

# THE DESCENDANT

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First published in 2012 by Darkwater Books  
An imprint of Harris Oxford Limited.  
41 Cornmarket Street, Oxford, OX1 3HA

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ISBN 978-1-909072-01-5

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***For David,***

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



# ABU SHAHRAIN, IRAQ, JANUARY 2003

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I need volunteers to go down."

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

"Let me go, sir."

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

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

He could see Fletcher breathing lightly through open lips. She looked watchful, tense. He leaned back as one of the team attached a winch to the equipment which stood over the shaft, then clipped one end of the rope first to the weapons inspection team member called Adams, then to Bennett.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bennett's voice was barely above a whisper.

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

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

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

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

A moment later, it was over. Adams slumped to the floor, landed with his face on one side. Bennett couldn't take his



eyes off him. So much blood. What was the explanation? A booby-trap? Poisonous gas?

“What the hell is going on down there?”

“Adams is dead.”

Then he heard Fletcher’s voice. “Airman, report.”

Bennett began to back away from the body.

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

Shaking his head, Bennett spoke into his microphone, “It’s not W.M.D.”

The lead inspector stifled a curse.

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

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

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

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

Why wasn’t Bennett dead?

## VIAL IN POCKET

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

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

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

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

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

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

But danger was theoretical – Jackson had never faced any serious consequences. Maybe this was the blissful naiveté of the inexperienced. Or maybe there was something special about his instinct for survival. After all, he reflected, wasn't his twin brother a decorated US Air Force captain, a veteran of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? His brother had been flying fighter jets since he'd left college, and always at war. If Connor Bennett had something special which helped to keep him safe, maybe Jackson had it too.

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

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

It wasn't unusual for biological scientists to bend the rules this way. Even so, Jackson always felt apprehensive when the moment came to stroll past the customs officials at the

'Nothing to Declare' desk. Lying didn't come naturally and he didn't get much practice.

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

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

Jackson knew that customs officials looked for signs of nervousness in the eyes and body language of travelers. Drug traffickers were their main prey, but Jackson felt sure that they wouldn't pass up the chance to bust a *gringo* carrying strange vials of an unknown, potentially lethal micro-organism.

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

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

"Pardon me?"

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

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

"*Narco-trafficantes* – the Mexican drug gangs. They know all the tricks to fake out the customs officials. But there's no

way to beat this system. Everyone takes the exact same chance.”

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

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

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

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

It was green.

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

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

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

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

promised to arrive in good time, with a thermos of ice with which to rescue the vials.

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

“PJ?”

Beltran stood, grinned and stuck out a hand that was still hot from holding the coffee. “Hey! Jackson! It’s great to see you again!”

“Well, well; the newly minted Doctor Bennett, correct?”

Jackson stuttered slightly. “Not exactly. I’m kind of behind schedule.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Before you ask, no, your boss doesn’t have any clue about what I’m about to tell you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beltran stretched his arms across the back of the booth, knocking down Jackson’s suede jacket. Jackson made to stand



up but Beltran was effusive with apologies. "Listen to me, I get so melodramatic. Let me get that for you." He picked the jacket off the floor, made a show of dusting the surface clean. He handed it back to Jackson as carefully as if it had been a kitten.

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

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

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

Mexican Customs.

Had they somehow caught up to him?

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

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

Jackson's attention shifted to Beltran. An unmistakable frisson of fear crossed Beltran's face as their eyes met for less than a second. Yet all he said was "Doctor Bennett. This is an

associate from the Institute. It seems I'm on an earlier flight to Monterrey. So I gotta get going, Doctor Bennett. I'll see you around, OK?"

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

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

"You're leaving . . . ?"

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

"Your flask," said the man to Beltran.

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

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

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

In fact, that in itself was strange.

*Why did Beltran keep calling me "Doctor Bennett"?*

# THE GREY-HAIRED MAN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Government agent' sounded convincing. The clandestine gun shook PJ's confidence. Did Mexican government agents threaten people with guns, practically in public? Maybe the

guy is going to ask for a bribe, PJ hoped. He found himself clinging to the idea. The Customs Department could make difficulties for PJ. It might be worth risking a bribe to avoid trouble.

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

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

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

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

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

Beltran had looked scared.

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

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

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

*Beltran was trying to send Jackson a coded signal.*

Could it have been a warning?

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

With a gulp, he swallowed the coffee.

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

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

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

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

Jackson was more nervous by the minute. The government was onto the whole illegal exchange. Presumably they would interrogate Beltran. It was just a matter of time before they were after Jackson, too. Presumably Beltran's

colleagues in Temixco could advise Jackson. Did he need a lawyer? Or would he do better simply to leave the country, right away?

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

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

The drivers in this city were every bit as bad as he’d been warned. They drove almost intimately close in eye-wateringly narrow lanes, with an informality that made the sweat patches under his arms grow larger by the second. Jackson held his breath. He probably needed eyes in the back of his head to get to his destination without at least a minor crash.

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

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

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

“I need to use the bathroom,” the grey-haired man said. He stopped and gripped PJ’s shoulder. His weapon dug hard into PJ’s ribs. There was something forced about the man’s tone, as though he wasn’t used to sounding quite this

accommodating. “You should take the opportunity too, Dr. Beltran. For you, this is gonna be a long night.”

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

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

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

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

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

His muscles seemed to have become locked. He heard the grey-haired man’s order to sit on the toilet seat as though

from a great distance. PJ watched, almost detached, unable to move as the revolver was raised. At that moment he sensed the crumbling of the foundations of his ordered universe; this was the abyss that people talked about, the final abyss of terror.

PJ Beltran was staring deep inside.



## A TEST-TUBE

The bullet entered PJ's eye with almost no sound. It blew his eyeball out of its socket with a slight pop, streaming easily through his head. Bone shattered as the bullet exited and sank with a faint thud into the soft plaster wall behind the toilet. Blood and brain tissue spilled freely from the open wounds. The assassin stepped into the cubicle and locked the door behind him. He pulled hard at the pale blue shirt that Beltran was wearing, yanked the garment over the dead man's head. He made a makeshift knot at the top to stem the flow of blood. The assassin spooled out bunches of toilet paper. With meticulous care he wiped away all drops of blood and flecks of brain which had spilled near the neighboring cubicle.

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

A moment later, the attendant returned.

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

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

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

Jackson finally caught sight of the welcome signs; toll booths for the fast road south to Cuernavaca, a large city close to Temixco. As he drove his car slowly through the booth, Jackson decided to stop at the nearby roadside service station. He'd pick up some Diet Coke and some spicy chips. A change of shirt also seemed like a good idea. Jackson's green polo top was soaked in two rounds of nervous sweat. As the air warmed up, his body was beginning to give off a sharp, acrid stench.

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

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

stretchy, synthetic membrane. Jackson peeled away the film so that he could examine the writing on the lid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Heaving rapid, shallow breaths, Jackson cast his gaze at the vehicles going through the toll booths. He couldn't return

to the car park – it was way too open. Whoever those men were, Jackson guessed that they had been following him since the airport. Maybe they even knew where he was going. After all, it was no secret where PJ Beltran worked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As incomprehensible as the idea was, Beltran must have planted the test-tube. Beltran's discreet warning, and his strange words, minutes before they'd been separated.

*"There's something more here, Jackson. Something big."*

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

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

## PYRAMID SACRIFICE

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

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

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

"Jackson Bennett! Hey, man. How come you aren't here yet?" Simon Reyes answered the phone, Beltran's newest doctoral student. Simon had graduated top of his class at university before he'd started a PhD program in University of

California, San Francisco. He'd rotated through a couple of labs there before Beltran had persuaded the young man to join him in Temixco. Jackson had never actually met Simon, but his own boss at the lab spoke highly of the young graduate student.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

"You have somewhere in mind?"

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

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

"It's fine. Simon, listen; you need to know something." Jackson then related, as calmly as possible, how Beltran had taken his departure from him at Mexico City airport. The phone was silent for a long time. Jackson continued, "PJ was

trying to keep me in the clear. I guess he wanted me to carry some sort of message. If only I knew what.”

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

Jackson raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you’re dressed to impress.”

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

*Sequestrantes* – kidnapers – had been the word he had not dared bring himself to use in his conversation with Jackson. A word Simon couldn’t keep out of his thoughts now. Everyone in Mexico knew what kidnapers were capable of. Recently the gangs were branching out beyond the simple fare of cash-for-victims, exploring the corporate possibilities of industrial espionage. If anyone had got wind of what Beltran and Jackson were exchanging at the airport, kidnapping was a genuine and chilling possibility.

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

A black Ford Explorer which was parked across the road from the Institute pulled into the traffic behind him. Simon’s

heart began to thud as he watched, in his rear view mirror, the Explorer take the same lane as did he towards Tepoztlan.

Today, there could be no coincidences.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Simon broke down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You think so, Fernando?” replied the grey-haired man, holding out Simon’s discarded clothes for him to change into. “You should see me with the ones who struggle, or fight back. Violence is a precision weapon. You don’t waste too much of

it on a good man like this. Save it for the dangerous bastards. Because it ages you; it destroys you inside. If you want to last in this profession, you've got to have a plan for psychological longevity."

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

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

# ON THE TEPOZTECO

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

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

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

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

worn blue jeans, stopped in front of him. She gazed at him intently with solemn, brown eyes.

“*Buenos días*,” Jackson said, politely.

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

Jackson sighed. Why not? He was perfectly aware that people disliked tourists who refused to part with a few dollars in the name of getting value for money, especially if they were American. With a wan smile, Jackson dropped the money into the girl’s grubby, outstretched hand and held out his right palm. The girl gazed into his eyes for a second, then took his left hand. “We use this one.” She studied it for a few minutes, and looked back into his eyes.

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

“I still haven’t found the right girl,” he said.

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

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

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

Jackson eyed her with a touch of cynicism. “You got any advice? Something I can actually use?”

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

Jackson smiled uneasily. “Ooh. Sounds serious.”

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

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

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

It was nothing but new-agey garbage, Jackson told himself. Normally Jackson would have nothing to do with unscientific superstition. But Beltran’s planting of the test-tube on Jackson had obviously unbalanced him. He took it out of his pocket once more and looked at the liquid in the tube. It was crystal clear, didn’t look anything like a bacterial suspension. The fact that Beltran didn’t seem to mind the test-tube being at room temperature made Jackson suspect that it could only contain one thing: pure DNA.

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

Jackson had to get to a lab.

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

Jackson asked him in English, “How good is it? Can you see the people up there?”

“You know someone up there?”

Jackson nodded. “Maybe.”



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

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

After another twenty minutes, Jackson was sweating profusely. The day was not particularly warm, but his suede jacket was no good for a hike. He caught up with another small group of German tourists. They carried a large water bottle and when Jackson politely asked for a sip, they equally politely offered to fill his empty Diet Coke bottle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fernando watched him closely. He avoided being in any shot. When Jackson was finished, Fernando asked him again. “Ready to go down?”

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

“OK Simon, I’ve seen all I want to see. Let’s go.”

They began the descent, passing the Germans.

“Did you pass many tourists on your way up?” asked Fernando, his tone light, conversational.

Then Jackson remembered where he had first seen the glint of gold in the context of danger. As clearly as though he

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

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

For the second time that day, adrenaline surged through him. Only furious concentration concealed his anxiety. Jackson clamped his jaw shut and reviewed his options. This guy – whoever he was – was probably armed and planning to attack him as soon as they left all witnesses behind. The forest at the side of the path was thick, the drop treacherous. At this time of day, a body could be quickly disposed of with minimal disruption.

Just so long as you had the element of surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# SILVER BEETLE

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

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

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

The wound would be a problem. Blood had soaked the lower part of his trouser leg. He examined the laceration by the light of his BlackBerry. The broken branch had inflicted damage deep enough that blood loss could become a serious concern.

He pulled off his jacket, tore the left sleeve away from the shoulder of his shirt and used the fabric as a makeshift bandage. He grimaced and pulled it as tight as he could bear. In movies, tough guys stitched themselves up with their own

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the next step seemed inevitable; the telephone number taped to the test-tube.

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

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

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

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

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

*"Who's speaking?"*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"Almost, ma'am, almost."*

*"You work with my cousin?"*



“Ah. You’re PJ’s cousin.”

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

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

“Stuff?”

“Genetic stuff. The details are a bit technical.”

“I’m an archaeologist. Not entirely unacquainted with the ways of you geneticists.”

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

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

“I’m going to owe you big time for this.” Jackson took a deep breath. “I’m near Tepoztlan. In the woods. I’m lost. Someone just tried to kill me.”

“Sounds terrible,” Marie-Carmen said, clearly unimpressed. “And you’re calling me, why?”

“Could you come get me? Please? You’re the only one I can trust. Please.”

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

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