

# **TROJAN HORSE**

*by Thomas T. Thomas*

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Prologue  
*Ali Sahir*  
ONE BY ONE

The world was black outside the Plexiglas dome—and none too bright beneath it. Gamal Shahid had practiced with the miniature submarine in the bright sunshine of a distant Mexican lagoon. Now, under cover of darkness in San Francisco Bay, he handled the controls of this rich man’s toy by touch and memory.

Despite the cold, murky water swirling under his chin, Shahid was comfortable inside his brand-new wetsuit. Because his training had been in warmer water, the suit was a recent addition to his equipment. However, his old belt weights did not quite balance the neoprene’s natural buoyancy. Shahid kept bobbing out of the web seat, his feet drifting off the rudder pedals. Finally, to hold himself in place, he buckled the belt around one of the fuselage’s internal struts.

Darkness and water in the unsealed cabin prevented his using a map. So Shahid carried his reference points in his head, like the experienced guerrilla he was.

Straight ahead, five hundred meters away, a string of bright sodium work lights lined the wharf, broken in one place by a dark bulk. The near end of the shadow was a superstructure lit by a constellation of portholes; its length disappeared into gloom. The rest of the night around Shahid’s head at water level was a confused jostle of winking buoy lights, red and green markers on passing boats, and car headlights flashing along the waterfront. Shahid kept his attention fixed on the shadowed bulk, his target.

“Praise be to Allah,” he intoned.

He reached forward and touched the shoulder of his partner, Muhammad Kebir. The other man turned, his face mask already in place. Shahid pointed at the shadowed bulk. Kebir glanced around and nodded to confirm their target.

Shahid adjusted his own mask and worked the valves and motor switches that submerged the submarine and drove it forward. A modest bow wave rose against the front of his dome. The water closed over Shahid’s head.

Now came the hard part.

In the practice runs through that Mexican lagoon, Shahid could steer a straight course over three times the distance he now had to cross. But those had been calm waters. Here in San Francisco he must contend with vicious tides and the currents generated by the Sacramento and San Joaquin river systems, which drained all of California. As his commando leader had explained, the combined outflow swept around a rocky point just north of the wharf where his target was moored. Under these conditions, driving straight in was nearly impossible.

The vertical distance between the target’s laden hull and the bay’s rocky bottom was no more than five meters over high tide. The river currents

raced through this confined space. Shahid had to approach his objective from astern, increasing power to his vessel's drive motors, releasing more air, and pushing down on the bow planes to sink lower. His tiny submarine came into position and settled on the bottom with a groaning scrape and a final thud. The two men were cloaked in utter darkness.

He tapped Kebir's shoulder twice this time—the go signal. His partner reached back and caught Shahid's wrist briefly, giving it a squeeze—acknowledgment, with a blessing upon them both.

Shahid sensed rather than saw when Kebir popped the latch on his own dome. The still water in the fuselage came alive with eddies from the current outside. He adjusted the motors to compensate for increased drag from the open dome.

Kebir snapped a chemical tube, bathing his face and hands with cold green light. He raised the tube above his head and the light disappeared into a curtain of dark seaweed. Shahid glimpsed the orange point of a starfish and a scuttling crab, both creatures living in the blanket on the ship's bottom.

His partner floated free of the hull, braced his knees against the turret ring, and began scraping at this curtain. As Kebir hacked, long shadows twisted and fled backward over his head. After ten minutes of this work, Shahid heard a shallow boom as the scraper struck bare metal. No one on deck would notice that sound, not through the tons of liquid cargo which muffled the spaces between source and hearer.

Kebir rattled around for another two minutes by Shahid's watch. Time was an important consideration—the state of the tide, the air supply in their tanks, and one other factor—but the situation was not yet critical. When Kebir was satisfied with the spot he had made, he ducked back into the fuselage and emerged with a flat disk cradled in his forearms. He lifted the thing over his head. The current caught at it and pushed him backward, but Kebir was strong, chosen particularly for this task. He guided the disk upward until it leapt out of his hands.

*Bong!* The magnets on its upper surface had found the patch of naked steel. Kebir's work was done. The package was already prepared, down to the timing of the fuse.

Shahid could only pray that his commando leader had been right, that the ship above their heads was indeed of the older single-hull construction, not one of the newer double-walled models. Tonight's mission would go for naught if their intelligence had been wrong on that point. But now the matter was in God's hands.

Kebir entered his turret, secured and latched the dome. Shahid raised the submarine off the bottom and drove forward against the current, turning slowly out of the danger zone under the tanker's hull. Once in clear water he fed full power to the motors to put as much distance between them and the target as possible. He also began angling upward on the bow planes.

Five minutes later, his dome broke the choppy surface of the bay. Shahid looked around to get his bearings for the run back to their mothership. The sodium work lights and the long black shadow were now seven hundred

meters astern. To the north was the lighthouse on Three Brothers, yes. To the west were the distant floodlamps of San Quentin Prison, yes. Around to the south was the great lump of Angel Island, backed by San Francisco's bright skyline. Shahid knew exactly where he was . . .

Or thought he did. An instant later Three Brothers disappeared under a blot that arose in the north. Had a fog bank come up? Moving so quickly? It ate up half the horizon. Only a single light, bright like a star, shone on top of this creeping void.

Shahid studied it. As his eyes focused he saw a curling white wave, creamy with bioluminescence, riding the forward edge of the black mass. Through the submarine's thin hull he sensed a surge of pressure pushing through the water, bearing down on them. He opened his mouth to cry out.

The shallowly angled bow of the oil-transport barge rode over the submarine's turrets at a speed of only six miles an hour. But the weight was enough to shatter both domes, turning the Plexiglas bubbles into rings of jagged knives and crumpling the hinges that held them in place around the heads of the two divers.

The transport's wide belly rolled the tiny vessel over and over, stripping off the dive planes and drive motors. The pummeling jarred loose air tanks, lines and cables inside the hull. It battered the two men senseless. Because the barge was more than four hundred feet long, this helpless rolling continued until the air inside their lungs gave out.

At last the barge passed on. The tugboat driving it gave the submarine's hull a last, flicking *ting!* with its bronze propeller. The ruined vessel hung upside down, five feet below the surface, riding out toward the Golden Gate on the ebbing tide.

\* \* \*

Ali Sahir checked into the Hyatt Regency on San Francisco's Embarcadero at four o'clock in the afternoon, early enough that he could specify and get a bayside view. He had chosen this hotel because of its peculiar shape and orientation, and because rooms facing east and north were plentiful.

He registered under the name "Peter Bogosian." Over the years Sahir had found that most Americans felt a vestigial sympathy for the Armenians as a people—maybe it was the legacy of Turkish massacre, maybe the writings of one William Saroyan. But he had also found that they could not distinguish an Armenian face or accent from those of a Turk or Syrian. So in casual contacts the identity would pass an agent from almost anywhere in the Middle East. An agent like Ali Sahir.

It was a mark of his careful preparations that Sahir actually carried documents—a Nebraska driver's license and two credit cards—that matched the name. The cards would actually ring up charges in the computer, too.

Although he registered at four o'clock, Sahir did not go up to the room until eleven that night, and then he went without luggage. Neither did he touch the bed. Instead, he called room service for a light meal and a carafe of coffee and took them out onto the private terrace, which was another feature influencing his choice of hotel.

When he had eaten, Sahir pulled a chair around until he could see past the angled wall separating his space from the room and terrace next door. Then he settled in for the long wait. He took a small pair of Zeiss binoculars out of his jacket pocket, unfolded them, and focused on the far reaches of the bay. As he had planned, his view stretched past the winking light of Alcatraz and the dark lump of Angel Island, to the string of beads that was the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge. To the right of this was his quarry: a long wharf lit with floodlamps and, behind it, shelving hillsides dotted with squat brown tanks. Each tank had its crown of red aircraft-warning lights.

The refinery at Point Richmond was not a purchaser of crude oil from Ali Sahir's country. True, the company that owned this facility did sufficient business with his sponsors—but that was neither here nor there. This particular refinery brought its crude down the coast from Valdez in Alaska, or across the Pacific from the Indonesian oil fields. True, Indonesia was a member of the OPEC cartel, the same as Sahir's country—but that, too, was neither here nor there.

In a marketplace where the price of sweet light crude had been hanging in the neighborhood of twenty dollars a barrel for the past decade, such niceties no longer mattered. Sahir's masters wanted certain results. They wanted their petrodollars flowing in at the old rate, and they wanted them now.

The action tonight would disrupt the refinery's operations by tying up its main offloading wharf. Sahir had given the matter much thought and study. He knew this approach was better than other attacks he might have launched.

He might, for example, have sent in a surface raid: his men climbing over barbed wire fences, carrying dynamite and grenades, targeting isolated manufacturing units laid out over a hundred acres of open ground. Each of those units was enclosed in a runoff berm and protected with foam-spreading equipment. The damage such a raid might do—at the nearly certain cost of his men being captured or killed—would be measured in the mere hundreds of thousands of dollars. It would be repaired in a week or two at most.

By contrast, sinking a tanker at the wharf would block the flow of crude oil in and refined product out for months. It would have the added benefit of creating an environmental stink. It might even force the politically sensitive Americans to shut down this major production facility. And all without reducing the sale of crude from Sahir's part of the Middle East by one drop.

For Ali Sahir, these tactical considerations were no more important than the emotional one. He was attacking the decadent West where it lived, in its energy supplies. As one of the faithful, he believed the international oil trade had been purposely designed to suck his country nearly dry. It had made a few sheiks at the top obscenely wealthy while increasing the poverty of the people. Such wealth, pouring so easily from the ground, had the effect of making his countrymen lazy, unscrupulous, and secular.

Tonight's action would not reverse that, he knew. But it was good to punish the Great Satan nonetheless, and to have his masters' blessing and support while he did it.

Sahir set the binoculars down and pulled his jacket tighter across his chest. Being so occupied, he missed the initial flare. It was just a smudge of light at the extreme range of his unaided vision. He checked his watch. Yes, right on time.

Through the glasses, Sahir saw a pillar of flame rising from the tanker's broken deck. In the gap at the fire's base, he could see the edges of the hull split apart, peeling back sheets of steel like the rind of an orange. Already the stern was settling into the water. The bow, being farther from the point of explosion, would take longer to sink.

Even the powerful glasses could not actually show him the crewmen running around on deck or scurrying off down the long wharf. But he knew they were there. He tasted their fear and panic and was made glad.

Finally Sahir broke away from the spectacle long enough to take care of his remaining duties on this mission. It would proceed without him, of course, but he wanted to maintain his authority, his aura of leadership. He rose from the chair, shaking the tingles out of his legs, and went back into the room. From the hotel switchboard he placed a ship-to-shore call to the vessel playing mothership on this mission.

It was a sleek yacht, eighty feet long with an aluminum hull, painted midnight blue like the tiles of his neighborhood mosque. That dark color had much to do with the selection, plus the fact that the roof of the aft salon had been reinforced—originally to take the weight of a tiny, two-man helicopter. The yacht had been built in Hong Kong, registered out of Portland, leased at Long Beach, and had spent the past three weeks somewhere north of Cabo San Lucas. For the last two days it had been berthed in the marina at Pier 39, a mile or so from this hotel. Tonight, it was standing out in the middle of the bay, somewhere to the east of Alcatraz, with its running lights turned off.

The captain answered immediately. Sahir knew he would be guarding the radiophone all night.

"Have our guests arrived aboard?" Sahir asked pleasantly.

"Not yet," the captain replied.

"That's—" The message sank in, overriding the encouragement Sahir was about to voice. "Oh well, it is early yet."

"Yes." The captain's tone said he wanted to handle this himself.

"Call me as soon as they arrive."

Sahir went back to his chair. The pillar of fire was taller now. Its upper edges were blurred with coils of black smoke, underlit by the orange glare. He watched until the sky paled in the east—the true east, not the false dawn he had made in Richmond—and a gray haze rose over the bay.

He went to call again.

"Are they aboard?"

"No sir," the captain said. "And, frankly, I fear the worst."

"Could the Coast Guard have intercepted them?" The activities of this agency, primarily concerned with marine safety, had always been an unknown element in Sahir's plans.

“No, we’ve been watching all night. Their cutters are distinctive, big and white. We would have seen any that crossed the path of . . . our guests.”

“After so long, would our people still have—” Sahir had to word this carefully, over an open radio frequency, speaking in the clear. “—the necessary *provisions* to reach you?”

“That is doubtful, sir.”

“Very well then.” Time for a command decision. “Proceed to the second rendezvous position. I will meet you there.”

As he hung up, Sahir regretted the loss of his team. He hoped that, if they still lived and remained uncaptured, they would have the sense to scuttle their midget submarine and swim for shore. They were trained for survival in hostile territory. They were supplied with dollars and documents. And they knew how to signal for fallback and retrieval. They were in God’s hands.

Still, he was frustrated. There had to be a faster way to cripple his country’s competitors and bring down the arrogant, wealth-sucking Westerners. Working one by one against individual targets like this was too slow, too tedious.

Chapter 1  
*William Clive*  
FIRST TIME IN WADERS

At quarter to four in the afternoon, William Clive turned off his computer and began preparing himself mentally for the upcoming interview with his agency mentor, Roger Isaacs. This might just be the big time, and Clive was ready for it.

He looked around his office for what he hoped might be the last time. It was nice enough, if not grand. It possessed four complete and solid walls. The wall six inches behind his chair back had cabinets and shelves going up to the ceiling, filled with his references on finance, management theory, and corporate law. The wall to his right had a window that framed a California liveoak which, from the way the tree stooped over, Clive had taken to calling the Wicked Witch of the West. The third wall, directly to the front, was his built-in desk module: seven feet of walnut veneer and Korean electronics. And the fourth wall on his left hand had a real door that opened and closed but did not lock. The floor space was no more than enough for Clive to stand up and turn around in, but it was all his. He also had a secretary whom he shared with four other account executives, although he sometimes had to queue up to get his correspondence printed.

Clive knew he had a good office space and a good job, as far as junior associate positions at Markris-Stone Consulting Services went. But it was not where the action was. After three months of scut work, even he knew that.

He left a note for Wanda and walked out of his building in the utilitarian D Quad. The coastal fog was just beginning to leak through the hills behind Palo Alto. By the time Clive got out of his meeting, the fog would be down among the trees, smothering the MSCS campus in a cold, gray cloud.

Isaacs's office was in the A Quad, a brown shingle and smoked glass chalet with a cathedral ceiling that soared thirty feet above the blond wood floors. The modern artwork in its central lobby, along with the lounges covered in butter-colored leather, were strictly for clients. Clive had paused here once, to examine a Mondrian he thought might be original, and the receptionist had actually cleared her throat at him. This time, however, he flashed his badge and she clicked the concealed switch to unlock the inner door.

Roger Isaacs had an office that was certainly big enough to turn around in. Hell, you could hold a square dance there, if you first rolled up the Bokhara carpet and moved the mission-style table that was his desk.

"William!" Isaacs said, getting up and coming around to shake hands. "So glad to see you again."

"Likewise, Mr. Isaacs."

"Please. It's Roger."

"Of course . . . Roger," Clive mumbled.

"Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable. No ceremony among colleagues." Isaacs waved him toward the circle of guest chairs around a low, talon-footed table that looked like an antique. The man sat across from him,

crossed his legs at the knee, and folded his hands on his paunch. Then he glanced up as if remembering something. “Coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

“Can’t offer anything stronger.”

“I understand.”

“So . . . where were we?”

Clive wondered if this was a test. “You wanted to meet with me,” he said slowly.

“Oh, yes. Cumulus Biologicals. New client of ours. Heard of them?”

Clive stirred his memory and came up with a profile from a *Fortune* article. Cumulus Biologicals, Inc., was one of the first-generation biotech firms, specializing in genetic research aimed at “environmental solutions.” Its original product had been a tailored bacteria that secreted enzymes supposed to inhibit the formation of ice crystals, to protect vineyards against early frost. Hysteria about some runaway science-fiction effect kept the State of California from approving it for testing in the field. But presumably Cumulus had other products in actual use. They must have, because they were making roughly a quarter billion a year in revenues.

“Sure,” Clive said. “What do they need?”

“Ostensibly, support for analysis and upgrading of their management information systems. They want to go to a 100base-T LAN system with throughput to support full-motion video in hypertext. But first they need someone to weed through the equipment they’ve already got, document it, and find out who actually uses the stuff. You did your dissertation on hypertext, didn’t you?”

“No, sir.” Clive suppressed a grimace. “Theory of the firm in a globalized market environment.”

“Then you minored in cybernetics?”

“No, foreign languages.” Oh, this was not going well *at all*.

“Well, would you know a piece of wire if you tripped over it?”

“Yes, sir.” Clive tried not to squirm.

“Then get with Bob Carstairs—it’ll have to be in the evenings, because this one is popping that fast—and brush up on local area networks, Ethernet, RAID stacks, plug compatibles, and everything else you don’t know about.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Their computers aren’t the problem, you understand.”

So this *was* it! Please, God, if you’re out there. . . .

“What is their problem, then?”

“Some of Cumulus’s best new ideas are getting copied by the French, sometimes by the Japanese, often before they finish testing in this country.”

“They came to us about this?”

“Of course not.” Isaacs frowned at him from under heavy eyebrows. “On the surface, the Cumulus people seem barely aware of the pattern. Our fellow travelers over in Agriculture gave us the heads-up. We have probes out to make sure none of the leaks are coming from Federal or state labs.”

“And now you want someone inside Cumulus,” Clive summed up.

“Exactly.” Isaacs raised his finger as if he had just discovered an important point. “This will be your first time putting on the waders and heading out for a deep hole, won’t it?”

Clive knew what he meant. Isaacs was a fanatic about fly casting and drew most of his metaphors from fishing. “Well, as you know, I’ve worked on half a dozen audits since coming to Markris-Stone. But they were all front-office stuff.”

“Not the same thing.”

“No, sir.”

“But you’ve been trained?”

“The basic introductory course, sir. With weekend follow-up classes.”

Clive was still feeling the aches from those.

“Well, we’ll assign an angel to you all the same.”

“Do you think that will be necessary?” Clive held his breath, not sure whether he felt brave and glad, or a little bit afraid.

“It’s standard procedure—” Isaacs waved off his objections. “—with our probationers.”

\* \* \*

In the culture incubator, under a bath of dull red light, the altered *Escherichia coli* bacteria went about their business.

Every one hundred and twenty minutes, a spindle silently grew out between centrioles lodged in the cell’s cytoplasm. Then the free-floating strands of DNA untangled themselves, ran off perfect copies of each gene, and aligned two-by-two across the spindle’s fibers. As those fibers contracted, the genetic copies were pulled into opposing bundles. Meanwhile, the cell membrane spurted into furious growth around the middle. When the genetic material had been duplicated at either end of the elongated body, the membrane pinched itself off like a sausage casing in a butcher’s nimble fingers. When the knot was sealed, the two new cells drifted apart, and the process started all over again.

One cell divided to become two. Two became four. And so on, doubling every two hours. The bacteria grew exponentially, provided there was nutrient to feed them. In normal *E. coli*, that nutrient was the dissolved food and dying cells in the lining of the human gut. But with this modified version, two tailored genes had been added to the bacilli’s nucleus.

The first, enz2, produced an enzyme that broke the covalent bonds in n-hexane molecules, effectively stripping the hydrogen atoms off the carbon chains in petroleum. The second, met3, altered the bacteria’s own metabolism so that it could directly absorb the newly liberated carbon atoms into its protein coat.

Sometimes, in the mess of compounds constituting raw crude oil, the bacteria found other molecules—those involving sulfur, for example—and reject the unwanted atoms. Helped by the modest heat of the cell’s internal chemical processes, that sulfur combined with the newly freed hydrogen. This was an undesirable, but so far unavoidable, side effect.

But in one particular batch of bacilli, something else had gone wrong—perhaps in the gene sequencing, perhaps in the activation. These modified *E. coli* were producing too much of the enz2 protein, more than they could possibly use in their anaerobic environment.

Edward Sedgwick opened the door of the incubator and took out the rack of test tubes he was culturing. He set them on the lab bench and went through them one by one, methodically categorizing the results in each against a matrix laid out in his computer spreadsheet.

At the very first culture, he frowned. He held the test tube up to the light and studied the effect. Instead of the clear liquid he was hoping to find, this tube held tiny lumps of blackish material swimming in murky fluid.

He took the Oom Paul pipe out of his mouth. Although smoking was not permitted in the laboratory, Sedgwick considered himself senior enough to break the rules. He pried loose the test tube's red rubber cap. Like any good technician who valued his olfactory nerves, Sedgwick wafted ambient air across the tube's open mouth instead of inhaling from the tube directly. The odor of rotten eggs was unmistakable.

"Bah!" he said, hanging the pipe back on his jaw. "Still the same."

He held the test tube up again and examined the black spots. Later he would put them under a microscope, but for now first impressions were important. "The bugs have simply curdled the oil," he concluded. "Like cheese. . . . This will never do."

He made a notation in his computer, capped the test tube, and proceeded to the next one. It, too, was ruined but in a slightly different manner: more fluid, less curds, but still unacceptable. And that odor of hydrogen sulfide! Who would accept an environmental remedy which brewed up a well known and deadly poison?

These bacterial cultures were all bad, but series E-32 was the worst. Very little liquid remained in that tube, all congealed in a crusty puddle at the bottom. The black lumps were fused into an almost solid mass, like soft coal. The smell struck him the minute the cap was off.

Sedgwick wrote up the entire batch as a failure. It was not, however, exactly wasted effort because he now knew at least one gene manipulation to avoid in tinkering with *E. coli*'s metabolism. But this morning's work put him no closer to his goal than before.

"Like old cheese," he muttered again, putting the rack of spoiled cultures into his refrigerator, thereby inhibiting growth. In a day or two, when the unit was full, he would dump the tubes in a biohazard bag. Until then it would pay to keep them, in case the suits from corporate had questions about his work. You always had to have something to show for your efforts.

\* \* \*

William Clive's first day at the Cumulus headquarters in San Francisco started at eight-thirty with an interview with Charlie Palmer, Manager of Information Systems.

He had spent the previous night until three in the morning skimming and scanning the stack of literature that Isaacs and his technical expert,

Carstairs, had sent home with him. Clive now knew enough to bullshit his way through the first twenty minutes of this meeting. It would be his hardest test, fooling the resident expert in his own domain. After that, with the other executives, Clive would play things by ear.

Charlie Palmer was his primary client contact, the man who called in Markris-Stone in the first place and who would authorize payment on the invoices for whatever Clive did with their computers. As such, he would be Clive's most important ally. After their introductory handshake and a little fencing about the commute traffic, Palmer got down to business.

"You'll find these people pretty easy to work with," he said, settling into his high-backed, black-leather desk chair. That piece of furniture made an incongruous picture in Palmer's fabric-paneled cubicle, which everyone seemed to occupy except for the most senior officers.

"How so?" Clive asked. "Because they're all technical?"

"Lord no! Most of these are financial types, accountants. They wouldn't know a gene if one stuck to their shoe. What they don't know about biology, let alone computers, would fill a college library. You can tell them almost anything, and they'll believe it."

Clive did not let himself be encouraged by this. "So, what motivates them?"

"The bottom line. Keeping the pipeline full of projects. Getting and keeping market share. And maintaining quarterly revenues. The top man, Jefferson—he's a lawyer, by the way, started here as representative of the venture capitalist—believes in the stock price. What sends it up is good. What puts it down is bad. A nice clear vision."

"But he's willing to spend for adding video capability to your local network," Clive said. "That seems rather esoteric."

"Because it will improve the bottom line."

"Then let's make him happy, shall we?"

From Palmer's cubicle, they went on an orientation tour: to a nine o'clock meeting with Robertson, Chief Financial Officer and guardian of the computer system's accounting functions, then with Jefferson himself at ten. After a lunch in a four-star bistro—for which Palmer let Clive's meager expense account pick up the tab—they spent the afternoon meeting second-echelon vice presidents.

By four o'clock, Clive's head was awl with Baby Boomer names and clear-eyed white faces sitting behind identical teak-veneered desk modules in identical cloth-paneled boxes. His pocket was filled with their business cards. But he had given out just as many of his own new cards, prepared overnight in Markris-Stone's print shop with a plausible-sounding title for this assignment.

The only face that stood out in this crowd, the only voice that did not ring true, belonged to the International Marketing Vice President, Peter Shore.

For one thing, Shore's job appeared to be a sinecure, because most of Cumulus's products were developed with Federal grant money under contract to either the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the Environmental Protection Agency. Foreign customers and contracts did exist, of course, but not in

enough volume to require a separate marketing division—or not according to the Markris-Stone analysis that Clive had absorbed. Besides, Shore's cubicle was too neat, with none of the clutter that identified the busy workspaces of the other executives. And his phone never rang once during the interview with Clive.

For another thing, the man seemed nervous. He squirmed in his chair, and he agreed too readily with everything Clive or Palmer said.

"Computer system?" Shore said, reaching around to pat the keyboard of the machine on the shelf behind him. It was turned off. "I couldn't get along without it. Staple of the business, yes."

"You should see an immediate improvement in throughput on the network," Clive said smoothly. "More complex documents, metafiles, wider access to on-line materials, video imaging—"

"Video?" Shore almost giggled. "You're going to pipe in *Baywatch*?"

"We're thinking more along the lines of desktop conferencing," Palmer said dryly. "Plus documents that will be able to exhibit video clips of experimental cultures, growth rates, electron microscopy—that sort of thing."

"Of course." Shore sobered up, but he never became what Clive would have called composed. "We're all looking forward to it."

"You might have special requirements from the new system," Clive put in. "Such as video compatibility with foreign screen formats and recording systems. Say, with the French or the Japanese."

"Good point," Palmer murmured.

"French? The Japs?" Shore seemed surprised. "Oh, I don't talk with *them*."

"I thought they might be big markets for Cumulus products."

"Competitors, is what they are. We keep our distance."

"My mistake," Clive said.

And yet he wondered.

Chapter 2  
*Juliana Troetelkind*  
A MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIP

On Clive's second day at Cumulus Biologicals, Charlie Palmer suggested they sit in on a typical product development meeting, to get a feel for how the company worked. "Miss T has a review session starting at ten. Why don't we crash that?"

"Miss T?" Clive asked.

"That's what everyone calls her. Juliana's last name is some impossible Dutch jawbreaker. It's worth your life to get it wrong."

"Sounds like a real dragon."

"Not at all. You'll love her."

A line of poetry, relic of his misbegotten education, drifted through Clive's mind: "For Juliana comes and she, what I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me." And then it drifted away.

The meeting was held in one of the "fish bowls," which was how Palmer described the conference rooms lining Executive Country in the headquarters building. One side of the room was floor-to-ceiling windows with a twenty-story view of the Bay Bridge and Mission Bay development. The other was a glass curtain separating it from the internal landscaping of office cubicles. The narrow end walls were decorated with projection screens and whiteboards.

When Palmer and Clive walked in, the people in the room were evenly divided by their modes of dress. One group wore business attire: dark suits and ties with shiny shoes. The other had on slacks or jeans, open-necked shirts, and sneakers. From the occasional white lab coat among the latter, Clive guessed they were the company's creative types, researchers and biological technicians. The two groups stayed apart, like oil and water. Then a woman in a business suit appeared, and the people settled along opposite sides of the table.

The newcomer was elegant. She was tall and lithe, moving with a ballerina's sense of "centeredness"—that quality the judo instructors had tried so hard to instill in Clive during his two weeks with them. This woman also radiated a personal poise which commanded the entire room. Her charcoal-gray business suit fitted her like a uniform, although she indulged in a silk scarf which hugged her throat on one side and draped across her shoulder on the other. The suit's pleated skirt floated around her knees above long, gracefully curved calves.

Palmer nudged Clive in the ribs and nodded.

Clive barely noticed. He was already in love.

Miss T's hair was the color of fresh wheat, and she wore it pulled up in a loose crown on top of her head—what Clive thought of as the "Gibson girl" style from nearly a century ago. He saw that old gold and a delicate purple seemed to be her colors. The room's overhead lights picked up glinting accents in her hair, and she repeated them through the golden trellis bordering her scarf. "Violet" best described the color of her eyes, which she matched with the

tiny flowers clinging to the scarf's trellis and the peculiar shade of polish that glistened on her fingernails.

She laid a leather-bound day planner in front of the end chair, scanned the room with those magnificent eyes, and stopped when she saw Clive.

"Charlie? Do we have a guest today?" Her voice was a mellow contralto, perfectly modulated and without any hint of surprise.

Palmer rose from his place among the suits, introduced Clive, and briefly stated his reasons for attending. The woman nodded once and turned quickly to other matters. Clive felt strangely hurt, as if she had dissected him and found him insufficiently interesting.

Miss T, whom Palmer had described as one of several senior project managers in the company, conducted the review meeting with cool efficiency. She had a number of projects in hand, so went briskly down the one side of the table, hearing each technician's report and taking notes in her planner using a fat fountain pen with an engraved, silver-and-gold nib.

The corporate people arrayed on the table's opposite side seemed to be listeners rather than talkers. Clive understood that they were all accounting or marketing personnel who would eventually sell the fruits of laboratory people's efforts. But no one bothered to ask questions. Everyone nodded at the right places. They all seemed to know what every word of the technical jargon meant.

Everyone except Clive. He felt that, if he was going to maintain appearances in this role, then he ought to at least try to understand what was going on. Finally, when an older man was firmly launched into a recital about his "C" series versus his "D" series, their successive enzyme generations, and the variable rates of hydrogen stripping he was experiencing, Clive found himself totally awash.

The old scientist appeared to be someone important. Despite San Francisco's strict laws against smoking in the workplace, he puffed at a briar pipe whose blue fumes had effectively cleared out the seats on either side of him. There wasn't an ashtray in sight, so he laid out a flat can into which he regularly knocked smoldering tobacco ashes.

"Excuse me," Clive said, raising his hand. "But I'm new here, you know . . . Could you tell me exactly what all this means?"

Miss T gave him another dissection with those violet lasers.

"Of course." She offered the briefest smile. "Dr. Sedgwick is working on the next generation of microbes designed to ingest crude oil. Once he fine-tunes their metabolism, these genetically tailored bacteria will break down hydrocarbon molecules under strictly anaerobic conditions, much like the bacilli living in the human large intestine. That means we could clean up an oil spill after it has seeped into the ground, or sunk below the surface of a bay or inlet. We can avoid the lengthy and environmentally damaging processes of mechanical extraction with dredges and steam hoses."

"I see," Clive murmured. The Corps of Engineers certainly could have used something similar to mop up after that oil tanker exploded and burned at Point Richmond. "Thank you."

“And, Edward?” the woman said to Sedgwick. “Our time is limited. Could you please make it march?”

“Oh, I did have some very entertaining results—” Out came the pipe. *Tink-tink* it went on the can’s edge. “—but nothing you’d call environmentally benign. Until I get the rate of enzyme-two production under control, we won’t see anything really useful. One batch in particular, however, produced a veritable monster which—”

“Edward?” Miss T prompted. “I’m sure this is all fascinating. Why don’t you circulate an e-mail for anyone who might be interested?”

“Sure thing.” And the pipe went back into his mouth.

\* \* \*

With her customary efficacy, Juliana wrapped up the product review meeting as quickly as possible. By her watch, she had beaten the scheduled ending time by five minutes. People were still gathering their papers and standing up when she withdrew into the hallway.

“Ma’am? . . . Miss T?”

Juliana turned and saw the computer consultant, William Clive, signaling from across the room. Once he had caught her eye, he squeezed Charlie Palmer’s arm, clearly bidding him good-bye, and hurried to follow her out into the corridor.

She turned to face him. Clive was just a fraction taller than she was, but then Juliana was wearing pumps with two-inch heels. “Yes?” She kept her voice cool and light.

“I, yuh, wanted to discuss your data-logging needs, ma’am,” he began shyly. Juliana was accustomed to having that effect on men. “As part of my computer network study? I see that you still take your project notes by hand . . .”

“Yes.”

Clive gestured for her to continue on, to wherever she was going, and fell in alongside her. Juliana sensed he was matching her stride for stride.

“I think,” he said, “that we can find you a set of applications, maybe in a personal organizer or a palmtop, which will speed up the process.”

“Really?” She did not offer him encouragement. Not yet, anyway.

Juliana came to her cubicle and stopped in the doorway. Clive passed a step or two beyond her, then turned back, confused. Then his eyes fixed on the panel’s nametag, which read “Juliana Troetelkind, Technical Manager,” and his face cleared. Palmer must have said something to him, because she could see Clive sounding the name out in his head. He obviously decided it didn’t look too difficult.

“Look, Miss Trottle—”

“Troetelkind,” she said evenly.

He tried to follow the combination of sounds. “True—”

“Troo,” she corrected, then nodded for him to try it.

He pursed his lips just as she had. “Troo.”

“Turl—” She gave it the faint glottal stop.

He made the one syllable into two. “Turtle.”

“Kint,” she finished, shaking her head.

He aspirated the final dental. “Kin-*tah*.”

“Troetelkind,” she repeated.

“True turtle kisses,” Clive said with a boyish grin.

Juliana frowned. She would not let any man get away with making fun of her. But then, this was also her day to be unpredictable. Impulse won out, and she laughed aloud. “Close enough,” she agreed.

“So what kind of computer can I get you?” He sounded relieved.

“Something tasteful and unique,” she said. “It should be pure black, not mouse gray or that silly putty color. And it must be extremely powerful.”

“With lots of RAM?” he asked, getting into the spirit.

“Of course. And have a very hard disk.”

“Floppies are so passé,” he agreed.

“Why don’t you come inside,” she said, “and show me what you’ve got?”

Juliana stood back in the cubicle’s doorway. As he squeezed past, Clive’s knuckles brushed the back of her exposed hand. A spark of static electricity from the carpet stung her, sending a tiny thrill up her arm. Or maybe it was something more.

\* \* \*

On the morning of his third day at Cumulus Biologicals, William Clive took up residence in the tiny cubicle that Charlie Palmer of Management Information Systems had arranged for his use. The space was, for reasons unexplained, in the Accounting Department two floors below Executive Country.

If he had thought the accommodations up there somewhat cramped, they were positively military on this floor where the clients and venture capitalists never trod. Instead of earth-toned fabrics, the partition walls down here were molded gray plastic. Every surface not covered with Formica was either a filing cabinet or a computer console. The desk chair was upholstered in cracked vinyl, and its pivot joint squealed whenever he tilted back—probably on purpose, to discourage idle lounging. But this cubby hole did have a computer, one tied into the company’s local area network, and that was all he required.

Clive had spent the past two nights working until early morning with Bob Carstairs from Markris-Stone. To short-cut his commute time, they had used a “safe house”—Carstairs actually called it that—in an apartment on Potrero Hill. The sessions alternated between a crash course in basic computer technology and hands-on training with an unlabeled floppy disk that Carstairs had brought along.

The disk’s files were small, some just a few kilobytes apiece according to the file directory. But the primary piece of software expanded with a zipper program like a paper flower in water. The result was a huge array of numbered subroutines, all of them armed with teeth and claws. Some were for infiltrating the general operations of a local area network without alerting the system administrator, while others went to work on specific applications. Carstairs had

made him practice launching each of the routines using a dummy system hosted by one of the Markris-Stone computers down in Palo Alto.

Mere possession of this disk was, Clive suspected, a *de facto* felony under one or more Federal communications laws.

He now turned on the machine in his new cubicle, logged onto his assigned drive space in the file server, and copied across the floppy's contents. Then he typed "unzip \*.\*," said a short prayer for himself, and pressed Enter. While the screen filled with expanding program activity, he sat back—causing his chair to shriek briefly. After a minute or more of automated clicking and scrolling, the computer screen said, "IDENTIFY FIRST TARGET LAST NAME FIRST."

Clive typed in, "shore, peter." His feelings about the man in charge of International Marketing hadn't changed. Shore was the clinker in a bed of hot coals. He drew attention to himself by being conspicuously less busy than everyone else, apparently less informed than anyone else, and having the one job at Cumulus that apparently paid well while contributing almost nothing to the bottom line. Clive pressed Enter again, and the screen got busy.

After another minute it said, "IDENTIFY SECOND TARGET LAST NAME FIRST."

That took a bit of thought . . . although, actually, not much. Clive typed, "palmer, charles." If anyone was in a position to extract and sell proprietary information, it would be the man in charge of the company's computer systems. Because he had access to secrets in all the company's many databases, Palmer might turn out to be the industrial spy. Of course, in any modern corporation, almost everyone had some kind of access. But Clive had to start somewhere.

According to Carstairs's description, the bootleg program was now combing through the local file server and camping on every piece of software which touched either Shore or Palmer, seeking out their access codes, mapping their various account identities, and tracing all their activities from this point forward. The program's field of view included, among other things, Cumulus's executive scheduler and appointment functions, e-mail received and sent, computerized phone records, and the contents of the two men's personal hard drive areas on the LAN server. The result of its researches was analyzed, compressed, and stored in Clive's own disk space. By pressing Enter those two times, Clive had definitely broken a number of those Federal laws, not to mention his client's sacred trust.

The screen requested a third target, and Clive canceled it with a last press of the Enter key. He could call up the program again, if and when other targets arose. Just as the screen was shutting itself down, leaving in place an innocuous window of word-processing a dummy memo, the telephone rang.

"Hello?" Clive wondered who might already have this phone number.

"It's me." The voice belonged to Juliana Turtle-kisses. "Do you want to ask me out to lunch?"

"Of course," he said. "My treat."

\* \* \*

Over the Caesar salad and crab cakes at Postrio, Julia detected a gleam of intelligence behind William Clive's puppy-dog eyes.

As a man, he could not look at her for more than five minutes without showing glints of obvious longing. But whenever he turned away—to deal with the waiter or focus on his food—then his face relaxed and he showed a quiet competence that she found appealing. Clive had a clear forehead and a long, thin jaw which finished off a beautifully shaped head. His dark hair and eyes gave him the look of a serious and scholarly boy.

Unlike other men she knew, he seemed to be more interested in finding out about her than in telling about himself.

"Someone told me your name is Dutch," Clive said at one point. "Are you old Knickerbocker?"

"Knicker—?" She asked uncertainly. "Excuse me?"

"That's New York aristocracy, originally of Dutch extraction."

"No, neither. I am a *Nederlander*."

"Really?" He seemed surprised. "Born there?"

"*Ja*, in Den Haag."

"But your English is perfect!"

Juliana tried to interpret this as a possible insult—she had lived in this country almost ten years, after all—and failed to find it. "Thank you," she said. "For most of us, English is like a second language."

At another point, Clive asked about her technical credentials, although here he was less direct. "I could barely keep up with the lab people at yesterday's meeting," he confessed, "yet you seemed to understand everything."

"I studied microbiology at the university," she explained. "But I took my masters in business administration."

"You didn't want to become a researcher, then, like the others? You could be making these wonderful discoveries yourself, for the benefit of all mankind."

Again, Juliana tried to be insulted. Didn't Clive realize that as a senior project manager she outranked almost everyone on the scientific staff? Perhaps he did not understand the company hierarchy, so she decided to be diplomatic.

"Not everyone has a calling for pure research," she said. "Or the talent. We also serve who only manage the function."

Later, during a lull in the conversation, Clive returned to her international status. "So . . . do you and your—family, whatever—get back to the Netherlands often?" he asked.

Ah! She interpreted that little hesitation intuitively. Clive was probing to see if he had romantic competition on either continent. Juliana did not wear a wedding band, but that signified nothing these days. "Family" was obviously meant to include a husband or a more-than-casual lover. Still, Juliana paused over the question. How truthful could she dare be with him?

The reality was that she would never return home. The state had provided her education through a series of scholarships, because her father believed that young women should raise babies instead of "fooling around with

germs and sea slime,” as he put it. The price of those scholarships had been a prolonged period of social service at minimal wage, either in teaching or in medical support. Juliana disliked children and hated the thought of emptying bedpans, so she had fled the Netherlands. When the expiration date on her visa had drawn near, she applied for and got U.S. citizenship. Now she wrote regularly to her mother and largely ignored her father.

“This is a land of such opportunity,” she said with just a flicker of a smile, “that I do not ever think of leaving.”

\* \* \*

Just as they were settling into mutual-discovery mode, Clive sensed Juliana vanishing into a puff of smoke.

He had already guessed that Miss Troetelkind might be foreign born, because European women had always seemed to him to possess a natural self-sufficiency, a *savoir-faire*, and a reputation for sexual savvy that he found both mysterious and fascinating. Clive had also guessed at her technical education, because she had lobbed those questions at her staff the day before too adroitly to be faking her expertise. Yet all through the lunch, though he listened carefully, Clive could detect no clues to her romantic status: no unnamed “him” lurking in the conversational shadows, no telltale use of “we,” no hint of shared experiences.

When nothing was forthcoming on the subject, he had asked—too bluntly, to his ears—about her personal situation by referring to her travels. He was hoping she might describe a vacation in the old country and drop a hint about some of those shared moments. Instead, she had answered straight out of the Ellis Island handbook for patriots. *Poof!*

But the moment she smiled Clive was distracted by her elegant bone structure. For real beauty, he thought, a woman’s skin must be clear and her teeth fairly even. But skin was subject to gravity, and teeth only served to hold the jaws apart. It was the fine bones underneath that gave a woman’s face timeless beauty. And Juliana’s bones were perfect.

After he had failed to make conversation on all points, she in turn asked about Clive’s life and times. To questions about his education and past work, he gave excerpts from the “approved resume” for this assignment. He told how he had taken an unspecified degree from Cal Tech and had held several anonymous and virtually untraceable positions at companies like, but not actually identified as being, Hewlett-Packard and Novell. All of it was fiction, of course, because Clive couldn’t talk about his real work.

He attempted a recovery by asking, “Do you have any pets?”

Juliana shook her head. “It’s too cruel, don’t you think? Keeping them cooped up all day while we go to the office?”

“Of course.” Damn! All the single women of Clive’s acquaintance owned a cat.

“Are you reading any good books?” he tried again.

Another shake, this time with disappointment in her eyes. “I don’t have time. Just magazines, mostly.”

“Oh? Which ones?”

“*Fortune, Forbes . . . and Vogue.*”

“That’s interesting.” Clive was loyal to the heavyweight, *Harvard Business Review*, which had once published in its entirety a six-page letter he had written to the editor. He also read *BusinessWeek* for more mundane affairs, but that wasn’t stylish enough to be on her list.

He considered asking what kind of car she drove—everyone in California drove something—when he caught a sudden vision of himself as teenage geek discussing boy’s toys with this beautiful woman. So he finally gave up and simply stared into her eyes over coffee. Juliana didn’t seem to mind that. He just wished he could be honest with her and not have to tell so many lies, conceal so much of himself. It was a terrible way to start a meaningful relationship.

The check came after half an hour. Clive put it on his Markris-Stone expense account, even though the card had been issued to him “for emergencies only.” That definition certainly did not cover social occasions, such as what Clive had come to think of as his and Juliana’s first date. Later, he would have to think of a business reason for this encounter.

Chapter 3  
*Alexander Nayle*  
CLOSELY HELD SECRETS

When he got back to his tiny cubicle after lunch, Clive attended to business—his cover business as a paid consultant, not his real job. He checked his voice mail and found nothing. Then he looked in his e-mail in-basket and found one item, a message from “ejsedgwick.” After a moment’s thought Clive identified the scientist from the meeting yesterday, the old man with the smelly pipe and the failed bacteria.

He clicked on the message and instantly found himself hip-deep in the minutiae of *Escherichia coli*, which he remembered as having some unpleasant connection with intestinal flu. The text talked in the alphanumeric soup of genetic shorthand, sprinkled with obscure references to enzymes, proteases, and metabolites. There were also the names of bizarre compounds which Clive recognized from once having audited an oil refinery. The memo went on for three baffling pages. Having nothing better to do at the moment, Clive tried to read it. This was, after all, the meat and potatoes of Cumulus Biologicals, Inc.

From his initial fast skim, he gathered that Sedgwick’s modified *E. coli* was unable to perform the desired function—“ingest crude oil molecules under anaerobic conditions,” as Juliana had explained it. But no, on second reading, Clive sensed the bacteria were on the right track but were performing inconsistently. Some of the cultures turned up their noses and refused to touch the oil at all. Others snacked on it with a weak and pettish appetite, creating in their wake a mix of noxious jellies and poisonous gases. And one variety—Sedgwick cited its series number, E-32—picked crude oil to the bones, leaving behind an insoluble residue of pure carbon coke.

It took Clive a minute to figure out why this could not be considered a raving success. Then he realized that oil spills at sea, especially in an enclosed inlet or bay, eventually found their way onto land. Such a thing had happened in Prince William Sound, for example, after the *Exxon Valdez* went aground. A cleaning agent that left hard lumps of carbon in the beach sand or dribbled them over the oysterbeds was unlikely to become any environmentalist’s friend.

Then a darker thought occurred to him. A cleaning agent such as Cumulus Biologicals was trying derive to would be mass-produced and widely distributed. Packages of the bacteria, in water-soluble form, would be stored in canisters at petroleum loading docks, aboard oil tankers, at refineries, even in the oil fields. It would probably become an environmental regulation that the agent be on hand against possible oil spills and other emergencies everywhere in the world.

But what refinery manager would want a time bomb like that sitting in a shed outside his plant? Any disgruntled employee could pop the seals, dump the bugs down a hatch, and clog up miles of pipelines and cubic yards of tankage. Or turn a ship’s cargo into blocks of graphite before it could sail into

port. Juliana had said the bug would function *anaerobically*, which meant it did not need air or sunlight to do its dirty work. The insides of a holding tank, or even underground down an oil well, would fit that description perfectly.

Clive wondered if he ought to share these dire musings with anyone. Sedgwick himself? Juliana? Or someone higher up? He decided not to, because the ensuing discussion might put himself and his work in an unhealthy spotlight.

However, he did check to see who else had received this piece of e-mail. According to the distribution list, it had gone out fairly widely. Clive remembered Juliana asking Sedgwick to circulate it to the meeting's attendees. That was probably why Clive, who had no business knowing this level of technical detail, was copied on it.

And yes, Charlie Palmer, who had sat in on the meeting with him, also got a copy.

\* \* \*

The housekeeper summoned Alexander Nayle from his bed to the telephone in the upstairs study. "A call for you," she said. "From California." That made the call important. Everyone he knew in California was a player in some part of his business.

Nayle glanced at the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece. Golden dragons, rampant on a block of green serpentine, held the pale clockface erect in their claws. It was just before six. Not even gray dawn had yet touched the Paris sky. He counted backward: West Coast time was just nine in the evening. Certainly, his caller might have waited an hour or two longer, to let him sleep.

"Yes?" he said into the mouthpiece.

"I may have something for you."

He recognized the voice immediately as his primary contact at Cumulus Biologicals. He had made several profitable exchanges with this person in the past.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Environmental . . . at least on the surface. This culture was originally designed to break down oil spills."

Nayle made a face. He would have preferred another agricultural product, of course, because they were usually easier to market. The world's spreading famine offered him a virtually global clientele. Environmental products limited him to buyers in Europe and North America, the only regions that could afford to worry about ecology and clean water. In most such cases, the buyers were already served by the company he and his contact were defrauding. Still, Nayle remained quiet at this point. He had learned early on that, in these negotiations, a cold silence staked out the power position.

"Well, are you interested?" the voice asked.

"You'll have to tell me something about it," he said smoothly.

His contact entered on a detailed explanation of bacterial growth rates, accelerated carbon-oxygen metabolism, hydrogen-stripping enzymes, and other esoterica that really didn't interest Nayle. He stared through the study's tall windows, over the brown-gray waters of the Seine, to the rooftops of the Right

Bank's Marais District. The sky was just growing light enough to bring out the red of the tiles there. And the chimney pots were beginning to send up sober columns of gray smoke.

What Nayle gathered from his contact's extended monologue was that the bacteria in question ate oil. They could turn valuable crudes into useless sludge. This did not sound promising. If the bug had done something practical, like expedite the refining process, then he might be able to sell it to one of the oil companies. Or to an Arab state which wouldn't mind competing in the market for refined products. But this bug—what was it called? Escher's collie?—was still in the experimental stage. And it was a failure.

Still, Nayle hesitated to refuse any offer outright. This person had been too good a source in the past to be turned down lightly.

"It sounds like an interesting package," he said, keeping his tone neutral. "But I will have to look into the matter and get back to you."

"I understand," the voice said.

"A day or two, no more."

"Whenever . . ." And the line went dead.

As he set the phone down, Nayle wondered if anyone of his acquaintance might have an oil spill on his hands? Now or in the future?

The list was depressingly short.

\* \* \*

The first thing Clive did on his fourth day at Cumulus was crank up that floppy disk full of secret programs and check on what he called his "trap line." He had not dared to leave the full panoply of contraband programs resident on his drive space in the file server, because it was not secure. The system administrator—Clive had been introduced to the current SYSADMIN, Bernie Heilman, on his first day—held peekaboo rights to anything stored there. Heilman would flip out if he saw some of the baggage Clive was packing.

The paper flower opened and reported that it held data on both of his current targets, Peter Shore and Charlie Palmer. The screen showed lists of messages sent and received, meetings scheduled and attended, calls made and billed—date, time, and phone number, but no voice recordings or transcripts. The software wasn't *that* advanced. Not yet, anyway. Clive noted that Palmer had duly received Sedgwick's memo about the oil-eater. He had presumably read it, then stored it off twice: once in his personal file space on the server and again in a subdirectory on his desktop workstation labeled \MARKETNG.

"Marketing"? What did Palmer have to market? He was one of the systems guys. At a corporation like Cumulus, his function would be almost wholly internal. He was as unlikely to be arranging sales to clients as washing out test tubes or mailing invoices.

Curious now, Clive used his package of programs to look at the entries in this directory of Palmer's. Judging from the date, Sedgwick's memo had been filed as CARBON.DAT. The others in the directory had names like BANANA.DAT, RICE.DAT, and weirdest of all, SLUG.DAT. The references meant nothing to Clive. He couldn't link them to the previous thefts that Markris-Stone had traced on Cumulus projects, which had been growth

hormones for agricultural crops like sorghum and soybeans. Still, Clive took a surreptitious download of this batch of files into his own drive for later analysis. . . . Then again, he mused, they might be something innocent, like a science fair project for one of Palmer's kids.

As an afterthought, before he closed up his collection of programs, Clive decided to add Edward Sedgwick to the trap line. Maybe someone else would show an interest in the oil-eater.

\* \* \*

It took Alexander Nayle most of the day to track down the buyer he was seeking. Although such men were generally elusive, Ali Sahir maintained a high public profile—but as a merchant, financier, and civilian advisor to his country's quasi-military government. His nighttime activities were appreciated by only the handful of Westerners in a position to supply him with arms, contraband explosives, and other technological gadgets.

Because the man's phone was usually bugged by either the CIA or MI-6, or both at once, Nayle spoke in a kind of code. The two of them had used it before.

"I have a product that might interest you," he said offhandedly, once the connection had passed through the requisite layer of subordinates and Sahir himself came on the line.

"And what is that?" The other's voice was merely polite.

"Think of it as a detergent, for removing oily spots from your clothing."

"Spots? How big are these spots you propose to clean?"

"Quite large. From several cubic meters . . ." Nayle knew he was freestyling here. His primary intention was to gain Sahir's attention. They would iron out the technical details later. Once he took physical possession of the bacteria, they could perform tests to establish its value, and so a price. "Up to several metric tons."

"Ah! Occasionally, in my business, I do have to deal with such spots. So tell me, friend, is your detergent chemical in nature? Does it require the application of much . . . heat?"

"No, no. It is of organic origin. A bacterium, I believe."

"Such things are usually too delicate for my purposes."

"This one appears to be quite robust."

"Is it fast growing, then?"

"So I believe."

"Ah."

Nayle counted up to five in his head, giving the other man time to think. Then he pressed his case. "A bacterial would have the benefit of working silently and at long range. It would also be undetectable, if not actually mistaken for some natural phenomenon."

"But only if this material were closely held," Sahir reasoned.

"It will be," Nayle assured him.

"So . . . it is not yet at hand?"

That was a slip. Nayle prided himself on not making many. “Not yet,” he admitted. “For a rare item such as this, I must secure a buyer before proceeding with negotiations.”

“I suppose that is wise. Very well. You may act as my representative in this matter—with the usual retainer.”

On the basis of their past dealings, Nayle could expect one million U.S. dollars to be deposited in a numbered Swiss account before noon the following day. “You are most generous,” he murmured.

“Not at all. From you, I am accustomed to results.” That was as much praise and reassurance as Sahir would give. He broke the connection without saying good-bye.

Nayle grimaced. Twice in one day different people had hung up on him. This had better not be the start of a trend.

He pressed down the plunger and began punching buttons as soon as he released it. Paris time was now seven in the evening. That made it ten in the morning in California. He knew which number to use.

“Hello?” the voice of his contact came on at the second ring.

Nayle started right in, knowing his own voice would be recognized. “I may have a buyer for that product you mentioned.”

“I thought we agreed you were never to call me here.”

“Things are moving too fast. We need to establish our bona fides quickly, which means I need to take a sample of the product within, say, forty-eight hours.”

The other hesitated. “That may not be possible . . .” The voice seemed to fade out, an effect possibly due to atmospheric working on the satellite link.

“Where is the difficulty?” he asked.

“The cultures, as I explained, are still in the early stages of development. We do not yet have a dependable—or even a stable—strain. At this point, the bacteria’s internal processes are shooting all over the board. The effects are unpredictable.”

This made it sound as if purifying the culture might take weeks, perhaps months. But now, with Ali Sahir’s interest aroused, Nayle had just days to deliver on his promises. His voice dropped an octave. “I hear you,” he said, making each word distinct, like stones falling down a well.

“But our researcher is pretty sure he can stabilize the cultures. Eventually, I will have something reliable to send you.”

“Who is he, this researcher?”

“Sedgwick. Edward Sedgwick.”

Nayle made a note of the name. “Then we can take the material out by the usual route?”

“But it’s too soon, I tell you.”

“I understand. But look,” Nayle coaxed, “you must have one strain that performs well enough to exhibit. Something I can use to whet our client’s appetite?”

The voice on the other end sighed. His contact was not a person of strong nerves or great daring. "All right. In that case, the best sample would . . . thirty-two."

Static on the line was growing worse.

"What's that again?" he asked.

"The batch is-s-series E-three-two."

Nayle wrote down what he heard, "C-32."

"But you should really let me take care of it," his contact said.

"No time," Nayle replied. Then he relented enough to say, "Don't worry. You'll still get your commission. Everything is under control."

And then *he* broke the connection. After all, he had everything he needed.

\* \* \*

On the premise that you climbed right back on the horse after falling off, Clive asked Juliana out again despite their first disastrous lunch. To his surprise, she accepted—although she did so with a withering, sidelong glance that seemed to ask, Why bother?

He took her to Harry Denton's, securing a window table in the east-side dining room. The restaurant was in a red-brick building, now a fashionable hotel, which had once been the local YMCA back when this neighborhood was San Francisco's equivalent of the Bowery. Their table overlooked a narrow stretch of bay between the Embarcadero and Treasure Island, where an errant north wind was churning up whitecaps.

"Looks tricky out there," Clive observed.

Juliana turned to stare at the water. "Tide's going out," she said. "The waves back up in the channel here when the wind's in this quarter."

"You're a sailor!"

"No, windsurfer."

"Oh," Clive said, trying not to sound disappointed. Then he had a sudden vision of her supple body in a tight, black wetsuit and his heart turned over. He had never been out on a board himself, because the sport seemed too cold and exposed. And too dangerous, skimming over the gray water at what looked like fifteen, twenty miles an hour.

"But I used to sail," she said.

"You just like surfing better?"

"No, it's that sailing needs two people, for any boat big enough to tackle the bay."

He nodded. "One to handle tiller and mainsheet, the other to haul the jib around."

"Exactly! I used to know some sailing people. But now . . ." She shrugged.

"I have a sailboat," he offered, almost too eagerly. "I mean, she's nothing special, just a twenty-two-footer, plain sloop rig, lapstrake wooden hull with lots of varnish, but—"

"She sounds perfect. What's her name?"

"*Soleil*. It's French. It means—"

“Sunshine.” Juliana smiled.  
“I’ll take you out. Anytime.”  
“I’d like that.”

\* \* \*

Frederick Wexler—familiar in certain London circles as “Freddie the Waxer,” and now with a growing Parisian reputation as “Monsieur Cire”—lowered himself into the seat of the British Airways evening flight to San Francisco.

While the other passengers pressed into the cabin, Wexler dug under the coattails bunched around his hips, looking for the ends of his lap strap. The damned airlines made these seats too narrow and then jammed them together front to back so that his elbows were always in somebody else’s ribs, his kneecaps in their kidneys. Nothing fit Wexler in economy class. But that was all right. A few more jobs like this one, and he could think about branching out on his own. Someday he would become as big a name as Mr. Alexander Nayle. Then he could travel first class, too.

The job at hand was simple. One, zip over to America and make contact with Nayle’s inside man at this biotech company. Not the bloke who was being so difficult over the phone, but the other one, who did the usual cash-and-carry on these jobs. Two, acquire some common medical supplies, available from any well equipped laboratory. Three, put the fear of God in an old bugger who was likely to take too much pride in his work. Someone almost guaranteed to talk later, too. And four, disappear into the night and fly home.

It was a cozy piece of work, involving zero risk, zero sweat, and a payout in the five figures. And those were good old English pounds, darling, not measly American dollars. At the current rate of exchange, that placed a fifty-percent multiplier on what Nayle usually offered. Thank God the old fart hadn’t gone over to francs, like everything else in his operation.

Relaxing for a moment in the glow of anticipation, Wexler performed a modest summing up. This work certainly beat his old dad’s life—which Freddie himself had been apprenticed to until he rebelled at the tender age of seventeen. Laying out the stiffs at ten quid per, wire through the jaw and plastic bridge a bob extra, so’s old Uncle Harry or Aunt Bess would “look natural.” Powder and rouge supplied at cost. What a life that was! No, *making* them paid a damn sight better than prettying them up, after.

At last Wexler found the aluminum buckle, let it out so he could click the thing across his stomach, and pulled the free end of the strap tight. As the plane pulled back from the jetway, he actually stopped to listen to the flight attendant explaining about exits and life preservers. She wasn’t a bad looking bird, except for tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes.

Just a dab of wax and powder, dear. Fix you right up.