

CHAPTER THREE:

2 THESSALONIANS 2:3

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

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

"C'mon, sport, get up."

"No yet!"

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

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

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

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

Eulie's morning ritual was a grueling chore mitigated by love. He dressed himself under direction; he just *had* to learn. But, the process took forever even when he cooperated. First came the diaper-like pull-ups, then the sweat pants and t-shirt. Even tube socks had their pitfalls for uncoordinated limbs. But the final task was by far the most solemn. Sally laid Eulie on his bed and slipped his small feet into the plastic orthopedic braces that she could not afford, and strapped the braces tightly to control his untrained ligaments and muscles. Eulie had the muscular

control of a three year old; anyone could see it. The braces were only the most obvious sign of his troubles. He was a mess both physically and mentally, but Sally fought for him, and made him fight for himself. She refused to accept the will of her mother's vicious God.

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

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

"No! Euie be good!"

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

"No toas, butter and jewwy, peas."

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

"Euie go shoo, this day?"

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

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

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

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

Eulie's Kindergarten day care stood two blocks east at the busy, six-lane intersection of Kessler and Keystone. He called it school because they taught the basics between playtimes: the alphabet, counting, and an appreciation of reading.

They did what they could for Eulie despite their lack of special education expertise, and Sally appreciated their efforts. Little as it was, their work showed that Eulie could learn, that, with help from caring adults, he was not doomed to helplessness the rest of his life.

She took him inside, away from the rumbling trucks and honking cars, and said a cheery hello to Brenda, the girl in the outer office just inside the doors. Sally paid the weekly bill and passed pleasantries about nothing as she helped Eulie remove his winter gear. She fussed over him as he put away his book bag, greeted his caregiver in the great room beyond the foyer, and investigated the toys in the red and yellow cubbyholes along one long wall. Other sons and daughters scampered about, and Sally's heart wrenched at how coordinated, oral, and self-sufficient they were, far more so than her broken child. The comparison was old, but its sting did not fade as its truth stretched into years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She appreciated the money, but not the experience of earning it. Davidson was a nut. He was obsessed with biblical prophecy, and his loose interpretations of scripture conjured multiple terrors from his fertile imagination. Strangely, he couldn't wait for universal destruction. He called it the joyous return of Christ. Sally

called it a death wish. But, his death wish sold copy, and his crusade drew ever closer to Indianapolis. She could milk more from Davidson. With luck, she might even land a face-to-face interview.

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

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

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

Does Reiser Uplift Tabloids,
Or Drag Down Journalism?

She frowned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mr. University Student?" He nodded. "Come on in! You're looking for me!"

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

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

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

Because *he* wants to interview *you*, she thought.

"Not a coffee drinker," the man said.

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

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

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

Mr. Gary LaMonte intrigued her. He was older than she expected for a college student. Twenty-five, maybe thirty. His rounded, boyish face contrasted with alert eyes and the grave line of his mouth. He might have been a soldier beneath those

shabby, bargain store clothes and that worn canvas book bag. He had that confident, engaged look of one who has challenged life and wrestled it to a hard-won draw.

"The chairs are free," she said.

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

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

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

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

"Should we get started?" he said.

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

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

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

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

"That's my thought."

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

"Want a bagel?" she asked.

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

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

"Up late. That computer guy thing."

"I thought you had a date."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's me. Rosa Vasquez."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, that insulted some of the Christian membership, who wanted no accommodation with modern science. These people formed new churches that defended the fundamentals of faith: the Bible as an historical document, with no possibility of error. There was no central organization to unify these people. They were essentially outside organization, renegades from the status quo. And they shared little between themselves, including any philosophical norms that might bring them together. They interpreted that historical Bible of theirs in often radically different ways. They had spokesmen, but only in a very informal sense.

William Jennings Bryan, for instance, but that wasn't enough for a cohesive movement to form and survive."

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

Gary smiled. "Yeah, but Fredric March played him, and they changed the name. Bryan and other fundamentalists tried to remove evolution from school curriculums, but they failed. Their movement suffered worldwide ridicule, and they dropped into obscurity during the Great Depression and World War II. Later, starting in the sixties, the fundamentalists came back with a scheme to elevate Creationism, which adheres to the literal word of the Bible, to the same level in academia as empirical science. They were roundly debunked by the scientific community, but they had grown in political clout, and could influence state legislatures and textbook publishing companies.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No offense taken," Gary said.

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

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

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

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

"He left a message."

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

2 THESSALONIANS 2:3

"Uh-oh."

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

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

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

"Two incidents in two days."

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

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

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

"No, I don't."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Excuse me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We're here."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I think you fixed it," Gary said.

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

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

"Nice place," he said.

"Come on in. Make yourself at home."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're raising your voice--"

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

"Now, you're being rude."

"I'm rude?"

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

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

"No."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lady, you are crazy!"

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

He stepped toward her, not too eagerly.

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

"I can see just fine from here."

"Scared of girls?"

His face set. He stepped a foot closer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And how many inaccurate ones?"

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

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

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

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

"Fine!"

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

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

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

"Get shoo help, Mommy?"

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

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

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

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

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

The boy leaned into his mother.

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

"Euie Eiser!" the boy crowed.

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

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

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

"Okay. Mommy help?"

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry..."

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

"Sure. Where were we?"

"Addresses. Do you have Web access?"

"I use the university computer labs."

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

The printer next to the laptop hummed to life.

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

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

The printer rolled out multiple sheets of paper.

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

"What?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hmmm, not any shorter."

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

"Sarah."

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

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

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

"Oh! I didn't even notice."

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

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

"And, thanks for yours."

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

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

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