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The Monster of Florence

Castle Bravo

By

Karna Small Bodman

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By Karna Small Bodman

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For Taylor and Jim
...Who have a love of history...and
international intrigue.

CASTLE BRAVO – CHARACTERS

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Tripp Adams, Vice President, GeoGlobal Oil & Gas

Pete Kalani, UCLA Student

Samantha Reid, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security

Dr. Cameron Talbot, Missile Defense Expert

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Max Federman, Assistant to the President for Political Affairs

Jayson Keller, Vice President of the United States

Angela Marconi, Special Assistant to the President for Public
Liaison

Jim Shilling, Deputy Director, White House Office of Homeland
Security

Joan Tillman, Administrative Assistant to Samantha Reid

Foreign Nationals

Sergei Baltiev, Opposition Leader in Kazakhstan

Nurlan Remizov, Exchange Student

Zhanar Remizov, Nurlan's Sister

Viktor Surleimenov, President of Kazakhstan

Others

William Ignatius, Secretary of Defense

Godfrey Nims, Lobbyist for GeoGlobal Oil & Gas

Jake Reid, Father of Samantha Reid

CASTLE BRAVO - The actual code name for a Top Secret U.S. Government project

ONE

The White House – Present Day

Could it happen here? Samantha Reid leaned over and studied the new classified report. It had been sitting on her desk in a special envelope when she arrived in the West Wing at 6:30 a.m.

The sun was just rising, creating wisps of light orange reflections on the Potomac River when she had pulled out of the garage below her Georgetown condo and headed toward The White House. She had been in a somber mood that morning as she mulled over the recent threats her Office of Homeland Security was investigating. *Why does every day feel like Monday?*

She had only been in the top job a few weeks and already it seemed that the tips, rumors and intel traffic were pouring in like some restless diluvial tide. There were concerns raised by the CDC about a biological attack using a new strain of virus. The Transportation Department had issued an alert about security on the Acela, the popular train that ran from Washington, D.C. to New York and then on to Boston. There were stories of bombs set to go off in the Lincoln Tunnel, threats of poisons in the food supply, and one particularly vocal group had distributed instructions all over the internet describing how easy it would be to blow up trains transporting hazardous chemicals.

Bad as they all were, each one was fairly localized. They could kill a lot of innocent people and do terrible damage to a certain section of the country, but this . . . this could be catastrophic. This new report eclipsed all the other memos in her In Box. She stared at the last paragraph. *This could change life as we know it and set us back to the year 1910.*

Samantha pushed a long strand of dark brown hair out of her eyes, shoved the report back inside the envelope, tossed it into her safe and slammed it shut.

TWO

The White House

“Do you know where your money is?”

The six Deputy Directors of The White House Office of Homeland Security stared at their boss. Samantha often asked thought-provoking questions at their morning staff meetings, but what was she getting at this time?

“Do you mean what bank it’s in?” the head of the section on Borders and Transportation asked.

“Is it really in a bank?” Samantha pressed.

“Well, sure it is. I get statements.”

Samantha looked around the small conference table in her second floor West Wing office. “Anyone else know where his money is? Today? Any day?”

“Sorry. I don’t get it,” Jim Shilling said. “I wonder who’s on her grassy knoll this time?” he murmured to the staffer next to him. Then glancing at his watch, he said to Samantha, “I thought we were going to review the latest on our Chemical and Biological Readiness Program this morning and talk about that CDC warning.”

“I know that’s your directorate, and we’ll get to that in a minute,” Samantha answered. “But first, I’d like to know if any of you has a clue what you’d do if you actually did *not* know where

your money was? You didn't know, so you couldn't get it. Not for food, not for medical care. Not for anything."

Her question was met with a half dozen blank stares. She glanced down at a sheaf of notes she had in front of her and continued. "Let's say there was a massive power failure of some sort, and all the computers went down at once. None of the banks, the insurance companies, the hedge funds, nobody had any record of their deposits, their assets, their payment schedules, their debts. Then what?"

"Then they wait until the power comes back on," Jim said. "Besides, all the banks have back-up systems. We have power failures all the time after hurricanes, earthquakes, whatever. So what's the big deal?"

"Back-up systems? Some New York banks have back-up systems in Jersey City. Too close," Samantha said with a wave of her hand. "No. What I'm asking you to consider is a situation where all of the computers, the stock market, the ATM's, the railroads, the cars, the hospitals with all of our new electronic medical records, the telephone system, the electricity grid, refrigeration, water treatment, in fact everything using electronics, all of it is fried and won't work anymore. Not for a long while, maybe months, maybe as much as a year, until all the systems are repaired. No water, no food. Millions of Americans would die!"

"Hey, Samantha, that's never happened. What are you talking about?" one staffer asked.

"I'm talking about an electro-magnetic pulse," she said in a serious tone.

"EMP? You mean when a small nuke or one of those other E-weapons we've got is detonated way up in the atmosphere and it sends out those magnetic waves, kind of like massive microwaves?" her Deputy for Energy and Nuclear Issues asked.

"Precisely," Samantha said.

“Okay, so the Pentagon has some of those new E-weapons,” Jim volunteered. “In fact, remember back at the beginning of the Iraq war, we knocked out an entire TV center in Baghdad with a single small E-bomb. Well that’s what they called it then. The Air Force dropped it to screw up their communications. But then we backed off.” He stared at Samantha and pressed on. “So, why are you bringing it up now when we’ve got so many other things to deal with? And besides, it’s never happened except for that one time. At least not any other time that I can remember.”

“Actually, it did happen a long time ago,” she replied.

“When?” A chorus of voices intoned all at once.

“Okay, I know it was before any of us were born,” Samantha said. “But I’m sure you all know about, or have read about, the series of nuclear tests our government conducted back in the 40’s and 50’s.”

“Sure. Weren’t they out in the Pacific somewhere?” the head of the Executive Secretariate asked.

“Yeah, the Marshall Islands,” Jim said. “We weren’t the only ones, though. The Russians, well the Soviets, they tested weapons too in Central Asia. And a bunch of people were exposed to radiation, right?”

“Yes, they were,” Samantha said. “But as I think back on it, we were trying to prove we had such powerful weapons, no one would ever attack us again.”

“Sort of, ‘You show me yours, I’ll show you mine,’ ” Jim said with a sly grin.

Samantha raised one eyebrow and replied, “Something like that. But my point is that we set off those bombs, out in places like Enewetak, Johnston Island, Bikini Atoll where some of the effects actually rained down on another island, and one of the results was that over two-thousand miles away in Hawaii the street lights dimmed, electrical systems were screwed up, circuit breakers were tripped, and there was permanent damage done to a

telecommunications relay facility. And that was over half a century ago when we weren't relying on computers and networks like we are today."

"So why bring it up now? I haven't heard about any EMP threats out there." Jim said.

"Well, I just did. There are threats. They just haven't been carried out yet. "She glanced down at the papers in front of her. "This morning I got a classified memo from a contact at DOD about how both North Korea and Iran have been working on EMP weapons. We know that China has the technology. But now I figure they'd just get the North Koreans to test it. You know, use them as their proxy, and then China can just sit there and say, 'wasn't us.' And as for Iran, remember that high altitude Shahab III missile they tested a while back?" Her comment was met with silent nods. "Well, it turns out that they've also practiced launching a mobile ballistic missile from a ship in the Caspian Sea. What this means is that they could launch a small nuclear device high enough into space to trigger an EMP off one of our coasts if they wanted to. And I don't even want to think about some terrorist group getting their hands on one."

"So, bottom line, what are you suggesting?" Jim asked.

Samantha turned to face him. "What I'm saying is that since I read the latest intel, I've done more digging, and I believe this is a threat worth pursuing. Big time. We had a Commission that looked into these issues. It was appointed years ago, but nobody paid any attention to their reports. They came before the House Armed Services Committee every once in a while, but then it was disbanded. No more money. So, when was the last time you read anything about an EMP threat?"

"There have been a lot of TV shows about cyber-attacks and one I remember alluded to an EMP effect," Jim Shilling remarked. "But, hey, that's Hollywood hyping wild ideas. They always try to be edgy."

“Edgy?” Samantha echoed. “I’m talking about a serious threat, not a TV series.”

“So what are we going to do?” Jim asked. “You know we’ve got a ton of other stuff on our plate right now. I mean, that WMD panel is telling everyone to focus on biological threats.”

“And the DOT is about to put out new rules on train safety,” another staffer added. “We’re still trying to infiltrate that group that keeps threatening to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel. Well, the FBI is, I mean.”

Samantha nodded as she assessed the anxious looks of her staff. “Look, I know we’ve got a ton of issues right now. Things we have to coordinate with the agencies. But our job isn’t just to react to threats, but to anticipate them. And this EMP thing is really bugging me. What we need to do is rattle some cages. I’m going to bring this up on our inter-agency conference call this morning and ask for a threat assessment.”

“Sounds like a full-employment act for our Missile Defense Agency,” Jim remarked.

“They could be part of it,” Samantha said. “The trouble is, the difference between us and the bad guys is that while they make plans, we just keep having meetings and appointing commissions. And that’s not good enough. We’ve got to get this kind of threat on the President’s radar screen before some group or some country decides it’s time to set off a blast that could send this country back to the last century!”

THREE

Rongelap, The Marshall Islands – Early February, 1954

“Please take me with you!” the young girl pleaded with her lover as tears streamed down her face. “I’m so scared. I don’t want to be here when the bomb goes off. Please!”

The Navy sailor cradled her in his arms, rocking her back and forth as he would a child while she sobbed. He wanted to take her. She was his treasure. She was the best thing he had found in his sorry life serving in the Seventh Fleet. But there was no way. He’d never get permission to take a woman with him. He couldn’t marry her, even if he wanted to. He still had years to go on his enlistment. And she was so young. Hell, they were both young. But what does age have to do with it when you find a gorgeous girl swimming in a lagoon and you’re deployed to build structures on some God-forsaken island? She had to be the best looking thing he had seen in years. Better than the ones back in Iowa, that’s for sure. So they got involved. But what now?

“Maelynn, you know I can’t take you with me now,” he murmured as he stroked her hair. “It’ll be okay. Don’t worry. We’ve got a whole fleet of ships out here, thousands of people setting up these tests. Do you think we’d be here if it wasn’t safe?”

She reached up and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Our Chief says that many people have had to be moved off the other islands. It’s been going on for years. And nobody knows when they can go back. If it’s so safe, why can’t they go back? I don’t understand.”

“We just want to be sure everything is okay before we let the people back on those islands. Sure we’ve been testing a bunch of stuff out here. Our mission has been to set up the tests and show the world what we’ve got so there will never be another war. You don’t want another big war, do you?”

“No, I don’t,” she said, haltingly. “The Japanese were so bad, everyone was happy when the Americans came to our islands. But you dropped big bombs on Japan so the world already knows what you have. I don’t understand why you have to show the world any more of them.”

“It’s called deterrence.”

“I don’t know that word.”

“It means that if everybody knows we have these weapons, no other country will attack us again. There won’t be a World War Three because we could fight back with bombs that are just too devastating.”

“You keep using words I don’t know. De-va-stating?”

“It means really bad.”

“But you just said I would be okay when the next bomb goes off. How can I be safe if the weapons are so devas...devas...”

“Devastating?”

“Yes,” she mumbled as she started to cry again.

“Honey, please don’t cry. This next bomb will go off over a hundred miles away on Bikini Atoll. As I said, you’ll be just fine.” He reached into his backpack and pulled out a package. “But look. I brought this for you. It’s my rations, all that I could carry this time. And here’s my canteen. I want you to have them. And just...uh...just take care of yourself. Okay?”

She examined the package and the canister and looked up into his eyes. “Will you come back to me?”

“I hope so.”

“But you have to. If you don’t, my family....my people....”

He tipped her chin up and stared into her deep brown eyes. “Your family? Your people? What are you talking about?”

She turned away, refusing to meet his gaze. She hesitated for a long time.

“Maelynn, what is it? What’s wrong? Something about your family? Are they sick? Are they all right?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s me. It’s us. It’s the...it’s the...”

“It’s the what?”

“It’s the...the baby,” she whispered.

He felt like he’d just been dealt a sucker punch. A baby? Maelynn was going to have a baby? His baby? He knew he didn’t have to ask. Of course it was his baby. It had to be. It had only been a short time since he’d been coming to the island to work on the installation of weather stations and other monitoring devices, but whenever he could manage it, he stole away to spend time with her. And now she was going to be the mother of his child. When she mentioned her family, he knew that they were very proud. They had their own ways and as an unmarried and unclaimed mother, she would be shunned, possibly disowned. What the hell was he going to do?

He hesitated, thought for a moment and then said, “Maelynn, look at me. I have an idea.”

She turned to him, her face anxious and still wet with tears. “What can we do?”

He reached over and pulled a ring off his finger and handed it to her. “This is my class ring. Here, take it. See? It has my initials on the inside of the band.”

She peered at the ring as he held it up to the light and saw the initials PVC clearly marked for Peter Van Cleve.

“Tell your family that we were secretly married by my Captain. Tell them that the Captain of a ship has the right to perform marriages in my country. Tell them that you are my wife and that I will come back for you. Tell them now before they know about the baby.”

She stared at the heavy gold ring and gingerly took it out of his hand. Then she wiped her eyes and paused for several seconds. Finally she said, “Yes. I pledge my life to you. You pledge to me?”

He nodded.

She fingered the ring and looked up with a hopeful gaze. “Yes,” she said. “Now I will be wife and mother. I will care for your child until you come back for me.”

Now what? He could hardly take her back to Maquoketa, Iowa. Not even after the war.

She could never live in the cold and the snow. Not after living among palm trees, eating coconuts and swimming in blue lagoons. Or could she? He took her in his arms, held her close and felt her warm breath on his neck. Maybe he could work it out. Maybe he could teach her his ways as she had taught him hers. Maybe after the government had exploded enough bombs and cleaned up the mess, maybe he could find a way to have her in his life. He said a silent prayer that he could figure out a way to pull it off.

He took a deep breath and said, “Maelynn, I will do everything in my power to come back for you. I give you my promise.”

On board Joint Task Force-7 – February 28, 1954

“Captain, here are the readings from our weather station. They’ve been checking surface wind direction and barometric conditions every hour and upper-level conditions every two hours.”

“What’s the latest?”

“Remember, the earlier report said they expected no significant fallout for the populated Marshall Islands but...”

“But what?” the Captain barked impatiently.

“But the midnight briefing now says winds at 20,000 feet are blowing west from Bikini toward the inhabited islands. Looks like they’re heading toward Rongelap.”

“Heading west? I can’t believe this!” The Captain looked down at his classified papers and said in a frustrated tone, “We’ve got over 42,000 military and civilian personnel working on this testing program, seven ships monitoring everything from blast elevation to electricity bursts and you’re telling me that some guy at some weather station is concerned because the winds at some altitude are blowing a bit west? Is he suggesting we should stand down?”

“That’s what it looks like...uh...sir.”

“Get the command group together and we’ll go over this one more time. This is our biggest test so far and even this one may not match the bomb the Soviets tested. And when was theirs?” The Captain stared off into space and then answered his own question. “It was two years ago. Two whole years and we’re still trying to play catch up ball.”

“I know, sir. But the islands...”

“Those nearby atolls were evacuated ages ago, and so I can’t imagine any fallout...”

“But Rongelap, sir. We didn’t tell the Chief to take any sort of precautions there.”

“Precautions? It’s over a hundred miles away. Besides, what precautions could they take? Hide behind a palm tree? Bury themselves in a sand dune? Get Serious.”

“Maybe they should have been evacuated too.”

“So now you’re a radiation expert?” the Captain asked in an irritated tone.

“No, sir. Sorry, sir. It’s just that we’re all...”

The Captain softened his tone. “I know we’re all over-worked, over-wrought, over-everything on this mission. But we have our

orders and unless there are truly extenuating circumstances, our orders are to detonate at dawn.”

Bikini Atoll – 6:45 a.m., March 1, 1954

The blinding flash of light was followed by a fireball of intense heat shooting up to the sky at the rate of 300 miles an hour. The earth shook and the ocean churned as water temperatures hit fifty-five thousand degrees. The largest hydrogen bomb ever detonated by the United States government measured fifteen mega-tons, one-thousand times as powerful as the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Within minutes a monstrous cloud of nuclear debris formed twenty miles up in the air and then a white, snowy ash began to fall on twenty-two fisherman aboard a Japanese fishing boat named “Lucky Dragon.” It was the unluckiest day of their lives.

The ash also rained down on Rongelap where the lagoons turned yellow and dead fish began to float to the surface. Maelynn was hiding inside her family’s hut, clutching the rations with one hand and holding the gold ring in the other. What had happened? When she peered out at dawn, it was as if two bright suns were rising in the East. And when the ground began to shake, she was afraid that an earthquake had hit their precious island. She was scared. She wondered when her mother would come back from fishing. Maelynn was about to go out to look for her when suddenly, the older woman ran into the hut, her hair covered with white dust.

“Don’t come near me,” she cried out to her young daughter.
“It came from the sky.”

“It looks like fire ash,” Maelynn said.

“I tried to wash it off but the sea is covered too.”

Maelynn held out the canteen. “Here is water from my husband. You can wash your hair.”

“No! No! We need it for drinking.” She shook her head, reached for a piece of cloth and tried to brush off the white particles. “You stay there. I don’t know what this is, but I am feeling strange. I think I may be sick.”

The next day the children played in the ash that was now two inches deep. Then they too became sick to their stomachs. Maelynn’s mother looked pale. Her hair started to fall out in large clumps as she lost her strength. She stared at her daughter and clutched her throat. “What is happening? The people are terrified. Everyone is getting sick. It must be from the bomb our Chief told us about. It must be the ash, the water.”

“Here, mother. Drink from the canteen,” Maelynn said, leaning over the woman who now was moaning in pain.

She took a small sip and pushed it away. “You save. Save for yourself and for the baby. And you stay here. Inside the hut. And you wait. We all will wait. We will wait for the Americans to come back. Surely, they will come back and save us all.”

FOUR

UCLA Campus, Los Angeles – Present Day

“Is seat taken?” the young man asked in halting English.

“Nothin’s reserved in this cafeteria.” Pete Kalani said, looking up from his textbook. “You new around here?”

“Yes, I’m here on exchange program. I see you around, and want meet you when I see T-shirt,” the young man said, pulling out a chair with one hand, and setting his tray of food on the long metal table with the other.

Pete glanced down at the writing on his black cotton shirt emblazoned with the letters S.A.I.N.T.S. across the front. Instead of a dot over the “i” there was a small mushroom cloud. “My T-shirt? What about it?”

“I’ve heard about group. It’s anti-nuke group?”

“Sort of.”

“That’s what I think when I see. But what does S.A.I.N.T.S. mean?”

“It stands for the Society of American and International Nuclear Test Survivors,” Pete said, taking a sip of his iced tea. “You’ve heard of us?”

“I saw video on YouTube.”

“Which one? We put a ton of them out there,” Pete said.

“The one showing people with radiation. It was like ours.”

“Yours? Your what?”

“Oh, I explain. My name is Nurlan. Nurlan Remizov. I am foreign exchange student from Kazakhstan,” he said as he grabbed his sandwich and took a bite.

“That’s in Russia, right?”

“We were part of Russia. Old Soviet Union. No more. We independent now,” he said with a hint of a smile on his broad face.

“That’s cool,” Pete said. “So what do you mean our video is like yours? You guys make videos about radiation?”

“Yes.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No. You see Soviets tested nuclear bombs in my country, and many of our people have bad times. Babies born wrong ...it sad.”

Pete stared at Nurlan. When he first saw the guy, he thought he might be an American Indian with his round face, slightly oriental eyes that were almost black, and straight inkjet hair. He had no idea what people from Kazakhstan looked like. Maybe they all looked like Indians. But what the heck. Here was a guy who knew about the S.A.I.N.T.S. A guy who seemed to have the same history he did. *Was this guy for real?* He wondered.

“Wait a minute,” Pete said. “My family is from the Marshall Islands where the Americans set off tons of nuclear weapons a long time ago. A lot of my relatives got horrible diseases from the fall-out. Are you saying that you and your family are nuclear test survivors too?”

“Me? Some things.” He pointed down at his leg. “Bones not so good. Radiation troubles last long time. Go through family. Tests done long time ago and my family suffered because they were in test places. They not told what happens. No warnings. Nothing.

Maybe Soviets thought no one there. I don't think that. They must know. They no care."

"I think the people in Washington knew too," Pete said with a scowl. "Bastards. I hate them. I hate the government. They make promises they don't keep. They set off bombs that killed people. And my own grandmother was on an island when radiation fall-out hit the place. She was pregnant with my mother at the time."

"But, she lived." Nurlan said.

"Yes. Just barely. After a while she and some of the others made their way to Hawaii. But right after my mother was born, my grandmother got polio."

"What happened to mother?"

"She was okay at first. I guess it takes a while for some things to go wrong. Anyway, she married my dad. He's Hawaiian. And she eventually got cancer and died when I was ten."

"I sorry for that," Nurlan said. "Same things happened my country."

Pete shook his head as he continued to stare at Nurlan. "I can't believe this. We have a group. We sometimes stage rallies or sit-ins when there's some sort of government hearing. But I had no idea there were people over in your part of the world with the same problems."

"Oh yes. We have meetings now too. We could not do them at first. But when we got independence, it was easier to do things. We have rallies now like you in West. We learned from your protests."

"Are they doing any good?"

"Maybe. We get press to come now."

"We don't get any press coverage now. I mean, there aren't any tests going on. This government has had a ban on atmospheric testing for a while. Though I wouldn't put it past them to do it again," Pete said. "Right now we're trying to get money for our people. We call it reparations."

“Can you get that? Soviets never give people anything.”

“We’ve been trying for years. They keep appointing commissions, passing legislation, making promises, but then they forget to put up the money. It’s getting so bad we want to find a way to really get their attention and fight back.”

“Fight back?” Nurlan leaned across the metal table and said in a low tone, “We have to . . . as people say . . . compare notes.”

FIVE

Washington, D.C.

Tripp Adams headed across Key Bridge toward Georgetown. He was used to gridlock on this particular span over the Potomac River but at eight o'clock at night, the commute traffic was over, and now he guessed that most of the folks leaving Arlington, Virginia were going into town for dinner. That's where he was headed, not to one of the trendy restaurants on M Street, but over to Samantha's condo where he figured she was putting together something simple. She usually said that with her crazy schedule, dinner ended up being whatever she could broil. That was fine with him. He didn't really care about the food, he just wanted an evening alone with her.

He remembered first seeing her many years ago on campus at Princeton when he was a senior and she was a freshman. How could he ignore the tall, gorgeous girl with the long brown wavy hair and striking green eyes? They both had classes in geology so he saw her in the halls on occasion. But back then, he was intent on graduating, getting out of New Jersey and joining the Navy, and he wasn't about to get involved with a nineteen year old even if she did have a body that would stop traffic.

As luck would have it, a dozen years later, he was now Vice President of GeoGlobal Oil & Gas and had been sent to head up their Washington, D.C. office. He had hired a top lobbyist, Godfrey Nims, to handle the Hill while Tripp had worked with The Departments of Energy, Commerce, Interior and The White House on a whole host of issues. He had met Samantha when a band of foreign agents from Venezuela had managed to cross the border and sabotage some of their natural gas pipelines. He and Samantha had collaborated, along with a number of government agencies, to find the culprits and put a stop to the havoc.

In the midst of all that turmoil, he had fallen for the brainy brunette, and that was quite a switch from his usual routine of playing the field. His buddy at the office, Godfrey Nims, had always given him a hard time about dating what he called “Fancies” or “FNC’s.” He said Tripp’s dates all had long blond hair and great legs and looked like Fox News Clones. But as soon as Samantha came onto the scene, all that had changed. Not only was she great to look at, she was one smart lady. Washington was filled with bright women, but this one made him feel. . .what did she make him feel? Comfortable. Maybe that was it. They could be in the same room or driving somewhere, and they didn’t have to talk all the time. Just being there was enough. Something else he liked was when she showed her rather off-beat sense of humor. Sometimes she had it. Lately, though, she had been so focused on her job and problems dealing with some of the egos in The White House, it was hard to get her to cool it and relax once in a while.

On the other hand, they did have a ton of things in common. She had been raised in Texas where her dad was in the oil and gas business. She had spent time out in the field with him, knew all about drilling rigs and pipelines, so in addition to the physical attraction, she was kind of like a soul mate when it came to his issues.

The trouble was, in addition to dealing with Washington, GeoGlobal kept sending him around the world to negotiate contracts with other governments. He had always enjoyed the travel, but now he found himself counting the days when he could land at Dulles Airport and head back to see Samantha. Then again, her job was getting so crazy, she didn't have as much time for him as she used to, even when he was in town. Since she had been promoted to lead that Homeland Security operation at The White House, her hours were brutal. She was on call 24/7 and it seemed that every time her cell phone rang, some city could be in danger. Talk about pressure.

He turned right on M Street and drove by a series of shops where students from Georgetown University were peering in windows featuring T-shirts, gold jewelry and ethnic food of one sort or another. He always wondered how they got enough customers in those stores since there was never any where to park on this stretch. He continued down to Wisconsin Avenue and turned right past the Shops at Georgetown Park. Down the hill, he turned right again on K Street under the Whitehurst Freeway and was amazed to find a guy pulling out of a place just a block down from Samantha's condo. *Rock Star Parking*, he mused as he took the spot. They always reserved the best parking space for the rock stars right in front of a stadium, and as he turned off the motor and grabbed the bottle of wine he had brought along for dinner, he felt a stab of the same sort of anticipation he sensed when he went to some of those concerts many years ago. The expectation of great music, camaraderie with friends and, hopefully, a chance to get lucky.

When she opened the door, Tripp set the bottle of wine down on a small table in the entrance, gathered Samantha in his arms, inhaled the faint scent of vanilla in her hair and lowered his mouth to hers. She wound her arms around his neck and pressed her body

close. As he deepened the kiss, he heard a slight moan. *God, she tastes good, feels good, smells good.* He looked down into those jade green eyes and grinned. “Missed you, Samantha.”

“Missed you too. I’m so glad you’re back.” She turned and picked up the wine. “Oh, it’s a Pinot Noir. This is perfect. I’ve got veal chops and creamed spinach tonight. C’mon into the kitchen and tell me about your trip.”

He followed her into a small galley style kitchen with maple cabinets and granite countertops. There was barely enough room for two people to be in the space, but he never minded bumping up against her body. And what a body it was. He tried to push those thoughts out of his mind, though he promised himself he’d get back to them later. He glanced around and reflected on how small her condo was. He knew she had given up space in return for proximity to The White House. People in Washington paid a ton to live in town and not fight the commutes on I-66, the Beltway, 270 or 395. And with her hours, it made sense to have this little place so near the action. At least it was across from a park where they sometimes went running together. And the restaurants at Washington Harbour were just across the street and down two blocks. So all in all, he could see why she picked this building. If they ever got serious enough to move in together though, they’d have to get bigger digs.

He watched as she reached into an overhead cabinet to retrieve two wine glasses. He liked the way her hips moved, and he began to wish that he could postpone the veal chops and move on to dessert. Her. That’s what he wanted tonight. As if reading his mind, Samantha smiled at him. “Later,” she said and pointed toward the bottle. “Would you open the wine while I toss the salad?” She grabbed bottles of oil and vinegar from a cupboard, sprinkled some bits of blue cheese on the lettuce, mixed the greens and spooned them onto two plates sitting on the counter.

Tripp pulled out the cork, poured a bit of wine into a goblet and handed it to Samantha. “Here. Try this. Tell me what you think.”

She took a sip and closed her eyes. “Best thing I’ve tasted all day.”

“Just wait till later,” he murmured, pouring some for himself. “Well, let’s see now. The trip was okay. Got a deal finalized in Norway. It’s almost summer so you’d think it would warm up. No such luck up there. Glad to be back home. But enough of that. Tell me about things in your shop. That is if there’s anything that’s not classified,” he said with a wry grin.

“Screwed up. Shifting. Changing,” she said. “One minute I think we need to focus on train security, the next it’s the ports, then it’s a new type of weapon.” She turned to face him. Holding her wine glass she asked, “Remember those kaleidoscopes we used to have when we were kids? You just move them a fraction and all the shapes change. Well, that’s how I feel right now.”

“Yeah. Kinda creates a new mosaic.”

“Exactly. The trouble is, I feel like we have to be on top of all of them at once. I don’t know how the President does it. Juggling things not only here but around the world.”

“But he’s got thousands of people in the government worrying about all that stuff. You’ve got people too, especially all of those bodies over at DHS. That department has, what? Hundreds of thousands of people, analysts, administrators, whatever. You just need to use them.”

“I know,” she said and gave a sigh. “I never was good at delegating. I’m always afraid somebody’s going to drop the ball or overlook something. And we’re talking about people’s lives here.”

“I know. Believe me, I know.” He grabbed the wine and followed her into the small living room. There was a round walnut table and two ladder back chairs at one end of the room where Samantha had set their places. An arrangement of low candles

had been set to the side. As they sat down, he saw that the reflections from the candlelight gave her face a rosy glow and made her hair kind of shine. Being with her again, after a long trip, made all the hours on all the flights drift away from his mind's eye.

But her mood was pretty somber tonight. He wanted to change that. "So, I wanted to tell you about a conversation I had with your dad today."

"Oh? What's the latest?"

"I'm really glad we took him on as a consultant. He's been great. Good man."

Samantha glanced over at the photo of her family perched on the glass coffee table in front of her sofa. It showed a rugged Jake Reid clad in blue jeans and a striped shirt with the sleeves rolled up, her mother who had died of cancer many years ago, Samantha as a teenager and her little brother clowning off to one side. Every time she looked at that picture, taken at their home down in Texas, she missed her Mom. But the look on her father's face made her smile. There he was. Big Jake as the wildcatters called him. One of the best in the business when it came to searching out and analyzing the most promising leases, the most likely places to find the precious oil and gas.

"He's pretty happy with the arrangement too" she said, "although I sometimes worry that he overdoes it. I mean, ever since he had that heart problem I keep asking him to slow down"

"That man is never going to slow down. You know that. In fact, he keeps bugging me about traveling to some of our overseas projects."

"Overseas? Where? Why?" Samantha asked in a concerned tone.

"Not sure yet. But you know we're negotiating exploration deals all over the place, especially in some of the former Soviet states."

“Way over there?”

“Gotta go where the oil is, my dear,” Tripp said tasting the salad. “Hey, this is really good.” He leaned over and poured some more wine into Samantha’s glass.

“Well, I don’t know,” she said. “It worries me when he goes traipsing around the fields all the time.”

“That’s what he’s good at. You can’t ask a man to quit. Not at his age.”

Samantha furrowed her brow. “I guess I can’t. It’s just that I love him, and I don’t want to see anything happen to him. I want him to take care of himself.”

Tripp reached over and took her hand. “Hey, hon, relax. Jake *can* take care of himself. You let me worry about him. You’ve got enough to worry about right now.”

They finished their veal and creamed spinach and almost emptied the bottle of wine. Samantha was feeling a bit of a buzz, a much more pleasant sensation than anything she had felt all day in her chaotic West Wing office. She had missed Tripp when he was away on his latest business venture. She wished he could stay in town more. On the other hand, with her insane schedule, it was always frustrating to know that he was just across Key Bridge, and she was often too busy or too exhausted to be with him. She could look out her picture window and see his building, Turnberry Tower, across the Potomac. At least he didn’t have far to go when he went home after one of their dinners. *Would he drive home tonight, or would he stay?*

She glanced over at the tall, muscular man she had idolized back in her college days. He had been on the crew back then, and even now he had the same physique she always associated with guys in that sport. She knew he worked out a lot, and she found herself berating the fact that she had skipped her usual morning runs along the Potomac ever since she got this new job. There just wasn’t enough time in the day. At least tonight she had carved out

a few extra hours to concentrate on Tripp, and she gave a silent prayer that her cell phone wouldn't ring for a good long while.

She started to clear the dishes when he pushed back his chair. "Here, let me help you with these," he said, picking up his plate and walking to the kitchen. She blew out the candles and took the glasses and wine bottle off the table.

"Coffee tonight?" she asked as she put the plates in the dishwasher. "Or how about dessert. I've got some sorbet in the fridge."

He leaned against the counter and grinned at her. "Guess it's not made with green tea and lime mousse."

"What in the world are you talking about? Green tea and lime mousse? Where did you hear about that?"

"Just some stuff they were serving on this last trip. It looked kind of weird, so I asked the waiter how they made it. Get this. I wanted to remember so I could tell you about it. Anyway, he said they take essences, now there's a word for you, essences of tea and lime and pump it out of siphons into a bowl of liquid nitrogen."

She burst out laughing. "And you ate that stuff?"

"No. I took a pass."

"Good choice," she said, rinsing off her hands and turning to face him. "Next time you're in Texas you should go to our State Fair. They've got better things there like Fried Milky Way Bars."

He chuckled and shook his head. *Enough chatter.* He flicked off the kitchen light and pulled Samantha into his arms, lifted her up and carried her down the short hallway to her bedroom. She started to giggle as he somewhat unceremoniously plopped her down on top of the white comforter, sat down beside her and started to unbutton her blouse. "Thanks for the great dinner, but now it's time for the dessert I've been thinking about for weeks."