secret words that got to God's ear fastest. But he maintained a self-assured humility that only those most certain of their status can develop.

His sermons were, of course, standard, even if he got and shared most of them with other priests on the internet. But the shared experience of being in a house with God was what people came for, and Agnew was content.

He did have a slight envy of the Pentecostals, most of whom seemed to take to speaking in tongues or rolling on the floors quite readily. He didn't actually believe in that, of course, but a more physical interaction with The Lord would have been nice.

Agnew had once gone into a Pentecostals meeting. He'd been passing by and the singing called to him. He'd stood at the back, and sang the songs he knew. People looked at him, then politely looked away. He'd never forgotten the joy around him. He didn't trust it to be quite true to his view of religion, but he recognized the spell.

He did have a satisfying, occasionally heavenly interaction with Wendy, a dark-haired farm girl from out Tillsonburg way, whom he married. She was happy to be a housewife and would have been happier to have kids, but that didn't happen, so she took a part-time job in a Kitchener lawyer's office, consoling herself with the thought that not all people thought Kitchener lawyers had one foot in Satan's Buick.

The rest of the time, she helped with church functions and requirements, revising sermons, meeting with sick parishioners, and, yes, even baking cookies as required. For intellectual stimulation she joined a book club which met once a month, and helped out at the library.

This went on for two years, four months, and five days, more or less, depending on where one marks the beginning of Agnew's tenure at the Ayr Anglican Church. When Agnew walked Wendy through the doors of the church, one December evening, the bomb-makers were still in high school in Belleville, Poe was writing poems and accumulating rejection slips for his sonnets, some of the teens were still virgins, and the Warm Buns Bakery was still a dream in the mind of Wyvalla and Windsong.

When Agnew reached orgasm, he never cried, "Oh, God," not only because it was taking the name of the Lord in vain, but because it would have reminded him that he missed, deeply, a closer interaction with the Big Guy. He didn't tell this to Wendy, and she didn't notice an occasional and undue lapse in his normal contentment.

He'd studied the biographies of the saints of his and other churches, and even tried flagellation and sitting on a pillar for a while, once he found a pillar that a construction company wasn't watching for long weekend. His parents, at the time, thought he was camping.

None of this had done anything for him. There was no rolling thunder, no matter what he tried.

Not until January eighth, in his third year of ministry. That's when God spoke to Agnew.

Other students at the Bible College in Peterborough had claimed to have chats with God, but when questioned, confirmed that they didn't actually get words back. Twice, students had confided to Agnew that they'd heard God, but Agnew had doubted that. It seemed unlikely that God would speak to only a few students, and besides, he knew that one of the students also claimed to have had a quickie with a space alien who wanted to take over his body.

Agnew concluded that people who claimed to hear God in actual words were suspect. Agnew suspected them, for sure. He also suspected that God spoke to you in clear words only when he was about to command you to do something no sane human would normally do. After which it could be difficult to tell the sane God-commanded humans from the insane ones. It didn't look like it was going to happen.

Which is why, when God spoke to Agnew on January eighth, Agnew tripped on a willow branch and almost fell into the river.

He'd been taking a walk beside the Nith, out past the new suburbs and across the baseball park, to work on modifying an internet-shared sermon and maybe getting a few younger people into the church. There was a foot of snow on the ground, but most of it was packed down, with only a few inches of fresh stuff, and even that marked with the tracks of people who'd been out walking their dogs the day before. When, of course, they'd have been better in his church walking their souls in the light of divine grace and Agnew's sermon about humility.

Willows live about as long as people, and they don't cling to their branches all that well, so walking beside the river means stepping over fallen willow branches. Willows like to have their feet in the water. Agnew was trying to make these willow facts into a novel sermon for the following week when a really deep voice called "Agnew!".

After he'd pulled himself up the bank and back onto the trail, he wanted to say, "Who said that?" but that reminded him too much of the old Cosby sketch about Noah, so he said nothing, wondering if he'd actually he'd been mistaken. It hadn't sounded like a human; there had been something godlike about the voice. He waited, watching the trees for hidden speakers, which was something Noah and the saints never had to worry about.

"Agnew!" The voice came again, and it came from everywhere. It would have taken a lot of speakers to do that, he knew.

Agnew figured he should fall on his knees or arrange for Dr. Akujo, his family doctor, to arrange for a CAT scan to see if he had a brain tumor.

"Agnew," the voice came again, and Agnew decided to go with the God bit.

"Yes, Lord," he said, remembering again the Cosby routine, and checking out if there was anybody around to listen to the conversation.

"Watch!" God always seemed to speak in exclamation marks. A small white cedar burst into flame in front of him.

White cedar is often called swamp cedar, although it prefers the slopes leading down to water rather than having its roots soaking. It's also known as *arbor vitae*, the tree of life, and Agnew thought, "good choice, Lord." But he didn't say it out loud.

The tree, of course, didn't get consumed by the fire. But the snow around it melted down to the dry grass, which also didn't burn..

Agnew could feel the heat, although his knees, now in the snow, started to ache with the cold.

"Yes, Lord. I believe," Agnew said.

"I don't exist!" God said.

"What?"

"There is no God! I don't exist! Never did! The universe is an accident!"

"What?"

"Stop saying 'What.' You heard me, Agnew!"

"You don't exist?"

"It's true! I wouldn't lie to you! This is not Mount Moriah, you know! Goodbye!"

The fire in the cedar went out. Agnew could hear the wind in the willow branches and the temperature dropped suddenly. He knelt there with his mouth open, but no more words came.

He got up, eventually, and a heavy snow began falling, driven by a stiff wind. More branches fell off willow trees, and a flock of birds made a dash for the deep forest across the river and beyond the pond.

It took some time to thaw his knees when he got back home. Wendy was still in Kitchener, at the law office, so he had no car. But he did want to get away from the church right now. It seemed so empty.

Agnew knew something was wrong. There were just too many contradictions and paradoxes for his brain to handle right then. He went outside again, and found his way to the fish-and-chip shop. He'd always avoided it for health reasons, but health wasn't a concern right now. He ordered a big plate, with two orders of halibut. Just for the halibut, his mind said, trying to find something to do.

Thinking didn't work; Agnew recognized some of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome from one of his parishioners, but recognizing it didn't remove the cause of the stress. There was no-one else in the restaurant, so word of his expression wasn't going to get around town till the evening.

He paid, then wandered out. He had to think. He had to stop thinking.

He wandered over to the Queen's Hotel, narrowly avoiding getting run down at the intersection by an Acura driven by a woman with long hair. Not the time, he thought, to die, what with heaven being not there, and all.

He sat at a corner table of the beer parlour, and ordered two beer from the confused waitress. And thought. Deep thoughts.

Then he went next door to the new library and found a book on symptoms of brain tumors. And hallucinogens, just in case some local smartass teen had managed to drop something with a blue star on it into the soup he'd had before leaving for his walk. Nothing matched his vision, so he went back to the river.

“God?” he called. But there was no answer in the snow falling on the cedars. The only thing I could tell for certain was that his previous tracks were filling in, and snow was starting to cover the grass beneath the cedar bush he’d seen burning.

“There is no God,” he told Wendy, when she served him supper that evening, and after she’d spent most of an hour telling him about her work at the law office in the morning and the shopping in the afternoon. They did as much shopping as they could in Ayr, but there were many things you just couldn’t get in a town with twenty stores.

“Pardon,” she said, putting down the pot roast.

“THERE IS NO GOD!” he shouted, then added, “He told me so himself, down by the river this afternoon.”

“Tell me about it,” she commanded. Farm girls learn how to take charge.

He told her, including the fish, the chips, and the beer.

“Brain tumor?” she asked. “Or LSD?”

He told her about the symptoms and they argued about it till she agreed it was unlikely. Mentally, she decided to talk to an expert or two, and maybe get her husband’s head scanned down in Buffalo as soon as she could make the appointment.

“So what now?” she asked.

He continued eating, not having lost his appetite at all, for a moment. “Gotta quit the Church,” he said. “Gotta give up my job. No God; no Church. Can’t go on living a lie, I think.”

“If there’s no God,” she tried, “He couldn’t speak to you. The fact that He spoke to you proves he does exist.”

“Thought of that,” Agnew said. “But either He doesn’t exist or He doesn’t want me to act as if He exists. Speaking to me confirms his existence, but I’m under marching orders not to believe in Him, so best thing is I start not believing in him.” He took seconds from the serving platter. “Or at least acting like it.”

“Maybe it was Satan,” Wendy suggested.

He shook his head. “I know the literature, and it doesn’t work like that. Not in the Bible. Not in my religion. Or former religion.”

That, of course, ended it, except for a bit more conversation that went on till maybe two in the morning, by which time Wendy had decided that if there were no God, poisoning Agnew would be the best thing she could do for herself. She fell asleep dreaming of widowhood in Arizona or Fort Lauderdale.

Agnew fell asleep only when his brain exhausted itself. He didn’t say any prayers.

When he woke, Wendy was gone, presumably to a meeting with some women on the church committee. She’d left a cookie on her pillow, and he ate it. He stepped outside into the cold. There was a dead sparrow under the picture window. No one, he decided, had seen it fall. He was going to hold to that thought.

This time, he avoided the fish and chip shop, and had a coffee and muffin in the little tea shop by the pond. Outside the window, the snow continued to fall.

It wasn't all that hard, he decided, once you'd figured out what a good Christian would do, then inverted it. One started, of course, with the ten commandments.

He would break them, one by one.

He left with a salt shaker in his coat pocket, and dumped it into a trash bin down the street a way. One down, he thought. Nine to go.

He figured he'd better hurry before people started getting suspicious. He would go right to the big one next.

Ned Hume's wife, Tammy, was surprised to see him, but happy about it. Ned was in the terminal stages of a cancer that had started in his spine. He was getting a lot of drugs, but not enough. He hadn't made peace with God because he hurt too much, even with the drugs. Actually, he cussed out God whenever Agnew dropped over, then did the same with Agnew since Agnew had refused to help Ned get out of this life. He had, at most, a couple of weeks to go.

Tammy left them alone, once again hoping Ned would get salvation or something. She took the opportunity to go down to the hardware store, just to get out of the house, so she wouldn't have to hear Ned cursing God and Agnew.

Ned eyed Agnew, unable to sleep. "Going to do it, asshole?" he asked.

"No problem. How should I do it."

Ned looked startled. "Take five of those pink pills, dissolve them in water, and pour them down my throat." He'd thought about it a lot.

Tammy arrived home to have a startled-looking Agnew meet her at the door. "I think he's dying," he told her.

"I figured that out myself," Tammy said.

"No, I mean right now!"

Tammy rushed to the bedroom as Agnew called for an ambulance, both of them knowing that lack of breathing on Ned's part was a certain indicator of his new condition.

Tammy, tears in her eyes, thanked him for his support as the shrouded body of Ned disappeared into the ambulance. "What inspired you to drop in this morning?" she asked.

"John," he told her. "The guy who live next to me. He blows his snow into my yard. I think he's a closet atheist or something; he does it to annoy me. I decided to do something so I wouldn't thump him."

"Well, I'm glad you came," Tammy said.

That, he thought, as he walked home, does numbers 6, 8, and 9. Things were looking good. Seven more commandments to break.

As he unlocked his door, he gave a hard thought to his neighbour, John, who never really blew snow anywhere but into the street or his own yard. Wish I had a wide-screen TV, he decided, just like John has. Then he thought of John's wife, Norah, and decided she'd be really fun in a bed. He mentally crossed off number 10.

Actually, he thought, Norah's always gone out of her way to talk to me. Maybe I can get to number 7 faster than I think. But he couldn't think of how one goes about having a quickie with

the woman next door, so he just muttered “God damn it, there must be a way to get laid.” Which, of course, took care of number 3.

By noon, he’d had a big fight with his wife. Wendy, it seemed, wanted him to stay at his job, just in case God had another, better instruction, or was joking, or they found another solution to his epiphany. Like, she thought, he’s snapped under some sort of stress I missed. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that that was indeed the case, and things could yet be saved before Agnew did anything rash.

It didn’t work. Within a day he’d quit his job, called his parents idiots when they phoned (there went commandment 5), and was looking for an idol to worship, which wasn’t as easy as one thinks, in a small town.

A day later he’d moved into the Dayton Block, apartment 5. Then he sat on the floor and wondered what to do. Finally, it came to him that he could use a table and chair. And an altar for the little statue of Shiva the destroyer he’d picked up at a dollar store downtown. Finally, of course, he’d need a bed for sleeping and, if things worked well, adultery some fine day.

He figured he’d have to do it before Wendy got a divorce, since as long as he was married, he didn’t have to worry about whether his future bed partner was married or single. After a divorce, he’d require a married woman to break commandment

What he didn’t know, of course, was that the two students in apartment one were nervously trying to stabilize their first batch of nitroglycerine, having decided to make something that only went bang when you wanted it to go bang.

And he knew nothing about the space alien downstairs behind the leather-goods store.

What he did know, however, was that he probably had a job lined up. A year before he’d helped guide, in a pastoral way, a man named Clyde past a crisis in the Clyde’s marriage. Not that the Clyde would have had that crisis if he’d been able to keep his hands off the university girls where he worked in the Audiovisual department.

Agnew had applied the “What would Jesus do?” question and a lot of biblical teachings to the problem. What had been a tormented soul had become a happy man, even if he was now living in a basement apartment with one of this year’s great crop of young sociology majors

Nonetheless, Clyde had credited Agnew with his current happiness, and was lining him up with a low-paid job keeping the media library going and doing basic repairs to projection equipment. Not everybody was willing to climb stepladders to clean ceiling-mounted lenses. Besides, it looked like Agnew had a knack for basic electronic repair.

All he needed to do was pay the rent on this apartment and keep himself in groceries until God announced his re-existence, or until Agnew achieved the nirvana that sinners were supposedly led to.

It hadn’t worked so far, mostly because the two women who had chatted him up had turned him down. They’d been recommended by Clyde, who no longer confined himself to students,

being happy with occasional half-hour relationships with bored housewives and women whose current relationships were getting dull.

Clyde, for some reason, attracted women, for reasons that escaped Agnew. Maybe, he thought, there's a pheromone Clyde emits that makes women want to rub up against him or something. It certainly wasn't Clyde's attitude towards women or his looks.

The first woman Agnew had dated, if you call a lunch at a pita place a date, had liked Agnew, but twenty minutes of conversation – Agnew really didn't know why women wanted to know much about the guys they went to bed with – had convinced her that she was missing God in her life, and she left abruptly when Agnew declined to rush her to the nearest church and seek salvation.

The second date was two days later, with a woman Clyde said was a nutcase who needed a man to cuddle every night, and since her husband was currently in Arizona with his sick mother, she was looking for some unattached male for a week or so.

A night or so would have done Agnew, still tormented by both his years of training and denial and his determination to get commandment seven broken. Actually, ten minutes might have done it if there were no other requirement than making a small deposit in the bank of sin.

But she, too, had listened to his story (with a few altered parts, notably the conversation with God) and had burst into tears about his "wasted life." Agnew had thought she meant his previous years in the church, but it turned out she was talking about his future. She was down on her knees talking to Jesus when Agnew ran out of the Heuther's corner coffee shop, his latte barely touched.

He might, he thought, have to pay for the service, and tried to remember the names of hookers he'd tried to convert on a student-ministry project years ago. What stopped him was, more than anything, the fact that he had to work with Clyde and Clyde simply wouldn't ever respect him again.

Agnew could live nicely without Clyde's respect. Well, maybe it would bother him a bit. But Clyde's hand on the tallest ladders was essential, and Agnew didn't want to compromise that feeling of helpfulness. He was pretty sure Clyde was happy trying to help him, the failures only making Clyde laugh mightily and pat him on the shoulder, saying he had a long list of women. Besides, Clyde liked giving advice, and would have been a good minister, if there were a church for what Clyde was best at.

Maybe, Agnew thought, I can borrow one of Clyde's ratty old sweaters and see if it's saturated with pheromones.

Meanwhile, he had an eye on the redhead in the unauthorized apartment downstairs. She was cute, and seemed like a non-talker.

The Dayton Block had included a bit of storage space behind each of the retail outlets, but the tailor's shop and the leather-goods store hadn't needed all of that space, so John M.

Brubacher had put in a small apartment in there. It didn't amount to much, but rent from it wasn't going to be declared, so it looked like a reasonable investment.

Besides, he'd soon be wealthy enough to get the mistress his wife always suspected he had. Then he could use the room for himself.

In the meantime, he rented it to a good-looking redhead in her thirties for a really reasonable monthly rate and imagined what they could do together. Rent was, of course, to be paid in cash, small bills, until and if, John M. Brubacher added in his mind, other arrangements could be made.

The redhead, who gave the name Alice Lea Nulman – just call me Lea, she'd said – seemed very much the quiet type who would be happy with a room that had no paperwork or guarantees behind it. She'd handed him a pile of twenties, to cover the first two month's rent.

That had ended the conversation, despite the landlord's attempts to keep it going, and she'd moved into the apartment, turning up the heat to keep out the January chill.

This body, the voice inside her noted, could accommodate a range of temperatures, which was good, considering the range of climate on this planet.

The body's name had been Christiana Cohen, usually called Chrissie, when, in a fit of womanly despair, it had walked out on the bridge over the Grand River one night in early December and had thrown itself, developing fetus and all, off.

Much to Chrissie's surprise, and even to her pleasure, since about the time gravity took over, she'd decided to poison Clyde instead of killing herself, she hadn't drowned. In fact, she'd not even hit the water (or the bottom that was under an inch of ice and five inches of water), when she became hostess. "Host," had she corrected the voice inside, the first time that spoke to her. "We're doing away with gender-based titles."

The organism had done something to her mind, for sure, since there didn't seem to be any time elapsed between the approaching water and Chrissie's finding herself back in her 1982 Volvo on the shoulder of the road beside the bridge.

"What happened?" she said aloud to nobody in particular since she happened to be alone in the car.

"Your body has been taken over by a space alien," a voice said clearly into her right ear."

"What?" she thought, not thinking clearly since she'd expected to be somewhat dead at this point.

"If you're trying to do conversation by thinking," the voice added, "it won't work for a while, if ever. I can't separate out thoughts from muscle commands and sensory input right now. You'll have to talk out loud."

"What happened?" she repeated.

"I'm a creature from space, and I've taken over your body. You weren't planning on using it, anyway, it seems."

"I changed my mind on the way down!"

"Sorry about that. How was I to know. Anyway, we're here now, aren't we?"

"Where are you?"

“Inside you, of course.”

“Like in Alien?” She had a frightening vision of the movie, the embryo alien consuming her slowly while she pleaded “Kill me! Kill me!” to total strangers.

“I won’t harm you. You’ll get your body back when I’m done, anyway.”

She became very calm and slightly buoyant. “How long will that take.”

“A few weeks, I hope.”

“Are you calming me down? I don’t feel so scared now.”

“A bit,” the creature lied, knowing it had found her principal chemical soothers and was increasing them substantially.

“What will I call you?”

“Al, for alien life.”

“Not Alf?”

“That’s been used before. Let’s drive a bit,” Al added.

Two days later, after a time in the Walper Hotel using Chrissie’s credit card, the alien rented the room in the back of the Dayton Block. It was perfect, Al thought, not knowing about the guys making the bomb upstairs.

John M. Brubacher was happy, not knowing he’d rented a room not to Alice Lea Nullman, but to Christiana Cohen and to Chrissie’s alien rider, who wanted to be addressed as Al.

Mind you, a landlord gets used to anything, as long as they pay the rent and don’t damage the place.

It was March 15, the ides of March in Roman days, when Poe the poet paused outside the Warm Buns Bakery below his apartment. He inhaled the cinnamon smell, but bought two butter tarts and a Nanaimo bar instead.

He didn’t know that the two students were sitting back in the chairs in their room, eyeing each other and trembling at the thought of the mistake they’d almost made in their chemical soup.

Nor did he know he was fifty feet from a space alien whose report was expected to put an end to the human race.

Al, whose original name on his home planet in the Aigon star system was totally unpronounceable by anyone not having an odilute and a modicum of telepathy, was one of six roving assessors for the galaxy.

It must be mentioned, as an aside, that any intelligent species has some telepathic abilities, but unless trained, it was useless, much like a baby’s babbling before learns to tell mother that its hungry and its bottom is smelling funny again.

Aside from endless meetings for objective-setting and policy statements, Al and the other met regularly to determine the fate of various races as soon as those species discovered quantum mechanics and loud rock music.

It was not that either of those elements was dangerous in itself, but the combination had several times led to the instability of star systems, to the chagrin of neighbouring systems in the few minutes before they were eliminated.

Not being ape-descendants, the assessors lacked some of the characteristics humans generally associated with morality, and so were willing to dispatch evolving species, and occasionally, even entire planetary ecosystems, to nothingness without the slightest qualm, but with much merriment, since their species tended to look at major events as comedies rather than tragedies, as long as it involved someone else. If a life form was getting dangerous, a couple of dozen representatives ended up in a zoo on Ghy, and the rest were eliminated.

Since the budget cuts a few earth decades back, the number of assessors had been cut to six, of which Al was the second youngest.

Humans shared all the essential characteristic of species deserving removal. They had learned technology more quickly than their primitive emotions had evolved, knew the first two percent of quantum mechanics, and were well into loud rock music without a clue what a quantum-based guitar could do.

So it looked like a done deal, and the deed would have been done ten years before if not for the budget cuts. Due to the cuts, Al's people were now experimenting with alternate ways of species cleansing. The K'paagt had made a lucrative offer to turn Earth into a game park, and simply hunt humans down, exporting the meat to delis all over the galaxy. It would have solved the problem of humans and budget cuts at the same time, and had generated much excitement at headquarters in Aigon.

But, despite the fact that humans seemed to fit the classical profile of those beings whose elimination was mandatory, a confirming report from a field agent was required.

Which is why Al, as a lump of protoplasm, was attached to the spinal column of one Christiana Cohen, and she was renting the unauthorized apartment at the back of the Dayton Block. It would only be for at least a month, before (most likely) Al would order the death and (as likely) marketing of humanity(after suitable government inspection) to a score of civilizations in the local galaxy.

Had he known this, Poe (the poet) might not have put off tasting the cinnamon buns from the Warm Buns Bakery. Actually, had he known about the bomb factory, he would certainly have grabbed some buns (cinnamon buns) and run.

He stopped instead, at the convenience store, named, for reasons unknown, Corner Convenience, to buy a copy of the Record, the local paper, from Aklif, the owner-operator-clerk. Then he went upstairs to his apartment with plans to read, eat peanut-butter sandwiches, and work on a poem about Dolly's Bakery in Breslau.

He'd driven to Breslau to check out Dolly's and to have breakfast there. The breakfast was good, or better than good, and the coffee was not bad. The coffee and service had improved, locals noted, since a Tim Hortons outlet had opened almost across the street.

The cinnamon bun rated a 7, no more, he decided, after finishing it. He had a scale from one to ten for rating cinnamon buns, based by arbitrarily putting a Tim Hortons cinnamon bun at the 5 mark.

Some places served warm cinnamon buns and some only cold ones, which had confused him and his scale for a while, until he decided that, for fairness sake, only warm buns would be rated. He'd had the clerk warm a Dolly's bun for a few seconds in the microwave – it was a crude method, but seemed to work – before giving it the 7 rating.

Now he made his way up the stairs to the hallway, shutting out the snow that was again starting to clog the mid-March streets, even at noon.

As he passed the first apartment, he nodded to two young men coming out. They nodded back, and he continued on, but their stares followed Alf as he shuffled down the hall.

One turned to the other and whispered, "Why not him?" The other said, "Let's just consider it for a while, eh?" They exited out to the parking lot, where one got into a small Honda, warming it up while the other brushed off snow. They had classes at the university.

From his apartment window, Poe watched them, wondering what it was about them that made him uncomfortable. He noted another car, a Hyundai, idling in the parking lot, in the space reserved for Apartment 2. That was strange, since Apartment 2 was still vacant, at least until July. But it explained the two giggling teenage girls he'd almost bumped into in the hall, as they came out of Apartment 2. Someone, he figured, was going to use the king-size bed that dominated the room, or so his quick glance into the closing doorway told him.

He had tea with his peanut butter and toast, and took out a sheet of white paper.

The buns they serve at Dolly's

And that was as far as he got. He wanted a limerick, having determined that any poetry more complex wasn't going to get read. (It had been a hard poetic life, up to this point.) But there were a limited number of things that would rhyme with "Dolly's" and none of them were going anywhere. "Jollies" and "follies" were possible, but not for what he wanted to say about their buns.

Actually he didn't know what he was going to say about their buns, other than they rated a seven out of ten. He didn't like the way the whole project was going. He tried again;

The buns at Dolly's in Breslau

Then figured he'd be long dead before someone got a rhyme for "Breslau." He threw the paper across the room into the wastebasket.

At Dolly's the buns rate a seven

That was more promising. He could always declare them "three short of heaven." And maybe do something with "leaven," which suited a bakery after all. But he really wanted the location in there somewhere.

At Dolly's the buns rate a seven

They're good, but three short of Heaven

In Breslau the folks

Seldom make jokes

It had possibilities. If he could figure out a way to work “leaven” in there and if he knew what Breslau people might joke about the bakery. And if he could fit it into one last line and make coherent sense.

He read it again. He didn’t like the way this project was going.

Restless, he got up, looked out the window, and watched the snow. Another car, a red Chev Cavalier, was pulling into the parking lot, stopping in the slot for apartment 5. A youngish man got out with a briefcase, and trudged through the snow. Seconds later, Poe heard footsteps on the stairs, then louder, coming down the hall.

Poe was shy, but this was important to him. He opened the door. “Hi, neighbour,” he said as the man fumbled at the lock of his own door. “I’ve got a problem.”

“Of course,” said the other man, “step in my castle. I’m Agnew.”

“I’m Poe.”

“Like the poet?”

“I am a poet,” Poe said.

“Suits. What’s your problem” Agnew was used to dealing with people’s problems.

“I’m trying to write a limerick about the cinnamon buns in a bakery, and I can’t get enough information into five lines.”

“The bakery downstairs?” Agnew asked.

“I’m doing lots of bakeries, but I’m saving Warm Buns for last.”

This made as much sense to Agnew as most of the things he’d heard lately. “Read me your poem.” Poe read it. Agnew said, “You’re right. But there must be solution. Let’s ask god, if you have a moment.”

Poe hesitated. “I suppose.”

Agnew lit a small cone of incense which he placed on a dish in front of the Shiva statuette. “Oh great Shiva, first among my gods,” Agnew said, asked, “what should this man do?”

Poe, bug-eyed, said nothing.

“He says,” Agnew told him, “you’ll have to write several limericks for each bakery. There’s no divine law against it.”

“You know, that might just work. I thank you very much.” Poe sidled out the door.

“No problem, neighbour.” Agnew almost closed the door behind him, then said, “do you know any women that want to get laid? Preferably married ones?”

Taken aback, Poe hesitated. “My wife, but she’s gone to live with a guru in Winnipeg.”

“Guru? I never thought of that angle. Thanks.

“Yeah,” said Poe, “she’s his second wife, or something like that. Unless he got a newer one and made her wife number three or something.”

“Kids?” Agnew asked, his priest training still there.

“A daughter, Penny. Five years old.” Poe studied the ceiling then the statuette. The incense smell was getting strong.

“Tough, I bet. My wife and I never had children, but not for want of trying.” Agnew used tongs to drown the incense in the sink. “I got the day off, on account of the snow might close the university.”

“You’re a professor there?” It seemed unlikely, but Poe had learned always to guess high; it might be a compliment.

“Audiovisual department. Assistant. Mostly I climb ladders and splice wires.”

“Not the best paying job, I’d imagine. Which explains why you’re not in a fancier place. I thought you might be doing field work or something.”

“I used to be a minister, Anglican Church. I’ll tell you about it sometime. You’re home from whatever, too, I see.”

Poe felt a wave of anguish wash over him, but being a poet, that was perfectly normal. “I sold the house, quit my job as a calibration tech, and banked the money. Until Darlene gets herself a lawyer, I can support my poetry habit without working. I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

“Tea?” Agnew offered.

“Ah, soon but not right now. I’ve got a set of limericks to write.” He waved at the statue. “According to Shiva over there, anyway.”

“You have a bottle of something strong? I haven’t been properly drunk since before I went to Bible College.”

“Got lots of half-bottles. We should get together when I’ve got a page done.” Poe edged toward the door.

“Sounds great to me.”

Poe went to his room next door, sat at his table, stared at the paper in front of him. He got out a rhyming dictionary, without which no poet is complete, unless he or she wants to stick to free verse for life.

Free verse has been defined as “prose with funny line breaks” or “like playing tennis without a net” but Poe knew it could express some things better than the formality of rhyme. He also knew that most of the modern world would leap into a canal, or at least into a plate-glass window before reading any length of poetry, rhymed or not. Which is why he’d decided to do a book of poems in limerick form.

Not that he knew whether this was because limericks fit the short attention span of the modern human or because limericks tended to specialize in sexual and scatological topics. But he was going to find out, with this book, or he was going to have to find something else to occupy his time, other than drinking and thinking dark thoughts.

“Christ,” he thought, “all I need is a raven to live up to my namesake.”

He hadn’t actually been named “Poe” for most of his life, Leonard Bosco Norman being the name his parents had given him, for reasons they weren’t around to explain when Lenny had been of a mind to enquire, both having died in a the crash of a small plane seven years ago. There was a mystery: the wreck of the plane did not include a pilot in the pilot’s seat, yet nobody could have survived the crash.

Just another part of the wonderful story of my life, Poe thought, pouring himself a small glass of rye and setting it beside the blank sheet of paper in front of him. He'd once set the glasses of booze onto the paper, knowing that the rings they left meant the paper wasn't entirely blank or valueless, but he'd learned that when he threw the paper towards the garbage can the glass often followed, at least part way, and he'd had enough of picking glass shards out of his feet. And mopping booze off the floor.

He studied the rhyming dictionary again, and tried the thesaurus. With the two books, rhyme wasn't all that hard. Thinking of something to say was another thing entirely.

Back in the other room, Agnew was trying to figure another way to get laid. He considered getting a computer and trying online, but was afraid of getting some 15-year-old or some guy from the Ukraine after six months of effort.

The whole sin thing was getting to him, or at least the ten commandments part. He knew that offing the dying cancer patient had been good, but now he regretted being too hasty in quitting the ministry. There were always old widows who might have done it with the visiting minister: the stories had been common among ministers. Too late now, he thought, wondering if it was time to start on the singles bar scene. He dreaded the thought: word had reached him that Wendy, his wife, had figured out his plan and was checking out the bars trying to find him. Sooner or later, she would find him – a private detective could do it in an afternoon through his employment records – and he was certainly hoping she'd fail until after he had broken the last commandment.

Wendy, at this moment, was back in Ayr, being consoled by two other women over brownies and tea, everyone in Ayr having had some version of the story. She'd have been more specific about the truth, but everyone would have added to the story. So, for now, she was working on the story that Agnew had a brain tumor that, being crazy now, he didn't want to have removed. Voices told him not to, she informed her guests, although she'd much have preferred to poison both of them.

She suspected in her heart that a tumor was the most likely option, but to get her husband's scanned, she'd have to catch him first. She made a mental note to look up hard-to-detect poisons, to use on either the local women or her husband, if he didn't have a tumor.

In algebra class, Barbara and Britney were both contemplating the big bed in Apartment 2 of the Dayton Block. It was a matter of getting to it without their parents finding out, and deciding who to share that bed with. They'd talked about it for a long time before Britney, feeling wicked, had suggested a foursome. Barbara, while no virgin, was so completely shocked and appalled that she agreed instantly. Barbara's boyfriend, Chad, was such an obvious choice for one male that he almost didn't make the cut. Barbara was getting a bit tired of him and his computer games. But making him one of the boys to share solved a lot of problems, so they included him. Now it was a matter of getting another suitable boy. And figuring a way to get them into Apartment 2 for an afternoon without alarms going off in people's minds.

At the University of Waterloo, two brothers were in separate classes, a couple of buildings apart, with only part of their minds on their classes. They were both, in the way close brothers

do, thinking about the same thing, their plot to bomb the Yonge-Bloor subway station and get away with it. It would be an April fool's joke on Canada. Even if a few people had to die for it.

Stumbling through the snow, Al the alien, inside the body of "Alice," was watching the people of Waterloo. Based on her observations, the fate of the planet hung.

In a windowless room in Ottawa a man named Copeman was putting more antacid on his stomach.

It had been a long two years, a roller-coaster ride for which he hadn't been emotionally prepared.

He'd been assigned as a team leader to an anti-terrorist group, because he had some experience in the middle east, a year in Afghanistan with the troops, and six months in Britain learning from their agencies, including the new MI9, a group so secret that even their name wasn't really MI9.

Actually, MI9 was primarily made up of a brilliant mix of losers and brilliant apple-cart upsetters.

Britain had had a long history of dealing with madmen, what with owning Ireland and losing most of it. That had been followed by Irishmen blowing up chunks of Britain from time to time.

So the Brits figured they knew about terrorists who moved among the normal populace.

As a country and empire, Britain had also had a lot of experience in the middle east; having the unique experience of fighting both Jewish and Muslim extremists. Heck, they'd helped make some of those countries.

So they were, in their humble opinion (humble Brits are rare, of course), safe from any more terrorism on their historic island. When the subway bombs went off, totally unannounced and totally unexpected by senior bureaucrats and politicians, heads had to roll. Or, in a time-honoured British tradition, a new government department had to be set up.

Two groups of people were hastily shuffled into the new department, which was charged with Subduing All Domestic Terrorism That Wasn't Made Up of People With an Irish Accent. The first group was made up of people that should have known that second-generation Muslim kids with a chemistry set and access to the Web might blow up things. Being incompetent – they had, as Parkinson's Law noted, reached their levels of incompetence years before – they still couldn't be fired, so they were put into an agency needing sharp minds and ambition. Both of which they had demonstrated that they lacked. They brought to MI9 what cement sneakers and deep mud bring to a footrace.

The second group was also made up of people who had to be removed from their old jobs. These were people – usually a lot younger than the first group – who had predicted and warned about exactly what had happened. They'd been classified as nuisances in their old jobs, and so noted by carefully-worded praise in their files.

The result was that MI9 was made up of senior bureaucrats without ambition or imagination, who were the bosses of younger agents who were noted as people who were a problem for those senior bureaucrats without ambition or imagination.

It's unlikely the war being fought by MI9 against home-grown terrorists could have been half as intense as that being fought within MI9 itself.

But it did give the politicians a group to blame, if and when that became necessary in the future.

Copeman had learned a lot there, about terrorism and politics. Eventually, being a bit of a thinker and action man himself, he'd spent a lot of pub hours talking to the younger group, learning how to find terrorists and how not to report it. It came, however, a bit too late for Copeman.

He'd joined the police after university, and had moved up not at all, because of his quick and pointed observations and intelligence. His superiors always figured (correctly) that he was laughing at him. So they encouraged him to seek employment in a more challenging environment, the Mounties.

He got his right leg rather damaged at the knee by being right, kicking down the door of an FLQ-revivalist's cell in St. Hubert. The win in that case had been the removal of the cell and the cover-up that kept it from the media. It was felt, wisely, that the media would only make matters worse. Terrorists require the media like a snow shovel needs snow to justify itself.

Copeman had been promoted, and after the creation of CSIS, had joined it as a dedicated agent. CSIS, of course, had been made up for the same reasons and of similar composition as MI9. Copeman had been expected to be a let's-call-another-meeting-about-this man, but had turned out to be a gimpy pushy bastard who was convinced that a terrorist bombing was inevitable in Canada. After all, Canada had one of the most diverse populations in the world, was supporting Israel, and had a reputation of letting in and encouraging almost anybody.

The few who listened to Copeman were too young to influence the seniors who chummed with politicians and who had one eye on their pensions. These guys lived in the certainty that if anything like a bombing happened, they could fire some of the young agents (or Copeman, who wasn't young but should have been) for not warning the administrators more clearly and forcefully.

There had been agents who had predicted acts of terror and who had been clear and forceful. But then, if the act hadn't happened, even if because the police had headed it off after a hint or two, the agent who had done the prediction was forever a wolf-crier who would be the subject of derision and chuckling sarcasm at department meetings ever afterwards.

Which described the fix Copeman had got himself into. He'd connected a Saudi of middle-class heritage with a group of mad mullahs, and had followed the lead right to a pile of dynamite and a backpack. But the connection wasn't provable in court, it turned out, and although the police had moved in a day before the backpack was to generate a bus station full of shredded Canadian flesh, that saved a few lives, but it didn't get anybody convicted. A few people had

taken a hint and decamped for their mideast homelands, and Copeman became a guy who predicted a bombing that didn't happen.

Which is why he was in a small, windowless room, which he shared with the department's Gestetner machine. Only the fact that nobody used the Gestetner any more kept Copeman's sanity. And the fact that he had a cheerful apartment overlooking the Rideau Canal to go home to. That and his collection of leaves.

Copeman collected leaves and conifer needles as a hobby, and it had kept him from going round the bend when his girlfriend had become a friend of a politician in Ottawa, spending more bed time in the back of the parliamentary block than in Copeman's place. Maybe she had a fondness for guys with two legs.

So he spent his days now chasing down bad leads and bugging every mosque in Ontario. Which was a topic of endless meetings and updates for his bosses, this being a sensitive project politically.

He also handled information and payments to five different people who were willing to keep track on their Muslim brethren for a weekly payment. Or at least they said they were trying to keep crazy people from tarnishing the name of Islam. He suspected that at least one wasn't delivering, but it was hard to be sure of which one. They all gave reports that sounded the same: a few annoyed people but no one about to blow things up.

Copeman knew that was possible, but the Americans were sure that someone, somewhere, was planning to teach Canada a lesson. A loud lesson. And humoring the Americans was essential.

Anybody with half a brain could figure that the security service had undercover contacts all over the place and had microphones anywhere two people might gather to bow towards Mecca.

He'd got onto the Dayton Block only because Haski, the tailor from Yemen, had attracted the attention of the CIA and military intelligence. With the destruction of Haski's cousin by the CIA (via the drone aircraft), the CIA either had to admit someone had made a mistake, or they had to make sure Haski's cousin was covered with suspicion. Option B seemed the best bet, and had become as standard with the CIA as it had with the NKVD in the old Soviet Union.

Knowing, as they did, that Haski's cousin had just borrowed the wrong car to drive into town, they weren't really concerned about Haski, but procedures had to be followed. So, for the first time, they followed procedures, asking CSIS to investigate Haski.

Copeman's bosses knew about CIA cover-your-ass operations, so they assigned the investigation to Copeman. He was wise enough to see through that, but he'd just learned from a contact that Aklif, the owner of Corner Convenience, was from Afghanistan and might be an object of suspicion. Actually, Aklif had nothing more explosive in his shop than a dropped Pepsi can, but two Muslims in one building constituted an item to be investigated.

He knew nothing about the two brothers upstairs from Aklif, nothing about the alien in the back apartment, and nothing yet about Poe the poet or Agnew the agnostic. He had much to learn.

He set off for Waterloo on the 15th of March, to see if he could make up a report that would keep him employed for a few months more.

He took a room at the Holiday Inn on Fairview Road. It defied his imagination that anybody might contemplate staying at the place for a holiday, unless one were totally nuts, or that, along the road, there was a fair view of anything more lovely than an endless series of shopping plazas and their parking lots.

But, he said to himself, who am I to judge what's a fair view and what's a Sunoco station with a special on dollar hot dogs? It was raining a cold March rain when he got to the Dayton Block, the water dissolving the dirty slush which made up the previous snow. Judging by the clouds in the west, and a chill in the air, as well as the ache in his missing leg, another snowstorm was moving in. Copeman parked his Toyota SUV in front of the leather-goods store, then walked to the Corner Convenience. He exaggerated his wooden-leg walk as he went in, then picked up a local paper and a bag of taco chips.

Aklif was behind the counter when the agent came up with his purchases. "Good day," Aklif greeted Copeman. He was clean-shaven and hatless, with a plain beige shirt and black trousers.

Copeman looked surprised. "That's a Pashtun accent, isn't it," he said, getting out his wallet. "It is, sir. I grew up in Kandahar."

Copeman smiled. "My grandmother had been in Canada for a year when someone on the street welcomed her to Canada. She never forgot it. So I'd like to say, just from a person passing through, 'Welcome to Canada!'" He reached out a hand.

For a moment, Aklif looked at a loss. Then a huge smile spread across his face. He reached out and took Copeman's hand, pumping it up and down. "Thank you!" he said. "Thank you! I am glad to be here. We have been here four years now, and we love Canada!"

"It is," Copeman said, "a country of many immigrants. The honour and traditions of Pashtuns will be a welcome addition to Canadian culture."

"You seem familiar with Afghanistan," Aklif said, putting the newspaper and bag of chips into a plastic bag.

"Not really. I took a university course once, and I had a professor from Kabul with your accent. That's all." He took his purchases and left, turning to wave goodbye.

He put the bag into the car, then stopped on the sidewalk, under the overhang of the bakery awning. Peering into the window, he noticed that the two women operating it were blondes, with checked shirts. He didn't figure them for bombers, so he went in just to buy some cinnamon buns. They were in fact, good cinnamon buns, and when he'd got halfway through, with his fingers sticky, he walked into the Clean Lines Tailor Services, to speak to Abdul, from Yemen.

Abdul, who was working on a tricky piece of suit repair in the corner, looked up. "Ah, please," he said, "you are so welcome to my shop, wherein I do the finest repairs to clothing. But I would entreat you now not to touch anything. I am working on a very delicate piece of work here, and I will make it so good that the gentleman who owns it will laugh with joy when he cannot find the hole that his friend's cigarette burned into it."

For a minute there was silence as Copeman finished the cinnamon bun and Abdul finished his sewing. Then Abdul hung the suit jacket onto a hanger beside his workbench, and approached the agent with a box of wet-naps. "You will probably want one of these after your fine snack, which I suspect is from the wonderful bakery next door. Indeed, it is only with great difficulty that I resist running over there twenty times a day for their butter tarts." He smiled at Copeman. "And what can I do for the representative of the Canadian government?" He smiled. "Have you come to tell me my wife and children are waiting for me at the train station, or would you like to check my spools of thread for nuclear bombs?"

"I'll check your spools of thread for bombs if you want. Maybe I'll replace some of the microphones hidden in them. But I think your wife and kids will be on their way in a few months. As soon as those assholes from the States calm down a bit, we'll be able to do something, I'd imagine."

"But you make no promises."

"I'll file another report on what a good person you are, and that's all I can do."

"And that is why you are here?" Abdul looked up at the agent.

"I needed to get out of Ottawa before I went crazy. Any rumours you've heard about people planning to blow up things?"

"That's a young man's game, and the young men don't speak to me. If I knew anything like that I would call you and make a deal as quick as I could." Abdul smiled again.

Copeman nodded. "I figured that." He handed the tailor his card. "Call me anytime to ask about your family."

Outside in the street, he inspected the block. The leather goods store was being run, and had been owned for years, by a man born in Sparta. It wasn't worth investigating, for sure.

Around the back of the apartment there was a tiny parking lot, just big enough for four cars. There were two cars there, and the one of the other spaces hadn't been used. This looked like a dead end, unless there were Muslims upstairs in the apartment.

A man in his thirties, wearing a heavy coat and a wool cap, brushed snow off an old Accord and drove away. Copeman took the car number to look up, as well as that of the other car.

The rain lessened as he returned to the Holiday Inn, checking to see if the view on Fairview Road was any fairer. It wasn't, and he went inside to see if the restaurant had a vegetarian meal available.

The creature that called itself, variously Al, Lea, or Alice Lea Nullman got its mount, Christiana Cohen, into motion and out the door. Standard practice when riding another life form was to keep the thing happy, in a perpetual state of bliss, and follow its own inclinations as far as health and routine activities went.

So after a morning shower, Alice went into the bakery and had tea and toast, then a couple of cinnamon buns for breakfast. It was snowing, and the traffic outside was moving carefully. Canadians tend to be sloppy and run into each other in the first snows of November, as if they've

never seen the white stuff before. But by March they're used to it again and allow a bit of extra time in the mornings.

The staff at the bakery didn't know Lea was a tenant almost directly behind their shop, but after a couple of mornings they were getting used to her coming in for breakfast. Had they known the full details, they might have advertised their wares as famous throughout the galaxy.

Lea opened her purse and examined the contents. She had ten dollars left, but Christiana knew she could get a couple of hundred more out of the ATM a block away. When she was out of the bakery, she informed the alien rider of this fact. A couple of people looked at this young woman apparently talking to herself. Made stupid and happy, it took a bit of effort before Christiana told Al a person could hold a one-sided conversation if she held a cell phone, or anything that looked like a cell phone, to her ear.

They bought a toy one for a dollar downtown, then got two hundred dollars out of the banking machine, Christiana all the time talking into a plastic phone that doubled as a water pistol.

It did confuse the taxi driver, though, that his red-headed passenger mumbled into her cell phone as he took them to a farm house outside town. Especially since the place was closed and waiting only the developers in order to disappear into another housing complex. Not that he cared, since she paid in advance, and added a generous tip for him to wait for her.

When she came back to the cab carrying a small metal briefcase, he assumed it was some sort of drug thing, but, he figured, business is business, and maybe she was just keeping stuff from her husband or something. He let her off downtown, close to where he'd picked her up.

The jeweler examined the small handful of uncut diamonds and his heart leaped. "Is this stuff stolen?" he asked, against his better judgment. He wanted these stones. He didn't know who could get uncut diamonds – stolen diamonds were normally already cut – but who comes into a Waterloo store with stuff like that?

"Depends on your definition," the woman answered. "These are from northern Ontario. I kicked over a rock looking for a place to pee, and there was this little green circle. I learned later it was kimberlite. You know, the stuff you get diamonds from." She reached into her pocket and brought out a piece of crumbling green rock with a couple more diamonds still embedded in it.

The jeweler examined it; it looked like the real thing. "You should have filed a claim. There's probably a lot more like that."

The woman smiled an abstract smile and stared at the wall. "It's in a provincial park. Even if someone dug a mine, and even if there were more there in that little green shaft, I wouldn't get any of it. I might have a claim, but nobody would me do anything with it."

The jeweler nodded. He was happy with any plausible story, or any story that he could convince the police he believed. "He made her an offer. "They still have to be cut," he said.

She asked for twice as much. They settled on a bit less than that, but the jeweler was planning a Caribbean cruise, maybe a safety deposit box in the Bahamas, too.

The alien now had enough money to get around. It was just a matter of figuring out where to go, and what to do, to fill out the report.

Copeman had done the routine before, so it didn't take him long to check out the two bearded guys upstairs. He'd assumed one of the middle eastern guys, Abdul the tailor or Aklif the convenience-store owner would have an apartment or bomb-making facility upstairs, but a bit of asking and checking had told him that neither of the men lived in the block at night.

Three of the upstairs rooms, he learned, had occupants. One was leased to a couple of brothers, Terry and Tom Bonisteel, who attended the University of Waterloo. He didn't check further, so he didn't learn these names were fictitious. One room was leased to a guy who called himself Poe the poet. You couldn't trust a poet, Copeman knew. Heck, the Koran was poetry. But a guy dedicating himself to limericks about cinnamon buns wasn't going to do too much damage, Copeman decided.

The other guy, it turned out, was an ex-priest, an Anglican from a village south of Kitchener, who was trying to find his way. At least that's what the Lenny, the leather-supplies store owner figured. Copeman figured ex-priests were likely to destroy only themselves, so he also dismissed Agnew.

He figured one more day, then he could go back to Ottawa, recommend that Abdul's family be allowed into Canada, and he himself return to watching the paint peel on his office walls.

But he was a thorough man, and after a few inquiries, found himself at the Shangri-La Bar in downtown Waterloo. The lighting was dim, with lots of candles, and the music was primarily chants from the far east. A motley group of men and women sipped California wine and talked of things they hoped each other would find interesting. Usually, it wasn't, but they were lonesome, and anything would do, or almost anyone

When Copeman got there, the one matching the description of Agnew was in deep conversation with a blonde fortyish woman with large round glasses, a classic figure, and a tight sweater. Poe, by the description, was on sitting at the bar, watching them and chuckling. Copeman sat down next to Poe. "Your friend is about to have a close encounter of the female kind?" he asked.

Poe shook his head. "Agnew's given up on religion – he used to be a priest – but he won't give up on honesty. Right now Angela's trying to convince him to get back to God."

"You think it'll work."

"Not a hope. He's done with God right now. But she's convincing herself and if she's on her knees tonight, it won't be for anybody but the Big Guy. God, I mean." "Your friend is about to have a close encounter of the female kind?" he asked.

Poe shook his head. "Agnew's given up on religion – he used to be a priest – but he won't give up on honesty. Right now Angela's trying to convince him to get back to God."

"You think it'll work."

"Not a hope. He's done with God right now. But she's convincing herself and if she's on her knees tonight, it won't be for anybody but the Big Guy. God, I mean. Last woman he talked to had to be thrown out when she started into a hymn."

“I should think that when you give up on God, you give up on morality and principles and things like that.” Copeman got a beer from the waitress, and sipped slowly. He’d wait till he had the information he wanted before leaving.

“Not Agnew. He has principles and rules and most of the paraphernalia of a priest, but he and the Lord ain’t speaking at the moment, it seems.”

“Any idea what happened?”

“He says God told him He didn’t exist. I don’t know what really happened.”

“God told him Agnew didn’t exist?”

“No. No. God said that God didn’t exist.”

Copeman pondered this a bit. Doesn’t that seem a bit contradictory?”

“I thought so, which is why I figured he made that part up. Sooner or later, as I understand it, his wife will get him in a net and have his head examined.”

“He’s married?”

“So I hear. Word is that she’s looking for him, but he didn’t leave a forwarding address.”

The agent nodded at the woman beside Agnew, who was getting quite animated. Her breasts had started to bounce quite nicely, he noted. “If he’s still a moral person, why is he talking with other women?”

Poe turned and looked at Copeman for a moment before replying. The background music switched from Tibetan chants to something more like Navajo woodwinds. “I’m a poet; they don’t pay me to try to make sense of this planet, just to observe it. From what I understand – and I haven’t got the whole thing – he figures that he has to break all God’s commandments and rules. He’s starting with the ten commandments, since they’re nicely numbered and all that.”

“How’s he doing?”

Poe turned to watch a lanky blonde talking to a aging hippy hiker type. “You’ll have to ask him.” He didn’t feel his evening was there for somebody else’s entertainment. He excused himself and left for the men’s room.

When he came back, Copeman apologized. “I’m sorry if I seemed too nosy he said. It’s part of the job I guess. I’m an field agent with CSIS.” He took out a card and showed it to Poe.

“Like a field agent would carry a business card.” Poe read the words, “Agent; Internal Security Canadian Security Intelligence Service.”

Copeman got his wallet out and showed him a couple more cards, including his pass to get into the building in Ottawa, and a card that identified him as working for United Insurance of America.

Poe examined all of them. “You’re investigating Agnew? You think ex-priests are about to sign up with Osama bin Laden?”

“The service is made up of idiots and incompetents. And me. Once you accept that, you can see why I’m sent to investigate a place with two whole Muslims in it. Not,” he added quickly, “that there’s the slightest reason, but my boss got tired of me picking my nose and wanted me to do some busy work.”

“In a bar?”

“Paid overtime. Taxpayer’s expense.”

“Ah.” Together they watched the blonde get up, telling Agnew, “God will forgive you. Go back to Him,” and leave. It looked like the priest was going to be stuck with her tab. Copeman hoped he had some source of income. Poe turned back, and said, “Well, I haven’t seen any sign that the tailor makes anything but clothes, and if you’re also talking about the guy who runs the convenience store, I think he’s pretty innocent. Not that I’d know, but I haven’t seen more than the odd bearded type – other than Agnew and me – wander into either store, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

“That’s what we’re looking for. If you’re a taxpayer, I thank you for the beer. This ‘Brick’ – it’s local stuff?”

“Made just at the edge of town.” The two of them watched Agnew order another martini then head for the john.

When he came back, the poet introduced him to Copeman, and Copeman to him, saying, “This here’s secret agent Copeman, checking out the Taliban warriors running the tailor shop and the convenience store.”

Agnew shook the agent’s hand. “I hope you haven’t gone to too much trouble. Those two guys seems to be working their butts off running their businesses, and I can’t see them taking the time to do that if they’re planning a jump into Paradise.”

“I think you’re right. Matches what I’ve seen. I guess I’ll be going back to Ottawa tomorrow, if the snow lets up a bit.”

Poe got up and left for the john, thinking, this must be contagious. Or maybe I never paid attention before. Or maybe the tinkling of all those wind chimes in the music now is making everybody think of other tinkling.

When he was gone, Copeman said to Agnew, “We really didn’t get a tip on those guys or anything like that. I just thought it was advisable to get out of the office for a few days, and you can always do that by checking out a Muslim these days.”

"Muslims been up to much in Canada, these days?"

"They seem a rather peaceful lot, actually."

“I’d think you’d check out people vacationing in Florida. Where it’s warm.” Since he’d left the ministry, he was getting fonder of sentence fragments.

“That’s for my bosses. I’m a bit lower on the totem pole.”

Agnew looked out the window at the snow. “Waterloo, in March, in a blizzard. That’s not too high.”

“Down there with the poets, I hear.”

Agnew laughed. “Can’t get much lower than a poet these days. I guess Poe got a good settlement when his wife and him split up – she came from money. So I guess he can be a poet as long as he lives in a garret and eats Kraft dinner.”

“And drives a bimmer.”

Agnew laughed again. “The car came with the breakup. Or so he said. When it goes, I imagine he’ll be riding a bike.”

“And neither of the Muslim fellows lives upstairs?” Poe joined them again at this time, saying, “well, we don’t know what they do at home. The only other apartment upstairs is rented to those two students. They don’t look dangerous.”

The agent smiled. “Only to young women, with their looks.”

“Not a big call to investigate blond guys, clean-shaven and all?”

“We’ll be surprised one day, I imagine,” Copeman said. “Or maybe they’ll get smart enough to changing their looks until they blow up something.”

“But it hasn’t happened yet?” Agnew ordered another beer. Copeman knew he and Poe could walk to their apartments. He also knew about the Bible’s anti-gay rules, and wondered when Agnew would try breaking that one, and with whom.

“You’ll let me know if any fanatics move in?”

Agnew nodded, but Poe said, “if they look dangerous. To us,” he added.

“A man can’t ask for more than that, I guess.” Copeman finished his drink.

“There’s nothing on the leather shop. Or the bakery?” Agnew needed something to take his mind off his aching balls.

“They look okay. If not, they sure fooled me.”

Agnew looked at Poe, then said, “there’s an apartment behind the leather shop. Some young redhead took it last week. It’s probably an unregistered apartment, but I don’t think that’s your department.”

“I’ll check it out, but there’s a lot of that going on, and, you’re right, that’s for other agencies to find out and handle. How’s the redhead?”

The poet answered. “In her thirties. Basically good-looking, even if her face is a bit long and her ears a bit large.”

Agnew chipped in. “We’ve both got the hots for her, but Poe’s trying to get to her before I turn her into a nun.”

“Thanks for everything, anyway,” the agent said. “You want the taxpayers to pick up the tab for your drinks?”

“Why wouldn’t anyone?” Poe asked.

“Because they’d be in the pay of a spy service. It’s a moral issue to some people,” Agnew said.

“You got morals, now?” Poe squinted.

“Not no more,” Agnew said. He turned to face Copeman, who was still standing there. “You can pay, no problem.”

Copeman used his credit card to cover the tabs of both of the bearded guys before leaving. He got a receipt, of course.

The next morning he was back at the Dayton Block again. Word about the unauthorized apartment at back meant he wasn’t quite finished. Besides, even though the sun was shining now, he didn’t want to hit the highways until they were thoroughly salted and sanded.

In the leather-goods shop, named Leather Weather, he asked the proprietor-owner, a fellow listed as John Hyde, if he could have a word with him.

Hyde, who was obviously beyond retirement age, looked up over his half-glasses and said, “Mr. Shiny-Shoes. Since this is government business of some sort, I’ll have you get me a cinnamon bun and coffee at the bakery.”

“How do you want the coffee?”

“Served. We’ll go over there; they have a couple of tables and that way we can get the stuff a bit hotter.”

The Warm Buns Bakery had recently added four small tables, each with a couple of chairs. The coffee was okay without being good, but Windsong and Wyvalla (not their real names, of course, but everyone knew that) were planning on putting in an upscale coffee maker in a month. People had a habit of taking their baked products out of the store to eat while sitting on the stone wall next to the old post office, at least while the weather permitted. Windsong had finally figured out that they did this not for the fresh air, but so that they could drink take-out coffee from one of the stores nearby. So they hired a very Seattle-educated gay guy to plan a limited, but simply fabulous, selection of coffees to start.

But Copeman and Hyde got the old stuff, with a slightly off taste to it. But the cinnamon buns were, as everyone acknowledged, to die for.

“So?” grunted Hyde, when he’d had a bit of bun and coffee. Not that he minded the coffee; something in the leather-tanning process had inured him to the off taste.

“As you guessed, I’m a government man,” Copeman acknowledged. He found this often derailed curmudgeons like the one he was dealing with now. “Federal government, CSIS.”

“I’m innocent, and so are those guys in the tailor shop and the shop on the corner.” Hyde winked. “This bakery, though, would lead a saint astray.”

“Had to check, anyway,” the agent said. “Now I can go home. Unless,” he added as an afterthought, “there’s something going on in that unregistered apartment behind your place.”

“I know what I’d like to be going on,” Hyde winked. “But I’m too old for her. The owner of this apartment gets half the rent and I get the other half, since I technically own the space. No skin off my nose, but I can use the money, however little it is. No, I think she’s probably no one you’re looking for.”

“Just checking.”

“You’re not going to evict her?”

“Told you. I’m federal. No business of mine.”

Hyde chewed his bun noisily, which is a difficult thing to do for most people. When he’d swallowed, he added, almost as an afterthought. “You want to know who makes me nervous? That priest and the guy in the next room. They don’t look like they care much about other humans. Sociopaths, if you ask me.” He finished his coffee. “But then, who asks me anymore?”

Copeman walked into the Corner Convenience a few minutes later. “Hi, again,” he asked Aklif. “Can I ask you a question?”

Aklif smiled. “I figured you were going to, sooner or later. You look like a government man. I hope it isn’t about my taxes. I paid them, and held nothing back. Nothing, I tell you.” He was still smiling.

“No. I just wanted to ask you about the people upstairs.”

“The students?” Aklif pointed straight up.

“Actually, the other two guys.”

“I don’t trust them. Where I came from there were people who followed the rules of the government and there were people who set themselves against things. Outside of normal people, you know. These two remind me of people who wandered into trouble. They may not have started that way, but a path leads on and I don’t like the look of the eyes of those two.”

Copeman said nothing. His experience told him that white guys, bearded or not, didn’t cause problems at the level he was supposed to handle. But his experience also told him never to rule out anything. He nodded, like reporters do, to keep people talking. If there’s silence and a nod, people who have said what they planned to say feel a need to fill the silence, and add details.

So Aklif went on. “In Afghanistan, it was always bearded Muslims in your news reports, but everyone knew of people from the west who joined al Qaeda for their own reasons. Not all of them were even Muslim. Some were just crazy and some maybe just wanted adventure or something. We heard that the Taliban put them out front, before their craziness turned around.”

Copeman had been in Afghanistan. He’d known that some of those rumours were true. It had been the practice of special forces troops to identify and shoot all westerners involved with the Muslims. The bodies were buried, or, more often, blown up. Taking prisoners of these guys had a history of creating political embarrassments that lasted for years.

But Poe and Agnew? The agent had met them, and if they were thinking of terror, it would be a surprise to him. Nonetheless he nodded. Outside, the rush hour traffic thinned and the sun came out. With the temperature again above freezing, the first rivulets of water started again running for the distant sea. Copeman thanked Aklif, made a couple of notes, bought a bag of salt-and-vinegar chips, and left the store.

After stashing the chips in his car for the long ride back to Ottawa, he climbed the stairs and knocked on the door of the students’ apartment. There was, as he expected, no answer, so he went downstairs.

Behind the door, “Terry Bonisteel” sat by the little table, sweat running down his face. On the table was a collection of electronics hooked to a cell phone and to a light bulb. He’d managed to turn off the phone just before “Tom” was scheduled to phone from a block away. If the light came on, they had a working bomb, except for the actual explosive material, which was still back at the university. Beside that, a map of the Toronto subway system. Terry heard the footsteps recede down the hall.

Two more stops. Copeman dropped into the tailor shop to speak with Abdul. The tailor was explaining his work to a customer, with a suit jacket draped over the counter. That done, Abdul took the man’s charge card

“Do you think,” he asked the Yemeni tailor when the customer, apparently happy, had left, “that those two guys in the apartment upstairs – the bearded guys – are any potential problem?”

“I don’t think of them as terrorists, if that’s what you mean,” Abdul answered. “But they make me nervous. Rumour tells me that the priest is trying to break all the commandments of God that Moses gave us.”

“There’s no commandment not to blow up stuff,” the agent observed.

“Very true, very true. But commandment six tells not to kill, and I’ll be nervous when he gets around to that one. A foreigner such as I am, especially one from Yemen, might be a ready victim. Or may be it that he and that poet have hatched up something really big. Poets are a miserable and antisocial lot in my country, and I doubt if things are better here. They could be planning on going out with a bang, if you know what I mean.”

“There have been few poetic attacks in the west, but I’ll keep a watch on them.”

“Oh, you may think so, you may think so, but I venture that if you look up any assassin you’ll find he had a book of poems in his room!” Abdul clapped his hands together at that, which meant something or other.

Copeman suddenly remembered that Louis Riel was a poet. He began to wonder a bit. Just a bit. Leaving Abdul the tailor’s, he remembered the redhead in the back apartment, and took the chance she was in. He found the door by following Abdul’s directions, and knocked. A woman matching the description answered. She had a coat on, and a slightly dazed, happy smile. There was no smell of marijuana, but she looked a bit drugged, Copeman thought.

“Can I help you?” Alice/Al/Christiana asked.

“I’m just checking out a few things in this apartment block,” the agent said.

“No problem,” the alien answered in the voice of woman, “I’d be glad to help.”

“Should I come in?”

“I don’t think so. The place is really too small for anybody but one person. Let’s go downtown and you can buy me a meal and a coffee. My name’s Alice.”

“I’m Copeman. I’d be glad to buy you lunch.” It was getting close to noon.

It was a short walk. The agent let Alice pick a Chinese buffet restaurant, and the alien let her pick out the food. It had been having a rough time trying to keep the human mount fed properly just by observing other humans, so it let up a bit.

Copeman, trying to keep his weight down, took a small bit of everything that appealed. It still added up to a lot, especially with the beer he added to it. Alice had coffee.

“I don’t care about the illegal room you’re in,” he told Alice after the wontons soup. “I’m checking out people in the same building in case any of them are dangerous.”

“You have any reason to suspect some of them are illegal aliens?” Alice asked, with a gentle smile and a faraway look. Copeman began to wonder if that was her natural expression. Maybe she’d had a stroke or was just normally half there. It might explain why she was in a tiny apartment, with, the other tenants had assured him, no visible means of support. The agent wondered if she were on the run from a nasty husband or boyfriend, but she didn’t seem the least bit uptight.

Nor did she make or take any calls, despite the fact that several comments had been made about her constantly being seen talking into a cell phone.

“I’m with the counter-terrorist division. Illegal aliens aren’t my problem unless they’re planning to blow up something or kill somebody.” He had a sudden vision of Agnew and Poe killing Alice. It bothered him, which was unusual for him.

Alice, who was well on her way to eliminating humanity, smiled, for the things she didn’t dare say. The rider inside had a way of hurting the human if she didn’t obey. She wasn’t sure how, but it was effective. “I’m not a good judge of people, so I’m afraid I can’t help you. Besides, everyone there has a reason to get up every morning. Except, of course, those two bearded guys upstairs, and me.”

“You have no job.”

“None. I’ve got a bit of money,” Alice said, “and I need to hide out for a month or so. So I can help you, if you need it.”

It was probably something in her puppy look, or her lack of guile that intrigued him, but when she asked about his job, she stared in rapt attention until he discovered that he couldn’t stand the thought of another helping of beef slices in pepper or fried noodles. “Want to go for a walk,” he asked.

“Sure. I could use the exercise.”

“You’re not afraid of being spotted by whoever you’re hiding from?”

“Nope,” she said. “Nobody around here knows me.”

It was possible the last of the March storms was over. St. Patrick’s Day was only a day away, and the snow was melting and running down the roads and sidewalks as they took the path to the park.

They spent the next three hours talking about nothing much, and deciding nothing much. The rider let the girl run free a little more, pleased at the interaction and the recordings it was making. There would need to be a file filed after any decision, of course. There was even the possibility of Central overriding a planetary explorer’s recommendation. But it was a big galaxy, budget resources were scarce, and it didn’t often happen.

Alice told him the minimum she could about her previous life, with hints of the boyfriend and thoughts of suicide. But she didn’t tell him she was pregnant, or what had happened at the bridge that night. Copeman was left to assume she’d had some sort of epiphany or got some guidance and was just biding time till she decided what to do with her life.

She heard about his career, his previous two wives, and his passion for wilderness hiking and old movies.

Barbara and Britney, between math and French classes, walked the sidewalk on the south side of Waterloo District Secondary School and discussed some primarily primal things.

The first, of course was the question of who. Barbara, although having done her boyfriend Chad three times, had decided to include him anyway. Since this was going to be a foursome, it was almost like a first time again, something different, like. Barbara smiled to think of all that bare skin in her uncle’s otherwise wasted bed.

She'd done a guy named Peter once, too, but that's just because he was one of the cutest and most popular guys at school. It hadn't been all that much fun, being a stand-up quickie behind the school, but it did make her feel empowered, for reasons best known to herself. Peter might have been a good candidate for the unused bed, but he'd just dominate the proceedings, she thought. And she wanted to run the show.

Condoms, she and Britney decided, were going to be mandatory. Britney wasn't on the pill, and had no desire to get pregnant.

Britney, unlike Barbara, was a mixture of nervous and thrilled by the prospect. She'd done her share of necking and groping, but was still a virgin. What a way to have one's first time, she felt. Whoever they chose to accompany Chad and have Britney's cherry would have to have an open mind about it all. Males, apparently did, all the talk said.

Barbara, who had the experience, however limited, was sure the boys would be ready to do it all over again in an hour or less. She wasn't sure about that – it might all have been male boasting – but she wasn't going to tell Britney that. The plan was to switch boys after the first time. She was sure Chad would be happy to do two girls in one afternoon.

They did come to the agreement that that was all they were going to do; just girl-and-boy, and no oral sex. There would be enough adventure as it was.

Charles's name came up among five or six others. Britney suggested him, and eventually Barbara agreed. He was neither particularly cute nor especially attractive, but he obviously did like Britney. And, they agreed, he was probably a virgin, too. Britney didn't want to be the only inexperienced one on the bed.

Britney was assigned to check him out.

Wendy, Agnew's wife, sat in a café in Waterloo, next to the only grocery store still downtown. She'd passed the point of being pissed off at her husband, and had passed the point of wondering if her ex-priest man had actually talked to God.

She'd been raised in a good Christian house on a corn-and-soybean farm close to Lake Huron. She'd been to Sunday school and she'd gone with her parents to the local Anglican church until she went off to university to study math and psychology and keep her eye open for good husband material. Unlike her mother, she hadn't felt a real commitment to getting married, and had gone through two years of school and two boyfriends, including a live-in one for a while, without actually seeing any advantage in being a wife.

It had been at a bible camp that she'd met Agnew, both of them working as staff counselors to the kids. That had been a job she hadn't expected, not being as committed to non-stop bible study as most of the people chosen. But somehow she'd got the job and had eventually got to like Agnew, despite his strict interpretation of everything in life.

They'd got married six months later, to the surprise of both of them.

Now, a couple of years later, she was alone and not happy about it. If there were a God, she figured, He wasn't the type to do what Agnew said. He didn't break up perfectly good marriages. And he decidedly didn't provoke guys into sinning. Which is what that encounter had done.

It had come down to an encounter with the Devil, or an encounter with a defective male brain. She knew enough about men to be confident her husband needed a hole drilled into his skull with a Black and Decker and a few rogue cells taken out.

But first she had to find him.

She'd been aware enough of his plans – he'd apologized in advance, to start with. And with a photograph of her errant husband, she'd been around Cambridge, Brantford, Kitchener, and now Waterloo. She'd hit pay dirt a couple of times in Waterloo right away, a couple of people saying they were sure they'd seen him in that very café. And three bartenders had definitely recognized the guy who seemed to convert women to religion. They'd assumed he was some sort of beer-drinking nutcase, but they had enough customers not to miss the odd women who was running off to the convent or whatever.

She started to wonder if God was intervening in her husband's sinseeking attempts. Not that it mattered. As soon as she located him, she was going to call a couple of members of her family, especially her two large-size brothers. After growing up on a farm they'd be able to throw him onto a pickup as easily as a bale of hay and they had access to a couple of syringes of stuff that would pacify him long enough to get a CAT scan, MRI, or whatever it took to confirm to him that he hadn't talked to God and to get treatment. People in Ayr would forgive anything of a guy that had a brain tumor. They might wonder why God would inflict such a condition on a priest, but , people were always wondering about God's ways, especially in a small town where ruinous medical conditions were as much the favorite gossip as pregnancies, abortions, and who had switched their soup brand from Campbell's to Aylmer, and did this switch signify a political change or a financial one.

So he was somewhere in Waterloo, trying to get laid. She herself had a syringe that was supposed to be used on sheep when you wanted to castrate them, or artificially inseminate them, depending on gender. and how likely the animal was to object to the process. Wendy certainly considered castrating Agnew, but what were the chances she'd get an all-woman jury afterwards?

Meanwhile, she sipped coffee and watched the people on the street. The snow was melting fairly quickly and people were carrying gloves and earmuffs in shopping bags. In October, at the same temperature, they'd be bundling up like Scott at the south pole.

She'd had an offer from a group of five women to help her scour the town, maybe fifteen minutes after she'd formed the idea, which was kind of scary, but that was Ayr for you. She'd turned the idea down, but was now having second thoughts, and was considering having Sally, one of the younger women, see if she could lure Agnew into a car for capture. That would, of course, depend on altering Sally's appearance enough to fool Agnew in a bar. She thought about it for a few minutes, then put her cell phone back. She was going to give it a couple more nights

before trying that. Anyway, they still had to find out where Agnew was hanging out, trying to commit adultery so he could go on.

He still had to kill someone, she believed, but she couldn't really see him doing that. Maybe he'd just pay a visit to a hospital and hurry someone along. She sat up suddenly: what about Tammy's husband last week? He'd died when Agnew was there. It was possible, she thought, definitely possible.

By the same token, she thought that he could have screwed some woman in Ayr. Difficult to hide, unless you're quick, but a quick one-two in the kitchen for a lonely widow, then tea and bible talk.... Of course not, she realized. If so, he wouldn't be out here doing the bar scene. You only had to sin once to cover that commandment.

She didn't have to point out to him that Matthew had said that "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart". Every priest dealt with that one, and every priest's wife debated whether lusting after men had the same sinful prospects. Anyway, it looked like Agnew was going to go for the real thing, anyway, and although she'd have preferred the lustful looks, at least he hadn't, it seemed, got laid yet.

She'd tried to hinder the prospect as much as she could when she showed his picture to the various bartenders, telling them that he had terminal AIDS, but she supposed there were lots of women spreading that sort of rumour about previous mates.

Tonight she would try the bar scene again, although people in Ayr were starting to speculate that in fact she wasn't looking for her husband at all, but instead her infidelity had driven her husband around the bend. People in small towns speculate a lot.

In the Warm Buns café Aklif, proprietor of the Corner Convenience, was talking with Abdul, the tailor. For reasons unknown to the universe, two Muslims talking hadn't yet triggered the American Defence Response, so their conversation was unmonitored, except for pieces picked up by Wyvalla and Windsong. Those two knew their responsibilities, even if they weren't sure who would eventually want to know. Two Muslims talking could get the Warm Buns Bakery into serious trouble.

Aklif was concerned. Since Copeman was a government agent, and they were Muslims, they were bound to be concerned. Somehow, since the fall of Nazi Germany then the Soviet Union, there weren't too many people for the guardians of the west to watch, except for themselves, smokers, and Muslims.

"You think so?" Abdul asked. "Things aren't supposed to work that way here." Abdul knew that in Yemen if the police were investigating you, your kin, or anyone on the same block or in the same apartment building, it was time to start taking stock of escape routes and making up your will.

"No doubt. I do not doubt it. These millions of western people run up against a hundred crazy Muslims and suddenly they are all crazy too!" Aklif ate a sweet lemon tart which, Wyvalla and Windsong had assured him, contained no pork products whatsoever. Vegetable shortening,

they said, was all they used. Being addicted to sweets from his years in Afghanistan, he enjoyed his afternoon breaks at the bakery. But he wished they'd learn to make coffee in the eastern way, very strong and very sweet. Alas, one could only ask so much in a new country.

Abdul nodded. Ever since the CIA had killed his cousin, he knew his store was bugged. He wondered if that CSIS agent, Copeman, knew that. Well, he should have; any Muslim who stayed in one place long enough would have a transmitter installed in his telephone line, behind the picture of his kids, and even, once his proctologist had been coerced, up his butt. He figured the bakery would have a camera in the Simpsons birthday cake soon, looking out of one of Homer's eyes. "We are clean, aren't we?" he said, meaning was Aklif hiding anything.

Aklif nodded. "I did, as you did, come to this glacier of a country to get away from such people. But," he added, waving to Wyvalla (or Windsong; he wasn't sure which was which and suspected they changed names every now and again) for another coffee and another lemon tart, "we may be close, too close, to some people of interest." He rolled his eyes up and to the left.

Abdul nodded. "The Bonisteel brothers, Tom and Jerry."

"Young guys with fake names. I don't like that. I am suspicious of them, whether they are westerners or not. If they are up to no good, we will be the ones the next plane out of here, I think."

"What can we do?" Abdul looked sadly into his coffee.

"I have already suggested that those two bearded Canadians are suspicious. We should encourage this CSIS fellow to follow them." Aklif nodded to himself.

"You are suggesting that we plant an evidence? On those two bearded men upstairs?"

"I am suggesting that maybe if those two students went elsewhere with whatever they're doing, and I don't know what they're doing, then there would be no trouble from the government."

"They'd blame us?"

"So we might warn those young men that there are government agents snooping around here. And we might redirect the government agent who is here."

"To follow a wrong trail for a while."

"Those bearded men are Christians, I am sure, and citizens also. They are safe in the long run, I am sure."

They pondered this over coffee.

They looked at each other. It would be best, they knew, to divert attention away from themselves. They had learned that as children.

"How shall we do this?" Aklif asked.

"The security people are looking for bombs. They must find a suggestion of a bomb."

"But if they find explosives," Aklif pointed out, "they will not stop until they find the one who made the explosives."

"No explosives. Something that can be part of a bomb or not part of a bomb at the same time." There was a long silence as both men thought. "A cell phone," Abdul said.

"A cell phone? What has that to do with a bomb?"

“In Madrid the cell phone was wired to the explosives. When the phone rang, the subway was blown up.”

“Everyone has a cell phone,” said Aklif.

“If it is taken apart, with wires – additional wires – beside it, it could look suspicious.”

“Where do we get one. One that isn’t owned by us?”

“The Salvation Army Thrift shop. I saw a dozen there, for a dollar each. The broadcasting regulations changed last fall, and these were no good any more.”

“People would sent to the Salvation Army something that didn’t work?”

“All the time. I don’t know why.”

“You can get one?”

“I will.”

“Will the bearded ones not get into trouble?”

“Only for a little time. This is Canada; they are westerners. Sooner or later they will be freed for lack of evidence and the police will look stupid.”

“What a wonderful country.”

They nodded and turned to watch Wyvalla and Windsong, who were worth watching.

Absent from the Dayton Block that day were a couple of young blond, crew-cut and clean-shaven men. The students were trying to figure out how to set off an explosive device and have it blamed on someone else, specifically, someone Muslim. That was the important part: getting a Muslim blamed.

Known to the landlord as Terry and Tom Bonisteel, they drove a Chevy Cavalier, a car that was relatively inconspicuous. In it they spent a couple of hours driving around Waterloo County looking for a place to test a batch of explosive where it wouldn’t be noticed.

That, if you’ve never tried it, can be a lot harder than one expects. Eliminate the villages, in which people note everything that goes on in and around the place. Eliminate open places and fields, in which you can blow up a few clods of earth, but will have a farmer at your side faster than you can say “spring wheat.”

Then there are a few scattered bush lots. But these are also watched, since people are always trying to steal firewood, light fires, or have a quickie with somebody’s mate. Nobody cares about the quickies, except for the condoms and underwear scattered around, but teens tend to leave garbage where they have their fires, and farmers, who routinely dump garbage in any low-lying area of such woodlands, object to empty beer bottles scattered on their trails through the woods.

Besides, it was March in Ontario, and there were few places to pull a car off the road that wouldn’t get one stuck in mud up to the axles.

After two hours of frustration, the Bonisteel Boys were more than annoyed. Up north, there are lots of places to set off explosives, uninhabited places where people will just shrug. But the vast landscapes of Canada, it seemed, didn’t abut Waterloo.

They spent an hour in a coffee shop in Ayr, grumbling and thinking, before deciding that it was better to do it near a community than out in the country. People near a community were more used to young people going off into nearby open areas than people who owned land.

Tom advocated this, since he'd gone snowshoeing for the first time earlier that year. The three other guys had parked their car on a side street in the village of St. Jacobs, once known as Jakobstettel before Germans lost their popularity. Then they'd started off out across an empty lot and into the fields and bushland. Simone, a dark-haired chick who was too fast on snowshoes to catch, regardless of a guy's intentions, had explained that parking on a street was open to anyone. People in the houses assumed an unknown car there was someone's cousin visiting someone, and didn't really care as long as their driveway wasn't blocked. Park in the country, she'd told him, and the farmfolk will assume you're cutting fences to get through or looking for an outbuilding to burn.

And the fields around the villages, she'd said, were not monitored as closely. The farmers had long ago given up on keeping track of such lands, since kids and their friends had no problem visiting the bushes around for nefarious, not to mention procreative, activities. Older village people had no problems with taking their dogs for a run in the fields. So farmers just sort of gave up hope of monitoring lands next to villages, hoping instead the problem would be solved by rezoning and some rich developer offering them big bucks for the land. Then the farmer could get a condo in Florida, where people belonged in a Canadian winter.

Though the fields were off-limits – a person stepping into a plowed spring field ended up with massive mud clumps on his feet – a walk along the riverside seemed a reasonable alternative. City folks were always coming out to little villages and walking along the river.

Eventually, they parked at the entrance to a baseball field and recreational area in Ayr. It was squishy mud in places, but the trail was clearly indicated by a ridge of snow. The rest of the snow was melting, with grass coming through the snow, but all winter people had been walking their dogs on the pathway, compacting it so that by spring the trail would melt last. The brothers avoided as much of the dog poop as they could, and picked up as few burs as possible, till they were well out of sight of anybody. They waited, but it was a school day, and lunch time, so nobody was around.

Both of them, having grown up where water, especially dangerously cold water, was nonexistent, kept away from the bank of the Nith. Terry pointed out a mark where someone had got too close and almost slipped into the river. They didn't remark on the cedar with no snow under it, since the warm sun on the trunks was doing that to other trees, too.

Terry set up a bottle rocket, a device made with a two-litre plastic pop bottle and a tire pump, and waited. That was a decoy, since someone might ask what the noise was. Another pop bottle, its side knocked out, lay beside it. An exploding pop bottle doesn't make such a loud sound, but who was likely to know that, he'd figured.

Tom put the explosive, about the size of a walnut, on the ground, then put a couple of big rocks on it as an afterthought, to muffle the sound a bit. He attached a couple of leads, got back a ways with Terry, and touched the leads to a nine-volt battery.

The resulting bang seemed to echo forever, although it was actually muffled by the willows to a large extent. Tom dodged the rock chunk that came at him like a cannonball, and both of them waited, and dodged the other rock that came down from the sky. They stared in amazement at each other; this chemistry stuff actually worked!

After covering up the evidence as much and as quickly as possible, the brothers went back to their car, where no one was waiting. Maybe loud noises were common in the valley. They drove home, contemplating April Fool's Day, a couple of weeks away, and the Toronto subway system. Lunch was a sub from the Subway in Kitchener, just for the irony of it all.

They'd decided on the Toronto system because it was the obvious choice. It would be easier, Tom had argued, to blow up something in New Hamburg, and might be more effective, since everybody feared terrorists only in major cities, especially in the subway system. He's argued that if they hit a small place, nobody could feel safe anywhere.

But Terry had convinced him that it would be seen as an act of cowardice, or that of some terrorists who were too inept to blow up anything more important than the Home Hardware in a village. Pathetic, is what he figured it would seem. Since the subway was the most obvious, it was the most protected, and if they blew it up it would seem a real coup. Tom finally agreed, with the proviso that a second bombing, if necessary, would be considered for a small-town location.

April first. They now had to get material for a larger bomb and, if possible, figure a way to detonate it without becoming suicide bombers themselves. They parked at the university and went to their respective classes.

Abdul glanced around the store, then back at the shelf. There were nine or ten cell phones in a basket with other electronic paraphernalia. He picked up the thinnest one, pretended to evaluate it, then dropped it into the shopping basket. He'd already picked up another dozen items. Most were for cover, but a couple seemed like something his wife Aisea could use, if he didn't find a use himself for them.

There was no one at the Salvation Army Thrift Store counter when he got there, but an elderly volunteer shuffled up, then adjusted her glasses and tried to remember how to run the new cash register. It wasn't a fast process, but it came to a full stop when the cell phone came up. She perused it carefully, then turned towards a co-volunteer straightening the sweater rack. "How much are these?" she yelled.

"It was in the dollar bin," Abdul said. "It costs a dollar. There were lots more."

"Eh?" the lady said.

"What?" the volunteer guy said.

"I asked how much these are," the lady said, holding it up.

"What is it?" The guy stopped straightening sweaters."

"It's an old cell phone," Abdul said. "It was in the dollar bin." He stared down. "It costs a dollar," he added, lamely.

The volunteer guy inspected it. "It's a cell phone, I think." He turned it over. "Or maybe a remote control."

"It's a cell phone," Abdul repeated, aiming his voice towards the hearing aid.

"How much do we charge for cell phones?" the lady asked.

"Well," the volunteer guy said, "they're worth lots when they're new. Hundreds."

"There are lots of them. They don't work. They're not worth more than a dollar any more."

"I'll be back," the volunteer guy said, and shuffled off. It took him a while to find the bin. The lineup at the register grew. The volunteer guy shuffled back, stopping to straighten the men's shirts rack.

"There's a bunch of them. They all seem to be a dollar. I wonder if that's right."

"Never had a cell phone," the volunteer lady said. "Too expensive."

"Probably doesn't work. Maybe there's an old style, like 8-track tapes or something."

"We charge two dollars for an 8-track now," she said. "Use to be we couldn't give them away, but now people collect them or something." She examined the surface of the cell phone molecule by molecule as if it had come from the Smithsonian.

"But it says a dollar on the bin," the volunteer guy said.

The volunteer lady eyed him like he was a terrorist or something. "Can't see why anybody wants a cell phone you can't use."

Abdul couldn't see why anyone would sell a cell phone nobody could use. "It's for my niece. She wants one to play phone with. This is as cheap as a toy one and she'll like it to play with. She likes to play phone." He wished he'd used more deodorant.

"Hope there are no parts she can swallow," the volunteer guy scowled.

Wyvalla and Windsong consulted over a tray of hot tarts, just out of the oven. "This building is getting strange," one of them (the shorter, wider one) said.

"How do you mean?" the other (the taller one with the hipbones and long eyelashes) asked. But she knew; she'd had that feeling herself.

"The people that live here. And don't tell me I'm just being paranoid. I see a lot of people come in here for lunch, and you get the full range of humanity."

"It's getting to be a pretty multicultural city, isn't it?"

"But the people that live here. Well, somebody could do a novel about this place. Those two Arab guys, the tailor and the other one, that owns the quickie mart or whatever it's called on the corner, they're what you might expect. And that crotchety old guy next door with his leather shop. You gotta wonder about him."

"Oh heck, he reminds me of my father. Just old and achy, and opinionated. I'll be that way myself someday."

"He's probably got leather underwear."

"Well tooled, I'd imagine, with lots of horses and cactuses engraved into it."

"What about those two upstairs?"

"You don't mean the students."

“Not them. The one’s a poet, he told me. Walks around in a perpetual cloud of gloom. The other guy, he looks like his world ended last month. I wouldn’t be surprised to see both of them hanging from a rafter some day.”

“Think they’re gay?”

“Not the way they’re ogling my tits.”

The other nodded. “I guess you’re right. I wonder why those students never come in here. Students are usually too busy to cook.”

“And then there’s that woman at the back. In the so-called apartment. She’s hiding from somebody, whoever it is.”

“I saw her talking with that government agent guy.”

“He’s a government agent?”

“So he claimed.”

“Maybe he’s working undercover right now!” She giggled.

They left it at that, and slid a long pink specialty loaf into the oven.

In the leather tooling shop, John Hyde could hear voices from the apartment. A single voice was normal: he’d just assumed she was nuts about phoning people. It didn’t bother him, since she always talked quietly, and he couldn’t tell what she was saying.

But now there were two voices, one of them male. He smirked: women who were hiding usually had had enough of men. But his experience had taught him that such women also got hooked up with men again, sooner or later. He paused in his belt-making. For a moment, it sounded like the male voice was the CSIS agent. Yes, it surely did.

Well, the agent was bound to ask questions of everybody in the building, and talking to her was probably a treat. He shifted in his leather underwear, the pair that left an impression of mating horses on his rump when he took them off. The agent was probably working undercover. He smiled at the thought.

Copeman, agent for CSIS, threw an arm across Lea’s naked breasts and snuggled close again, pulling the covers back over him. He was rather worn out, and a bit chilly: the apartment tended to leak outside air currents. Lea slept, snoring softly. He liked the sound. She sounded content, asleep, and he thought it was always better to have a woman sound contented after sex.

He got up after a half hour, hungry, and rooted through the cupboards and fridge. He made himself some peanut butter sandwiches, then put soup on to heat, starting with a can of chicken noodle, and adding some vegetables and leftover chicken from the fridge. He knew spices, but she had a collection the like of which he’d never seen before. There were small quantities of everything imaginable, from every food culture on earth, it looked like. It hardly complimented

the Kraft dinner, peanut butter, and take-out leftovers that seemed to be the mainstays of the larder. Bizarre.

Tight along Lea's backbone, and curling up into her brain, the creature that called itself Al kept her asleep and content. It knew she was dreaming, but had no way to tell what made up those dreams. It had used her to explore the town, and had been more than pleased to have Copeman wander into her life. The alien had attained enough control of Lea's hormones to ensure both mating and pleasure. But it was her conversations with Copeman that most pleased the creature. He seemed to provide an in-depth look at human society. If things worked out properly, more information was to come.

Not that Al didn't suspect the planet would end up as a biosphere reserve for everything but humans, with some spice plantations; some Earth spices seemed likely to have potential market value in the galaxy. And their cultivation might supplement the Department's income.

When she woke, Lea smiled at the agent. The world had seemed so much better since she'd picked up the rider and problems seemed more distant. Part of her brain screamed that she was carrying an off-world alien, but somehow that part was small and distant these days. Al had assured her he was nothing like the movie parasite, and would leave her unharmed.

"Thanks for the soup. You really know how to cook," she told Copeman. "I used to be a pretty good cook, but not like this. Mostly just standard North American cuisine."

"You must have been better than that, with all these spices to work with," the agent chuckled.

"Oh, I... I just got curious what I could do with spices and Kraft dinner. My boyfriend never let me try spices and my parents didn't vary much from potatoes, peas, and a piece of meat." That would do. She knew that pain would follow if she got anywhere near the truth, but she was getting good at improvising. Her body chemistry pumped another dose of serotonin into her brain, relaxing her. The alien increased her oxygen uptake to give her the wit for conversation. "Stay with this man," Al told her, the sounds going directly into her eardrums. "Do what he wants."

Copeman had got used to the pauses when she started a sentence. He figured she had some secret she didn't want to talk about. That was okay with him. A routine job had turned into something delightful. He liked Lea, and didn't know exactly why, other than the obvious fact that she was a reasonably good-looking woman, at least ten years younger than him, and good in bed. And she seemed drawn to him.

"Do you know anything about the other people in this apartment?" he asked her.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know anything. I'm not the type to enquire. And I really never liked being the nosy type. I went through school trying not to mix with other people. The little cliques of girls just never seemed to like me, and I stopped letting it bother me." She paused, and the silence lengthened. "I lost my heart once, and that wasn't an experience I care to talk about. So you won't mind if we keep this casual." She smiled a brilliant smile and his heart melted again. He hoped she wasn't a spy of some sort.

She was, of course, still two months pregnant, but the alien just ignored that. It could have altered a few hormones and induced an abortion, but there didn't seem to be any reason to.

"Casual is good for me," he said. "But I insist on being a friend and not just a lover. I like you."

"Sounds like a plan. Can I hang around with you during the day? I feel safe with you and could use some distraction."

"Of course!" He decided not to tell head office. He felt good and didn't want to change that, since he hadn't felt so good in a long time. "I've got a couple more days of inquiry here," he said, although he didn't really. Then I'm supposed to go back to Ottawa."

"Why don't I come to Ottawa. I've got enough money to get myself an apartment. Or is there someone else back there?"

Surprised and delighted, he said, "No, I've got no attachments there at all, just a job. I think that would be just wonderful." And so it seemed to him. "You can come with me while I make inquiries around here, too." It was against regulations, but he figured the inquiry was going nowhere anyway.

It wasn't a big problem getting into Poe's room; the poet never locked his door. Anybody, he often told people, who'd steal food probably needed it, and anybody who lifted his poetry probably wouldn't be slowed by anything less than the strait jacket they probably needed. He too often told the joke about the burglar who broke into a poet's place and left after putting twenty dollars on the table. It had stopped being funny quite a while ago.

Abdul put a "be back in five minutes" note in the Clean Lines Tailor Shop window, went around back, and climbed the stairs. There was a lock on the stairway, but it hadn't worked for years. Poe's car was gone from the parking lot: he was probably out with Agnew, talking about life and women again.

There was nobody around as Abdul walked the tile floor of the hallway. At the Poet's room, he looked around, then pushed the door open and stepped in. He closed the door behind him, taking care not to make any noise, although there shouldn't have been anybody else on the floor.

The room itself was pretty bare, with a few books on a shelf, a few cans on the counter, and an old television with duct tape covering all the knobs and crossing the screen with a big X.

Abdul opened a cupboard. A spider looked back at him. He set the cell phone on the shelf then pushed it back into the shadows. He'd modified it, so that wires going to the cell's ring system stuck out of the case. And he'd wiped all his prints off it.

He'd no sooner stepped into the hall and started back towards the stairs than he heard a door open. He turned his head to find himself looking at the unused room the previous tailor had owned. Abdul himself had considered seeing if he could lease it in July, when it came up for renewal. The door to the room was opened. A teenaged girl was standing in the doorway, and the head of another peered from behind it. He suddenly thought he recognized one of the girls.

Wasn't she a niece or granddaughter of the previous tailor? He wasn't sure. Strange, he thought. Maybe she got driven from her home.

Quite honestly, Copeman didn't know what to do. He didn't want to go back to Ottawa for a couple of days. Touring the area with Lea would be a vacation; the area was melting, but Ottawa was scheduled for another snowstorm in a couple of days.

He thought of checking out the Bonisteel boys, but that seemed futile. Students seldom pay attention to anything but studies, beer, and the opposite sex.

I guess, he thought, since I've got the suspicions of Aklif and Abdul, I'll use that as an excuse to check out the poet and the ex-priest.

Not that Lea seemed to mind. Despite her obvious intelligence, she was the least uptight woman Copeman had ever run across. In fact, it had taken him a while to be sure she wasn't on drugs, legal or illegal. In his experience, intelligence didn't reduce anybody's worries, it just changed them. He ran an inquiry through the CSIS data base and came up with nothing significant. She'd been at the University of Western Ontario up till a month ago, working on getting a doctorate in Finnish history, then dropped out for reasons unknown. She'd had speeding tickets and parking violations (which suggested a pushy person) and had once disputed a tax return, but other than that she was clean.

She also deflected any questions about her recent past, refusing to explain why she'd stopped her schooling or not gone home to her parents. She seemed to have enough money – the agent found over fifteen thousand dollars in an old Monopoly box.

He had no idea why she struck such a chord on his heartstrings, but suspected it was something deeply buried from his childhood. He imagined the company shrinks could figure it out, but being happier than he'd been for a decade was enough for him, without them. Agents who fell for mysterious women soon had other agents all over them; it was a long tradition in the world's intelligence services to lose one's mind to members of the opposite sex. So he didn't ask for a more detailed inquiry. She just didn't seem the Mata Hari type, somehow.

In fact, she asked him a lot of questions, but always general stuff about his views on humanity, and didn't seem concerned when he shuffled off any that got close to his intelligence work or anything that might be of use to Chinese or American industry. So he just enjoyed her company.

Lea, in turn, with her hormones tinkered with, and her natural desire at this point for human company, was more than content.

Al, its report never far from its mind, was happy to find someone who could not only provide input on the human condition (Copeman had done a lot of thinking on this) but was able and willing to travel and interview people. It would have given an arm and a leg, had it had either, to ride Copeman for a while, as Lea knew too much about Finnish history and not enough about humanity, but, for technical (and budgetary) reasons that was not practical at the moment.

Morning found them on the way to Ayr, while he was waiting for a report from Ottawa on Poe, a poet of few poems and unknown financial support. Who knows, he thought, maybe I'll turn up something. Lea's offer to move to Ottawa to be near him delighted and concerned him. The concern came from the fact that she'd only known him a few days, and so he wondered about her motives. Did she just need security?

Security was what concerned Copeman. An agent who moved a girlfriend into an apartment anywhere near Ottawa was going to have himself and his girlfriend investigated rather thoroughly. They had programs to monitor his email and phone messages to flag changes. He knew that; he'd done the odd investigation himself when some agent had changed these things. Only once had an agent been discovered to be harbouring an industrial spy from Brazil, trying to keep a wing and a prayer ahead of Bombardier. Copeman understood the motivation of the Brazilian manufacturer, and one look at the Girl From Ipanema (or wherever) told the investigators all they needed to know about why the CSIS fellow had paid for her house, entertainment, and hair stylist. Just looking at her had made Copeman's knees weak. But the agent involved was now cleaning up old DEW line sites until his early pension kicked in.

Copeman himself had always thought he'd never get caught like that. His over-careful analysis of everything had been one of the major factors in the dissolution of his marriage, his wife having run off with a poet from Québec and was probably now living in a garret somewhere writing *Franglais* sonnets.

And Lea wasn't, in youth or beauty, anywhere near that of the Brazilian beauty. Her eyes were a bit too small and her nose a bit too large for true beauty, and she could have lost ten pounds to turn heads. Not that the agent cared; he'd found her attractive (not counting how long it had been since he got laid) when he'd met her for an interview, and she was growing on him like ivy on a stone wall in the sunlight.

He didn't know, of course, that her original personality, that of Christiana Cohen, had been uptight about too many things, especially in pursuit of a PhD in Finnish history at the UWO, where there was only one instructor, an assistant professor with a winning smile, warm bed, and rich wife.

Nor did he know that her adjusted personality was more or less standard procedure among K'paaght investigators. Aigon, their home planet, had suffered under a couple of nasty invasions before the K'paaght set themselves up – with the gratitude of other races in other systems – as the ones to report on upcoming species. The morality of wiping out such civilizations had been taken care of first by not recognizing potential troublemakers as being civilized, and second, by redefining morality.

Besides, there were the Formeets to do the actual dirty work. Formeets had a rather simple view of others: you were either in their circle of friends, or you weren't. If you were in, and all current long-established species were, they'd, individually and collectively, die for you without a moment's hesitation. If you weren't, they'd dispose of you with no more hesitation than a human would swat a mosquito. The Formeet recognized the weakness of their philosophy and let the K'paaght decide on the value of upcoming stellar civilizations. It had mostly worked pretty well,

even if a few potentially valuable cultures had been relegated to the same status as trilobites or first-term abortions. Aborted civilizations never complained, anyway.

Humanity, rapidly evolving with a tendency to leave regrets about actions to the history books, looked pretty typical of those civilizations on the way to the dusty files of K'paaght agency vaults. But not without a report, and the more ground Al could cover as Lea's rider, the better the report would be. Given the recent budget cuts anyway. It used to be standard procedure to include a second investigator, but not any more. Whatever the rider of Alice Lea Nullman ("Lea") and her consort could discover in a month or so would be the basis on which a decision would be made.

The Formeets normally started with removal of selected industrial centres and larger cities, followed by substantial broadcasting of viruses tailored to the target species. The last few were hunted down, and the planet allowed to continue as a source of raw organic compounds (such as the spices Al was investigating) or tourism. The tourists knew better than to ask about the species that had built the crumbling ruins on the planets they waddled or swam across.

And Copeman was looking for someone who might blow up a hundred people in a subway.

Ayr, in March, is a delightful place, except for most of the buildings and some of the people. The ice on the pond is starting to break up as every warm day brings more water down the creek. The fish and chip shop has changed ownership again, and has a new recipe. The hardware store has brought its spring collection of rakes and wheelbarrows out to the sidewalks, and the librarian in the nice new library with the big windows is staring at the clouds going by and wondering why the hell she hasn't gone somewhere where she can kiss another woman in public without the circulation of books dropping fifteen percent.

At the Pondside Tea Shop Copeman and Lea had tea, coffee, and some rather fancy brownie squares. They talked history and psychology, or as much as they could. Copeman had a wide view of the planet without much specifics other than Afghanistan on Copeman's part or Finland on Lea's part. Both seemed to want the other to do all the talking, so conversation wasn't too strenuous until Copeman got overloaded on coffee and, Al, worried about losing the conversation entirely, upped Lea's awareness level.

At the library, the dollar shop, and the Queen's Hotel, they saw the town and worked the locals on the matter of Agnew the wayward priest. Not that it was possible to do it directly, since locals are even more suspicious of outsiders than they are of their neighbours, and that's saying a lot. But Copeman pretended to be a cop whose brother and his consort were thinking of applying for a priest's job at the Anglican church, rumour having been passed around in church circles that a position was available. His stand was that his brother had sent him to check out just how liberal the town was, since his brother's wife was young enough to be his daughter at least, and more interested in clothes than in bake sales for the relief of Nigerian homeless. He said he'd heard a rumour that the previous priest had sold his soul to the devil and run off with a local widow.

That, and a few offers to buy coffee, as well as three visits to people who were about to sell their homes and move into retirement residences, got him as much information as he wanted.

People who are looking old age in the eye need a distraction, and by God, they need someone to talk to.

By the afternoon the weather was simply divine, even with the locals all assuring him that it was just too good and they (and he, of course) would have to pay for it, presumably with a monumental blizzard or temperatures of minus ten till June. He wondered how people who were so convinced that God never let them have good weather without their paying for it got the ambition to go to church. Maybe just in hopes of heading it off, he thought.

But he did learn where the locals figured Agnew got his epiphany, and at two, when the weather was at its best, he parked the car by the recreation area and ball park by the river. It was on flood plain, and the Nith was known to rise ten feet in the spring (some things were measured in meters, but river rises were always in feet, like people's heights). So the flood plain contained the baseball diamond, with the idea that a few benches and a baseball diamond could be replaced easily if the ice took them out.

There hadn't been any ice jams for many years, however, due to the dam upstream at New Hamburg: there they drained the water just before the spring freshet. The locals in Ayr were getting concerned because the baseball backstop was getting worn, and the local vandals had pretty well torched all the seating. The good people of Ayr were counting on a swath of roaring ice to take out these things so that the Ontario government would finance their replacement. The warm day brightened their outlook with its possibilities, and if God paid back the sunshine and warmth with three days of heavy rain, why, they might get a whole new set of stuff at the recreation area by the river. They should have named the park "Lord God's Gift," rather than after the man who'd squeezed the last three replacements out of Queen's Park, but it seems God doesn't always get credit.

He certainly didn't get credit for Agnew's conversion. What little was known was that something had happened down by the river, and there were conflicting rumours of Satanic initiations, little boys and friendly rumps, and a sudden head bumping after tripping on a willow branch. Or maybe all of them. Leastwise, a loud bang the day before had been attributed to the ice breaking up. Nobody had gone there this morning with less than three dogs, for safety. Besides, Copeman and Lea found, it was hard walking. The old trail was a hump of ice turning into slush, and the land next to it was water-soaked and full of three kinds of burrs and two species of brambles.

Copeman, having almost been blown up by three different roadside explosives in Afghanistan, has learned to watch every stick and stone as he walked in the countryside. Any countryside. He spotted the blast area instantly, separating it by a knowledge that the locals didn't have from the little burned circles the pre-teens made when they gathered there in summer evening to swat deerflies and check out each other's genitalia.

He knelt down, getting his knee muddy, and examined a couple of rocks, then moved one aside.

"What is it?" Lea asked.

"A blast site, I think."

“Firecrackers, maybe?”

“Well,” he said, it’s very recent, and it smells a lot more like C4 than anything you put into a firecracker.” He fished a baggie out of his pocket and put a couple of small rocks into it. “We’ll see what the lab says,” he said, getting up.

They went on a bit further, till it got too difficult, then walked back, their footprints filling with muddy water. Beside them, the Nith grumbled on. It was free of ice and muddy. And it was rising steadily. Another foot or so and it would be up onto the floodplain. Having sifted itself through the trees along the shore, it wasn’t likely to do any damage to the ball park unless ice blocks or floating trees managed to bull their way through and attack the backstop. Copeman watched a large sycamore float by.

In the old days, when pioneers like the Martins, Roths, and Erbs had settled, there had been a number of dams along the river. Most of these had been built not by the German settlers, who needed only the occasional one, and only in fall to grind grain, but by ambitious Scots, who ground oats into the makings of whisky all year around.

The Scots had done well, for although the German Mennonites weren’t big purchasers of their services, Irish and Scots passing through went out of their way to get supplies, and some of these took marginal lands to settle on, as long as they were close enough to the mills to set up a pub.

In 1893, however, a dam had broken above New Hamburg, and the resulting wall of water had successively taken out the rest of the dams all the way to Brantford. Most were never rebuilt, and peace reigned on the Nith’s shores afterwards. There were a few fishermen (women, it seemed, must have been banned somehow) and the occasional canoeist who knew that the cops would get you for drinking while canoeing the Grand River, but never on the Nith. There were sober canoeists on the Nith, of course, but these were people tending the marijuana crops planted in the woodlands along the shores.

In Waterloo, Copeman stopped at the UPS store to ship his samples to the CSIS lab, asking for an urgent analysis, and leaving his cell phone number.

The UPS had the samples by morning, but the clerk, who was due to be promoted to senior clerk, mistook “Copeman” for “Campbell” and set them aside. Campbell was convinced he was being poisoned by stuff sprayed from aircraft going over his house. Various authorities had assured him that the sound made by the planes over his Kitchener house was them throttling down the jets for descent at Pearson Airport in Toronto, and they’d refused to do more tests on the samples of blood, feces, urine, and skin cells on Scotch tape he kept sending them. There was a collection jar, in fact, at the lab to get money to spray his house with a crop duster and justify his concern, even if he were to subsequently die of whatever they could drop on him.

So the rock samples didn’t get the attention they deserved until the clerk took a “mental health” day somewhat later and his substitute, who could read better, noted the difference between the names.

It was Aklif who warned the Bonisteel Brothers. They were just pulling into the parking lot when the convenience-store owner, who'd left his layabout son-in-law running the store and eating chocolate bars nonstop, opened the back door to the Buick and got in. In keeping with a feeling that they shouldn't drive anything for too long, the brothers had leased an American car to keep hidden. What kind of terrorist, they figured, would drive a Buick?

Terry, who was driving, since Tom had his hand bandaged from an accident in one of the chemical labs, almost drove into the wall of the apartment building. If you're a would-be terrorist and someone jumps into the back of your car, you panic. Hitting the gas is a distinct possibility, no matter which direction you've got the car pointing.

"Greetings!" said Aklif. Both Tom and Terry tried to get out, but Tom, with his hand bandaged, just managed to lock all four doors, and neither of them were in a state to figure out what was wrong. This tendency to be confused by mechanical devices when under stress didn't bode well for their career as bomb-makers.

"I am a friend!" Aklif shouted. "I am from the Corner Convenience right below your apartment!"

Since the Bonisteel Brothers had avoided all the stores in the building, for security reasons, they didn't recognize Aklif. But they stopped trying to get out. "What do you want?" Tom croaked.

"I am here to tell you that a man from the Canadian government has been around asking questions."

"Questions? About us?" The brothers asked, paling.

"He is asking about Abdul." Aklif was met with blank stares. "The Yemeni tailor in the building." Aklif pointed in the general direction. "He also asks questions of me because I am a Muslim." This was a lie: Aklif had converted to Christianity just before he made a hasty exit from his homeland. But nobody knew about this except his Lebanese wife and kids.

"And us? We are..."

"You are of course good Christian Canadians with grandfathers from Scotland and grandmothers from Québec and you are driving a good Christian car and are looking very, very Christian and Canadian and harmless, so there is no need for me to tell you about this man from the government who is investigating a Muslim from Yemen and asking questions of an Afghani such as myself and looking for suspicious activity, is there?"

"No. Of course not." Terry noted that the man, whose name he didn't know, was wearing disposable gloves and a toque. He felt his pants get warm and wet.

"Then, if you will unlock the car door, I will get back to my store before my good-for-nothing son-in-law eats everything of value in it."

Terry managed to get the door locks unlocked. "The tailor? From Yemen?"

"He's interested in the Yemeni, or so he says. I am nervous because he is still here, with the redheaded woman in the back." Aklif got out. "Of course, this does not matter to you, since you are westerners." He closed the door gently. Then he tapped on the window. When it was down an inch, he said, "I tried to point him also to those two bearded fellows in apartments three and five,

but I'm not sure it will do anything. He may check out the whole building, anyway. I thought you'd like to know."

Tom and Terry looked at the illegal apartment twenty feet away, then at each other. They backed out and headed down Regina Street. Waterloo's Regina Street had once been known as "vagina street" to the locals, because of the number of free-enterprise and untaxed enterprises that had been located there. Then, in the eighties, the municipality had put in a parking garage and the municipal offices. Money still went to the street, but the pleasure was less and the satisfaction harder to find from the unsmiling women who frowned at your unpaid tax bills.

"What do you think?" Tom asked Terry when they'd settled into a seat at a Chinese restaurant. Nobody suspected Chinese restaurants of anything other than economic or gastronomical crimes, so they felt safe there.

Terry glanced at the Buick outside. The bomb-making equipment was hidden inside a spare tire which cleverly came apart when needed.

"Well, I think we can just wait it out. If they're suspicious, the last thing we want to do is make any sudden moves. We're not ready with the package yet, anyway."

"You think we should go back to the apartment?"

"Spring break starts tomorrow. We can take a vacation, I think. In town."

"But we'll keep away from the apartment as much as possible?"

"For sure."

The rest of the meal was in a strained silence. They tried to eat foods without pork in them, but it was hard to tell, so they had a lot of plain rice with vegetables. It was probably good for them.

Just as they were leaving, Tom said. "I gotta get the bandage off. We're too visible with it."

"We might want to encourage this government guy to look closer at the bearded guys in the other apartments." Terry left a tiny tip. He added, "One's a poet. We might need a poem, too."

"Only if the government guy doesn't leave in a day or two."

"And if he doesn't?"

"We should plant some evidence in the poet's room. The authorities will waste time investigating them."

"You think?"

"Yah."

"What kind of evidence?"

A pause. "Cell phone parts. I'll get an old, untraceable cell phone and leave parts in the poet's apartment."

His brother nodded.

Wendy sat in her house in Ayr and watched the sunlight on the bare branches. She had a good book but wasn't concentrating, and had baked enough to use up all the flour and chocolate in the house.

Tonight she'd go back to Waterloo for the last time. If she wasn't going to find Agnew this time, then that was the way it was going to be. She'd file for divorce, sell the house, maybe hire a private detective and hit man. She didn't feel like it but she prayed for help. She didn't get much this time.

Barbara and Britney went for a noon-hour walk with Charles. Shyness and circumstance had left him as much a virgin as Britney, and what Barbara was saying filled him with awe and wonder. Barbara did all the talking to him, with Britney walking on the other side of Barbara, saying nothing and looking at the ground.

"Me and Britney?"

"That's the idea. It's what she wants to do."

"With me." He had a hard time grasping the concept. "And you and Chad."

"You and Britney get one side of the bed and me and Chad get the other."

"Well, yeah, of course." He could barely walk just trying to wrap his mind around it. "But don't you and Chad want to do it at some other time?"

"We already done that. Now we're ready for this." She hadn't actually asked Chad yet, but she knew he'd think it was a great idea. If sex was involved, Chad would think it was a good idea. "Don't worry about being inexperienced, like Britney here's a virgin, you know. It'll be her first time."

"Oh. That's great then."

"And if you guys want, we can switch partners afterwards. You and me and Chad and Britney."

The sky trembled, and Charles had a hard time breathing. "Wow."

There were two elderly volunteers at the Salvation Army Thrift Store counter when Terry walked up with a basket full of odds and ends and a cell phone. The woman with the pink hair held up the cell phone. "Here's another one!" she said in a loud voice to the guy with more wrinkles than hair. "We should be charging more for them." She looked at Terry. "What are you going to use it for? I was told these don't work any more." She squinted up at him.

"It's a toy," he said. "For my niece."

"She'll probably swallow the buttons and choke." The bald guy rang it in.

Back at the apartment, Lea's parking space was still empty, as were all the others, so Terry figured he could get away with things if he were quick. But, at the top of the stairs, he passed Agnew's apartment and impulsively turned the knob. The door opened. Terry slid in, quietly, and looked around. There wasn't much in the room. He found a space under the sink to hide the cell phone. It was in pieces, with wires pulled out of the ring assembly. Wrapped around it, with an elastic, was a computer-printed poem:

On the Subway, a man from west often said,
People will wish they'd stayed home in bed
And when the trains go past
To the sound of a blast
Some of them will wish they were dead.

As he left the parking lot did, Copeman and Lea pulled in, in Copeman's rental SUV.

Copeman and Lea had driven around, asking a few questions, but they weren't able to get a handle on the locations of either Poe or Agnew. They could understand Agnew finding a place to hide, in case the apartment weren't enough, but Poe? What did a poet do. What was his last name?

They talked about this in the Warm Buns Bakery over coffee and cinnamon buns, until Wyvalla or Windsong turned up to offer another cup of coffee. "Any idea what that poet upstairs does in his off time?" he asked her, not knowing who else to ask.

"He drives around from bakery to bakery, checking out girl's buns." Ms Windsong poured Copeman more coffee.

"What?" The agent wasn't often taken by surprise, but this one did it.

"He's going to write a book on cinnamon buns. He visits each bakery and rates their buns, and the girls who serve them."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"How do you rate? I mean your buns."

Windsong (at least she knew who she was) laughed. "He promised he was going to do this place last. I don't know why, but that's what he said."

"Must be nice to be able to have the money do just do something like that." The agent sipped approvingly. The coffee wasn't all that good, but he wanted to keep her talking. "And do it in a BMW."

Windsong leaned over a bit. "He and his wife split up. She got the house, and he got the car and some money. That's what he said, anyway. I don't know if it's true or not."

"What about the priest?"

"Nosy bugger, aren't you?" She laughed and went back to check the bread.

"What do you think?" he asked Lea.

She smiled her usual smile. "Nothing we can do until they get back here. They're always here in the evening."

He checked his watch. "I want to get into their rooms," he said quietly.

Poe was, in fact, in Millbank, at Maud's Country Bakery. He sat at one of the two small tables and watched the people, over a paper plate of cinnamon buns and a cup of tea. Country bakeries, and any country eating establishment around the Waterloo area specialized in lots of baked goods, and large quantities of plain food. Quantity seemed to matter more than quality in the area.

He contemplated the totality of it all. The cinnamon buns were good, without being great, he noted in his book. Kept warm rather than being just baked or being warmed. A bit more cinnamon would be nice: that was unusual: most places added too much.

The ambience was old building with a bright bakery area built in. The place was clean, and painted with lots of white and a bit of light blue. It hadn't broken anybody's bank account paying for an interior decorator. He made more notes.

Tammi, the young woman who served the poet, was the best of the trio of factors at the place. She was about twenty, he guessed, and blonde. There were lots of blondes in Waterloo county and the surrounding areas, not only because so many of the original settlers had been blonde, but because that set a standard of some sort, and there was a higher incidence of young women going blonde than in other parts of Ontario, where red had been the thing for a couple of years and was on its way out. Poe liked blondes, so he was happy.

She was cute, too, with uncommon grey eyes and a classical figure that she was probably trying to trim down to skinny. Not much chance of that, working in a bakery, Poe felt.

Poe had written acres of poems in his time, from being a precocious child through an intense and troubled teenhood. But he'd been good-looking all his life, and that had kept him going through school. He'd dropped out of the University of Toronto to walk the streets and write poetry, working as a janitor, then as a copy writer at a publishers. When it was discovered he had a natural talent for programming, he got a job in which worked mornings for four hours, writing and debugging code in a four-room business that customized programs for industry. This was back at the beginning of time, it seemed later, and in one bad month they paid him in shares instead of money. He nearly starved that month, and wrote a long ode to Toronto on the backs of the share forms.

The shares, surprisingly, never amounted to a great deal, but when he sold them, he kept himself going till he met Anna. Anna's folks were from the Bridle Path, which looks down on Rosedale people as cheap. Anna'd had everything growing up, and it turned out when she was twenty that she wanted a good-looking poet.

It hadn't lasted, of course, with her parents sniping at his walking the streets and writing poetry, and after two years they bought him out with a bit of cash. Cash suited him just fine: it kept him going for the next ten years until he got rounded up by another rich woman, this one from Sudbury, where poetry isn't the primary product.

When that marriage, too, dissolved, Poe went back to poems and girlfriends. He'd never had a strong sex drive and the times between girlfriends didn't bother him. But once again he had money, and a good car, from the divorce settlement.

He'd taken the car and the money and driven to Waterloo. There were new streets to walk and new poems to write. A book about cinnamon buns and bakeries would do it, he'd decided. He was in no hurry: when the money ran out some girl would take him in; some always had.

Tammi asked him what he was doing with the notebook – writing reviews or doing homework or what. Poe explained about his poetry project and Tammi listened intently. Her mother needed this guy, she decided, since he was a bit too old for Tammi herself. But he left before she could get her mother down there, taking a pie and his notes with him.

Five limericks for Maud's bakery, he thought. He'd got tired of the classical forms of poetry and was into a limerick phase. He worked on the first of them as he drove back to Waterloo.

In the Audio-Visual department of the University of Waterloo, Agnew was again the object of Clyde's attempts to get the ex-priest laid properly. "You got to try Alexander's Place," Clyde assured Agnew.

"I've tried all the other places."

"You sure have. I think you've converted more people than Billy Graham ever did. But Alexander's is loud, really loud, and full of broads with only one thing on their minds."

"You said that about the last three places," Agnew said, "and that didn't work out so well."

"I saved this one for last. Just in case the others didn't work out."

Agnew looked at him skeptically. "I'd suspect you're just doing this to entertain yourself if it weren't that I actually do get interested women wherever you send me."

"Well, then, you've got to stop being so honest. Lie a little. Won't hurt you, will it?"

The priest shrugged. "I don't know. I like to leave lying up to God. Us humans are supposed to be better than that."

"Man, you are one strange cat."

Abdul, still wondering about the girls he'd seen in the unused room upstairs, phoned the current owners. They were the relatives of the man he'd bought the Clean Lines Tailor Shop from. The apartment room had not come with the Tailor shop, although Abdul would have liked it, as he expected to have his family over from Yemen soon. But the earlier tailor, before his death from blood poisoning, had leased the room for a girlfriend, and had paid in full through July.

The family's lawyers, being Waterloo lawyers, and not that careful with other people's money, had advised the family that for four months rent, the last month of which they wouldn't get back anyway, just to leave the place empty. There had been a thought that the previous tailor's sister might come to visit for a couple of weeks, and with her nasty kid and yowling Siamese cat, the apartment would come in handy. The same would be true if her mother came for a visit: anything to keep distance would be welcome.

The tailor's brother-in-law, was, then, content that the paid apartment stay paid until the term ran out in July. Of course, every man has his fantasies, and the way Shirlee, at the office, managed to run into him so often, especially in the small and crowded photocopier room where her breasts so often had collisions with him. And once she'd reached for a sheet she'd dropped and managed to rub him on the crotch on the way back up. He wasn't sure these were all accidents.

Not that he was likely to do anything, or that a motel room wasn't available just out of town, but an available apartment, with that huge bed the tailor had put there for his own girlfriend, somehow warmed him in the places he liked to be warmed, including his fantasy sex life.

So they didn't go to John M. Brubacher, owner of the Dayton Block, to try to arrange a sublet or whatever, when the will was going to take months to probate anyway. They just hid the key in the bedroom, in the shoebox in the closet, from where it was borrowed long enough for their daughter, Barbara, to make a copy.

Barbara had been worried about a locksmith actually making her a house key – older people didn't trust teenagers for reasons best known to themselves – so she'd arranged to wreck her key to her parents house. Her mother loaned her her own key, and a note to the locksmith that it was okay to make a copy. The apartment key, which Barbara said was a back door key to the house, was copied at the same time.

But Abdul knew only that teens were lurking in a supposedly empty room, and wanted to check things out.

The former tailor's sister, in response to his question about the apartment, assured him that things hadn't changed; it would remain vacant until July, after which time Mr. Brubacher would probably be happy to rent it to him. She asked about his family and clucked in sympathy to learn that there had been holdups in the processing of forms.

Abdul thanked her, assured her the tailoring business was doing just fine, and wished her a happy springtime.

He didn't mention that he thought he'd seen her daughter in the apartment. It was, after all, none of his business, and while he wasn't going to approve, this wasn't Yemen. Besides, life in a mid-eastern country had taught him to hoard knowledge that others didn't have; it was cheap, but sometimes valuable.

He made a mental note that he should, if possible, let the daughter know that he'd seen her. A secret kept might, someday return a favor. Not sexual – he was under no illusions on that score – but somewhere, sometime, something, if only a returned silence when he needed one.

When Copeman's samples were eventually analyzed, he wasn't phoned right away. Analysts aren't big on following instructions about things other than analysis, and the clerk who had originally catalogued them with Campbell's shit did get his promotion, and a transfer. The new clerk, not yet trained in procedures, took two days to find the note and another day to get someone to confirm that he was to follow the instructions on it. Around CSIS, it wasn't always

the right thing to do to follow instructions; sometimes you have to check that the guy giving the instructions has the right to give those instructions, and then you've got to check that, even if he or she has the right to give the instructions, it's politically wise to do so immediately, not-so-immediately, or not at all and claim you lost them.

In this time, a number of people were consulted and the fact that a chemical very similar to the explosive C4 had been used in Ayr Ontario, in relation to an inquiry being made by Copeman in relation to a Yemeni immigrant whose cousin had been killed riding in a terrorist's car, was passed around.

There were thousands of spies fired when the Soviet Union fell. A number were kept in each of the former Soviet states, and some got desk jobs at home. And a few, with only a few months to go before their retirement plan kicked in, took dead-end jobs in places like Canada, where they weren't supposed to be.

But being in places you weren't supposed to be and doing things you weren't supposed to do were never problems for the CIA. Camille, infiltrated into CSIS two months before (they thought they were infiltrating the CIA), picked up the news and passed it to The Agency outside Washington. It was the first piece of information she'd got that hadn't been taken from a newspaper.

Not that the CIA was noted for getting everything straight.

Paris, Ontario, isn't an awful lot like Paris, France. Its sole claim to fame – and nobody outside the town was aware of it – was that Plaster of Paris was named after the Ontario town, not the French city. Where the Nith River (which also flowed past Ayr) lost itself into the Grand River (which also flowed past Waterloo), the water had cut into a cliff and, years before, revealed the band of calcium carbonate that was the main ingredient of the mixture. For years people mined it, and it was used for plaster and drywall. Eventually, however, chemical processes were developed that didn't require the stuff from the riverbank, and the mine was closed.

Paris then got into the train business. The flats just to the north of the town were conveniently placed midway between Windsor and Toronto, so a repair facility was set up. The tracks were still there, strung out in parallel lines, but nothing sat on them anymore but a few abandoned boxcars and half-cars full of wooden railway ties that had been ripped-up from lines elsewhere and replaced.

But The Bunnery downtown, where the two rivers joined, still claimed to make legendary cinnamon buns. On a warm day in summer it was possible to sit on the balcony and look up both rivers a ways. The Grand ran clearer than the Nith, and was wide, but shallow. Gulls waited on rocks in midstream, and herons tried various locations looking for small bass and minnows.

That, of course, was in summer. However warm the spring day, the patio wasn't going to be opened by this management until mid-April. And both rivers ran fast, deep, and full of mud and

chunks of ice this day. The locals kept a wary eye for ice jams on both rivers. One good ice jam, and the rivers could take a short cut through the downtown: it had happened before.

The Bunnery was a disappointment, Poe found. The new owners not only refused to open the patio doors so he could watch the brown waters, but the tea and bakery place was now a coffee and treats place. Forty-two different combinations of coffee were available, he gloomily, if inaccurately, estimated. And various slices of cake, most of it with fancy swirls included when served. Breads were probably baked locally, and the coffee beans helicoptered in from Hawaii, he gloomily estimated. But the cinnamon bun was a day old at best, and cold. When he asked, the girl behind the counter with a cheerful grin pasted on, overheated it, and served it on a square white plate with four lines of caramel elegantly twirled around it.

For tea, there was a selection of twenty types. Pick your own bag, get a cup of hot water yourself, and be seated. It was, it must be known, a better way to get what you wanted, but he missed the dribbly stainless teapot, the standard teabag, and the service. And for all the increased price, there was still no place to put the teabag, should you want to remove it before you had lumberjack tea, except onto the plate with the cinnamon bun. Where it soaked into the bottom of the bun. I am a poet, he told himself, an impartial observer of humanity and recorder of its foibles and triumphs. I do not get involved. It didn't always work. It seldom worked, but he always tried.

Still, it wasn't a good scene. Poe took out his phone, searched through his file list on the display, and called up Cynthia, who lived in Paris, above the hardware store, less than a block away.

"Hi," he said when the answering machine cut in. "I'm..."

The phone was picked up and a delighted voice cried, "Poe! Where are you?"

"At something called 'The Bunnery,' down beside the water. I wondered if I could buy you..."

"You're here?! In Paris? Come right up. You know where I live."

"You're sure?" he asked, as if, from the tone in her voice, he had any doubt.

"The Bunnery's gone all to hell since they got the new owners. Get the hell up here."

"The chocolate deserts look good."

"I'll put chocolate on my thighs. You can lick it off. I'll be expecting you in four minutes." She hung up before he could say anything.

It took him three minutes, including the time it took him to make notes for his upcoming book.

Upstairs in the Dayton Block John Hyde, owner proprietor, and curmudgeon of the Leather Weather Supplies store, carefully opened the door to each of the four apartments. When you worked with fine leather, picking locks was not a big problem. The empty apartment was still empty. The unlocked apartments of Agnew and Poe were suitably barren of real human habitat. As was the apartment of the Bonisteel Brothers, students at the university.

Hyde carefully locked the door to apartment one when the oddness of it all struck him. Not that it was unnatural to have only men in the four apartments. That was probably just a statistical coincidence, even if it ruined any plans he had to put miniature cameras into the rooms.

The oddness was the students' room. Not that there was anything incriminating in it. It was almost as bare as the other rooms, but with pizza boxes.

No signs of party life, no beer bottles, no posters of unclad women or men. Just living space. What was up? These guys were engineers, for cripes sake! Engineers. It wasn't natural at all.

He decided to tell Copeman. Perhaps there was something in this building to be suspicious about after all.

The President of the United States got some of the world's best coffee for his breakfast. He probably deserved it.

At the table he looked through the pile of papers in front of him, making notes. He stopped at one paper. It had a brief description of the attack on the car in Yemen, which he'd been told about a couple of weeks before, with an additional note that C4 was found in the residence of one of the terrorist's brothers in Canada.

Canada again, he thought. He pushed the intercom. "Can you set me up for a call to the Canadian Prime Minister," he said. "Thanks."

"Alexander's Place? That's what Clyde said?" Poe squinted at Agnew in the little restaurant

"He says he saved it for last because it was a sure thing."

"I'd think with your skills at saving souls, nothing is a sure thing. Has it occurred to you that God tricked you, knowing you'd be out here saving more souls than you could preaching sermons every week in that little church?"

"I thought of that. It doesn't compute. If God works that way, then nothing's right anywhere and I might as well do nothing."

"I think you just ran something by me that didn't stop. But, hey, we're working with you, not me." The restaurant was mostly empty at this time of day. Agnew had just got off work at the university, and Poe had met him on this plaza. Neither had any idea Copeman was trying to find them, or that the Prime Minister was in consultation with the army at the moment.

"How did the search for good buns go today?" Agnew knew Poe had planned to spend the day driving around looking for quality cinnamon buns.

"It always goes well. Good or bad, each bakery is a poem. I'll need the full range before I can get a book done. Millbank had fairly good stuff; Paris had a nice view."

"The view was the best part?"

"It was."

"Two bakeries was all you need for a day's work?"

"When one has a quest, one doesn't want to get it over with too quick. I'm stretching it out. I did some shopping, visited an old friend. Still running better than your quest."

Poe squinted into the afternoon sunlight coming through the window. “Got any suggestions. Any useful ones, that is.”

“Well, you’re going to try again this evening, of course, and let’s hope you get lucky this time. But you might want to try talking with God again. Just in case instructions have changed.”

“I’ve been down by the river twice since then. Nothing down there but snow and dog poop.”

The poet laughed. “Maybe you need a traveling quest. Maybe God’s waiting for you on a mountain somewhere.”

“Maybe God doesn’t exist. Maybe I should take His word for it.” Agnew ordered a beer to go with his toasted bacon and tomato sandwich. “I’m getting kind of frustrated here, so to speak. You got a mountain for me?”

Poe laughed. “Mount Moriah. Mount Pelion. Mount... Well there are hills all over this province called mount this or that. Depends on the landscape around it. Mount Brydges, out past London must be all of fifty feet high. But someone had a sense of humour, or something.”

“You think I should stick to in-province mountains?” Agnew looked about to sneer, a habit he hadn’t has as a priest.

“For convenience, I’ve decided to keep to Ontario on my cinnamon bun quest. If you want to take a road trip to look for God, I could come with you. If you want.”

The priest thought a long time, finishing his sandwich before saying anything. Poe had a vegetable wrap and a Coke and watched the parking lot. He was disappointed in his cinnamon quest so far. After years of producing tomes and booklets, to various praise and minimal sales, he’d just about finished his writings as a poet. There hadn’t been much new to say for a couple of years. This last one had seemed a way to say, “screw you” to his muse and thumb his nose at the world. But it didn’t really interest him. As a poet, he’d done heavy stuff since he was a teen. Now he was planning to write limericks to buns. He’d never been the type to be depressed, but you really had to wonder, he thought, where you’re going with this. And he wondered what could be next.

Poe decided, abruptly, that he needed to talk to God, too. If only to be assured that He didn’t exist. It was while coming to this conclusion that he realized a poetic biography of Agnew’s quest to break all God’s rules might be quite interesting. Spicier than cinnamon, it would be.

Agnew broke into his thoughts. “Where is Mount Moriah? In the bible it’s the place where Isaac almost got sacrificed by his father. The Temple of Solomon was built on Moriah, some say. A few nutcases argue that Jesus was crucified there.”

“This is just a hill, you know. Nothing much on it but trees and squirrels.”

“It’s a strange coincidence, if you ask me. When God was talking to me, he said ‘This is not Mount Moriah.’ I wondered what he meant by that. And now I meet a poet who can take me there. Strange, don’t you think?”

“I can’t take you to the original place. Just to a hill in Ontario. But we can go if you want to. It’ll be a road trip.”

“A road trip.” Agnew liked that sound.

“Call it a pilgrimage if you want. I don’t care.”

“Will you write a poem about it?”

“I’ll write an epic,” the poet assured him. “If necessary, there’s a Mount Moriah village in Newfoundland and Mount Moriah wilderness area in Nevada. After that, we’ll probably have to go to Israel.”

“We’ll start with the close one,” Agnew said. “And work from there if nothing happens.”

“And there’s a zillion churches, religious schools, and Masonic lodges with that name.”

“They’re not the mountain; they’re just named after the mountain.”

“But,” Poe pointed out, “so is this Ontario hill.”

Agnew shrugged. “God seems to like solitude, or would, if he existed. And natural features.”

“Didn’t that outdoor bit bother you churchy types? You were always putting up big buildings.”

“Nah. Got right cold outside. Or hot, or dusty or whatever. Congregation spent too much time swatting insects and watching for scorpions,”

“Lot fewer people going to church these days,” the poet offered.

“Lot fewer people reading poems these days,” the priest mentioned. “You ever get any voices telling you poetry doesn’t exist?”

“Every time I read somebody else’s poems.”

“Poets are their own God?”

“We try to be.” Poe got up. “Want to go home now? Back to the apartment?”

Agnew left a tip on the table. “Not me. You can. I only eat and sleep there. It’s too early to sleep and I just ate. Got a couple of hours to put in before I try Alexander’s.”

“Any more sins you can do?”

“I could look for some clothes with linen and wool both in them, or have a blood sausage.”

“Not going to bugger some gay dude.”

“I’m rather hoping the world ends before I actually get to that one,” Agnew said, wryly.

In the end, they motored off to St. Jacobs, and shopped the big box stores just outside town. Scored on the sausages – the local German population is always willing to sell blutwurst – but, while there were lots of polyester-cotton and other blends, the exact linen-wool blend specifically mentioned in the bible was nowhere to be found. Both men rather enjoyed the time together, and didn’t care if other people assumed they were a couple of gays out evaluating fashion.

Back at the Dayton Block, Copeman and Lea waited in vain for either Poe or Agnew to come back. Copeman wasn’t sure what he was going to do, other than interview each again.

After an hour or so in bed with Lea, and an instant coffee, the agent phoned CSIS. It took a while, but he finally got through to the clerk, who had to be talked through the authorization procedures so he could release the information to the guy who’d asked for the analysis. He had to call back, after going through channels to be assured he could do so, and that took time. But eventually, he confirmed to Copeman that the explosive was C4, or something reasonably similar to it.

After hanging up, Copeman told Lea. "I can't believe that I came here to investigate a Muslim from Yemen, and now it looks like a born-in-Milverton Anglican priest is getting instructions from God and dicking around with C4. Where the hell did he get the stuff?"

"You think he's colluding with someone else?"

"Only the poet, as far as we know now. And the poet doesn't look like the type. Neither of them do." Almost twenty years in the secret service, and he was telling his investigation thoughts to a woman he didn't know and whose background he hadn't checked.

"Now what," Lea asked, heading for the shower.

"Now I check their rooms."

He was perfectly competent at lockpicking, but didn't have to: the doors weren't locked. He found the one cell phone in Agnew's room and the other, with the limerick, in Poe's room. He found nothing else.

Both phones, he knew, were enough to sent an agent's blood pressure through the roof. The idea was, when someone called that phone, the phone rang the little ringer assembly with a few jolts of electricity, even if the jolts were modulated into a tune. If you took the wires from the ringer assembly, you had two wires that would send out electricity when the phone rang. Put the wires into an explosive device, and leave everything in a backpack somewhere. Then call your cell phone from a safe distance away.

It was a lot safer and more reliable than the old clockworks and timing assemblies. It was how they'd done it in Madrid and London. The limerick sure seemed to implicate the poet.

But he couldn't figure out why there was no other evidence of bomb-making or contact with someone who would actually have a reason to blow something up. It just didn't add up, somehow.

But, as he told a naked Lea a few minutes later, it was his duty to report anything this suspicious. It was only the screw-up that had got him into trouble the year before that made him hesitate. He decided to wait till the two came home, and talk to them about the weather and life and all that, under the pretext of still investigating Abdul.

"You think the Canadians can handle it?" the President asked.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff snorted. "They're a warren of terrorists, just practicing till they can walk into the U.S. and blow up things. Canadian army's a laugh and the security service couldn't guard a Wal-Mart on a moonlit night." Being not all that well informed didn't slow his opinions much. He divided the world into countries he'd have to invade someday and countries not worth invading. He had game plans for all of them.

"Do we have any agents there?"

"I'll check with the agency. But we might want to send in a special squad to take this Abdul guy out before he slips away."

"Get me a game plan. Can we use a SEAL team?" The president was a big fan of the special navy teams.

“SEALs?” It seemed silly to the military man. This was more of a CIA stab-in-the-alley thing. But he knew better than to argue with his boss, like his predecessor had. “I’ll see if I can get a few of them. This shouldn’t take long.” Not, he thought, like invading a Muslim country or something.

Alexander’s Place just started getting lively about eight, and Poe and Agnew were there at the bar when people came in. Nobody paid any attention to the seven TV screens, which had their sound off anyway; this was obviously a place where the main business wasn’t watching sports. Hooking up was the modern term, and it was a place full of amateur hookers.

Or so Poe told Agnew. Not that either of them knew the truth of it. Poe’d never had to do the bar scene to get a girl, and Agnew had avoided them till his revelation down by the river. The fifteen other bars in Waterloo, Kitchener, and Cambridge hadn’t seemed all that different, except maybe a little less intense. The others had had people there who wanted to stay in groups; Alexander’s was for people who were more interested in coupling. You could feel it.

The ages of the people ranged from mid-twenties to mid-forties, for the most part, and people seemed to say hello to others in approximately their own age groups. Poe wondered if there were bars for seventy-year olds somewhere.

In Ayr, Wendy backed out of her driveway for her last night’s search of the singles bars of Waterloo. Her brothers had already advised her to give up, saying she was better off without him. But she was a farm girl; she’d grown up not giving up on animals that her parents had advised putting down, and sometimes, just sometimes, she won.

She had the usual list of bars, and much thought and analysis hadn’t done anything. She’d start with the A’s and see how far she got before she got discouraged. Alexander’s Place was first on the list. It would be her second time at the place.

At the back of the Dayton Block, Copeman and Lea had got around to a topic they’d been avoiding for a while. Over plates of lamb chops and boiled potatoes, she’d asked if he’d tried to investigate her.

“No,” he said. “I haven’t tried.”

“I’m not using my real name,” she said.

“I figured that. You seemed to be a person hiding out, and I expected it would be under an alias.”

“You’re not worried?”

“You don’t seem to fit the profile of a terrorist or spy. If you’re a criminal, I don’t want to know about it.”

She seemed about to say something, but winced, then settled into that beatific smile again. “Tea?”

“Sure,” he said.

The Bonisteel Brothers were safely in their other apartment, the one their father knew about, and the one they stayed in when not planning to bomb something. It was completely free of

anything dangerous or any clues in that direction. Here they used Saudi names, Hassan and Mohammed. They'd invited a few friends over for a party.

John Hyde had closed his leather tooling shop a few minutes before Copeman and Lea had arrived: his suspicions about the students could wait another day.

Abdul had closed his tailor shop. He was back in his rented room across town, wondering if and when he'd ever see his family.

Aklif was still in his convenience store, but he was getting ready to close. There wasn't much traffic in the evenings. In summer it would be different.

The Bonisteel Brothers were willing to wait till the government agent had left before they did anything further – even return to the Dayton Block apartment to complete their bombs, or set out a few clues that pointed towards Muslim fundamentalists after the bomb went off.

“Do you think,” Terry asked, “they might be on to us?” They were sitting in the central court of the university student association building. Terry was sure that any efforts to bug the place, even if someone tried, would be frustrated by the echoes and constant noise of the cavernous space. Like many of the university's buildings, it was built in what architects (and their critics) call “brutalism,” the use of bare gray concrete, usually with the marks of the original wooden forms still showing. Architects like it because it's easy to design with – you can deal with large shapes and spaces without worrying about decoration. Institutions like it because it's cheap: you don't have to worry about decoration. Put in a few chairs, let the students decorate the walls, and you have everything you need. Except a sense of warmth, or course. The place looked like an abandoned concrete factory with a Tim Horton's outlet at one end.

Students, however, have to meet someplace other than classes and beds, so there was a constant traffic. Hence the echoes, and the safety from listening devices that Terry wanted.

“I think,” Tom said, still favoring his damaged (but now unbandaged) hand, “that they've bugged the dorms of every middle-eastern student in Canada. “But that scan we did last month didn't show anything at our places, either the dorm or the downtown flat, so maybe they haven't got around to us yet, or the Canadian intelligence service is running way behind.”

“It's the Americans I worry about.”

“They've probably got so much data coming in they'll be a year behind in processing it. But I'm getting nervous waiting. I'd sooner get this over with.”

“Well, April first is still the logical date, what with the conference in Jerusalem and all. But maybe we can take a dry run to Toronto. March break starts tomorrow, and it would be normal to go somewhere.”

“Just to test things out?”

“Sure. Nothing serious. Just take a ride on the subway, eat at a few ethnic restaurants, come home. We'll carry a few books in our backpacks. See if it looks good.”

“Well, I guess.”

“Women.” said Poe, sitting at the table with Agnew in Alexander’s Place about the time it got nicely full. There were times it would have been busier, but something to do with the upcoming break for university students had, somehow, kept people away. Maybe some single parents had to stay home for their student-kids. Or maybe there were fewer places to take a pick-up when you did get one, what with your history-major daughter back home.

“Pardon.” Agnew was checking out the possibilities, one by one. He wasn’t concerned with anything but availability, which put him in line with most of the guys there.

“Women,” continued Poe, “are like poems. Half of their beauty comes right from their souls. The rest is the result of hard work.”

“You think that’s profound?” Agnew had got past some of his original problems at the bars, but his lack of success was making him crabby, and the closer another try got, the crabbier he got.

“I figured you wanted something deeper? In this place?” He snickered.

“Don’t snicker. It probably puts them off.” Agnew noticed a thirty-something brunette that had her eye on him. He got up and went to sit beside her at the bar after the previous habitant had abruptly left.

“Can I...” He was going to say “buy you a drink,” but she’d obviously just got one, a tall greenish something or other. Agnew wasn’t too sure of anything beyond a dry wine. “sit here and say hello,” he finished.

“I’ve been hoping you would. Get yourself a drink.” She waved at the bartender, and, miracle of miracles, he was there at once. It was indeed a slow night. “This guy wants to buy himself a drink,” she said.

Agnew ordered a rye and coke. “So what do you do?” he asked her.

“Well,” she said, “while my husband’s out of town, I come to bars and find nice guys to entertain me. Are you entertaining in a bed?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I can’t say the topic of anything but practicality ever came up.”

“Do you quote scripture when you’re coming?” she giggled.

“What?”

“Oh,” she laughed, as Agnew paid for his drink, “you’re getting famous. I expect to be nose-deep in Epistles to the Corinthians by ten.”

“Ah,” he sighed, draining most of his drink and considering ordering a bottle and a straw.

“On the other hand,” she said, “I was a nun for almost a year, and I never did satisfy my hankering for a priest.

“I was never a priest.”

“In this world, you do the best you can. Want to come up to my place and see if God comes before we do?” She recrossed her legs and leaned forward a bit, looking him deep in the eyes.

“That,” he said, “is the nicest thing anyone’s said to me in a long time.” Which, of course, is when he looked up to find Wendy standing beside him.

“You think,” the Prime Minister said, “that the army’s the right thing for this? I’d think this would be more of a police operation?”

The military man in front of him had little regard for the police. “The Mounties can’t figure out where a door is any more. They’re all busy trying to cover their asses over that last scandal.

“CSIS?”

“Not supposed to operate in Canada. Charter, you know.”

“That’s true. But do you think a bunch of tanks is going to do what we want? It’ll sure make good news copy.”

“We don’t have any more tanks. They’re all in Afghanistan, blowing up mud huts.”

“Well, then?”

“I’ve got three operatives on the JTF2 team that can deliver these guys without problems.”

“JTF2? JTF2?” The joint task force two was Canada’s elite anti-terrorist squad, with all that that entailed. They’d replaced the Somalia-disgraced Special Parachute Regiment since every government needed, or felt they needed, such a team. For a few years it had been a criminal offence even to mention their existence, but one day that band of criminals in a place where nobody can be prosecuted, the government in the house of commons, had revealed it for a hoped-for boost in popularity or something.

Like the SAS and SEALs and other equivalents, the training started with a lot of volunteers and just drove them through mental and physical exercises until they were down to the number needed. The survivors justifiably felt themselves tougher than nails. For the next few years most of them spent their time in Afghanistan, shooting bearded people.

The problem with such a team was that it worked well overseas. In a mud hut in the hills south of Kandahar, you could shoot your way into a building, eliminate the ones who looked suspicious, apologize for the innocents you’d shot by mistake, and leave. In your own country, killing a guy who was coming at you with a weapon could still result in five years of court cases, and as for the ones you killed by accident – well, that could bring down a government.

Which is why, if a member of an anti-terrorist squad broke into a building in Canada, the Prime Minister would want a description of each bad guy, complete with fingerprints, before authorizing you to shoot him in the toe. That was just the political reality.

“JTF2? Why, in God’s name? They can’t be set up against Canadian citizens.”

The army guy hesitated. “Ah, he said, “we had one of our JTF2 men in the area, on leave to visit his mother. And...” The Prime Minister wasn’t going to like this.

“And?” The Prime Minister looked at his watch. Not that he didn’t have time.

“He saw a guy he knew from training.”

“Another JTF person?”

“Actually, no.” Again a long hesitation. “A member of the SEALs.”

“SEALs? The Americans?”

“It could be a coincidence. They haven’t notified us. Maybe the guy was visiting old friends in town.”

The PM sat back. "Or maybe this got leaked to the Yanks and maybe they're treating us like a third-world country again." He sat back. "Just when the hell were you going to tell me this?"

"Ah, when we'd got a bit more information. As I said, those guys are US citizens and they have the right to visit our cities if they want. We were trying to find out if it was a legitimate business."

"What did you learn?"

"Nothing."

"Which does what?"

"Makes us very, very suspicious."

The PM shook his head. "Send in whoever you want. But," and he aimed his finger like a pistol, "if this gets embarrassing, you'll go down before I will. Control your men!"

"Got it. We'll send in a couple we can trust."

Christ, thought the PM, who can you trust in that outfit? They're kill-happy monsters, all of them.

Wendy was dialing her cell phone as she stood by the bar, face red. The nice woman at the bar, who'd been looking forward to some intimate religious counseling in her apartment bed, maybe twice by morning if she were lucky, had the sense to say "excuse me" and depart before things got tough.

The bartender, with fifteen years experience behind him, didn't get the tips his pretty assistant did, but he was paid twice as much for his experience. The Taiwanese group that owned Alexander's had learned to pay for talent where talent was needed. He instinctively moved in front of Agnew's table, after pressing the little button under the bar.

Karl, who supervised the kitchen staff (there was never more than two at any one time), made sure the janitors cleaned up afterwards, and checked the accounts, was also the bouncer. It was a pretty yuppie place, so no much bouncing was needed. He caught the light and the buzzer and came out to the bar, cleaning a mug. The mug was in fact polypropylene, padded inside, and used to tap people who needed tapping: Karl wasn't a dishwasher. The cleaning act just made his appearance a little less threatening.

The rest of the place didn't seem to notice, although a couple of women near the action at the bar decided it was time to visit the powder room when Wendy asked Agnew what the hell he was doing here. Agnew's wife didn't usually talk that way, but she wanted him to know she meant business.

Agnew knew what he was doing there, and while half his brain was disappointed in his failure to break the last commandment, there was also a sigh of relief in his heart. Before he'd had time to say anything, Poe was at his side.

"I'm his wife," Wendy told the poet. Who are you." She was still on the phone.

"I'm his lover. We live together in a basement apartment and bugger each every morning." Poe smiled his biggest smile.

“Bullshit,” Wendy said. She figured Agnew might do it with a guy once, after he’d run out of other sins, but he wasn’t going to change his sexuality. “Bob?” spoke into the phone. “I found him. Alexander’s Place on University, in the plaza. Okay.”

“You people were just leaving,” Karl announced, quietly, but with conviction in his voice. He had the assurance that convinced people what he said was the way it would be.

By this time, everyone in the place had become aware that there was an unsmiling and tense group of five people at the bar, and had turned to watch. This could get interesting.

It did. Poe picked up Wendy and set her onto a chair, while Agnew made a break for the door. Poe followed, a couple of seconds later, knocking over a couple of bar stools as he left. By the time Wendy made it into the March darkness, two cars were leaving the parking lot.

“Shit,” she said, running for her car.

Luck was with her, and she could pick out the odd tail lights of Poe’s car a couple of blocks away when she got to the street. She kept back, dialing her brother again, and giving her progress.

Poe and Agnew had no plan; they just naturally drove back to the Dayton Block. Poe, who was behind Agnew, checked his mirror, but couldn’t tell if they were being followed; he thought it unlikely, considering the speed at which they’d left the singles hangout.

At the Dayton Block, Agnew was frantic. “What do I do now?” he asked the poet.

“Well,” Poe said. “There’s always Mount Moriah. We can start the road trip now, in my car.”

“Good idea.”

“You think she’s following us?”

“I think she’ll find us, or her brothers will.”

“Well, then, why not leave your car. We can be off in a couple of minutes, for all we’ve got to pack.”

“You think?”

“Why not?”

“I’ll get packed. Oh, shit, what about my job at the university.”

“It’s March break. Maybe you can get it off.” Poe went ahead of Agnew up the wooden steps.

Agnew found Clyde’s at-home number and called. Clyde, of course, wanted to know how well the priest had done. He laughed and dropped the phone when Agnew told him.

“I’m running from my wife,” Agnew pleaded. “Can I get some time off from work?”

“To be honest,” Clyde said, “you’d be doing me a favor. My budget’s kind of tight, and if you take the two weeks without pay, we can afford to update some old software.”

“I can afford that.”

“See you in two weeks, then,” Clyde chuckled. “If you don’t get caught.”

Downstairs, Copeman and Lea watched the two cars out the window. Judging by the noises upstairs, things were happening. Copeman went out to his SUV, opened the locked section, and

took out an aluminum case. From it, he took two small devices. Feeling around under the wet cars, he attached one to Poe's BMW and another to Agnew's Toyota.

"What was that?" Lea asked, when he slid back inside her door.

"I put a couple of tracking devices on their cars. They're good for up to fifteen kilometers on my receiver, and better than that from the satellite." He pointed to the ceiling. "I'm wondering if they're packing up to move."

"Can't you arrest them, now that you know they've got explosives?"

He shook his head. "There's something not right about this. I'd sooner see who they're tied in to and what they're up to." He took a peek out the window. "They're putting suitcases in the trunk of the BMW. Now they're going. I'm going to follow: want to come?"

"Damn right."

"Nothing to pack?"

"I'm carrying all I need."

They'd just got into the SUV when a small car and two shiny pickups pulled into the lot and surrounded Agnew's Toyota. A small brunette and two large dudes got out of the various vehicles. One guy stepped up to the window. Copeman rolled it down. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah. We're looking for a guy named Agnew. Owns the Toyota. Seen him?"

"He lives in apartment five, upstairs. It probably isn't locked." The agent watched as the two men disappeared up the stairs. They'd figure it out. He was about to move the car, when he noticed that Wendy was still there, watching him.

"Who are you?" she asked. "And what do you know about my husband?"

Copeman hesitated, but he suddenly realized she might know something about her husband that he'd need to know. "Right now, I'm chasing your husband and that other guy." He opened up his wallet and handed her his card; it had nothing on it but his real name and his cell phone number. "Call me."

When they stopped for a light, he had Lea take the receiver out of the aluminum case and set it onto the dash. She plugged it into the 12V power out that used to be known as the cigarette lighter socket. The screen lit up. On it two small spots started blinking. He pushed a button, and the one the wasn't moving disappeared. He was, he figured, about three kilometers from Poe's bimmer.

Ten minutes later they were on the expressway, heading south towards the 401.

Sammy and Lester were part of a sub-group called SEAL team Gamma 4. They had, they knew, no business being in Canada, but they'd been sent there four times before, each time to make sure the Canadians did what they were supposed to do. Not that the Mounties ever knew they were being watched. Three times, the fellow they were supposed to watch had been deported. The last time, they'd had to convince the guy to take a vacation.

It wasn't a job for SEALs. SEALs were supposed to be dropped off the coast of Nicaragua and return two days later having stuck limpet mines to the bottom of a Soviet "trawler." Or, the

Soviet Union having vanished, they were supposed to be hidden on a mountain slope between Iraq and Iran, ambushing a convoy of special equipment meant for killing US troops. Decidedly, they were not supposed to be in Canada, dressed in civilian clothes, unless they were on holiday, seeing the top of the CN Tower or canoeing in Algonquin.

But there was a suspicion in American circles that the Agency, as the CIA called itself, didn't have an agent that wasn't known to the Canadian spy agency. The CIA had screwed up so often that other agencies were looking good.

Naturally, if anybody was to be researched, coerced into spying for the States, or simply made to disappear, the last thing you usually wanted was a SEAL. But a SEAL followed orders, and if Sammy and Lester weren't invisible in a jungle hole full of centipedes. and were instead walking Waterloo's streets on a March evening, that was alright with them. Quite alright.

Their orders were to just be there and see if anything suspicious happened.

Lester had his suit altered a bit – he'd gained a bit of muscle since Iraq – at Abdul the suspect's Clean Lines Tailor Shop. He didn't have the twisted mind of an Agency guy, and quickly decided that Abdul the tailor was an okay guy.

Both walked into Aklif's convenience, and were addressed as "Mr. Warrior," by a guy who'd seen enough of that species in Afghanistan. But Sammy had spent three months with Afghan tribesmen, and was happy to call Aklif "brother" in Pashtun, and shake his hand.

After that, they bought a ready-made belt from John Hyde at the Leather Weather shop, then had a lemon pie at the Warm Buns Bakery. Sammy took a quick walk through the upstairs that afternoon, but heard nothing from the two locked apartments and saw nothing useful in the other two.

Of course, he was a SEAL, so if nobody was trying to kill him, he wouldn't have recognized a problem if he fell over it.

The only untoward incident that afternoon was running across Jake, whom they'd trained with in Puerto Rico. Jake was a JTF2 Canadian demolitions specialist, who was surprised to see them in Waterloo. Jake lived in Waterloo, so he belonged there. And he was able to believe the story Lester told him, about Lester's daughter being a systems analysis student at Wilfred Laurier University, in Waterloo. He just couldn't see why Sammy was there. SEALs hung around together. But not Sammy and Lester; everybody knew that.

Jake was friendly, and shared a hamburger with both of them. Afterwards, he phoned his captain.

In downtown Toronto, the winds are always higher. It could be the effect of the buildings, funneling the moving air between the buildings, and that's what you get for an answer if you ask around.

But it could also be the effect of heat generated by all those activities and, in the summer, by the sun on all that pavement and asphalt (including suburban roofing shingles), right next to Lake

Ontario, a cool body of water. The temperature difference will bring in winds from the lake, even in March on a warm day.

The wind was whistling around the South Ontario tower, where some members of the Anglican Church were meeting to talk about Agnew.

“How long has this priest been in Ayr?” the archdeacon asked. He’d just been let in on the events.

“Two years,” the bishop said.

“And no problem in all that time?”

The bishop was about to reply, but the deacon of Paris broke in. “No problem. He’s been an exemplary priest. People in the community have nothing but good words to say about him.” He shifted in his hard seat, aware that, sooner or later, he’d be asked his opinion about the matter. And he didn’t really have one.

“What about his record before that?” the archdeacon asked, scowling. Renegade priests had been a problem since 1591, but this didn’t sound like a renegade. More like someone who’d gone round the bend.

“Not a problem. Followed the Church line without complaint.”

“Stress in his life?”

The deacon of Paris spoke, since he had copies of the records in front of him. “Nothing that we know of. Nothing that anyone in Ayr is willing to talk about. Nothing that his wife admits to.”

“Just this one incident,” the bishop said.

“Just this one incident,” the deacon acknowledged.

“What do you think?” the archdeacon asked the deacon. “What’s up?”

“Most likely stress that we haven’t found out about.”

The others knew what that meant. Not being celibate, Anglican priests didn’t diddle little boys like the Catholics did, but they were still susceptible to the charms of other women in their area.

“One would have thought,” the dean said, “that in that case, he’d have run off with whoever he was involved with. Remember Martin?”

They nodded. Martin had left his wife and family, his church, and his downtown city church to live on a commune with a young woman half his age. A year later, when he tried to come back, he found a lot of people who would forgive him, as long as he went away again and stayed away.

“You have another idea?”

“Well, Wendy – that’s his wife – was adamant that Agnew believed it was a religious experience. She tried to talk him into getting his head checked, but he was certain he was talking to God.”

“God.”

“Who, as we’ve heard, assured Agnew that He didn’t exist.” The deacon rolled his eyes upward, but saw only ceiling tiles, arranged in order and full of little holes that held no message or meaning.

“I think,” the Bishop said, “that we can assume that it wasn’t God that Agnew talked to. Can we use that as a starting point?”

“The history of our church hasn’t been too full of direct voices booming out at people,” the archdeacon noted. “Not that we can discount the possibility.” The others nodded. To discount the possibility would contradict their belief in the Bible. “But,” the archdeacon went on, “if we can believe that God informs someone that He doesn’t exist throws up some contradictions that are so profound that to believe in them is to assume that God is mad, or stupid. Or has a sense of humor quite beyond anything we as humans can understand.”

“God has no history of humor like that in the Bible.”

“We all know – and dread thinking about it – that the entire Bible can be read as an elaborate heavenly set of jokes, both verbal and practical, by one rather sadistic God. However,” he waved his finger at the others, “if we think that, we might as well go home and kick the cat around for fun. No, my friends, we have no choice but to make an a priori assumption that God is not joking and does not joke, lest we misinterpret his humour.”

“If there was a communication, then it wasn’t supposed to be funny?” the Bishop asked.

“Not if it was from God. That’s sort of axiomatic to the faithful. So if it was from God, then it had to be a lie, and God doesn’t lie, or we might as well go home and cook the cat, or it was... I don’t know. One might think God capable of lying to achieve an end, but the circumstances would have to be extreme for the Deity to make such a change in his revealed personality.”

“But,” the deacon said, “it could happen in such an extreme?”

“Just suppose so. Suppose God wanted Agnew to do something. Then we can assume He’d just identify Himself, then tell Agnew to do it. It worked with Moses and Noah. Can’t see why a direct order would be a problem, particularly with an Anglican priest, who by training, would expect a communication with God to include a direct order.”

“Instead, Agnew is out trying to commit every sin in the bible. I can’t see that being God’s aim. He may work in mysterious ways, but not that mysterious.”

“So we can rule out an actual divine communication?”

The others nodded, uneasily.

“If so, then it only appeared to be a communication. We can’t see Agnew really making such a switch in lifestyle without him actually believing he heard the voice of God.”

“So he’s crazy.”

“People almost never have one psychotic episode then suddenly behave like rational people. Usually, the voices they hear continue, following them into the padded cells they’re destined for”

“Almost never.”

“Almost.”

There was a heavy sigh. “It’s possible. A brain tumor that alters behaviour, then regresses or moves around a bit. The patient becomes normal again, till the tumor regrows.”

They looked at each other. “He believes it. He doesn’t think he has a medical condition..” the Bishop pointed out.

“That,” the Archdeacon noted, “could make him dangerous. He could start his own religion. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

There was a long silence, broken by the Archdeacon. “Recommendations? Shall we pass this up the line?”

“No,” the Bishop said. “We’ve seen nothing but a bit of local embarrassment that can be explained by a medical problem in a young priest. We have no reason at this point to alarm anybody higher in the church.” There were general nods all around, if only in relief that decisions were being made.”

“We monitor it,” the Bishop said.

The Archdeacon nodded. “I suggest we have him followed for a while. Can we afford to send a spy after him?”

A quick calculation by the treasurer showed it could be funded at the county level, if the “spy” didn’t bill too many expenses.

“Who shall we send?” the Archdeacon asked.

“I know a man, a guy by the name of Snopes,” the Bishop said. “I doubt that Agnew every met him. He owes me one.”

There’s something about a road trip that’s refreshing. It’s a beginning that leaves things behind, and has no more baggage than what you carry with you. As long as there are roads there’s no need to end a road trip. Except for running out of money, of course. And the job Agnew had to come back to in a couple of weeks, so he’d have enough money to keep living at the Dayton Block. Actually, not at the Dayton Block, since Wendy, and, just as important, Wendy’s brothers, knew where he lived now. He suspected they were already loading his little Toyota onto a flatbed truck, preparatory to sliding it into the manure pond behind the barn.

“You think we’ll find anything?” Agnew asked, as they picked up large fries and big Macs at the McDonalds at the first rest stop on the 401, just east of Kitchener. “He’d asked the same question twice before in the last ten minutes. It was a sign of nerves, Poe supposed.

“I suppose we’ll find out,” the poet said. “If nothing else, we’ll get a few miles under our belts and see some country we haven’t seen before. At best, of course, we’ll talk to that non-existent God of yours.”

Also starting on a road trip, but without a clue where it would end, were Copeman and Lea, not far behind.

“You must see some of the worst of humanity,” Lea said.

“You mean, back at the office? Probably.”

“I mean, you’re the one who looks for people who want to destroy each other.”

“Destroy each other?” The thought puzzled him for a moment. “I guess that’s the way it would appear to an outsider.”

“You don’t think so?” The alien gave Alice a little boost of serotonin to show her it liked this line of questioning. She was elated by the drug and annoyed that she was still on a leash. It

had been rather tense some times, talking to her rider without Copeman hearing. In public, when she could lose him for a moment, she'd use the toy cell phone, but when she was sure she was alone in the apartment, she'd just talk out loud. Why couldn't the damn thing learn to read her thoughts like a proper space alien?

"No, I don't," the CSIS agent said. "That only happens to psychopaths, and they're loners. CSIS deals mostly with organized groups. We turn the psychos over to the local police."

"Well, there's sure a lot of people trying to destroy each other, if you read the news." If she ever got rid of this damned alien thing, she, thought, she'd sure as hell get off to somewhere far away from all this.

Copeman adjusted the tracker. It showed that the poet's car was just under twenty kilometers ahead and that both cars were moving at the same speed. "People are aggressive out of fear. They're afraid for themselves and their families. They'll destroy anything to keep their own people safe, if it comes to that."

"They're not just naturally genocidal?"

"No," he answered. "There are, for example, over a thousand different groups in France, each group with its own agenda. They'll burn cars and block the highways, but since they're not frightened, just pissed off at each other, they don't kill each other."

His mind wandered again. He was developing, he knew, an attraction to Alice he hadn't felt for a woman in twenty years or more. But CSIS agents didn't trust many people, not even each other (especially each other) and there were a few strange things about her. Her refusal to talk about her past, for one thing. And that incident where he'd seen her talking on a cell phone; a cell phone that turned out, when he got a chance to inspect it, to be a toy. He'd scanned her apartment, but had found no listening devices, but unexplained incidents still made him nervous.

He checked the tracker again. "They're leaving the highway at the Glen Miller intersection," he said. He wondered what the guys in Ottawa would think. He was quite sure his tracker was being itself tracked at headquarters, especially since the higher-ups had not only denied it, but had issued a signed paper saying they wouldn't do it.

Back in Kitchener, Snopes, designated amateur spy from the Ayr Anglican Church, was having supper at Vijay's restaurant with Wendy, Agnew's wife, and a couple of her intimidatingly large brothers.

Wendy reminded Snopes of some archetype of a farm girl turned priest's wife, until she told him what to do with himself, in terms he thought only old sailors knew. Actually, she used a few terms sailor's wouldn't use because they referred to acts often thought of but never mentioned onboard ships, and a few terms that included acts not imaginable by people who hadn't been raised in a farm setting.

Snopes closed his eyes. His head hurt. The Indian food was good, Vijays having recovered from the fire that had taken a year out of the restaurant's lifetime. He raised his hand for another

beer, and it was delivered before he opened his eyes again. Maybe, he thought, he shouldn't have ordered the lamb bhoona "hot."

"When," Wendy spoke very slowly and quite quietly – she had to, since the six other customers had stopped talking in hopes of picking up a few more phrases their mothers hadn't taught them, "when and If Agnew calls me, I might call you to let you know. But," she wolfed down her "extra-hot" lamb bhoona, "that will depend on whether you can convince me you have a good reason for knowing."

Snopes sighed a deep sigh. Deep sighs were one of his specialties, but Wendy knew that from previous experience, so it had no effect on her. He took a big sip of beer to calm his sore mouth, and began the tedious process of explaining why he should be kept in the loop. If there were a loop. If her renegade husband-priest ever phoned in.

Right now, that looked unlikely. Agnew was still fleeing his wife.

Back at the Dayton Block, things were proceeding as well as anyone with too much imagination could imagine.

The owners of the two corner stores were meeting in the Warm Buns Bakery, in the middle, for some coffee and cinnamon buns. They sat at a little round table and watched the snow turn to rain as an end-of-March warm front from the Gulf of Mexico finally reached Waterloo.

"You're sure he found the phone, the CSIS man?" Aklif asked, eyeing his coffee. He liked the cinnamon buns, but this western coffee was so thin that he'd never got used to it.

Abdul nodded. "I placed a hair under one corner. It was gone this morning."

"I don't like doing this," Aklif said. "The poet is an honest man, if a little crazy."

"They don't respect poets in this country," Abdul noted. "Everybody just ignores them here." He thought of the Yemeni poets. People still named their kids after many of them.

"In Afghanistan the Russians shot up most of the poets. They wanted to destroy our culture. They left only the ones that would praise Communism." He sighed. "The Taliban shot those ones." Both men nodded in sorrow.

"The Americans have ignored any poets they found."

"And the Canadians?"

"I hear they give them candy bars. As if being in Afghanistan wasn't hard enough, the poor bastard has to be a poet as well."

"This poet we've framed, is he any good?"

"As a poet? I can't tell. But he hasn't been asked to read at any civic opening ceremonies, I notice."

Abdul snorted. "That doesn't mean anything here. The only poet they'd have is some rapper dude bragging about the police he's shot."

They both nodded wisely.

"You think he'll get into trouble?" Aklif asked.

“I think not.” Abdul waved for another cinnamon bun. “There’s no evidence other than the phone. And his fingerprints aren’t on it. And he’s not a Muslim.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“What else could we do?”

“We could do what I did.”

Abdul raised his eyebrows in question. Wyvalla or Windsong (he wasn’t sure which) brought them more coffee. Abdul handed her a printout from the web. She glanced at it, and nodded. It described how to make coffee the middle-eastern way.

When he was gone, Aklif said, “I warned them that there was a CSIS agent who was in the building looking for things.”

Abdul raised one eyebrow even higher. “Our young bombers. Maybe we should have turned them in.”

There was silence. The Bonisteel boys were westerners, in the first place. And police, even Canadian police, were suspect to immigrants such as these. On the other hand, people blowing up things wasn’t going to do anyone any good.

“Maybe they’ll call it off, if they think they’ve been found out,” Aklif said.

“Let’s hope so.”

The Bonisteel Boys didn’t dare go back to the Dayton Block. They couldn’t figure any way CSIS could have got onto their little bomb-making enterprise, but paranoia is at the apple core of radicals, so they accepted it.

And decided to go with what they had.

What they had was a small bomb, like the one they’d tested near Ayr. It would do, since they weren’t interested in killing anybody: just making a statement. One little bomb, with a bunch of Islamic jihad literature around it, and maybe Canada should think twice about allowing more immigrants.

“When should we make the bang?” Terry brought up the topic that they’d been avoiding: naming a date. The rest of the Tim Hortons crowd ignored them.

“April first,” Tom said abruptly, after a second’s pause. “It’ll be our April Fool joke on them.”

There was a long pause.

“You don’t like that idea?” Tom asked? “I thought it might add a bit of something or other to the whole event.”

Terry shook his head. “This isn’t a joke we’re playing. We don’t want to get confused with German art students trying to make an artistic statement. Besides, what if people think it’s just an April Fool’s Day prank and all gather around it?”

Tom nodded. “I think you’re right. Let’s make it March 31.”

There was a long silence. “Yeah, Let’s do it.”

There was a long silence.

Barbara and Britney walked past other students, waving to those that counted in their lives and were Facebook friends. Spring was coming, even if slowly, and they were planning on an afternoon's interesting activities.

"Like, should we video it? For YouTube?" asked Barbara.

Britney stopped dead. "God, no! You wouldn't, would you? Tell me you wouldn't, Barb!"

Barbara laughed long and hard. "Don't worry: I'm not that stupid!"

Britney sighed. "Now we just have to get all four of us out of school at the same time. Without, like, our parents or anybody else finding out. I'm, like, wondering how you plan to do that."

"Simple. We close the school. They let everybody out. For the afternoon."

"Okay, that's a plan." Britney thought about it a while. "But, like..."

"Like, eh, a bomb?" Barbara snickered. "If they think there's a bomb, they'll close the school and let everybody out." She laughed. "Our parents will worry about us being out on the streets."

Britney just smiled briefly.

"You nervous?" Barbara asked.

"Well, as you know, I've never been in bed with..."

"No, no! I mean, like, are you nervous about us making up a bomb story?"

Britney looked puzzled. "Of course not. Why would I be? When will we do it?"

"I'm thinking April first. Isn't that a hoot? They'll think it's a joke at first, and after they find out the bombs are fake, they'll be sure it was a joke."

Jake called headquarters for JTF2 on his cell phone as he was trying to decide whether to eat at Montana's or just go out to the Heidelberg for pigtails. He couldn't see why there should be a SEAL wandering around Kitchener, and wanted to make sure it wasn't something that violated Canadian sovereignty or something. Being a member of the special forces can make one paranoid about everything, even fellow special forces members from allied countries. It wasn't quite the level of suspicion that a spy has, but it was enough to have him place the call.

They returned his call in less than an hour, which surprised him: he thought nothing in the higher levels of administration took less than 150 times the logical amount of time needed. But instead of assuring him that he had nothing to worry about, they asked him for a favor. A CSIS agent was reportedly chasing a couple of suspected terrorist bombers eastward on the 401. They'd tracked the agent, who was following a planted bug on the bomber's car, as far as Oshawa.

When Jake asked what this had to do with him, he was told the CSIS agent was likely to get his head blown off by these terrorists, and maybe Jake could intervene.

Which is how Jake, in his Tundra SUV ended up on the 401, heading east at his best speed trying to catch up with the cars ahead of him. It would take a long time, he thought, unless his quarry stopped for the night somewhere.

Agnew and Poe spent the night in a motel outside Oshawa, about the time Agnew got cold feet and started questioning the whole process.

Having assured Agnew that he wasn't gay, and each having assured the other that he didn't snore too loudly, they took a room with two beds at the Oshawa Inn, just off the 401.

It was getting on towards ten at night, but they picked up a pizza and a six-pack of Molson Dry. Poe got the pizza, but it turned out the priest didn't like pineapple on his pizzas – "hot pineapple isn't natural," he maintained – so the poet ended up with most of the pineapple slices in exchange for a couple of slices of pepperoni.

"Maybe I should go home," Agnew said, into his fourth slice and second bottle. "Maybe I imagined the whole thing and maybe I'm crazy after all." He was looking pretty morose, Poe noted.

"You can't," Poe said.

On the other side of the motel, in another room, Lea had her legs wrapped around Copeman in a double bed. The tracker device, sitting beside the clock radio, would tell them if their quarry left the motel again. They'd waited out the pizza-and-beer expedition in a dark corner of the lot.

The tracker device continued to signal CSIS headquarters, and every ten minutes Jake got a phone call telling him the location of the poet and the priest. He was just getting out of Scarborough (often called Scarberia, or occasionally Scarlem by the locals) on the 401 when he got word that they'd stopped at a motel in Oshawa. He eased off on the gas.

"Why not," Agnew said. "Who are you to tell me I can't just call up Wendy and go home?"

"The prophet," said the poet, "is walking through the valley of death with a laughing young harlot, her cheeks red with laughter. Corpses are all around them."

"What?"

"Vultures shift aside as they come. The prophet tries to pet their naked heads, but they skitter away."

"What are you talking about?" Agnew finished his second beer.

"Behind a piece of rusty hurricane-strew a man with half a beard and no nose gets the prophet in his scope and starts to press the trigger."

"I'm sorry. I don't follow."

"He who has ears, let him hear. He who has eyes, let him see."

Agnew recognized the biblical quote. Jesus had probably meant it to say, "Think about it. You'll figure it out." So he thought about it. "You're telling me," he said, eventually, "that the universe may make no sense to us. We just have to follow where it leads."

"As the prophet falls, one live man reaches up and grabs his ankle."

“But how far can I follow a path I can’t see?” The pizza was gone, and the world lost much of its charm.

“Moriah.”

“Moriah first,” the priest said, in resignation.

“Moriah second. Glen Miller Meeting Night first. That’s tonight.”

“What’s that?”

“You have a place to go and may have people to meet. You’ll find no people as part of your destiny on Mount Moriah. So you have to go to some place where the Non-Existent God can present you with people.”

“That makes no sense!”

“The rainbow ends in an old bar where the harlot meets her forgotten son. He still has the gun.”

“You got a point there.” He looked out the window as Jake pulled into the motel lot. “But what’s this Glen Miller Meeting Night?”

“You’ll see. Last beer?”

“Sure. I was going to baptize a vulture with it. But if I’m going to continue on this Quixotic quest, I’d better drink it myself.” Jake walked by the window, and for some reason Agnew felt a cold spider in his stomach.

Jake fell asleep within twenty minutes of getting to his room; he’d learned to do that years ago. But he did a lot of thinking in the those minutes.

He’d lost a couple of good friends in meaningless actions against the Taliban in Afghanistan. It gave him no sympathy for Al Qaeda there and less for foreign nationals around the world who were ready to kill their own countrymen for their own beliefs. That was the new Al Qaeda: Spaniards bombing Spaniards, Englishmen bombing Englishmen. And now, if word was right, Canadians planning to bomb Canadians. Had to be Islamic radicals. Who else.

He decided, just in his own mind, that he’d ask them to confess. If he didn’t get cooperation right away, he’d shoot one of them and then ask the other his questions again.

He slept like a baby till just before dawn.

Sammy and Lester knew the Dayton Block was being watched, but not who in the building was suspect. Naturally, they radioed back the information that two middle-eastern types were running businesses at each end of the block. They were told, however, that they were SEALs, not spies, and they could better serve by just waiting till they got orders.

They were happy with that, and had a cinnamon bun and coffee at the Warm Buns bakery, talking about their families. They didn’t particularly like each other, but they were brothers in the service, so they watched each other’s back and made small talk. Until Aklif came in.

Aklif had turned his store over to his lazy son for a few minutes, and was planning on another coffee with Abdul the tailor. That was when he spotted Sammy and Lester.

Now the SEALs might have been taken for a couple of gay health freaks by most people, with their obvious bond and muscles, but gays, however persecuted, didn't watch the area around them like special forces did. Aklif knew these guys were military, and he knew they weren't standard troops. He did the only thing he could think of: he pulled up a chair and sat down beside them.

There was, Aklif felt, no longer any reason to try to deflect attention from the Dayton Block; someone had it in their sights, and he could bet they were looking for Muslim terrorists. It was time to save himself, and Abdul, if possible.

The SEALs didn't move; they froze. "Hello," Aklif said in Pushto, the official language of Afghanistan.

Sammy replied with a inquiry as to the health of Aklif's family, and a wish for his health." His accent was bad, but the ritual was nice, the convenience-store owner thought.

"My name is Aklif," he said. "I own the store on the corner." He gestured, but slowly. "I came from Afghanistan ten years ago."

Sammy and Lester nodded, their eyes scanning him and the room again.

"Whatever you have been told," Aklif went on, "Abdul and I are not the ones you want."

"Abdul?" Lester asked.

They must know less than I thought, Aklif thought. He went on; "Abdul is the Yemeni tailor on the other end of this building. I am Christian; he is Muslim. Neither of us are terrorists."

"Okay."

"You might want to have a look at the two brothers in Apartment 1, though. I suspect they aren't what they seem."

"Do you have names?" Sammy asked.

"I believe they are calling themselves Tom and Terry Bonisteel. But you should check with the owner of the building, if you want to be sure."

There was a silence, then Lester said, "Thank you." Aklif went back to his store, and put his son to unloading boxes in the back room where he couldn't eat so much of the inventory.

Back at their car, the SEALs used a secure line to pass the information on to headquarters, secure in the knowledge that in less than a year it would get to the appropriate authorities, at which time they'd be disciplined for playing spies instead of the mad-dog killers they were trained to be.

They couldn't have known that the character they were reporting to was, in fact, part of a special group unknown to the Navy, and was coordinating the project with members of other secret services. It was part of an evolutionary trend, where each secret service, in turn, grew into a tight-lipped, mostly useless money-sucker that was impossible to kill. So new intelligence agencies were formed, lean and useful for a few years until they became peanut-brained dinosaurs themselves.

An economist had plotted the growth of these organizations, concluding the country would end when the whole GDP of the US got funneled into about three hundred and twelve agencies, with nobody knowing where the money all went.

So it was only a few hours before it was known that a) the Bonisteel Brothers didn't exist as such, and b) they were most likely Jim and Bryce McCrum, residents of Sarnia. And that Bryce was a chemistry major. Having a secret identity and a secret apartment away from their well-monitored dorm rooms started making people in Wheeling nervous. Wheeling had been chosen for the headquarters of the new agency because nobody in their right mind would expect a spy agency in Wheeling, West Virginia, home of country music.

The tracking device was still beeping under the hood of the Bonisteel car, and it was being tracked by both CSIS and the SEAL team, the CIA for once passing along information. That morning, an American spy whose usual job was as mayor of one of the twin cities passed a photo to Sammy and Lester, and a note that the Bonisteel car was on in downtown Toronto.

Sammy and Lester retrieved their illegal-in-Canada weaponry and headed east towards Toronto.

Agnew and Poe had a breakfast at the motel – on Poe, who still figured he had more money than the priest. Agnew noticed the sinewy man whom he'd seen pass his window. Although the man didn't single him out, he did sit in a corner where he could watch the entire room and the door. A hired killer, maybe, thought Agnew. He couldn't imagine either Wendy or the church doing to such lengths to eliminate him, and poets were seldom shot in this country; instead they were just ignored to death.

But he tried to memorize all the cars in the parking lot when they left.

But he couldn't see Copeman's SUV, keeping well back as they continued east.

They spent the day ambling through Colborne and Cobourg, Brighton and Whitby, the smaller towns along the route, sampling cinnamon buns at every stop. Poe took lengthy notes for his planned limerick book. They had supper in Trenton, at a steak house where they could watch people in boats in the river trying to snag the snowmobiles that had gone through the ice in the winter.

Poe placed a phone call at the table, talking to an old girlfriend named Angie. Agnew didn't get all of it, but gathered that "Glen Miller Meeting Night" was a go.

"Should we book a motel in Trenton?" Agnew asked the poet.

"Won't need to. We'll sleep in Glen Miller."

"It has a motel?"

"Nope, but don't worry. There'll be a place for you." And he refused to elaborate.

The hall had been used for community events, Poe said, since the Great Depression.

Agnew looked at it carefully. "Looks like they didn't have much money when they built it," he said politely.

“It’s a dump. A relic,” said Poe. “The roof sags and the windows leak air. The attic’s full of mice and raccoons. They replace the shingles when they run out of buckets. The scouts use it on Wednesday evenings and there’s sometimes a dance on Saturday nights in the summer.” He glanced at the priest. “A couple of times they’ve held tent revivals in it in the last few years. Mostly it just sits there.”

Agnew watched people drift into the gravel-and-mud parking lot. “Most places this old get burned down. It’s still covered in insulbrick. Who’d insure it.”

“It’s not insured.”

“They’ll just build another one when it goes?”

Poe shook his head. “It won’t burn.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true. It’s been torched dozens of times. The fires won’t take. Someone puts a bunch of brush against one side, lights it, and runs. By the time the fire department gets here, there’s a few ashes where the fire was, and maybe some smoke marks on the building.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“This is Glen Miller. People say the devil protects it.”

“Not God?”

“Churches burn all the time. Glen Miller hall doesn’t.”

Agnew thought he might have a point. “This town isn’t named after the band leader, is it?”

“Glenn Miller? Nope. Some Scot, lonesome for Glen Nevis and Glen Coe and Glen this or that named it long before the big-band leader.”

More cars parked along the edge of the lot. Some dropped off people. Agnew noticed there was nobody under thirty, as far as he could tell.

“Let’s go,” Poe said. “I’ll see you in the morning. Right here.”

“Wait. Where will we spend the night?”

“That won’t be a problem.”

At nine the next morning Poe’s car was waiting in the hall parking lot. It was raining lightly, but the day was warming. A red BMW pulled in, with a middle-aged redhead driving, and stopped. Agnew got out, waved goodbye as the Bimmer left, and walked to Poe’s car carrying a paper bag.

“You got take-out?” Poe asked as the priest got in.

“Just some salmon sandwiches for later, if we need them.”

“Sounds good. I ended up with cheese, salami, a loaf of French bread, and some bottled water.” He indicated the centre console. “I picked up the coffees on the way here.” The coffee cups were extra large and then some.

There was silence as they followed the Trent River north.

Just past Batawa, once home of Bata shoes, Agnew said, “I....”

Poe interrupted. "It's traditional not to talk about your experiences at Glen Miller Meeting Night."

Agnew said, "But if I want to?"

"Well, then, shoot," the poet said.

Just behind them Jake scratched his shoulder, where the Glock 9 mm rested. He himself wasn't rested. He'd parked his car down the street, and had followed Poe back to an old housing block not far away. He'd got less than three hours sleep, and had woken early, shivering.

He began to reconsider shooting only one of the bastards.

About two minutes back, Copeman and Lea followed the signal. They'd spent the night at a motel in Trenton, just off the expressway. Lea ate a fast-food breakfast from a bag. Copeman had wolfed his share, and was sipping on a coffee as they drove.

At nine-fifteen, he reported by cell phone and was told to keep doing what he was doing. He snorted. That sounded like the department when they didn't have a clue.

Agnew spoke. "One girl took me outside to show me something. I was hoping it was her tits, but she pointed at two docks in the river, and asked me what I saw. I said, 'two docks,' She said, 'It's a pair o' docks!'" He sipped a coffee. "Then she pointed at a couple of mallards out in the water, and asked me again. This time I got the answer right, I guess. I said, 'A pair o' ducks,' and we went back inside. I'm not sure what she meant, but she said that a priest who gets involved in a paradox is heading for deeper water than he can handle. Did you tell them I was a priest?"

"Nope. Didn't tell anybody we were coming."

"That's what I figured out, eventually." The silence continued as they crossed the bridge at Frankford and kept going north. "You left with two women," Agnew added

"Old girlfriends." The poet sighed, and seemed to get a bit sad. "It happens, you know. You left with a bunch of people. I guess you found a... place to stay."

"I'd rather not talk about it." Agnew put the seat back and one slightly muddy foot up on the dashboard. "This okay?"

"Fine with me. If we get in an accident, though, the air bag'll shove your leg up your nostrils."

The priest shrugged. "I'm in the hands of fate on this trip." He finished his coffee. "I bet they don't do many church functions in that place."

"Once in a while someone books it for a wedding or something. Usually newcomers to town looking for a cheap hall. But word's got around."

They stopped in Stirling for a pee and more coffee.

North of Stirling, the fields begin to show boulders scattered from the last glaciation. The farmers have managed, over the years, to move most of these to the edges, but some have been left, for one reason or another, where they stood.

I am, Agnew thought, like a boulder. Cold, and left in some glacier's retreat. The bare trees of early spring would get leaves again, and the fields become full of grass and cows. But the boulders would remain. "I phoned Wendy," he said.

Poe just raised his eyebrows.

"About midnight, someone filled my glass with whiskey, and said, 'Don Quixote slew no monsters.' A very short man asked me when Toronto was burning. I said I didn't know. Then he said it would be when I felt it burning."

"Interesting place isn't it?"

"I told her I'd be home in a couple of days."

"I missed the connection," Poe said.

"I don't want to go to Mount Moriah," Agnew said.

"You want me to turn around?" Poe slowed the car.

"No! That's how I know I have to go, now."

"Poets and madmen," Poe answered. "Gods and demons."

"God," said Agnew, "killed the firstborn of the Egyptians to get Moses free. Kids innocent of the crimes of their parents. And, presumably, the firstborn of all the slaves that worked for the Egyptians."

"Your God?" asked Poe.

"Would have been, if He hadn't told me He didn't exist." A pair of ducks flew over and a shiver ran down the priest's spine.

"Hallelujah," Poe said.

"Much farther?"

"About an hour, lunch stop included, then we can start walking up the hill."

The stopped in Madoc, a town with no visible means of support. There was a café downtown that seemed to offer what few larger towns did anymore. At least it claimed to specialize in Chinese and Canadian cuisine. You have to find places like that in the smaller towns, relics of a century before.

Agnew leaned over his dinner-for-one special, with egg rolls and wonton soup on the side. "Just what is this Mount Moriah, anyway," he asked.

Poe smiled. "About time you asked." He wrote a six-line love poem on a napkin and handed it to the waitress.

"Well, I know what the original was. It was the hill on which Solomon's Temple was built in Jerusalem. But I don't know anything about this one in Ontario. How did it get its name?"

"I don't know that. I've heard that a preacher, such as yourself, once had a vision there. He saw Solomon's temple for moment while camping there."

"Probably smoking the oak leaves. You wouldn't bullshit me, would you."

"Such language from a preacher. No, I would never fib to you. I am a poet. I know only truth." He stuffed an entire egg roll into his mouth. The waitress winked at him.

"What do you know about the mountain?" The won ton wasn't warm enough, but Agnew was very Canadian and said nothing.

“It’s part of a large pluton called the Deloro Pluton.”

“What’s a pluton?”

“The core of a really ancient mountain. The mountain’s worn ago hundreds of millions of years ago, but the granite heart remains.”

“Poetic.”

“My job. Anyway, the Mount Moriah Pluton’s about a half mile square.”

“It’s big?”

Not as plutons go. The Deloro Pluton, not far away, covers about thirty square miles of woods and swamp; maybe 170 cubic miles of good granite.” He tried the soup, rejected it. “That one’s about six miles deep.”

“High?”

“Not from this stuff. Mount Moriah’s a bigger mound than most, but it’s only two hundred feet – what’s that, 66 metres? – higher than the land around it.”

“We can climb that, I think.”

“It’s a big area, like a molar with dips and valleys. We’ll do a lot of walking before we get to the top.”

“Do we need to get to the top of the hill?”

Poe shrugged. “Did Moses?”

There was a long silence as they decided just how much of the lunch to eat.

“Why are we being followed,” Poe asked.

“Well, it’s a guy, so it’s not one of your old girlfriends. Either you’re a closet queer or some old girlfriend’s boyfriend is making sure you don’t drop in.” Agnew shrugged. “Why else would anyone follow a poet?”

“You’ve got a point there,” Poe said. “I think the church has a hit man after you.”

“He looks a bit like one, but he’s not in a hurry, is he?”

“I didn’t think you Anglicans were so bloodthirsty.”

“We’re not. I can’t actually embarrass the church any further, and the most evil guy they got is an old gal from Montreal who checks out our accounts. I don’t think he’s a churchman.”

“Then who?”

“Anybody else got an interest in Mount Moriah?”

Poe pondered this. “The government did, once. They figured it was a solid piece of unfractured rock that had been a solid piece of unfractured rock for the last billion years.”

“So?”

“They wanted to drill into it and store nuclear waste there.”

Agnew calculated his share of the lunch bill, thinking maybe it’d be good to get out of there before the waitress, who looked about twenty-five, actually came over and started rubbing herself up against the poet. “Sounds like a plan. What happened?”

“Loud NIMBYs. A lot of brought-in scientists who mumbled about unknown structures, existing drillholes, and the fact that storing things in a high point of the watershed might not be a good idea if it did leak. The government withdrew.” Poe got up.

“So that guy might be a government agent?”

“Not unless he knew we were coming here and there was a store of nuclear waste secretly hidden under the mountain.”

“Seems unlikely. I go for the boyfriend theory.”

“Anyway, if he meant us harm, we wouldn’t have got this far.”

A block down the street Jake checked his gun. He’d decided to see where they were going, since it didn’t seem to make any sense that they’d head into the swamps and hills where JTF2 conducted some of their training. Then he’d gut-shoot the taller one. Information would flow like water. Kind of a shame one of them had to get back alive. More or less.

Sammy and Lester spent the morning watching the Bonisteel Brothers’ Taurus from a distance. They’d woken up at two-thirty in the morning in their Mississauga motel room, and waited for the word to come in. At three, the signal had been received, and at three-fifteen the phone call had come in. The coordinates of the target car, within twenty metres were passed on, and the SEALs found themselves, a half-hour later, outside a hotel, also in Mississauga. They’d identified the brothers from a department gallery of photos of university students.

When the brothers shopped in Erindale Mall, Sammy had attached a continuous tracking gizmo to the Bonisteel brother's car. That made things easier. Sammy rambled on while Lester sat in silence. They’d talked out what little they had in common the day before. Lester tried not to watch Sammy eat another chocolate donut. Sammy had been nicknamed “Carpool” because of the pools of vomit he left in cars. He could leap from aircraft and survive four-meter waves off a banana republic coastline in a rubber boat for days at a time, got sick in cars.

He liked chocolate donuts. Slowly. He inspected each endlessly before deciding where the first and last bites would be. He complained about everything, letting no one and nothing get away from his opinions. It was just as well he was so hard to beat up. Lester thought of shooting him. Accidentally, of course.

Sammy thought Lester was an uptight asshole with a better-than-thou attitude. But Lester was a brother SEAL, and he loved him in that way.

They waited while the brothers shopped, then returned to the hotel. The SEALs took a room on the same floor.

One of Southern Ontario's main divisions is between the Canadian Shield country to the north and farm country to the south. The line goes through Madoc.

In general, south of the line, you plant trees around your new house for shade; north of the line you cut down trees to make space for your new home. As Copeman and Lea followed the signal north, the amount of forest increased, and the farms got smaller and poorer.

"People farm this?" Lea asked.

"Family farms from the days when all farms were this small. Mostly Scots and Irish. They'd come here as landless farmers, and had free land. When you cleared all the trees off and moved most of the rocks to the edges, you had, if you were lucky, farmable land that looked as good what you had back home."

"Except for the winters."

"But you owned it. Being a landowner had been a big status thing back in the old country. You'd cut a lot of trees for that, and move a lot of rocks." He checked the signal. "They've turned right at Bannockburn. I wish I knew where they were going. Maybe they're going to meet an alien spaceship. Would that be okay?" He looked at her.

"What do you mean?" she stared ahead.

"Well, I know Alice Lea Nullman isn't your real name – I looked that far into the database – but you must have some affinity for nonhuman aliens." She looked hard at him, but didn't say anything, so he continued. "'Nullman' could be taken as not man, which as a woman you're not, or as not human. And Alice Lea Nullman is easily written as A. Lea. N. Alien. Makes one wonder."

There was a long silence.

"I'm not an alien from outer space," she said. Then she turned to Copeman, who'd made the turn onto the gravel road towards Cooper. "I've got to have a moment's conversation with... myself... here." She closed her eyes.

"You're sure?" she asked the empty air.

"It just might make a big difference to him, you slimy bastard."

"Stop doing that! I want to go through this without all those damn chemicals."

"Well, screw you, then."

She opened her eyes and said to Copeman, "My name isn't Alice Lea Nullman. I'm Christiana Cohen, I'm three months pregnant, and I've got a space alien or something like that living inside me."

"Ah..." he said, "Like in Alien, the movie?"

She looked forward for a moment or two. "It says 'no, it's not growing. I'm just a temporary host and it'll leave without hurting me.'" Another pause. "But it really liked the movie."

"Okay," Copeman said. He wasn't sure what else to say. He was following some whackos into the wilderness, and in love with a woman who belonged in an asylum. Life did keep its interest up. "What's it called?"

"It says to call it AI."

"Paul Simon would approve."

“No doubt.”

“Are you a willing host?”

“Would you be?” She watched out the window as the trees went by.

“Not really. Does it control you?”

“It pumps my brain full of happiness hormones every time you screw me.”

“Oh.” The land suddenly became open as they passed under a set of five lines of hydro towers. With the defoliants keeping things down to scrub and weeds, it looked like an section of western badlands. Then they were back into forest. “You’re with me by assignment?”

“Got it,” she said.

“So you don’t really like me?”

“How the hell would I know?” She curled up and they drove into silence.

Cooper might have been on the map, but the general store had closed years ago, and four houses, two of which were farmhouses, were all that remained of the community. The car rolled east.

“The call,” Snopes said, “came from a village called “Glen Miller.”

Wendy didn’t ask him how the church had found out where Agnew’s midnight phone call had come from. “What now?” she asked.

“Might as well go there and ask questions.”

They left in less than an hour.

In the Mississauga hotel room, Terry and Tom Bonisteel took the telephone and scratchpads off the table, leaving only the nice brass lamp, and assembled their bomb. Carefully.

Then they put it into a school packsack.

Two doors down the hall, Lester finished cleaning his 9-mm sidearm, then lay down to catch up on sleep. Sammy sat in the car, watching the door and the Bonisteel’s car.

In Waterloo, Barbara assembled three imitation bombs wearing latex gloves. She didn’t know quite what bombs looked like, but the internet gave her a couple of clues. They weren’t bad.

She went back to school after lunch, the devices in her school packsack. She managed to hide them without being seen or caught, but was still sweating when she got to math class.

Tomorrow would be an interesting day. She kept the key to apartment 2 in her purse, and winked at Chad and Charles when she saw them. She walked home with Britney, to keep her friend from getting cold feet. She told Britney about the email message the school would receive at ten the following morning.

The Lingham Lake road followed the power lines and the Black River. Lingham Lake's tucked in to the northeast of Mount Moriah. It used to be a large swamp, but a dam had been built by the Moira River conservation authority decades before. The Black's a tributary of the Moira. The idea was to help control spring and summer water levels.

The resulting lake was full of dead trees and hundreds of tiny islands. And fish, mostly smallmouth bass. Eventually the conservation authority closed the road to the lake and declared it a fish sanctuary.

Poe parked the car beside the gate. He stared up at Mount Moriah, green with pines and brown with fallen leaves and bare trees.

"What's that building?" Agnew asked, pointing to a sprawling one-story edifice at the base, behind a gate that reminded him of the entranceway to temples in Japan.

"Beats me," Poe said. "We'll deke around it." They began to climb the hill, angling sideways to keep out of sight of the buildings. About the time they'd got up over the first ledge, and onto a slightly flatter part – the mountain ascended in steps – Jake parked his car, and started after them.

Jake had got only as far as the first ledge when Copeman and Lea pulled up and got out. What the hell, he wondered. Then he continued on, following the other two.

"Where are they going," asked Copeman, not expecting an answer. "And who's that guy following them."

Lea answered. "It looks like they're taking the shortest route to the top."

"You can stay here," Copeman began, but Lea interrupted.

"I've been told to go up the hill, too."

Copeman shrugged. "Follow me."

After a few minutes Poe, leaning against an oak and puffing a bit, asked, "Did you notice that we've got three people following us, now?"

Poe looked, then shrugged. "The more the merrier. We'll all have a religious experience together. Or not. They don't look like killers, anyway."

Jake, who looked like a killer, figured he'd get to where they were going before gut-shooting the tall one. And maybe the two people following behind, whoever the hell they were.

Copeman, who had the eyes of a killer when he wanted to, and a Glock in his pocket, wondered if there was a terrorist convention ahead. He turned to Lea. "How are you doing?"

"I'll be tired tomorrow, but right now that jerk in me's dumping adrenaline into my bloodstream and has upped my metabolism a bit. Piece of cake."

Split personality, Copeman thought. I like one of her personalities, anyway. Maybe she can go shopping or something when the other's in control. He was puffing a bit too.

The circus continued uphill, sometimes having to go down a bit and around a pond, but up again the other side.

The top was a clearing, with a few gnarled old oaks, many with lightning damage. "This is it," Poe announced.

Agnew looked around. Aside from a ring of stones from a long-past campfire, there was nothing unusual. In one direction he could see Lingham Lake. The other way he could see the power lines marching across the landscape. "Don't see any stone tablets," he said.

Jake spoke suddenly. He'd come the last hundred yards very silently. "Don't move or I'll kill you." Poet and the priest turned and looked at the gun. There was silence, then the crunching of leaves.

"Put your gun down!" yelled Copeman, from behind a tree far too small to be protection. "I'm a federal agent!"

"Paul Jake," Jake yelled back. "JTF2." Suddenly he was hidden behind a rock.

"Bill Copeman, CSIS."

"Not the same Copeman from Kandahar, three years ago?"

"You still owe me ten bucks."

"I saved your life. That should make it square."

"Nope. I knew that guy was there all along."

"Wanta shoot for it? Survivor collects?"

There was a silence, then Copeman stepped out, his gun pointed at Agnew. "Yeah, sure. Like I'd win that one."

Jake came up from behind the rock, his gun pointed at Poe. "Which one you want to shoot?"

"Why do you want to shoot us?" Agnew's voice had gone up an octave. Poe couldn't speak, with those ugly muzzles pointed his way.

"Planning to make bombs. Terrorists. Go ahead, deny it," Copeman said.

"He's a poet, for Christ's sake! I'm an Anglican priest. Or at least I was." Agnew waved his arms around.

"What are you doing here?" Jake asked, sitting on a convenient rock. He watched as Lea came into the clearing, her hands well away from her sides. He calculated that she was harmless and could be ignored.

"I'm trying to talk to God. He's coming along to see what happens."

"They're in denial. Can I shoot the tall one; we might get a confession." Jake was beginning to think he wasn't going to get away with shooting anybody, which was a shame with these religious bombers.

Copeman pondered this for a moment. "Take your clothes off," he told them.

"What?"

The bullet went right between the two. “Off.” The two complied, although Poe got his laces knotted for a while. It was a warm spring day and it was midday, but they still were covered with goosebumps.

“Step away.”

Jake circled around, lifted the clothes. He checked their wallets, then looked up at Copeman. “That’s what their wallets say.”

“I’ll bet Osama bin Laden wrote poetry. And I bet he used to hang around with religious nuts.” But Jake lowered his gun; he knew shooting one of them was too big a gamble to take in-country. He started to ask them to put their clothes back on, when he found himself unable to move his arms or legs.

Four men, two of them naked, rotated their heads as Lea walked to the centre of the clearing. She stood still as a pale blue beam circled her. A silver rope came down from the sky, and Copeman watched a slug-like thing as big as a large garter snake oozed from his girlfriend’s neck, then climbed onto the rope. Both disappeared upwards. Five sets of eyes followed “Al” upwards and into an area like a large totally black triangle. Copeman estimated it to be maybe a hundred metres on its longest axis. It floated sideways and down swiftly to the power lines. There was a spark as it touched one of the lines, then abruptly it seemed to leap into the sky. It vanished without a sound.

For a moment there was nothing but the wind in the dead oak leaves still on branches. Copeman ran over to his girlfriend, who had fallen.

Thomas (never “Tom”) Weston was a geek. He was third-best in the Waterloo area in one of the more popular online role-playing games. He’d sold his bike to enhance his computer. His parents didn’t know what he was talking about half the time.

Girls generally avoided him, except in his imagination.

Barbara needed to notify the school that it was full of bombs, or five of them at least (she figured they’d find three and keep the school closed while looking for the others). But she didn’t want it traceable. The person sending the message had to be in class, for one thing.

Thomas Weston had no hesitation in slaughtering other role-playing characters. And he’d programmed a computer virus, but never used it. He could send a bomb scare message to close the school, and make it untraceable, but he couldn’t see why.

Until Barbara made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.

“You okay, Lea?” Copeman asked.

She got up to her knees. “Chris. Christiana. My name’s Christiana Cohen.”

“Sorry. I forgot.” He noticed that the back of her neck was red and swollen, but the skin wasn’t broken. He tried to help her up, but she shook him off.

“I can get up myself. Get your hands off me.”

He backed off, watching her. He glanced up: the sky was empty. She stood up, silent, rubbing her neck.

After a moment’s silence, Agnew and Poe started getting dressed again, still shivering in the March wind. The afternoon was getting late, and the sky was clouding over. Agnew looked up at Jake, who was sitting on a rock, his gun still in his hand but pointing at the ground. “You okay?” he asked the man from JTF2.

“Goddamn it.” Jake put his gun into the shoulder holster. “If this doesn’t screw all.”

“I guess it does,” Agnew agreed.

“What are you doing here?” Jake asked, looking up at him.

“I thought I got a message from God. I was trying for a confirmation.” Agnew waved his arm around. “I thought I might find it here.”

“One message wasn’t enough?” Jake smiled wryly.

“I’m either too much of a doubter, or not enough.” He turned as Poe came up.

“And I suppose you’re not a bomber either.” Jake showed no sign of getting up.

“Not that I know of,” Poe said. “I write little limericks about cinnamon buns.”

Jake shook his head. He turned to Copeman. “I was told you were following some terrorist bombers. I was supposed to help.”

Copeman was still watching Christiana, but he answered. “I thought you were going to shoot me.”

“I wasn’t sure you were the asshole I was supposed to babysit. To protect from these” he waved at Poe and Agnew “dangerous terrorists. Could it be CSIS screwed up as usual?”

Copeman smiled. “The organization’s got a record to maintain. Now what.”

“Well, my job is killing bad guys. No bad guys; I’m outa here.”

“What are you going to tell your fearless leader.”

“They’d never believe it. I think I’ll leave out a detail or two. Like I said, I’m here to kill bad guys, not defend the damn planet from damn aliens.” Jake got up, scratched himself, and was quickly gone down the hill.

“Wait!” yelled Christiana, but Jake just kept on going.

“Can we go, now?” Poe asked Copeman. “We’re not mad bombers or anything like that.”

“There were bomb components found in your rooms,” Copeman said. But he could tell from the blank looks on their faces that they knew nothing. “Made from cell phones.” He got another blank look from the pair.

“I don’t have a phone,” Agnew said.

Poe took out his cell phone and examined it. It looked like a normal cell phone to him. He held it out to Copeman, who pushed it away.

“It’s been an interesting jaunt,” the agent said. “You going to see if God wants to follow that opening act?”

Agnew looked at the poet beside him, and shook his head. “I’ve found out all I need to know. I just want to go home and have a bake sale to get money for the church plumbing.”

Poe raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

“Either of you got a business a card?” Copeman asked. Both, it turned out, did. Copeman put the cards into his pocket then said, “We’ll be off, I guess. If... Christiana wants to go.” He raised his eyes to her.

“The sooner I leave this place, the better.” She started down towards the car. Copeman followed, but since he had the keys, he didn’t get too close. He figured people who had just got rid of an alien probably needed some time alone.

She stopped, however, and turned, as he squeezed between a gnarled oak and a couple of large boulders. “It left a message for you.”

“For me?”

“What, you think it didn’t know you?”

“Sorry?”

“Apparently there were or are some people in the apartment building who were making a bomb. Those students at the end of the hall. They’re planning an incident of some kind on the Toronto subway.”

“What!?”

“Problems hearing?”

“Ah, no. Sorry. Did it say when?”

“Tomorrow morning. Bloor and Yonge. During the rush hour. Do I have to repeat that?”

“Got it.”

Christiana turned and resumed her descent of Mount Moriah. Copeman followed, thinking hard.

Up on top of the hill, Agnew was explaining things to Poe. “I guess I spent too many years living in the Bible. I figured the voice by the river wasn’t a trick by people, and it wasn’t a mental problem on my part, so it had to be God.”

“And now you’re not so convinced?”

Agnew shrugged. “It seems there’s a lot of things in this universe that can perform tricks. More than I thought of, anyway.”

“Makes you wonder about Old Testament tricks.” Poe was always one to get to the heart of the matter. The wind picked up a bit and the brown leaves in the oaks rustled a bit. Oaks, no matter what species, like to hang on to their leaves, however dead they are.

“Well, there’s a lot of things in the old testament us Bible types don’t like to talk about. For example, when the Israelites, led in person by Moses and God, entered the promised land, they ran into lots of city-states. In about every case, they were ordered by God to slaughter the entire population. God invented ethnic cleansing and genocide.”

“He’s on record as killing babies in Egypt,” Poe noted. His butt was getting cold sitting on the rock. And sore: nobody designs rocks for sitting.

“And most of the punishments listed for doing something wrong were extended for seven generations. Something your ancestor did in Moravia in 1809, like wearing linen and wool at the same time is going to have you suffering.”

“Your point being? You’re going to become another atheist ex-priest?”

“No,” Agnew said. “What I’ve got to do is remember that we’re creating God. He exists, but we’ve been defining and redefining Him for thousands of years. Now he’s full of love and forgiveness and everybody’s equal in his eyes.”

“When does this stop?” Poe stood up, and eyed the group of people climbing the hill behind Agnew.

“Maybe when we’ve remade God into a proper God. Maybe that’ll take forever. Beats me. But people are part of God. The evolutionary part.” Agnew was getting fierce.

“You might want to explain it to these people.” Poe pointed over the priest’s shoulder.

Poe turned. The leader of the group of ten people waved. “Hello. How are you?”

He seemed friendly, so Agnew walked forward and shook hands with first one, then all of them. Poe hesitated, but eventually also shook hands.

“Quite the show, I hear,” the man who seemed to be the leader said. “I missed most of it. Are you guys aliens in human form?” The guy laughed, and the others joined in.

“Not us,” Agnew said. “I’m an Anglican priest. He’s a poet.”

“Wonderful! We’re more used to humans. But we welcome all beings at Orgyan Osal Cho Dzong.”

“At what?”

“It’s a centre for the study and practice of Nyingma Dharma.” At the blank look on Poe’s face, he said, “Buddhism. A Buddhist retreat at the base of a hill named after a holy place in Jewish and Christian and Muslim history!” And he laughed again. The followers joined in.

“You take in people who need time to think” Poe asked.

“Part of our calling.”

“Even mixed-up Anglican priests?”

“Sounds like a person who needs us. A bit chilly at this time of year, but lots of time for meditation.”

Poe waved at Agnew. “You’ve got him.” He turned to Agnew. “Call me when you’re ready. I’ll tell Wendy to wait till you call her.” Agnew’s mouth was still hanging open as Poe headed down the hill towards his car. But he didn’t follow.

Copeman and Christiana spent the night in separate rooms in a motel in Whitby. Being by yourself in a motel room in Whitby can clarify some things as well as a week in a Buddhist retreat, but not all things.

It had been a quiet ride back along the dirt roads and highways. Copeman had asked if she wanted to stop for supper. She’d shook her head, staring out the passenger window at the March scenery going by.

Copeman watched TV, flipping channels. There was nothing on that he wanted to see.

He thought of phoning his superiors, but any explanations of events would have to include alien slugs and large black UFOs. He didn't figure he was up to it. He didn't know what to do about things, and hoped something would turn up.

He'd asked Christiana how much choice she'd had in becoming his lover, but she'd just given him a dirty look and continued her silence. Now he wondered. He didn't know whether the alien had owned her mind, or had just controlled her via carrot-and-stick, punishment and reward, pain and happiness. He didn't want to think she'd been entirely an alien mind.

He lapsed into sleep about ten, and hammered on her door at six the next morning with a coffee and muffin in his hands. Surprisingly, she was still there, and even more so, she opened the door and took the food.

"I'm off to Toronto to the subway. Just in case that thing wasn't lying to us," he told her. "Shall I drop you off at the train station, or the bus stop?"

"No way. I'm going with you."

He didn't think arguing would be productive. They joined the rat race and were at the commuter parking lot by seven.

The Bonisteel Brothers left the hotel at six in the morning. Terry went out with a suitcase which he put into the car, then went back into the hotel.

They'd talked it out and considered the remote possibility they'd been followed. It seemed unlikely, but you can never be too careful. So they left by the back door, walking a block then picking up a taxi they'd called from a hotel lobby phone.

The SEALs, of course, were in the parking lot, waiting for them to show up with the second suitcase. As a lot of people knew, they weren't spies; their skills lay in other directions. By the time they figured it out, the brothers they'd been following were gone.

Lester tapped on their room door, but got no answer. "If you were going to bomb something, what would you bomb?" he asked Sammy, with a few well-chosen words added for effect.

Sammy shrugged. "Something with high visibility, like a world-famous building, or the government building. Or the subway. It was the subway in Madrid and London." Since they couldn't remember if there were government buildings in Toronto, and couldn't think of any world-famous buildings in Toronto, they headed for the nearest subway entrance.

After buying tickets, they studied the subway map, and decided there were several important junctions. Sammy randomly chose what looked to be one of the three biggest. They caught the next train for Yonge and Bloor.

Two brand new armoured personnel carriers were rounded up from the manufacturers a couple of hours away, and were headed towards Waterloo just before dawn. They were to

rendezvous with a task force at the Dayton Block at eight, but by seven they were a couple of hours behind, and losing time as they went. Nobody seemed surprised.

A helicopter scouted the approaches to the building without getting too close, then returned to Trenton for fuel. Fifty-two troops sat in the carriers and complained.

A satellite downloaded a detailed photo of the Dayton Block to the NSA, who passed it along. Things looked suspicious because nothing looked suspicious, and that's a sure sign of the cunning with which things can be disguised. It would have been passed on to the two SEALs, if Lester had remembered to bring the comms unit (SEALs like losing communication with their bosses).

Just before they went into the subway system, Lester got a call from headquarters. The satellite photo was described in detail, but Lester just rolled his eyes and told the sender that the suspects were in Toronto to set off a bomb and they, Sammy and Lester, would do their best to stop them. Without using any weapons. Which was, of course, all they normally used, but they were SEALs, and would figure it out.

At nine Copeman and Christiana were still at the Yonge-Bloor subway section, going up and down the escalators between the Bloor platform and the Yonge platform. They carried Sears shopping bags, and scanned the people. It was crowded. People had bags. Students of all ages had backpacks. They recognized nobody except two lean and muscular dudes who passed them several times. Copeman wondered if Jake had sent a couple of JTF2 buddies to help. But then, he remembered, Jake knew nothing about this little upcoming event. And that was assuming neither the alien nor Christiana had lied to him.

Who knew what goes on in an alien space being's mind?

Christiana grabbed his arm. "Those two guys. They're from apartment one. The Bonisteel Brothers."

The two looked vaguely familiar to Copeman; he'd seen them only once, and that time they were in a car, pulling out of the parking lot as he'd come in. It was spring break for the universities, so they had a right to be away from Waterloo. But it was a mighty coincidence, he thought, as they started after the two.

At the same time, he noticed the lean and muscular dudes (LMDs, for any future report) started in the same direction, keeping well back of the students. Copeman also noted that one of the students had a school backpack.

Abruptly, the two sat on a bench and watched a train leave. The backpack went beside them. Copeman continued past them, then turned. The students got up, leaving the backpack beside the bench, coming towards Copeman. Two polite Canadians tried to tell them they'd forgotten the packsack, but the Bonisteel Brothers shook them off and kept coming. People started getting concerned, and were obviously starting to look for subway security. Copeman considered drawing his gun, but wasn't sure what would trigger the bomb.

There are suicide bombers that just push their own buttons and blow up. Then there are terrorists who hope to survive the blast, maybe even get away to start all over. These guys normally get a block away, then set off the bomb by dialing a phone set into the bomb mechanism. It looked like these guys were type two.

Copeman kicked one of the bombers in the crotch, and he went down. The agent figured they'd divide the chores, one having the packsack and the other carrying the detonating phone, so he kicked the one who'd had the packsack.

The other fellow started running back past the bomb. People started running, blocking the stairs. Not that the other guy got far. Christiana stuck out a foot and he went sliding down the platform, into the LMDs. The bigger LMD stuck his thumb into the guys' solar plexus, then tapped him on the side of the neck.

"Strip them!" Copeman yelled, and ran for the bomb. He took out a knife sharpened the way he liked it. He slit the sides of the packsack, and examined the contents. Peeling off several components, he identified the explosive heart and the phone attached to it. It was a lot smaller than it could have been, which puzzled Copeman.

There was a thin possibility they had another guy in on this, or a long-distance phone call coming in, so Copeman pondered what to do. He walked quickly to the men's washroom, yelled "BOMB" and tossed it in. Three men came out, two of them holding their pants. Then another guy, who threw himself out the door. There was no blast.

By the time he'd got back, the two LMDs were sitting on the brothers, holding up a phone. "Took it from this one," one guy said.

Copeman showed him his identification. The guy nodded, and said, "we're just tourists. Don't want no trouble. We'll just mosey along. I guess you can handle this."

Copeman smiled. "No problem. You have my thanks."

The stairs were mostly clear by this time, except for a few old people who'd been knocked over, so the LMDs disappeared before the transit cops got there."

Then, of course, the bomb squad had to remove the bomb from the bathroom, and collect the other components, whatever they were. And give Copeman hell, while they were at it.

Christiana actually smiled this time.

In Waterloo, the army still hadn't got going by ten, when the emails arrived at the high school. Thomas Weston, geek with a future, was in class when his home computer coerced a computer at a lawyer's in Perth, Australia, to send the email message to the school.

The principal took one look at the package, right where the email said it would be, and ordered a general evacuation. Everybody was to go home. Now. Don't go back into the school till tomorrow.

The bomb squad was called and showed up within fifteen minutes. By that time, Barbara and Britney were on their way to the Dayton Block. Chad and Charles were heading the same

way, by a different route. Things were going just fine, even if a couple of the participants were getting the jitters.

When the boys got to apartment 2, Chad knocked. The door opened a bit, and Barbara's eyes confirmed their identity. She had most of her clothes off before Britney had the door locked.

At 11:30, the two armoured personnel carriers arrived, one on the street in front of the Dayton Block and one on the street at the back, but both a block away. The helicopter arrived and began circling slowly, keeping radio contact with the carriers. A JTF3 team scaled the side of the building and walked silently across, splitting into four groups.

Upstairs, only apartment two had occupants. They wouldn't have noticed a Shriner's parade outside.

Abdul noted the military presence and heard the helicopter. He walked outside and saw the military vehicles. Raising his hands, he walked towards them, stopping in the intersection. He was joined by Aklif, also with his hands up.

Explosions took out a couple of sections of wall, and the JTF3 members went through the apartments in the building, from one room to another, just breaking through the walls. They found nothing but some naked teens. Four more teams went into the stores, ignoring customers and workers, going into the back rooms. People left in a hurry, and were rounded up outside by men with automatic weapons. John Hyde, of course, threatened to sue everybody, but kept his hands in sight.

The armoured personnel carriers rolled up and disgorged lots of guys in camouflage. They surrounded the adults, but ignored the now semi-clad teens, who ran into the federal building across the street to find a place to get dressed.

For a moment, it was quiet, then someone accidentally fired a rifle into the ceiling of the Warm Buns Bakery while stealing a cinnamon bun. A team member up above blew a small hole in the floor and dropped a flashbang and a tear gas grenade through it. With soldiers running and things being knocked off their proper places, a fire started in the kitchen of the bakery.

The fire department was called, although most of the engines were at a high school for some reason, so a good chunk of the building was burning by the time they got there.

Afterword

The Canadian government eventually figured out that the Bonisteel Brothers were, in fact, Jim and Bryce McCrum, residents of Sarnia. It was pointed out that showing how close the subway had come to being bombed might just make the public nervous, but the government was, at first, not inclined to let these guys off the hook. Things got to looking better, however, when it was discovered that the Bonisteel Brothers' explosive turned out to be a small charge with a lot of fine white powder wrapped around it, and the radioactive cores of a few smoke detectors. It might not have killed anyone but it would have taken weeks to assure the public that the powder

was harmless and the radioactivity negligible. Which, of course, would have been a longer-term problem than a single blast.

Poe figured out before he got past Madoc that his car must have a tracking device on it: how else could he have been followed? He located it and attached it to the car next to him. Then he called Wendy, to explain that Agnew was in a retreat, and was getting his head back together.

Once the government figured out he wasn't a bomber, he moved in with a woman who ran a goat farm near Peterborough. She made cheese; he wrote God and Cinnamon Buns, which was short-listed for a Giller literary prize the next year.

Agnew left the retreat after a month, and, declaring himself healed, was welcomed back into the church. Wendy was happy to get their life going again, although the church posted him up to a remote native community for a three-year term. While there he wrote The Midewin Way, a book about the secret aboriginal society and how it meshed with contemporary Christianity. He claimed to have got the information from a local elder, and the locals never told on him. It was a big seller, especially for the ecology movement.

And Agnew didn't have to see his in-laws nearly as often, except when Wendy's brother came up north moose-hunting once a year.

Barbara and Britney and Chad and Charles went back to school, of course. Barbara and Charles were an item for a couple of months, but after that, they drifted into other groups. The bombing hoax at the school was never tracked down.

Abdul moved his tailor shop to a strip mall in a suburb, and continued tailoring. Embarrassed by the whole episode, the government expedited the immigration of his family from Yemen, although a few intelligence agencies planted microphones all over his place.

Aklif got his lazy son married to a woman from a good family and put the insurance money into expanding his other convenience store across town.

Copeman quit CSIS without having to fully explain how he ended up in Toronto after following the wrong guys to the wilderness north of Madoc. He opened a security consulting business with Christiana doing the bookwork. She gave birth to a perfectly human daughter not long after the wedding.

Jake is still in JTF2, doing training. He occasionally leads his trainees across Lingham Swamp and up onto Mount Moriah.

The Alien, whose original name on his home planet in the Aigon star system was totally unpronounceable by anyone not having an odilute and a modicum of telepathy, returned and filed his report on Earth. His boss welcomed back the roving assessor, and was all ready to turn the planet over to the Formeet, who would pay for the privilege of removing humanity to their freezers. The pay would help the department meet its budget.

The recommendation made, however, was that humanity be allowed to continue as an entertainment resource. Once the department had seen the tapes, nobody disagreed, and humanity became a live-action soap opera for those species with a sense of humour. The series

provided a steady income to the assessment department, and may have saved a number of other galactic societies.

The Dayton Block was restored, at least on the outside and the Warm Buns Bakery opened again, with Wyvalla and Windsong running it. Within a year, they had two franchises, one in Guelph and one in Chatham. John Hyde got his Leather Weather shop running again, and although business was still light, it was enough to keep him out of trouble in his retirement.

The upstairs was made into offices for lawyers.

Sammy and Lester, the SEALs, returned to the States and filed a report giving themselves full credit for stopping the total destruction of downtown Toronto. Nobody believed them (they were SEALs, of course) but the report was passed along as gospel, and the president smirked, to know that the States had saved Canada, again.

**** THE END ****

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