

## Chapter 1

The giant bats had bodies the size of a St. Bernard, and an eighteen foot wingspan. With the sun shining through their translucent red wings they dove towards the church picnic.

Jocko, who had no clear idea how June Anne had talked him into being there, was retrieving a cold one from a cooler in the cab of his pickup when he saw them. Jocko had spent a lifetime being ready, and, although this was not an mission he had trained for, he reacted as though it was an invasion of Black Helicopters.

The Winchester twelve gauge pump shotgun had cost more than the ring he'd given June Anne a month ago (and had taken longer to select). It held five shells. The walnut stock glowed from hand rubbed oil.

He dropped the as yet unopened beer on the seat and slid the gun from the rack behind the driver's seat. Fitting it to his shoulder he fingered the safety off and pulled the trigger before his shooter's eye had finished calculating distance, speed, and angles.

The solid, flat, *blam* of that first shot ended Rev. Haskins' conversation with Margaret Smith. It had been a one-sided dialogue which he was enduring with as much grace as he could manage. Margaret was one of those people, he'd been thinking, who had a real need to feel important. She used her position as head of the recreation committee to make sure those who had made the mistake of

volunteering to work with her understood exactly why they should defer to her. This had caused friction and she was using this inappropriate occasion to tell the reverend details he had no desire to know.

Jocko regretted the first shot as he realized the bats were still too high and recalculated their size accordingly. Those suckers were huge, bigger than Eagles - by a lot. He wished he'd brought a rifle. He pumped the gun, ejecting the spent shell and chambering a fresh one, while he waited for them to come into range. It took all of his will not to fire too soon. He noticed that a couple seemed to have separated from the main group, but decided to ignore them for the moment.

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Things seemed to go into slow motion for the reverend. He turned towards the parking lot in time to see a man he didn't immediately recognize fire another shot into the air. It only eased his mind a little when he noticed that the gun was pointed up away from the crowd. Haskins took a step and the man shot twice more. The cheers for the sack race died away and then a woman screamed.

The scream started loud and high and rose both in pitch and volume. It conveyed sufficient urgency to draw Haskins' attention from the rather riveting scene in the parking lot. He turned and his gaze followed a woman's outstretched arm just in time to see three monstrous creatures swoop down in flawless formation to snatch the leaders in the sack race from the field.

The shotgun boomed again and a different one of the hideous apparitions crashed into the vibrant grass.

Jocko had to switch away from the main flight because he was afraid of sending shot into the crowd, besides a sixth sense told him something was coming at him.

His next shot blew away the right wing of the lead bat that was diving on him. It gave a shriek and tumbled out of control. The second bat, seeing that it was facing the business end of a shotgun, pulled out of the dive and tried to evade by flying between a row of parked cars. But Jocko was psyched and made the shot of his life - hitting a target moving at close to eighty miles an hour as it passed through the gap between two cars. The lead bat thudded into the back of his truck and lay there twitching while its wounds poured blood onto the black plastic liner Jocko had installed to protect the truck's bed.

He turned back towards the picnic and saw that the three bats were having trouble gaining altitude given the weight of their loads.

Jocko tore open his glove box and feverishly started jamming shells into the gun. Looking out the windshield he saw they were heading towards the pond, and, realizing there was no time to be lost, he slid into the driver's seat.

He drove like a man possessed. As he backed up the row the open passenger's side door snagged on a car and was ripped off. He slammed into the beverage table sending its inadequate selections flying in a hundred directions as his tires spun trying to get a purchase on the grass.

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The reverend stood rooted, one step away from the now screaming Margaret

Smith, as he watched the truck tear across the meadow. Moving quickly, it gained on the bats which were clearly struggling with their loads.

He was struck by the notion that God was employing some peculiar angels but had the presence to send a direct powerful prayer as the still unknown man jumped from the truck and began firing again.

The child, released by a wounded bat, fell screaming twenty feet to the edge of the pond where he hit the mud and water with an obscene splat.

Jocko aimed above the next bat to avoid hitting the kid and his second shot went high, but he corrected and sent another of the hideous creatures cart-wheeling towards the pond. From the corner of his eye he saw movement coming towards him, but he held still firing at the third abductor a split second before he was hit.

He remembered high school football when something hits you so fast you don't know it until you're down. In a quiet resigned way he watched as his shotgun spun through the air away from him. It was only then that he realized the impossibility of it all.

The last shot clipped the bat's wing and, although not badly wounded, it was forced to release little Susan Foster who would be dealing with this afternoon for the rest of her life.

Two mothers made an adrenaline driven run across the field, at speeds an Olympian could only dream of, and plunged into the lake to rescue the fallen children who were thrashing around in the shallows.

Jocko, who had planned on keeping a low profile at the picnic, found himself the center of attention. The reverend had insisted that he kneel beside him when

**they gave prayers of thanksgiving for their deliverance.**

**Jocko, who hadn't prayed except in moments of utmost urgency or great regret in years, added a quick thanks that he'd managed to not hit the kids.**

## Chapter 2

While he waited in the General's outer office, Major William Robbins fingered the crease on his highly starched uniform sleeve and wondered how long they would be able to get away with the deception. He had so far been able to placate ranchers who had lost lambs with ample compensation and pleas to their patriotism.

When that didn't work he had a particularly neat little threat. The tame psychiatrist, who spent most of his time keeping the wacko scientists in line, would explain to them just how hard it was to be regarded as a kook by your community. He used a particularly outlandish supermarket tabloid as an example, and promised that they would be on the next week's cover if they insisted on holding on to this fantasy about giant bats.

This time he didn't think he was going to be able to get away with any of this. In the past it had been the word of one or, sometimes, two men against the rest of an unbelieving world. This time a hundred sober, upstanding, common folks had seen it. No blaming it on acid flashbacks, no d.t.s, there was no fury like mothers who had seen their children attacked.

Four years, three months, and twelve days until he could get out with his pension. He cursed the chaos of the bureaucracy that had created Project Nightmare and kept him there.

At first it had sounded good. Use science against our enemies. Why should we have to send our boys into battle when we can do far more damage with a corps

of genetic giants that would strike fear into the hearts of any enemy?

That was until he'd met the drunken degenerate scientists the army had gotten from God only knew where. That was until he really thought about what they were doing, and before the animals had started escaping.

The Major still believed in his country. He also believed in keeping his ass in an army uniform until he put enough time in to qualify for a pension.

His own greatest mistake, he'd decided, was five years ago thinking he was bored and looking for a position that would be a little more interesting.

It had seemed as though the project had all the things he thought he'd been looking for. The ultra secret compound set deep inside a sprawling military base, a chance to be on the cutting edge, and, he had thought, a chance to show the pentagon what he was made of -- a chance to stand out in the midst of a huge crowd.

It hadn't worked out the way he'd thought it would. The ultra secret compound and his hours gave his wife the excuse she'd been looking for, and she left him. The cutting edge turned out to be the lunatic fringe and he had the distinct feeling that they laughed when he called the pentagon.

After the obligatory cooling of heels, the general's sergeant told him he could go in. The fact he'd waited only ten minutes was not a good sign.

He tried to set the direction, "General, I don't know that we're going to be able to contain this one. The bats attacked children, sir. And a local killed four and probably wounded a couple more."

**"How'd he do that?"**

**"Pump shotgun, twelve gauge, sir."**

**"Don't get me wrong Major, and I will get back to your problem in a minute, but I don't like the implications that the best this project can do is produce a force that gets slaughtered when they attack a church picnic."**

**"Yes sir." Robbins was still reeling from the description, 'your problem'.**

**The general continued, "This could be very bad if it got out. It contradicts all the tests we've conducted so far. What went wrong?"**

**What went wrong? Squad of giant killer mutant bats had escaped and attacked a church picnic. The general wanted to know why they hadn't laid waste to the assembled civilians. The major swallowed and answered.**

**"From what I can tell there was an element of bad luck in that a civilian had a weapon within reach. Apparently they were conducting a snatch raid and picked children who were too large to be carried easily. It was the ten to twelve year olds."**

**"Did anyone videotape it?"**

**"There were only two people there with cameras and it seems that they both dropped them when the bats attacked."**

**"Damn, I would have liked to see a film of it, maybe we could have seen what went wrong."**

**"Like I said, sir, it was bad luck. Apparently two were detailed to go after the shooter, but he managed to drop them both."**

**"He must be some shot. Was he in the service?"**

**"Yes sir, Marines."**

**"God damn jar-heads."**

**Robbins used the moment to try and figure how to get the conversation back on track. "Sir, I spoke to the preacher and told him that it was in the national interest to keep quiet about the incident. But I'm not sure he's going to. He had a lot of questions. And, for a man of the cloth he used some pretty strong language."**

**"Have you spoken to the editor?"**

**The major had gotten a commendation six months after he'd arrived because he'd managed to uncover some compromising information the editor of the local paper. "Yes sir. But I'm not sure that it's going to work much longer."**

**"It had damn well better."**

**"Yes sir."**

**"I mean that Robbins. If this gets out and is traced back to us, you're likely to finish your tour supervising three men who are digging a hole somewhere in northern Alaska. You will not be invited to reup and will find yourself on the short stick end of your pension."**

**"Yes sir."**

**"Did you recover all the casualties?"**

**"The four he killed, yes sir, though the shooter wanted to keep one as a trophy. It took some convincing, but we got it. We have a team out trying to find the survivors."**

**"How many does that leave still on the loose?"**

**"Six, so far as we can tell, in this group, and then there's the blue squad."**

**The blue squad consisted of five survivors of the second generation. They were the**

result of a complete redesign in which, among other things, more attention had been spent on the aesthetics. Their wings were a pale blue, their furry bodies two tones of progressively deeper color. Intelligence had been raised too; they would have had more sense than try to snatch quarry too heavy to make off with.

The two teams had been on a joint exercise when they'd been caught in a thunderstorm and blown out of the training range where radio controlled brain implants were able to ensure their return.

The general got up from his desk and walked to a large map on the far wall. He pointed to an area to the north of Clarkstown and said, "Send the capture team here."

It was a guess, Robbins knew, but it was as good a guess as was possible given the fact that the bats had been trained to be evasive and not predictable.

"And Robbins, I want you to go with them."

### Chapter 3

The bats would come if you played either Bach or Mozart. If the Major had asked her, Joyce could have told him that. Not that she would have even if he'd asked her, which he didn't.

She knew he was the enemy. She deliberately gave him wrong directions to the men's room in part because he was as big an asshole as some of the cowboys and she got a kick of sending customers down to the basement where they discovered that Cowboy Bob's hygiene stopped at ground level and the door locked behind them.

Joyce had learned how to let the sexist innuendo she got from breakfast to dinner roll off her polyester uniform like eggs off a Teflon coated frypan. The comments, like the tobacco smoke and the pickups in the gravel parking lot outside of Cowboy Bob's Burger Barn, came with the territory. At first she'd tried to impart her Eastern Liberal Consciousness on the customers, but halfway through the first morning she realized they viewed it as the finest entertainment to hit town since the drunken traveling preacher had showed up two summers before - so she'd changed tactics. While she was working, Joyce was vivacious displaying a friendly and cheerful face to the world. After work she changed into jeans and a loose flannel shirt, climbed onto her battered trail bike and blasted off to nobody knew quite where.

Everyone knew she had an apartment over where the hardware store had been until Ralph had retired last year and had found that there were no buyers for

a marginal business in the run-down center of Clarkstown, a town that had no particular reason to be there since the mines had shut down. She went there only to shower and change between May first and the end of October.

There wasn't a lot to do in Clarkstown and a lot of time was spent speculating about the parts of other peoples' lives they didn't know about. The current best guess about her was that she had a man back up in the hills somewhere. Some thought it might be a Vietnam vet who wasn't ready to come back to the world yet and had built a cabin up there somewhere. Today she seemed in a hurry to get back to him.

There was no man, veteran or otherwise. There was a crude cabin, a lean-to actually, that she'd built herself. It sat just below the edge of a ridge in a stand of trees. The forest extended fifty feet to a cliff which provided a balcony that overlooked the whole world and kept it at bay at the same time. The roof provided shelter against rain and was supported by three crude log walls. The fourth side which faced out over the cliff top was open. She slept in a hammock and ate the food she brought from the diner. A stream far below provided an invigorating bath which she supplemented with hot showers at her apartment when needed.

As she turned off of route 244 onto the fire road, Joyce immediately noticed that someone had been there. Army trucks, she thought, by the look of the tracks. She knew she had to warn her friends who just two nights ago had scared the hell out of her.

## Chapter 4

"As the moon rose  
brilliant over the mountains  
bathing us in its cold clear light  
I knew we would  
together find a peace"

The man's voice, soft and mellow, came from her right. From where there could be no man. Unless he was sitting high in the pine that grew out of a crevasse in the cliff face. Joyce, startled nearly into a seizure, jumped to her feet. The moon was rising over the Eastern range. Its cold clear light illuminated some scattered wispy clouds. She was, so far as she could tell, completely alone.

Was it an hallucination? She tasted her saliva for the metallic sharp taste she associated with her long past hallucinogenic adventures. There was none. The rest of her felt normal, except for being jumpy. "Not a flashback," she thought. "ESP," she wondered?

There had been a poet in her life once. But he'd written about dark, decay, and pain -- not light and hope. If she called out, *Who's there?*, she would be admitting that it was real. She would be asking for an impossible response. And she wasn't sure she was ready.

She reached out and switched on her portable stereo. Back in the city they'd been called boom-boxes, but here its surprisingly good fidelity filled the still night with Mozart. She took a step to her right looking up into the crown of the tree searching, hoping to find nothing to reassure herself.

Forty minutes later when the cd ended he said, "That was nice. Appropriate."

"Who are you?" Joyce heard her voice, too high and too loud, echoing her fear.

"My name's Joshua. You don't have to be afraid."

She looked again, this time she could see that there was a large dark shape in the tree. "Are you in the tree?"

"Yes."

Her heart was going as fast as it had the day when three members of the Savage Skulls had come into her classroom to negotiate a business deal with one of her students.

Never show or admit fear. Why was he in the tree? How had he climbed it, climbed past her, without her seeing? Knowing his name didn't help much, she thought, but it helped some.

"You startled me."

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid it's something I am prone to."

He had a nice voice she decided, not the voice of an escaped axe murderer, "Why are you up there?"

"It's a long story."

Joyce stared up into the tree hoping for a glimpse of his face, "I've learned that life is full of long stories."

He told her that he was shy. That he was more comfortable talking to her from up in a tree. She felt slightly violated. This was, after all, her place, he should have asked her permission or something.

"So, Joshua, tell me about yourself."

"I'd rather hear about you."

Joyce hadn't survived as a single woman in New York for eight years by falling for lines like that. She ducked back into her Eastern persona and tried to remember if there were any serial killers operating in this part of the country.

It was not a neighborly act, but, it was, she thought, justified, as she reached for the industrial strength flashlight she occasionally used to keep bears at bay -- and flicked it on.

Because its trunk began down the cliff face, the top of the tree was only twenty feet above her. The tight bright beam danced through the branches until it found him.

Simultaneously they cried, "AAAh".

He, it, was blue. All of him. Not the pants not a jacket - head, legs, everything. It was a bright glorious royal BLUE.

"You're blue." She cried when she got articulate enough.

"Yes. You scared me." His voice sounded shaken.

"You're blue," she repeated and switched the light off.

"And I'm not a man. I was going to tell you."

"I'm going crazy." And she was pretty sure she was. If she thought it was real she was crazy. But if it wasn't real and she was seeing it, she was crazy. There was no third option she could think of.

There was melancholy in his voice as he said, "It's not you, it's the world that's crazy."

"That's easy for you to say. Oh God, why did I do all those drugs when I was young?" She wanted to run to her bike and take off through the woods, but she doubted she could drive.

"It's not easy for me either." His voice was soft and tinged with a sadness so profound it pulled Joyce out of her self-absorbed tail spin.

"Oh my God, I'm sorry." Joyce found she was genuinely embarrassed. Not knowing what to say, she reached out and restarted the music.

An hour later, after she had coaxed him down out of the tree, she asked, "Who taught you how to talk?"

"There were a few of them. But Rosa was the teacher I liked the best. She taught me music, then how to sing."

Here I am, Joyce thought, sitting on the edge of a mountain bathed in moonlight talking with a bat, a blue bat that's as big as I am, and I'm about to ask him what kind of songs he likes to sing.

Before she could get the question out, he said, "But I didn't have many reasons to sing, because they took her away. And then they tried to get us to do things."

Us? Joyce thought, and asked, "What things, and who are they?"

"The army. To be precise about it, special warfare projects. Code name Project Nightmare."

"That sounds like a bad movie."

He nodded, "Not that I've seen that many movies, except as part of my language training."

"And what did they want you to do."

"Assassination, espionage, and sabotage. We're the ultimate stealth warriors." Was there a bit of pride in his voice as he said that, Joyce wondered? It sounded as though there might be.

"And where did you come from? They didn't... " she broke off. Her half remembered biology classes convinced her that it had to be some DNA mixing.

"I don't know exactly. I heard they took an egg and implanted it in a cow. Exactly where the egg came from and what they did to it is a guess, except they added a lot of blue."

She couldn't help but laugh. And think, but not say, 'a fair amount of brains too.' Later she would remember that evening, and realize that it had been more pleasant that the majority of dates she'd been on in the past few years.

Joyce purposefully kept the next day as normal as possible. She laughed her usual laugh when Ed suggested, as he did every morning, that she should consider giving up her job and moving in with him. "Don't need a wife. Had one. Could use a waitress though." She kept checking to see if there were any indications that the

flashback was continuing. She wasn't sure if she was hoping for symptoms or not.

The next night had not started as calmly as the previous one had ended. A fallen tree served as her table and another blue bat had swooped down and stolen her sandwich. Joyce who had seen it out of the corner of her eye knew that her hope that the previous night had been a dream was not going to come to pass.

Later, as she softly strummed her battered guitar, she heard some movement in the trees around the lean-to. When the moon rose half an hour later, she saw them silhouetted on some branches. At first she was scared, but when she stopped she heard them imitating her playing. She struck a chord and let it die. From a tree to her right the chord came back just as slightly out of tune as hers had been. She let herself relax, beasts, so long as they were musical, were, until proven otherwise, benign in her book.

After playing another chord and having it come back to her, she punched the play button on her boombox and a different piece softly filled the night.

She sensed a ripple of excitement around her and before she had time for fright to set in, one and then another of the bats had fluttered down to the ground beside the cd player.

The last to land was the one named Joshua, "I'm sorry that Tommy stole your food earlier."

"That's ok, I've got more. Are you hungry?"

That was enough to get the other's attention. For a second she felt

overwhelmed as they all turned towards her.

They were a little unnerving though, and as much to calm herself as them, she spoke to them in a low soft voice. The same voice she'd used when the drug dealer in her history class had used her desk to barricade the door to keep the police from arresting him. "Hang on a minute."

She lowered her food bag from its bear-proof place hanging between two trees and proceeded to ransack her larder searching for things that might interest them. They were hungry. They jostled each other, as they moved clumsily jockeying for position. "Hey take it easy, you can have what I've got." The bats took a particular interest in fruit and she made a note to stop at the supermarket on the way back tomorrow.

As one came close to take an apple from her, she noticed the radio collar on his neck. She touched it gently, "What's this?"

He moved his wing so that one of the claws touched the plastic ring. He pulled at it a couple of times and then moved his claw away. Joshua said, "That's how they controlled us."

Joyce touched it again searching for a clasp. There was none. She thought for a moment and then got up and found the tool she had used for trimming branches from the logs for the lean-to. It was like a giant's scissors with curved blades. The handles were three feet long to provide leverage. She demonstrated its use on a branch that had escaped last night's campfire.

The collar was tough, but could not resist a Fire-Forged Clipper, one of a collection of tools she'd bought at give away prices just before Ralph had closed the

hardware store for good. With a crunch not unlike a walnut being spilt, the plastic gave way. But instead of falling to the ground the collar hung suspended from a wire that ran through what looked like a plastic button set into the back of his neck. The clipper cut this wire as though it was string and the collar fell to the ground. For half a second she waited to see if cutting the wire had any bad effect. Actually the bat seemed pleased, it turned its neck back and forth.

Immediately the rest of the bats gathered around and waited for her to remove their collars too. When, after a couple of minutes, five cut rings of plastic lay on the ground, the bats leapt into the air and gave her an impromptu airshow. They rolled and dove, swooped and soared in perfect formation before settling down beside her again. Joshua said, "Thank you." He turned to one of the others and issued a series of orders that were barely audible to Joyce. The bat gathered up all the collars and launched himself off the cliff. Joshua turned back to her. "They might be able to track us through them so he's going to drop them into the river."

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The helicopters with their brilliant spotlights were not something that could be hidden, so the Major told the tame editors that there had been an outbreak of Anthrax in the mountain goats and they were assisting the CDC in keeping it contained.

## Chapter 4

Jocko wanted to be somewhere else. Not here dressed in a shirt and tie eating Sunday dinner at the reverend's table. The worst thing was the table cloth. The reverend's wife had gone on and on about it, about how it had been in the family for over a hundred years. How it had been bequeathed to her by her mother as she lay dying. How the lace work could not be duplicated. How she stored it in a velvet lined box inside a cedar chest. He was sure he was going to spill something on it, something that would not wash out. He was used to swinging his elbows a little when he ate, and the table was crowded with lots of important people.

They seemed bent and determined to turn his life around, and he wasn't so sure he was all that happy about the way it seemed to be headed. They were talking about a full time job that was going to pay him just about as much as his unemployment and his half-time off-the-books gig (less if you counted the taxes.) But it was respectable and legal and there was no way he could turn it down, not if he wanted June Anne to talk to him.

At least no one would be giving him any shit for having the gun in the truck. He successfully finished his soup and let his attention go back to the reverend.

"At first I thought it might be a sign of the apocalypse, but when this army officer dressed in civilian clothes came up and started talking to me, I began to wonder."

Jocko nodded, checked to make sure his mouth wasn't full, and said, "Was he wearing a blue windbreaker?" When the reverend nodded, he continued, "Yeah,

he came up to me too. I wanted to keep one of them, you know, take it to Jim and have it stuffed."

June Anne, from across the table, jumped in, "What would you want it for?"

He wondered how he could have fallen for a woman who had as much class as she did, "I figured it would look pretty good hanging over the fireplace. Course the wings would cover the windows."

She made a face, but before she could silently mouth, 'We'll talk about it later', he continued, "But he muscled it away from me. I started to make a fight about it and he said, 'You want to spend the next six months talking to the IRS?' Now don't get me wrong, but I don't have anything to hide but I don't particularly want to get entangled with them, and besides I had the feeling that June Anne wouldn't think it went along with the way she wants our place to look."

That got a little laugh. From the end of the table June Anne's father said, "I saw him too, he was coming out of The Sentinel. I was going in to see Hank and tell him that he'd missed the biggest news story this town ever saw."

Someone said, "There wasn't anything in today's paper."

Her father continued, "And there won't be. When I went in Hank was in a rage. He said that if he wasn't mortgaged over his head he'd fight things, but, he didn't come out and say it in so many words, but the man must have been leaning on him hard. I've never known Hank to let anything get in the way of his paper."

The reverend, after a moment's silence, said, "Well I guess it doesn't matter where they came from, so long as we can give thanks for our deliverance from them."

From two places to his right April Elizabeth, June Anne's oldest sister, interrupted. "Hold on there, do I hear you right? Are you telling me that the nightmares I'm going to have for the rest of my life seeing that horrible creature swooping down on my child are OK because everything turned out OK? Well I don't think it's OK and if they won't publish it here, maybe somebody else will."

"That's another problem, nobody is going to touch a story about giant bats attacking a church picnic except for that paper I see sometimes in the supermarket."

"But there are witnesses, a lot of them."

Her father spoke, "Honey, he's got a point, can you see an anchor man saying, 'good evening we have a story tonight about how a church picnic was attacked by a group of creatures straight out of a horror film.' He's just not going to do it without some proof."

"Well I got proof. I got it on tape. I was filming Cindy and it has to have some of it in."

"Have you looked at it?"

"No," she admitted, "I haven't. But when the man came around offering a hundred dollars for anyone who had a video camera, I smelled a rat and kept my bag closed."

The dinner was interrupted as she ran down the block to retrieve the tape and three electronics experts gave advice on how best to play it on the reverend's antiquated television.

After fast forwarding through last week's dance recital, the tape showed Cindy who was, it seemed, hell bent on winning the race. Her mother's shrill shrieks of encouragement were painfully loud. There was the unmistakable sound of the gun, a shadow flashed over the camera and then, there it was, a hideous creature reaching down and grabbing Cindy by her dress. The scream on the tape was punctuated by the cries of the crowd in the Reverend's den.

The camera jerked and went in and out of focus, but it followed the bat as it tried to gain altitude. it zoomed in to the child's horror-filled face and then panned back as Jocko's truck bounced across the meadow.

They saw him leap out of the truck, fire his shots, get struck, and go down. The camera swung back to the children splashing in the swampy end of the pond before it went dark.

"That was some shooting son."

Jocko answered, "God must have been doing the aiming." Before he could think about it. And after seeing the film he was sure of it.

"So what do we do now?"

"I guess we ought to take this film over to Helena, where they've got a network station."

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The station was a bit of a disappointment to Jocko who had ridden in the Reverend's car. The office was cramped and didn't look anything like he imagined it

would.

He admired the way the reverend had handled things. After introducing himself he handed the tape and a church directory to the station manager. "You're not going to want to believe this. You're going to be looking to see if it's a fake. Call any of the people on this list, ask them what happened at the picnic. Call them all if you have the time."

The station manager played the tape on a large monitor. He got most of the way through before he grabbed a phone off the desk and began punching its dial.

"I'm telling you it's no fake. I'll fax you the church directory, you can call and verify. Hell, I'll hook up a feed and you can talk to these people yourself."

Jocko imagined that there were a lot of arguments going on in New York because there were two or three phone calls coming in at a time. He watched as the station manager made two copies of the tape and then transmitted it to New York.

They waited for what seemed to be a long time then things started moving quickly. They were hustled into a newsroom set and seated in chairs off to the right of where the reporters usually spoke. A reporter came in still wearing the paper bib that kept the makeup off his clothes. "We're going on the air in about ten minutes. We're going to go live on this." A technician placed little button speakers in their ears and clipped microphones onto their lapels. "I think that some one in New York is going to ask you questions. Just look into the camera and answer them as best you can. There's nothing to be nervous about." He was nervous, it was the biggest story of his life, and probably as close as he was ever going to get to the network

anchor even it was the Sunday evening substitute.

They watched the feed from New York as the Anchor started off with the days international developments. After the news of the middle east and Europe which Jocko normally paid little attention to and just as he was really starting to get nervous, one of the men wearing microphone headsets came over and ushered them off the set. The local anchor was having a fit, “What do you mean they are pulling it?” “Damn it. We’ve got a story, who cares if the president’s wife’s motorcade collided with a Mister Softee truck on her way to dedicate some stupid center?”

He turned, “I’ll do the interview.”

They were only three questions into the interview and Jocko, who was at times less than perceptive, understood why this man was never going to be called to a big city. He was doing his best but the way he was asking the questions made them look like a bunch of kooks. The video, though dramatic if you had been there, was blurry, shaky, and spent more time focused on screaming children than on the bats. It looked like a very cheaply done Japanese Horror movie.

They did not hang around the station to watch the broadcast. Several members of the congregation taped it and despite the fact it was the first time any of them had ever been on television, there was no joy in watching it.

{ there is room for expansion of this - can do the interview in part or whole}-

Major Robbins ordered the sergeant to cut the chain that blocked access to an old logging road in the National Forest.

The three vehicles then moved up the rough road for twelve miles until they came to a turnoff near the ridge line.

He made them get the generator and radios operational before allowing any of them to get some sack time.

He wondered if the bats would respond to the emergency recall signal. He remembered a disheveled scientist, hair and shirt-tail askew, saying, "Why? You want to know something? Any scientist who says he knows any of the whys is lying. We don't know nothing about the why."

The man had stopped and taken a huge drag on his cigarette. "But if you want to know what is probably going to happen, I can tell you that. First, they're going to be tricky. I can't tell you really how smart they are, because we're dealing with things that aren't real easy to measure. They can communicate using their sonar over long distances. That means it's going to be hard to catch them napping. The second thing is they are going to be mean. They haven't seen their handlers in pretty close to a month. The lessons of responding to them are probably unlearned by now.

There were two coded frequencies they could use. The first one was the standard recall that would theoretically get them to stop whatever they were doing and return to an acoustic signal.

**The second was a failsafe. It triggered an electrical implant inside the bats' brains. Originally designed to stimulate their fear centers a lab technician with a sense of humor had instead placed them in the pleasure centers. When triggered the flock of bats went instantly, into an intoxicated, orgasmic frenzy. It did not render them incapable of flight, but it did confuse them considerably.**

**The technician's prank had been discovered when it had been tested and the bat had dove on and raped the base commander's German shepherd.**

**The acoustic beacon operated at a frequency well beyond what humans could hear, but was audible, it was said, to the bats at a distance of up to ten miles in still air.**

**The Radio supposedly covered a radius of twenty miles.**

**The general was fighting the bureaucratic battle of his life. Yesterday's pork barrel was turning into today's compost heap in a big way as his superiors worked feverishly to distance themselves from this project. The senators who had made use of the recreation facilities were unavailable.**

**\*\*\*\*\***

At work Joyce kept thinking about the strangeness that had unfolded around her. It wasn't until noon that someone mentioned a rumor about the killer bats. She was relieved when she heard that the attackers had been bright red.

One small voice told her to consider staying in town tonight, but she rejected this. After all, she had moved to the wilderness in search of an adventure that would make her forget the misadventures of her previous life. Instead she had discovered that it was more quiet than adventure. The chaos she'd left behind in the city had been adventure enough, And she had come to realize that it was quiet she'd needed. But there were times when she missed the adrenaline rush, and it seemed as though one was being thrust at her.

The two customers weren't really cowboys, but they did drive pickups and had the deeply tanned leathery skin that comes from working out of doors eight or nine months a year. If she hadn't sworn off men as a part of her flight from the East, Joyce might have found Larry interesting. She paused at their table after refilling their coffee because Frank was saying, "There's soldiers all over the place. They're trying to keep out of sight but they're there. I saw two trucks go up towards Summer Pass and I'll bet there are more."

"What are they doing here?"

He turned to her, "Didn't you hear about the bats?"

Joyce thought quickly, "Heard about them, didn't believe it."

"You ought to believe it. Probably part of the United Nations thing. I was in the army --- there is a lot of strange stuff going on that nobody ever knows about.

**You'd better give up riding that bike of yours until they kill them."**

**She knew she couldn't let that happen. Bats that liked Mozart were a resource that had to be protected.**

**The bats had not been there when she returned, but within five minutes of her starting the boombox and playing some Bach they began arriving. They seemed very happy that she'd brought food and clamored around her seeking attention. It was, she realized, a bit much. Five creatures the size of very large dogs, looking as though they were dressed for some mad Halloween ball, bouncing around you was a bit unsettling.**

**They heard the helicopter before she did and took refuge under her roof. The chopper passed slightly below them and seemed not to see the lean-to at all. She noticed the worry in her friends and realized that she was going to have to do something to help them get away from there.**

**Joyce had always been a sucker for underdogs. Her boyfriends back East had been a motley collection that averaged out on the far side of the dividing line between alcoholic and heavy recreational drinkers. As a teacher she had championed impossible kids who, by the time she got on their case, were so damaged in any several of a hundred ways that the odds were long. She saw in them a glimmer from the spark that had been there once. She recognized the pain that she shared with them.**

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Jocko, tried to keep the desperation out of his voice as he said, "You don't understand, June Anne, these bats are the chance of a lifetime." She didn't even begin to understand how his life could change if he bagged another of those suckers. Actually he hoped there were hundreds of them out there. He could become a guide, *the* man to hire if a hunter wanted to bag a rogue mutant bat. One ad in 'Guns and Ammo' and he'd be booked for a year. Hell he wouldn't even need an ad if he could bag one. Just a photo of him standing beside one of those suckers, and word would get around - that would be enough to set the phone ringing off the wall.

He could see how June Anne would be a little worried though. But she was going to have to learn to trust him. She still hadn't answered, he hated it when women left conversations hanging like this. He decided to go at it straight on. "You're not worried about me getting hurt are you?"

That got a response. "Hurt? Why no, I could live with a little hurt, but I've been watching those soldiers driving by. I've been watching those helicopters shooting at the hills. Jocko, you're going to get yourself killed out there."

The copters did worry him a little, but he wasn't going to admit it, at least not to her. "Those fly boys don't know the hills the way I do. They're looking in the wrong places. Besides, becoming the premier mutant hunter isn't going to do me any good if I'm not careful."

"Why can't you take the job that Mister Fuller offered you?"

He took a step forward and laid his large hand gently on her shoulder. "I've

told you about the square pegs and the round holes." He gave her a squeeze that pulled her hard against him. "You wouldn't like it, believe me. It would make me crazy. You're not attracted to a man who can sit behind a desk for more than a couple hours at a stretch." That hadn't come out right, but he decided to try for a kiss rather than straighten out his thought.

For a second she tried to avoid his lips, but then her arm came up around his back as she ceded the argument for the moment.

He remembered that kiss as he climbed towards a ridge that ought to give him a good vantage point, and wondered if June Anne didn't have a point. He'd been forced to stay in concealment for a couple of hours earlier as first a copter buzzed around overhead, and then as a foot patrol came through the woods.

It was a bitch having to stay in deep cover, but then he figured that's where the bats would be too. It was good to be back in the woods though. June Anne was driving him crazy with her wedding plans and her attempts to domesticate him. When she got angry she called it, "house breaking" him which was something he took exception to. He kept his place spotless. Neatness was something he'd learned in the Marines and was something he took a fair amount of pride in. Now they had some differences on how a house should be set up. On the wall he favored a glass fronted gun rack, and she wanted one of those original oil paintings you could buy certain Saturdays in the parking lot of the Kmart over in Jackson. She wanted either a clipper ship or a seacoast with waves breaking over the rocks. The day she'd dragged them over there to take a look at them he'd actually been attracted to

a picture of a puppy with big eyes and a sad look, but he would have let red ants live in his underwear before he would have admitted it.

In the woods he didn't have to worry about any of that. In the woods he knew where he stood. Unless he was lost or turned around a little, and that didn't happen all that often.

The music was positively spooky. He found himself a place to hunker down for the night, a place which afforded a view without being too exposed, and was settling in when he heard it faintly. At first he'd thought it was wind in the trees doing weird things, but after a minute he realized it was real, or he was going nuts. He didn't think it was that because he always imagined that if he went nuts and started hearing music it sure wouldn't be classical shit.

He'd just finished setting up his simple camp (which involved unrolling his sleeping bag and tying his pack up in a tree), so all he had to do was grab his rifle and make his way through the brush.

As he got closer, and the music got louder, he crouched down and moved with extreme caution -- looking for trip wires or other defensive devices. There were some odd folks up here -- some of whom took their privacy seriously. The classical music told him that it was someone who was pretty strange, and someone who wasn't worried about being snuck up on.

The underbrush thinned out some on a rocky outcropping and as he topped it he slid down onto his belly and let his eyes check out the woods. At first he didn't

see anything, but then he caught some movement off in a little clearing next to the cliff face. He used the rifle scope to bring it closer, and suddenly he saw a woman sitting on a log with her back to him. He kept the scope on her until she tossed her head and he saw she was the girl who worked at Cowboy Bob's. That made some sense. The word was that she was different, coming from back East and all.

He swept the area with his scope, and, just as he had decided that she was alone, a shadow passed through the trees.

When he got it in view he saw it was a bat, a big one, but different. For one thing, it was blue. For another, it wasn't attacking the woman who partially blocked his view of it as she held out something.

It was an impossible shot with her that close. All it would take would be for the bullet to clip a twig and start tumbling and it could hit her. But there was something else that kept his finger from pulling on the trigger. Her posture told him that this was different; that everything was the way it should be. This was a woman who didn't need rescuing.

He'd learned a lesson about unwanted rescues once in a bar when a couple over at one of the tables had erupted into a fight. When it became clear that the woman was not getting the best of it he'd tried suggesting that the man lay off. As expected the drunk had come after him, which hadn't bothered him any, but as his attention was occupied, the woman had bashed him in the head with a full bottle and the next thing Jocko knew, he was on his knees in the parking lot puking.

He looked around and saw it was quickly getting dark. If he was going to be able to make it back to his camp without getting tangled up in underbrush or falling

off a cliff, he would have to head back now. If he stayed he knew he was in for a chilly night. The other option was to stand up and saunter down the slope into her camp and see if he could borrow a cup of sugar or something.

He seriously thought about that, but knowing, and not having her know that he knew, gave him a card which he could play later, he thought.

As he drifted off to sleep, wishing for his sleeping bag, he realized it didn't make any sense, but then lots of things weren't making sense.

In the morning it wasn't classical music, but the noise of a trail bike being fired up that woke Jocko. He looked at his watch and realized that she had to get up awful early if she was going to make it down off the mountain in time to serve breakfast at Cowboy Bobs. He envied her the bike. It would take him most of a day to get down off the mountain, especially if he kept off the fire trails that he was sure he would run into an army patrol.

After eating a cold breakfast he looked at the sky and considered his next move. First he would check the area around her lean-to on the odd chance that he could bag a bat. If that didn't work, he was going to have to decide if he wanted to set up an ambush and wait for nightfall or if he should talk to her first. There was something going on here that made him cautious. something that told him there was a lot more going on than he knew.

He'd almost made it back to where he'd parked his truck when a squad of

soldiers pulled up in a Humvee. Jocko viewed them with some suspicion, which they returned. "Kind of a big gun for small game season."

"This way I don't have to worry about skinnin 'em"

They laughed. One said "You ought to try a gunship."

Another finished, "It'll turn a cow into a big mac."

Jocko suddenly felt protective of 'his' bats. He didn't want these clowns getting them.

## Chapter 5

The major watched the troops slide down ropes hanging from the hovering choppers. Two gunships circled in case the bats tried to escape by air. He didn't expect they would because the ravine and the area immediately around it had been hit hard by artillery before the gunships had made three strafing runs.

The red bats, he hoped, would be shredded lumps of fur and yuck. Then he'd have to turn his attention to the blue team. They were the ones that really worried him.

## Chapter 5a

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Jim wiped his oily hands on a greasy red cloth which he tossed onto the tool bench as he turned towards Joyce. "Whoa, slow down a minute. You lost me about two miles back."

Joyce didn't know how much to tell him. She wasn't sure she could trust him, but he was one of the few men who didn't openly stare at her breasts when she served him at the restaurant, and that fact put him head and shoulders ahead of the rest of the pack. "I need a truck."

"I got that part."

**"It can't be open, it's got to have what do you call it? A box in the back."**

**"What are you going to be carrying?"**

**"Just some stuff that I don't want to get wet if it rains."**

**He looked over her shoulder through the window out into the clear day.**

**"Ok." His tone said he reserved judgment. "How big is this stuff?"**

**"Not too big. I mean a truck like that would probably do." She gestured out into the lot where a step van that wore the faded logo of a defunct bakery sat listing at a slight angle.**

**"Well your cargo would stay dry inside that truck, but it might not get to where you were going."**

**"It doesn't run?"**

**"Oh it runs, after a fashion, it even might make it up a fair sized hill, but it's the going down the other side that would be the problem. You see, the brakes aren't exactly what are needed in parts like this. Among other things," he added a second later.**

**"Couldn't you fix that?"**

**He looked into her eyes. She saw that she had challenged his ego. "I could. But the question is why? You'd be left with not much of a truck that could stop. Shocks and tires are shot, steering needs work..."**

**"But I need a truck."**

**"So you say. And right away from the sound of it. Is there something you aren't telling me?"**

**Joyce could see that she was going to have to tell him something, be it fiction**

or fact, before he got motivated to lift a wrench to help her. "I want to go camping, and I can't afford one of those campers, and I was thinking that would do." She knew it wasn't much of a lie before it hit the ground and lay there flopping like an undersized fish.

"A backpack might be a little easier. And you don't need all the amenities you could stuff into that truck. You're not the RV type."

Amenities? Not the word she'd expected to hear, but now wasn't the time to dwell on it. "Look it doesn't involve you."

His eyes focused on hers, his tone grew serious, "Is some one bothering you?"

She thought about making up a big lie, but decided against it, she just wasn't good enough at that sort of thing. Her inability to lie had gotten her into trouble before. "No. It's not like that."

He watched her face for a few seconds before he relaxed slightly. He looked at his watch, "How come you're not getting ready for the lunch crowd down at the Burger Barn?"

"Because I'm trying to get a truck."

He smiled, "I guess I asked for that."

"I know it sounds funny, but..." She let the sentence die because she saw him take a breath.

"Let's say, for the sake of argument, that I was able to find the parts to get that pile of bolts to stop more or less when you wanted it to. And we can even pretend that it had a valid license plate and inspection stickers and that you got the

stuff you wanted to move into it, how long would you be needing it for?"

"I don't know, a few days I guess."

He shook his head and moved towards the door. "The reason I was asking was have you ever driven anything like that before?"

She thought of trying to lie her way through it, but shook her head. "Not really."

"That's not a truck for long trips, It's designed for local deliveries." Her expression must have shown her feeling, because he said, "Listen, you can tell me about it. I've always been a sucker for a woman in distress. You Easterners might not know it, but that's the cowboy code. Even if the cowboys work in a garage."

"I do need help," she admitted. "But you're going to think I'm one of them Crazy Easterners."

"I already think that." But he said it with a friendly tone and with a smile, and Joyce found herself at ease enough to head in the general direction of the truth.

She pointed to the hills on the other side of the highway. "You've seen the helicopters, well they're trying to kill some friends of mine."

He took a step back and shook his head before answering. "Wait a minute. You're saying that the U.S. Army is after some friends of yours! Who are these guys? What did they do?"

"Well they're not exactly guys."

His eyes got wider and his voice rose, "A bunch of radical lesbian libbers?"

Joyce saw he was imagining a corps of diesel dykes in camouflage outfits and

had to fight off a laugh, "Not that either. Not even close. Sorry. It's a long story. But they didn't do anything."

It took him a few seconds to return from the idea of Rogue Montana Amazons, "I did my time in the army, and I'll admit it was a pretty fucked up organization, but they don't go off and run search and destroy missions against people who didn't do anything. But," he gestured off towards the mountains, "There sure as shit is something going on. I've been watching them, what are they doing? I didn't buy that story about rabid chipmunks or whatever it was."

"Look, you heard about the bats right?"

"Yeah." His head swiveled towards the hills. "You're telling me..."

She jumped in, "It's not the ones that attacked the picnic. This is a different bunch, but the Army is going to wipe them out too. These ones are different. They're not dangerous."

It took him a moment, but he figured it out, "And you're going to rescue them?"

"Yeah, that's what I mean to do."

He cocked his head, "Lady, you are a puzzle. You bring your education out to the Burger Barn. We've noticed the books you read when it gets slow. Then you disappear off into the hills, and when you come out you bring a tale so tall even an experienced cowboy would have trouble getting it out."

Joyce fought the urge to scream long enough for it to be replaced with a desire to put her boot in a place where he might take notice.

Again her expression must have telegraphed her feelings because he took a

step back and raised his hand. "Take it easy. I was just commenting. I can see why you were a little skittish about why you need the truck. How big are they anyway?"

"When their wings are folded, they're about the size of a great big dog, you ever see a St. Bernard?"

"Yeah. Jesus, that's big. How many are there?"

"Five."

"What do they eat?"

"You mean, besides cowboy mechanics?"

He laughed, "yeah, besides the obvious."

"Fruit, and vegetables mostly. They have developed a fondness for Cowboy Bob's BBQ chicken."

He took a few steps towards the truck, but stopped. "You know I think there's something better in back." He turned and led her around the side of the garage to a part of the auto orphanage she had not seen before.

It had been a school bus before a bunch of hippies had got to it. At the back a five foot section of the roof and half the walls had been cut off to give it a patio. Inside there were three very small bedrooms and a kitchen dining area. The outside was emblazoned with faded flowers and the words, "Love Buss".

"About five years ago three guys from California decided to try to revive the hippie movement. They were trying to make a movie about it, anyway they made the mistake of getting busted by Sheriff Buford Buttress who, at the time, was in a hard race for re-election," Jim explained as he led her through the bus. "He made

an example out of them. It helped him win, but after the election he decided he didn't want his jail contaminated by their type. Besides, they had hired some high profile hotshot defense attorney and he didn't want to risk looking a fool in court, so he gave them an option of paying a big fine and getting on the next plane out of Helena.

"They didn't want to be in our jail just as much as he didn't want them there, so they left the bus here. During the campaign the bus was wrapped up in chains and had 'evidence' stickers all over it, and was parked front of the courthouse. But afterwards he had me take it."

"Does it run?"

"Just fine. It'll need a tune-up, a new battery and an oil change, but that's about all. One of the hippies had some real money, and had bought this bus new. It's only got thirty thousand miles on it. And I made sure it was stored properly. I had the idea of someday using it as a camper."

Without thinking of the consequences Joyce stood on tiptoe and kissed him soundly on the cheek.

He went redder than she'd ever again expected to see a man blush, and stammered, "And I guess you'll be needing someone to help you drive it?"

Joyce nodded. She hadn't been looking for help but Jim seemed like he could be useful to have along. "That would be a relief to all the other drivers this side of the Mississippi." She didn't really believe it, but she thought she might as well play to his ego a little, besides, he was cute.

That afternoon, as Joyce was getting ready to leave the restaurant a man came up to her. "I'm sorry, but I'm off now. Shirley can help you."

"No it's not that - look I know about the bats, I saw you with them, and I wanted to tell you that there is an Army patrol on your mountain."

"What do you mean you saw me?" Joyce was trying to figure out who this guy was.

"I was up on the ridge last night. I heard your music."

"What were you doing there?"

Jocko pushed back, "Look, I'm trying to help you. Besides, you don't own that mountain."

Joyce nodded, he was right, still it creeped her out a little that he had seen her. "Where were they?"

"On the fire road. In a vehicle. If you go cross country you should be ok."

"Damn, I need another day."

"For what?"

She looked at him, realizing she was going to be needing some more help.

"I've got a plan to get them out of here."

"What? Oh, the bats?"

She looked around and motioned for him to follow her outside.

"You saw them so you know they aren't dangerous."

"So you say, I saw the red ones attack."

She interrupted, "These ones are different."

**"Don't matter, the Army wants to kill them." Jocko remembered the jerks on the trail earlier and then relived the push that came close to shove when they'd grabbed the red one he'd shot and was going to take over to Jim to have mounted. It still pissed him off. It was the combination of the muscle and the threats about having the IRS give him an enema every year for the rest of his life that had made him give in. That and the fact they were going to shoot the tires on his truck.**

**Maybe he could get his picture taken with one of them. There still might be a way to salvage something out of this. With the army there he realized that his dreams of being the sole bat hunting guide were gone. "What are you going to do?"**

**She looked up at the sky, there were a couple of hours of light left. "You want to help? Let's go see if the bus is ready."**

## **Chapter**

**Major Robbins stood on a boulder and swept the horizon with his night scope. It had been two days since they'd taken out the red team, but it was the blue team that worried him now.**

**Last night the general had said that there were what he called some 'additional issues' there. "The details are in a sealed envelope in my safe. The previous commander told me I should pray that I didn't have to open that envelope." He paused and had looked directly into the major's eyes. "The way I see it is my career depends on my not having to open that envelope. I suspect a bright boy like you can appreciate how that relates to your situation."**

**This confirmed the rumors the Major had been hearing ever since he'd joined the project. Two months after his arrival he'd seen a grim faced group of military policemen stuffing two scientists into the back of an unmarked van. When he got evasive answers, he'd known better than appear too interested about it, and the whispers he'd heard just enough to scare the hell out of him.**

**Over the next couple of years there were rumors about the blue team. Poison claws, ultra-sonic death beams, and a demented intelligence. It added up to nothing specific, but he was sure there was a terrible secret buried somewhere,**

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The rich hippie had owned the bus long enough to have put some money into it. The kitchen, while cramped, contained a good stove and refrigerator. There was a stereo system that had to be forcibly restrained from deafening them. And it ran, according to Jim, like a dream. "For a school bus", he was quick to add.

They had taken the bus as far up the fire road as they dared. Mozart had rarely been played this loudly, Joyce thought as she stared into the darkening sky.

The technician looked up from his scope. "Sector C for Charlie five, we've got movement sir."

The Major looked at the large scale map on the wall of the command trailer. "Tell me more soldier."

"It could be the subjects, sir. Moving about thirty miles per hour heading south it looks like, sir. I don't have definition but it looks like more than one."

The major thumbed the switch on the microphone, "This is Thunder Cloud, I want choppers alpha and bravo ready to lift in five. Captain Marsby meet me on the tactical channel."

On the other side of the trailer Marsby's voice came out of a speaker set in the wall. "This is Marsby. Go ahead."

Robins flicked a switch on the console, "Marsby we've got a solid possible moving in sector Charlie Five. They're headed south and we can't take the chance of their getting over the ridge. I want you to send Alpha and make as though you're

doing a regular ridge patrol. Search lights -- the whole works. Then I want Bravo to follow our vectors to the bogie. Bravo is to fly dark, and with all weapons armed."

"Roger. I'll be in Bravo."

Though no explanation was required the Major told the technicians that he was hoping the bats would be preoccupied with the ridge patrol and that the second chopper would be able to get within range. "What are they doing now," he asked the technician?

"They're flying low it looks like, still headed south."

Another technician called, "the choppers are ready to lift sir."

He nodded, "Get alpha up and tell bravo to follow a minute later. By the way, who's flying Bravo?"

"Paulson, sir."

"Paulson? I had that son of a bitch grounded."

"You did. He was, but the general ordered him back up."

"That's fucking wonderful. He's a madman."

"The general said he was the best." The tech was obviously enjoying his role of delivering bad news.

"The best at getting himself and his crew killed." But he was trapped, the mission was underway and if he pulled back now the general would have his hide. Besides, if there was anyone who was crazy enough to go low enough to get those fuckers it would be Paulson. He ordered the tech to start directing Bravo towards the flight of bats which had altered their course away from the patrol.

The copter flew low. Paulson liked to joke how the copter's belly was stained green from the trees he brushed against and how the floor inside was stained a different color. It was not all boast, on the bulkhead behind his seat he kept a list of passengers he'd made shit in their pants. The Major was his latest conquest. He had nearly killed them all doing it, and he'd been grounded for a week, but it had been sweet. His crew knew that he could do things with a copter that the designers hadn't dreamed of, but they also knew that his ability to do these things came from a suicidal streak. "No better way to go," he'd say after a few drinks, "than in an orange fireball against the face of a mountain somewhere. No fucking lingering pain for me, no sir. If I do it right I'll wake up in heaven and never know what hit me."

He was good, but was he as good as he believed he was? That was the question the Captain wanted to be around to answer.

As the copter closed in on the flight the major took over the communications. "Ok they should be about a mile dead ahead."

The technician said, "The signal is getting funny. I think they're diving."

The major shouted, "Power up the lights and fire at any thing that moves."

He moved to the door of the trailer and watched as a battery of search lights came on and the guns on the distant copter began to fire.

Joshua had heard the second chopper in time to direct the flight towards a knobby secondary peak whose rocky summit thrust out of the forest like an angry

pimple. Then, as the chopper approached, they reversed course and dove under it.

The lights came on, and their brilliance dazzled the pilot for that second he might have been able to avoid the rocks that were coming at him at one hundred sixty knots. The liquid nitrogen cooling system which allowed the machine guns to lay down a virtual blanket of bullets without melting their barrels, was of no use as the copter discovered just how hard rocks are.

The sound of the explosion took thirty seven seconds to reach the Major, who had watched the fireball expand in inverse proportion to his likelihood of making retirement.

Joyce had the stereo cranked up as loud as it would go. The Jupiter symphony seemed feeble against the vastness of the forest. Jim sat next to her on the sundeck at the rear of the bus and nervously smoked one cigarette after another. At least he didn't roll his own, Joyce had observed, maybe there was hope for him.

She had warned him that they could be disconcerting when they came. But he was not prepared when, suddenly the sundeck was filled with silent large dark strange shapes. One instant it was the two of them -- the next it was a crowd.

Joyce reached out and turned off the music that was now much too loud, and said, "I was afraid, I saw some helicopters."

A voice came from the back of the group, "They tried. They may send the other after us."

She got to her feet, "Come inside, and we'll get going."

The bats quite filled two of the small bedrooms.

Joyce watched Jim as he slowly started to fall apart. When they got inside the bus and she turned on one of the lamps and he was presented with the irrefutable evidence that there were blue bats, big, very big, blue bats. These were the creatures that DTs and bad acid trips were made of.

It didn't help that they talked.

"Jim," she said, grasping his arm and gently steering him through the curtain that separated the sleeping quarters from the rest of the bus. "Jim, we really ought to get going."

He plopped into the driver's seat and stared through the windshield with a blank expression on his face. "I don't believe it."

Joyce leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. "Believe it cowboy. You're about to make history."

He shook his head as though to clear it and moved his hand towards the ignition switch. "You know, I didn't really believe you about them," he tossed his head towards the rear of the bus.

"So why are you here?"

"Well," he looked up at her quickly as he turned the switch, "You are a good looking woman, and everybody who's asked you out has gotten shot down, so I figured, I don't know exactly, well you know, maybe I could get to know you this way -- anyway it was too crazy a story to let it lie."

He pulled out onto the fire road. "Once we get off this hill, where are we headed anyway?"

Joyce had actually given this a little bit of thought. "Well I thought we'd head past McAllister and then catch 44 West."

He nodded and shifted. The bus made the familiar, but almost forgotten whining sound that school buses make as it worked its way up the grade.

^^^^SEGMENT OUT OF PLACE%%%%%%%% EARLIER?????

?????here or earlier????/

June Anne liked Jocko for a lot of little reasons. She hoped that a lot of little reasons would add up to enough. He was rough and tough, but he was quiet about it. About the loudest thing he did was have the shotgun mounted in the rear window of his pickup, and though she would have never admitted this to anyone, she kind of liked riding around with it. He didn't look for trouble. But he wouldn't take any shit, and ever since her father had humiliated her date for the junior prom, she had decided that she wasn't going to settle for a man her father could push around. It would mean, she figured, among other things, that she would be able to escape behind such a man.

Not that her father was so bad, he wasn't, but he was strong willed and didn't brook any willfulness from his girls.

She wasn't sure what Jocko saw in her exactly, but she was glad she had whatever it was.

Another thing about him that she liked was that behind his gruffness, he was sometimes a little kid. On the night he gave her the ring she had watched as he worked himself nearly into a frenzy. His face got red, he started to sweat and he ran off and changed his shirt for the third time. Finally he came back into the room and handed her the box. "Here." He stood in front of her; his eyes locked on the floor between them.

He also, and this was probably the most important thing overall, liked her the way she was. He didn't particularly want her to be something she wasn't. This was, it seemed, in direct contrast to her parents, and a lot of men's, attitude towards

her. He didn't criticize, her hair, the way she didn't always stand up straight.

Her father had a thing about names, April Elizabeth and she were testament to that, so it gave her a thrill to see her father struggle with calling him Jocko. He'd tried calling him Mr. Stage, but it just hadn't worked. Jocko wasn't trained to answer to that.

Still, he did want with a bit of polishing, and the church picnic had been an attempt in that direction. Though she had to blush at the promise he'd extracted from her in return for his cooperation.

\*\*\*\*\*

bats0112 CHASE SEGMENT - SECOND.

"Radar shows no activity. Sir"

"Shit they've got to be there somewhere," said the Major who had Alpha pick him up, if only to get further away from the General who was on his way to the command center. He turned to the weapons officer, "turn on your infra red sensors they've got to be there some place."

It took a while as the man adjusted his instruments, "Major, we got trees, lots and lots of trees. There's nothing out here but... Wait a minute, there's something big, it's a vehicle. Its big."

"location?"

"Ahead to the right that's Charlie 6. Looks like its heading down the fire

road."

"That's where the bogies were headed," said the pilot.

The Major didn't know what to think. "Anything else?"

"Lot of nothing sir."

"Check out the vehicle then, use your lights to give me a visual."

A couple of minutes later the pilot spoke, "It's a school bus sir, sort of and it's turning onto a road, wait a minute, Map says its 211. They're driving kind of fast sir."

"Tell me about the heat source."

"Engine in front then it's blurry but there are a bunch of people in there, can't give you a count."

The major looked at the map, route 211 wandered around the mountains for a bit then went into Clarkstown. "Go low use the loudspeaker, get then to stop."

"Too many trees right now, I'll fly ahead and look for a place where I can get low."

It was loud, sounding like Joyce imagined the voice of God would be like, "Stop your vehicle." Jim looked up through the windshield trying to see the helicopter. Then he hit the gas.

"What do you mean they're not stopping?" The major didn't know how but something told him the bats were on board the bus.

**"Fire a short burst. Put most of it into the road ahead of them, but I wouldn't mind if a couple of rounds came close." The pilot dropped closer to the trees and angled the copter's nose towards the bus.**

**"Go to live weapons, set burst for fifteen rounds."**

**The weapons officer nodded and toggled a couple of switches.**

**Below them the road curved and passed under a stand of trees hiding the bus for a moment.**

**"Weapons armed and ready."**

**"One burst, Eddie, the major doesn't want them turned into hamburger."**

**"Got it," The trees passed from beneath them and with a free view of the road the weapons officer waited and then pressed a button.**

**The gun fired its rounds so rapidly it sounded like a single explosion. They saw some pavement torn up just in front of the bus then a couple of flashes as one round hit the hood and two struck the roof of the bus.**

**The bus swerved and then seemed to speed up.**

**"They didn't seem to get the message," said the pilot.**

**"You want another burst," the weapons officer added, "I could put some into the engine this time?"**

**The major didn't respond. He knew he was far, very far, beyond his authority ordering these men to fire on civilians. Seeing the rounds hit the bus had scared him, "Let me talk to base."**

**The general's voice came over the channel. "I don't care what it takes, stop**

those sons of bitches."

The pilot pushed down on the collective and the chopper dropped towards the trees again. "Jesus sir, is that a legal order?"

The major shook his head. "No, it's not. Killing the bats is ok, and maybe we could make the argument that the civilians were..., but you're risking court martial. Besides just because we think they are on the bus doesn't mean they're not back there hiding in a cave." He wanted to give another answer, but he also didn't want to spend his retirement in a military prison.

The chopper had made Jim nervous ever since they'd heard it, and the couple of times it had dipped real close he'd had to fight the impulse to close his eyes. When the bullets ripped into the road and then hit the bus he'd lost it for a second and found the bus in the wrong lane headed for a guardrail that would have only slowed them before plunging down a steep slope.

"Jesus Christ," yelled Jocko.

Jim yelled the obvious, "They're fucking shooting at us."

They were only a couple of miles from town, and for no reason Jocko could put a finger on, he decided that that was where they might find safety. If they weren't turned into hamburger first.

"We've got a town coming up," the navigator had been quiet until then.

The major knew there was no way they could continue the engagement once they got to a populated area.

Can you get real low in front of them?

The pilot looked ahead at the trees. "This bird doesn't work so good as a weed-wacker. By the way major, we're getting short on fuel."

The major thumbed his mike. "We're breaking off. I want a company of perimeter guards in three duce and a halves, and three humvees ready to roll the minute we land." He turned to the pilot. "Take us home, fast as you can."

The bus tore through the outskirts of Clarkstown and slowed only when they got near the center of town.

Jim and Jocko raised the hood and announced that the round that had hit there had missed everything vital, hitting only, so far as they could tell the windshield washer fluid reservoir.

"So what do we do?"

"I saw the chopper head back towards the base. My guess is they'll send out vehicles to try and cut us off."

"And?"

"And there's another fire road that starts just outside of town. A lot of locals use it to get to the interstate. I think the bus can make it because it hasn't rained in a week or so. They'll probably put up roadblocks in Red Creek and Oslow and we'll go past them as pretty as you please."

Jocko nodded, "If we stay here they'll get us sure as shit."

Joyce didn't like the idea of leaving a semi public place, but she also knew that by ten o'clock this town would be so deserted that Elvis could return and not be noticed.

"Let's go."

The fire road had been built to accommodate fire trucks so it was just wide enough for the bus. It had not been built for speed or comfort and Joyce soon found that the only safe place was in the dinette with her legs wedged under the table so she wasn't pitched around.

The fire road ended at a gate that Jim said had once been locked. "But the locals kept cutting the chain off and they got tired of putting new ones on I guess." They rolled down a grass embankment, lurched across a small ditch, and bounced up on the shoulder as a semi full of hogs screamed past.

After the fire road the interstate seemed like a seamless carpet. For such a major road there wasn't much traffic, but compared to the two porcupines and one deer they'd seen on the trip across the ridge, it was crowded. It took Joyce half an hour before her pulse stopped feeling jumpy.

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DOES THIS GO HERE OR DO WE WAIT UNTIL THE CHASE IS OVER  
AND THINGS LOOK GOOD??

^^

^^

With the roadblocks in place and a surveillance team up in Alpha, the major had some time on his hands. He knew better than to be in his office where the general could find him.

The general's warnings about the bats had made him wonder about what exactly was involved. If he was going to capture them he needed to know more about the bats and decided to nose around some. The MPs had left a report of an incident involving one of the drunken scientists who had gotten drunker than usual. A lot drunker. He decided to visit the man. Hangovers were a good interrogation tool he'd found.

The scientist's house looked like an ordinary suburban home, except that its back yard was fenced in by miles of virgin forest. The major parked his car in the man's driveway and walked to the front door.

The man's wife, Helen, according to the card he'd pulled, didn't look as though she'd had a good night's sleep. She held the front of her rather frumpy, quilted, robin's egg blue, bathrobe shut with one hand while she fumbled with the latch on the aluminum storm door to let the major in.

"He's not up yet." Her eyes asked that he be left that way, but the major ignored her plea.

"Let me have a glass of water and a cup of coffee."

As she poured the coffee into a mug emblazoned with a crest and the words

*United States Military Academy, West Point*, she said, "Thank your men for bringing him home last night."

She added a dollop of milk and added, "and all those other nights."

He answered, "It's our job," and started to reach for the mug, but stopped, "Last week he seemed more upset than he usually is. Do you know what that's about?"

"Not really, something to do with the bats getting out, but there's more to it than that. But that's all I know. He's worried about something," she looked down, "I guess you know he's drinking more."

He took the mug, nodded curtly and made his way up the stairs. He didn't have to ask where the bedroom was, it was in the same place as was in his house.

The scientist held the same rank as he did, and it irked the hell out of him. He got a bit of revenge by half shouting, "Get up you hung-over piece of dog shit," as he walked across the room and opened the blinds letting the very bright morning sun fall directly onto the bed.

The man tried to burrow under the covers but the major stripped them off the bed with a quick fluid motion.

"What the..."

"You're in a shitload of trouble Major. You've got three minutes to convince me that I shouldn't turn you over to the civilian authorities."

The man looked up at him blankly.

"You don't remember, do you -- you sorry son of a bitch?"

He shook his head and reached out for the glass of water.

The major let him swallow one mouthful before saying, "Attempted rape is pretty bad, and the fact that she's only sixteen is going to make it a whole lot worse."

The scientist's face showed panic as he tried to talk, but the major said, "but that doesn't worry me. There's something else, something about the bats isn't there?"

The man nodded, "Yes."

"What?"

"They're going to die, and they're going to start a plague when they do."

"What the fuck do you mean?"

"The scientist took another sip and then rolled off the bed and stumbled into the bathroom.

The major followed and stood behind him as the man relieved himself. "Tell me about it."

"Jesus, let me take a leak and then maybe I'll puke, it'll fucking wait."

"The police will be at the base commander's office in half an hour."

"That's a crock. I was drunk, but I wasn't that drunk."

The major didn't say anything. It was a crock, but he didn't want to either admit it or try to push the lie any further.

The man turned and said, "I thought so. If it was real you wouldn't be so interested in the bats, that isn't going to happen for another couple of months."

The major took a sip of the man's coffee.

"So tell me about the fucking bats."

**"Let me get back to bed."**

**It wasn't a request, but rather a statement of natural law.**

**"That part's so secret nobody knows about it."**

**"Somebody's got to know, somebody had to approve it."**

**"The last three commanding officers to rotate through here told me they had no need to know. The details are in a sealed envelope in a safe. There's a reason this operation doesn't show up on any paper. Why do you think you leave the budget code blank on requisitions?"**

**"Who approved it?"**

**He shook his head, "no approvals were needed. There were these three generals in charge back when the project started. They said, *make it live up to its name, make it a fucking nightmare.*"**

**"And you did."**

**"Yeah we fucking did. Killing them off was a natural, and the plague was just a little icing on the cake."**

**"What kind of a plague?"**

**"Airborne, bacterial and fungal. It looks like pneumonia but the fungus eats antibiotics like a kid eats cheerios."**

**"So how do you cure it?"**

**"You don't."**

**"You what?"**

**"It's got to run its course. The fungus mutates in ten days and then you can**

send in crop dusters full of penicillin. It was designed to be the biological equivalent of the neutron bomb."

"And you say we've got a couple of months."

"About that. If they don't get an injection that keeps it dormant. Hard to say exactly. But the shot was due last week. We never tested that part but it was designed to let them operate for 90 days behind enemy lines before it was triggered."

"Can't you stop it? You must have had a plan, you didn't want them to infect us, right?"

"Yeah we had a plan. Give them the injections every month. But yeah there was a contingency. You know the building behind barracks 23?"

"What about it?"

"It's the world's biggest microwave oven. We were going to get them to go in there, close the door and cook them until they were sterile."

"Jesus."

"Well, it's still an option. Maybe you can get them to come back."

"Is that the only way?"

"Just about. A major fire might do it too. But it would have to be a big one."

The major understood why in the old days they had killed the messenger. He didn't know where to go with this information. If he went to the commander the man would go absolutely nuts and would, he guessed order him to keep quiet about it. If he bypassed him several things would happen. The first was that he would be

viewed suspiciously, as the brass tended to be real nervous about people who circumvented the chain of command. Second, everyone would want to foist it off on someone else, just as he was trying to do right now. He could see himself running in circles in the pentagon for the entire three months.

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He didn't have long to think about it because the general called him.  
"Ground troops report no sign of them. Expand your search area."

If the general hadn't been so determined to hush it up, they could have caught the bus in no time... All it would have taken was one call to the state police, "look for a hippie bus with a back porch. Stop the vehicle and call us." They wouldn't have had to know about the bats or anything else. The general had vetoed that plan. Instead they'd had to do all the eyeballing themselves. At first he'd been sure they were headed for New York, It was a hunch based on the fact that if he was going to try and hide a bunch of enormous bats he couldn't think of a better place. Then in a stroke of luck they were spotted heading towards Utah. They also got word that a local waitress had been seen getting on the hippie bus.

The captain had good instincts. "It's either Seattle or Frisco and my money is on Frisco."

Why's that?

"Because you got to figure she's going to run somewhere. She's a kook. That's what they say, right? So she's going to run to where there are some other

kooks. And Frisco has got as many kooks per square mile as anywhere I know."

They assembled a small convoy and took chase. It made sense, and besides it took him away from the general who was getting more and more dangerous by the minute.

They had lost six hours waiting for the bus to show up at one of the roadblocks until one of the search parties found the fire-road.

The convoy, eight trucks and four humvees, the newer bigger better jeeps, was travelling as fast as they could. They were not built for speed, but, he hoped, they were going to be able to catch a school bus. The chopper had developed a problem that kept it grounded so he was forced to use two of the humvees to scout for the bus. They leapfrogged ahead of the convoy stopping at gas stations to see if anyone had seen the bus. A good number had, the bus ate gas almost as fast as their trucks did, and it was memorable. The one report he had trouble with was the pretty consistent comments that they were playing classical music, loud.

\*\*\*\*\* segments needed Joyce and Jim and maybe a close call.\*\*\*\*\*

"I always wanted to be an outlaw." Jim looked up at the holes in the roof.  
"Of course the way I used to play at it when I was a kid, I'd run off a and the sheriff would give up when he saw I'd made my get away."

"I don't think they will give up."

"Yeah except there is something going on. Or not going on. We got passed by  
a cop a little ways back. He looked us over pretty good - but you've got to expect

that in this, then he drove on."

"So they haven't called the cops."

"Maybe he didn't get the message. Maybe it doesn't mean nothing, but it could mean its so secret or they are in so much trouble they can't call the cops.

When I was in the Army - a couple of times things happened and they handled it themselves."

"What are you saying?"

"We can't outrun a radio wave. And the way we are dressed someone is sure to see us. And it takes the Army a while to do something. So if they are following us we've got a chance."

"So how did you end up a garage cowboy. You look like you belong on a horse?"

"I do and I don't. Horses are great when the weather's good. But in the rain and snow they are, well, wet and cold. When I was a kid we didn't have much money, but there was a busted pickup out back. Lived five miles from town nothing much to do so I got to playing with it. Actually got it to run -- made it to town and when the coot who ran the garage back then saw me in it he gave me a job. He said if I could fix that one I could fix most anything. That was about the time my mother got tired of my Pa's ways and one day she didn't come home from the job she had waitressing at the truckstop.

He shifted in the seat, resting his elbows against the wheel and fired up another cigarette, "Don't know why I'm telling you all of this."

**"Go on. I'm interested."**

**"Well, one of the things my ma didn't like about my father was the fact that he was a regular alley cat when it came to women. After she left about a week later she brought home a woman." he stopped shook his head, "she was something else. Remember I was sixteen and stuck on a bit of a farm way outside of town. I was not exactly experienced with women, and anyway, she started to come on to me. My Pa caught on and decided it was time for me to get going. He came home one night and told me that I'd signed up for the Army. Seems that he was a sometime drinking buddy with a recruiting sergeant. Anyway after the shock wore off I realized I was lucky to get away. One thing the Army did right was send me to mechanics school. So it worked out."**

**"What about your father. Did it work out with..."**

**He shook his head. "Dead. Trouble with tomcatting in these parts is that everybody knows everything. He was fooling with the wrong woman, and the husband got wind of it and came home unexpected. Dad jumped out the window and lit off across a field. Trouble was he left his boots under the bed, and in the dark he must of stepped on a snake. He couldn't go back to the house so he tried to walk to town, but the venom got him before he made it."**

**"Jesus. I'm sorry."**

**"Strange the way things work out. I mean it was more or less the way he always said he wanted to go, '*with my dick still wet and all my money spent.*'"**

**"Must have been something growing up with him."**

**"Yeah. It was something alright."**

There were seventeen miles of silence before she spoke again. "Its funny but you always think that everybody else had a family like 'Leave it to Beaver.' My mother took off too. When I was twelve. She was a working mom, had a job for an insurance agent. Her secret life was she gambled. We didn't know any of this because when she needed to she baked cookies and went to the PTA, all that stuff. Anyway, one day she says she's going an insurance training course in Omaha. Then on Tuesday her boss shows up at the door. He talked to my dad and my sister and I listened through the heating register. Said there was no course --- she had told him she was going on a vacation with the family, but that there was a lot of money missing. Seems like some checks that were supposed to go pay for someone's burned down house didn't get there, but they were cashed. At first everybody said it must be a mistake '*Jeanne wouldn't steal a dime from a millionaire,*' my dad said. But he was concerned. I heard him talking on the phone and he says, 'there are some things I couldn't explain or understand.'

"Then the next day we start getting calls asking for her and two days later this guy who looks like an extra in a godfather movie comes to the door. He talks to my dad and says my mom owed his boss nine hundred dollars. My father told us he had no choice but to believe the man. We were waiting so hard for the phone to ring and it be her, but it never did. At least not that way. A week later the bank calls tells my father he's over-drawn and the credit card bill came.

The credit card bill ended in Vegas. My dad went there and looked for her, and I still don't know if he found her. He wouldn't really say. What he said was, '*I*

*didn't find your mother,'* almost implying he found her, but she was a different person. He was real quiet for a while maybe six months. Then one night we came home from school and there was a woman from our church in the kitchen. She had one of our mom's aprons on and was cooking dinner. He said, 'it'll take a while for you to get used to her being around. In the beginning all I ask is that you be polite.'"

She paused for a minute then continued, "We were happy for him, but it was a bit of a shock especially when she tried to boss us around. She was kind of pitiful, we knew her from church and her husband had died and you could just see how lonely she was." She paused and watched the shrub and rocks they were passing, "It's a long story but the next chapter begins with one day a hospital calls and says our mom is there. She's drying out from booze and is she still covered on our medical policy? Turns out she was, and six weeks later my dad does the Christian thing and takes her back to a room in the basement. He tells the new one that its only temporary - she pitches a bitch and he promises to marry her. So she moves in, not that she wasn't staying there most of the time anyway, but she gives up her place throws our sofa out and moves her stuff in."

Jim laughed, "Bet things got a bit tense."

Joyce nodded, "Not the word for it. Tense like the Berlin Wall. I mean the new one, Mary she was, actually went and had barbed wire put in the stairs that went down to the basement. My sister and I couldn't get out of there fast enough. There was this college that took you early and I got in after my second year of high school. My sister didn't have the grades, so she joined the Navy. Last I heard they

both were there. My mom wouldn't give him a divorce, her name is on the deed and after she inherited some money had an addition put on the basement."

"What did your dad do?"

"I think he liked it. You know, having two women fighting over him. Can't prove it, but for a while there it seemed like he was having sex with both of them. At different times of course. I don't know about now though because I haven't been back in years."

"I can see why." Jim stared through the windshield, "That got you out of the house, what was it that brought you to Montana?"

"Let's say I learned how to have bad relationships from my family."

"Sounds about right."

"Not only did I specialize in the wrong men, I was a teacher and I guess I was trying to save the world at the same time."

"Like you are now."

"This is different."

"Hey, saving the world is fine by me."

After a minute she replied, "It's hazardous to your health."

She stood and poked her fingers through the holes in the roof. "I was shot at once before. You see, I was trying to keep one of my students out of a gang so it was after school and I was talking to him on the street. It was what they called a drive by. Except they got stuck behind a garbage truck.

They put two bullets through my briefcase. I pushed the student down

behind a parked car. Anyway, something in me snapped. I don't remember it too well, about a hundred witnesses said I went totally nuts. So I guess I have to believe it.

"I ran up to the car which was stuck in traffic. Turns out they were out of bullets, but I didn't know that. Anyway, I pulled the kid who had done the shooting out of the car, there was a fight, and I hit him with something I'd picked up and I hurt him pretty bad. He was in a coma for three days. He may never be completely ok."

"The press put me on the front page. It was the perfect story and since there were four papers and I don't know how many television stations competing, they got carried away with it and called me the Tiger Teacher. You can imagine - White teacher saves a black kid - white teacher nearly kills a black kid. It got wild. News crews were climbing up the fire escape. I had seriously dissed a gang so I got a bunch of death threats among with the marriage proposals. The Board of Education didn't know whether to shit or go blind, so they decided to say that I was disabled by the trauma and got rid of me."

"At the time teaching was the thing I loved the most. It was my whole world, but now I see that they did me a big favor. I was too involved. So I came out here where it was quiet where reporters didn't follow me around, where nobody was looking to shoot me until today."

"Well you certainly added some excitement to what was shaping up to be a dull week."

"I guess, but I was really liking dull."

**"Well that's not a word you are going to use for a while." Jim looked in the mirror and put his foot down. The bus was more or less comfortable at fifty, got a bit bouncy at sixty and at seventy five seemed to want to shake apart. "What is it?"**

**" I think we've got company." He looked in the mirror again. "Good thing their trucks are slow too."**

**She leaned over him so she could see in the mirror, and saw nothing. "How can you tell?"**

**He looked in the mirror again, "It's the headlights. Army trucks have a slightly different color. They are way back, with any luck we'll make it to Reno before they catch us."**

**"I wonder what happened to the helicopters."**

**"Something must have. They would have had us yesterday. Maybe they're trying to be keep it quiet."**

**\*\*\*\*\***

## **Chapter**

### **SANCTUARY SEGMENT**

**The rectory, a sizable two story house that just missed being Victorian by a few years, sat across a manicured lawn from what many people referred to as, "the cutest little church". The porch was littered with plastic toys including a tricycle, a red pail and shovel, and a large pink ball.**

**Inside the wrought iron picket fence that enclosed the entire church property a puppy of obviously mixed parentage ran in circles barking with a voice halfway**

between yip and arf.

Jim eased the bus up to the curb, "Is this it?"

Joyce pulled on the metal handle that opened the doors and said, "I hope so," as she stepped down.

Bill had lost a fair amount of hair or gained a substantial forehead, she thought, but he still had a wonderful smile.

He didn't look much like a priest, not dressed in jeans and a tee shirt that was stained with what looked to be spaghetti sauce.

"Joyce? I still have trouble believing it."

"Just wait, it will get stranger."

He smiled, looked over her shoulder at the bus and said, "You look as though you've got a story to tell me."

"More than a story, I'm afraid. Like I said on the phone, I'm in a little trouble, maybe a lot actually, and you're the only priest I know. You see, I have these friends who need sanctuary. I may need it too I don't know. You can do that can't you?"

His smile tightened slightly, "It's not one of my regular duties. And I'm no lawyer, but we can talk about it certainly. Do you want to come in?"

Joyce looked back towards the bus, "Actually it would be easier if I showed you. It's kind of hard to explain."

"Let me tell my wife where I'm going, I'll be right with you."

He emerged a couple of minutes later wearing a clean tee shirt.

She paused before starting down the wide wooden steps that led from the porch to the path made of large pieces of slate. "I should warn you that the story gets strange."

"I would expect no less," he looked at the bus, "even without the psychedelic wheels. You're not caught in a time warp are you?"

She had decided it would be better for him to meet one rather than the entire flock of bats so they had Joshua waiting just behind the curtain.

She had him sit at the dinette before opening the curtain bringing him into view.

"Oh my God."

"Bill, this is Joshua."

Joshua shuffled forward a couple of steps and said, "Pleased to meet you. I hope you can help us."

The reverend tore his eyes off Joshua and turned to Joyce, "Joyce you'd make me very happy if you told me where you rented that bat suit."

"I wish I could."

He turned back to Joshua. "Please excuse me, but the last time I talked with Joyce she was explaining why the car she had borrowed from my roommate was filled with chicken feathers."

Joshua said, "I don't understand."

"Neither do I. I didn't then and I don't now."

Joyce said, "listen Bill, this is serious. We've got at least a hundred soldiers

after us. They want to kill Joshua and the rest of his flock."

The priest held up his hand. "Let's take it slowly, please. First you're saying the Army is after him. And then you're saying there are more like him."

Joyce nodded. "Yes. You see, the flock escaped from an experiment the Army is..."

"The Army was doing this?"

Joshua responded, "Yes sir, it was called project Nightmare."

Bill didn't have a chance to figure out the next question because a child came charging up the steps into the bus. "Daddy, mommy wants to know..."

Joyce waited for the kid to scream, but instead he said, "Hi."

Joshua replied, "Hi."

"That's a neat bat suit, but it's not Halloween yet."

"Tommy, that's not a suit. Go tell mommy.."

"Not a suit, that's bad." The kid took four steps over to Joshua, "Can you fly?"

"Yes."

"I wish I could fly. Could you give me a ride?"

Before Joshua could answer they saw a woman come out onto the porch. Again the kid showed the most presence of mind. "Mom's not ready for you yet. You'd better get behind that curtain."

"Oh here you are, Bill. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I've got to take Emily to basketball practice, and I didn't want to leave Tommy alone."

Bill turned in his seat. "You go on, things are in control."

"Why don't you invite your friends inside."

He nodded, "Yes. Listen dear," he paused.

"Yes?"

"Never mind, I'll see you after the practice."

"Fine, but let me know if we're having guests for dinner. I'll need to do some shopping." She turned to leave, "and Tommy; you try and stay out of trouble."

Bill's eyes followed her as she walked back to the house. Joyce said, "Bill, we could be in real trouble, maybe we shouldn't have come."

In a second he turned to her. "No. In a way I'm glad you did. Things have gotten a little too settled. For me, and for the parish. I've been looking for something to shake up their smug little world with. I suspect that granting sanctuary to a flock of enormous, sentient, fugitive bats is a good beginning." He paused and looked across the well kept grounds, "I am going to have to make some calls though, why don't you move the bus around to the parking lot in the back?"

Joyce watched as Bill, his casual clothes looking out of place in the quite formal office he maintained in the rectory, placed the call to his bishop.

"I am sorry to have to call you like this, Edgar. But I've just had a very strange request made of me, and, since it does have the potential of putting us very squarely in a public view, I knew that you would want to be informed as soon as possible.

**“I'm afraid, sir, that it's a rather complicated situation, and if I gave you the full details over the phone you would suspect that I was intoxicated. I can say that it involves granting sanctuary to a group of fugitives.”**

**He listened for a minute, frowning. Then responded, "Yes, it is an extraordinary set of circumstances. Beyond anything I could imagine.”**

**He listened for a minute longer, said "very well", and then hung up.**

**Turning to Joyce, he said, "It is going to be interesting to see how a man who has, how can I put it gently? - less than a robust imagination - is going to deal with what is," he waved his hands, “difficult to imagine.”**

**The church basement consisted of a large, surprisingly high room with alcoves and other rooms opening off of it. There was a kitchen off to the side, and one rather large area was given to a thrift shop. The center of the room was filled with folding tables and chairs. "On Tuesday and Friday nights we have an AA group that uses this space from seven to nine or nine thirty.” He grinned, “Your friends ought to cause a stir at the beginners meeting.” He gestured to a corner of the room that had toaster-ovens stacked on shelves and a rack of hanging clothes, “The thrift shop is here on Wednesday afternoons and Saturday mornings. I suspect we will need to suspend that. The kitchen..., by the way, what do they eat?”**

**"They're more or less omnivorous. They like fruit, chicken, and lately have discovered peanut butter sandwiches.”**

Bill was proud of his church. He led Joyce and Jim through the sanctuary and was demonstrating the organ, when a couple of the bats revealed their musical talents by responding in harmony to the piece he was playing. He stopped in mid note his hand frozen an inch above the keyboard. "You're not going to believe how good they can make your choir sound," Joyce said.

"I'm not going to believe much of this." He stood up and flipped the switch which powered the organ. "I just realized that I've got to call the Vestry."

The bishop was a large, broad-chested man with a shock of gray hair and a generally distinguished look about him. He did not smile as he came up the steps of the rectory where Bill, who had changed into a more formal set of clothes including the white collar, waited.

Thank you for coming. I'm sorry if I've pulled you away ...."

"William, you said this was important."

Joyce marveled at the number of things he said with that interruption. "Get on with it...this had better be important...I want an explanation now."

"Yes, first let me introduce Ms Joyce McKennah who arrived on my doorstep this morning with a story that I would not have believed had she not shown me some rather startling evidence. He paused for a second and then said, "And I think that is the way we ought to proceed too. If you would come with me to the church I have something that I'd like you to see.

The bishop gave a tight curt nod and followed Bill as he led them down the slate path which ran between flower beds and across the lawn to the church.

The bats, all six of them, were crowded into the kitchen learning the pleasures of Oreo cookies which Jocko had liberated from the AA supply cabinet.

"What is this?"

Joyce moved past them into the kitchen. "Joshua come out here."

Bill began to explain, "There was a secret government project which, as I can best understand, developed these creatures for military purposes. In doing so they seem to have crossed over a lot of ethical and moral boundaries."

Joshua shoved his way out of the clamoring crowd and shuffled through the doorway. "Hello. I'm Joshua."

Joyce had been watching the Bishop's face wondering if it would go red or white.

It went white. He stared at the blue bat and mumbled, "Dear God."

"They escaped and sought aid from Joyce," Bill continued, "and she came to me."

"And what do you think you can do for them?"

Joshua spoke up. "Sir, we are being pursued by elements of the seventy seventh mountain division and the forty third light air cavalry. We were a part of Project Nightmare and we will be killed if we are caught."

The bishop's voice rose, "The Army is chasing these, these whatever they are?"

Joyce nodded, "Yes."

**"What are they exactly?"**

**Bill spoke, "From what I understand they are the products of a monstrous experiment in DNA engineering."**

**The bishop moved a few steps to an overstuffed chair that was among the thrift shop's offerings and sat heavily.**

**"Dear God." He shook his head, "There are enough theological issues here to keep a seminary busy for years." He looked around the room, "As I am sure you know, granting sanctuary is an extremely rare occurrence, and legally it does not carry a lot of weight. I do not know if it has ever been used with a non human. I am certain that it has never been used ,” he waved his hand towards the kitchen and did not finish the sentence. “Come to think of it I suspect there are legal issues here as well."**

**In the kitchen the remaining bats broke into a Bach fugue which Joyce remembered having played on the trip.**

**Jocko's voice rose over it. "What's wrong with real music?"**

**The bishop, said, "Are they doing that?"**

**"Yes," Joyce answered, "they seem to have a talent." She nodded to Joshua, who using ultra sonic commands got the other bats to come into the room to demonstrate their skills.**

**The music was not loud, but it filled the room. To Joyce it sounded as though she was in the front row of a concert hall.**

**The bishop had started to get out of the chair but he sat back and listened to the piece.**

When they had finished he got to his feet and said. "William, I need to use a phone."

The lawyer accepted the situation with great aplomb. He wore a five thousand dollar suit that did not call unnecessary attention to him, all the while proclaiming he was a man to be listened to. His eyes sparkled as he listened as Joyce and the Bishop told him about the situation.

He followed Jocko out to the bus and examined the bullet holes in the roof. Before he was finished he pulled a small square of plastic, which he unfolded and turned into a cellular phone, out of a pocket and punched in a number.

"Hi. Listen Glenda, As usual, I've got a few things that have to be done five minutes ago. First take down this address," He then gave her the church's address and told her to contact a list of people all of whom were to come immediately. "The second thing you have to do is get someone to go to a supermarket and buy a few hundred dollars worth of food. Stuff that doesn't need too much cooking. Peanut butter, bread, juice, soda, beer, cookies, whatever. Then get it over to the same address. Take it out of petty cash, whatever you do don't worry about buying too much, but it's got to be done now."

After finishing the call he scrolled through his address book and selected an entry.

"Hilary, this is James Hallorhan, yeah, look I know you're busy, but what you've got to do is drop everything. Grab a van and a camera crew and get over to an address I'm about to give you.

**“Hilary, you know who I am, and if I say I'm giving you a scoop that's going put your career in orbit then maybe you ought to listen.”**

**"I'm not going to talk about it on a cell phone, but I guarantee you that you're going to be the first piece on the network news tonight."**

**"Yes the lead story. If I'm wrong I'll buy you dinner for a week in the seven most expensive restaurants in this town."**

**When he walked back into the basement the lawyer got their attention by saying, "Look sharp people, the ball is rolling. I've got a newscaster arriving in about twenty minutes, maybe less if she gets a driver who knows the shortcuts. I've contacted a private security firm, and I've got a parcel of lawyers arriving with their laptops. I'm going to have most of them set up in the house. We've also got some food coming in an hour or so. With any luck we'll get this set up before the powers that be try to cordon us off."**

**He turned to the bishop and said, "Edgar, you're going to have to decide if you want to be front line involved with this. If you do, go find a collar, if you don't you'd better go home and turn on channel 4."**

**"I'm staying. This is exactly where I need to be."**

**Hilary didn't know how he'd gotten the number of her cellular unit, but she did remember the favor she'd done for James Hallorhan when she'd managed to lose a small segment of film that would have been very embarrassing to one of his**

bigger clients. It hadn't been anything she would have used probably, but when the half naked woman who wasn't even close to looking like the man's wife had half fallen out of the limo her camera had picked it up. The man had been arriving at court for his sentencing following what she considered a most artful public plea bargain for a man who was guilty of a lot more than he was going to be punished for. The man who was going to do three months in some nice little jail somewhere had used his last night of freedom to get drunk and laid. It would have made a little splash on the six o'clock news, but she'd decided it would be worth more later and she'd given James the tape.

He'd taken an interest in her career, taken her to dinner twice, and then told her that he didn't forget favors.

As the van careened through the quiet residential streets she wondered what could be going on at a church that was so exciting.

The driver, Fred, lifted one hand from the wheel as they half slid through an intersection, and said, "I just love it when you tell me to get a move on it."

"I also told you to get us there alive."

"Hey, 'rising star news talent killed in van crash. Film at eleven.' That's not a bad way to go."

The assignment editor's tantrum had been peaking as she walked out the door. He hadn't accepted her explanation that this one felt big, but she did, and that was what counted.

^^^^^orphan paragraph@@@@@@@@@@@@@@

**"The biggest problem with this story is that it's so big it's hard to get people to believe it. We're going to have to really be careful to make people understand that they're not watching a coming attractions piece for some science fiction made for tv show starring three bimbos and a bunch of nobodies in bat suits. But then we've also got to remember our objective which is to make people laugh so hard at the army that they won't dare try anything."**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**Kenneth Rivers was going to make a good cop, the sergeant thought, once he realized that the world was composed of thousands of ordinary occurrences for every extraordinary one.**

**"Sarge, there's a news van parked down at the church over on Greenwood Lane."**

**"What channel?"**

**"Four."**

**"Don't worry about it." It would drive the kid crazy wondering what it was about the channel that made the all wise sergeant know there was nothing going on.**

**"There's other stuff going on too."**

**"Like what, Rivers?"**

**"Limos, Sarge and there a big hippie bus parked around in back.**

**"A what?"**

**"You know, a school bus that someone painted flowers on, and it's got a back porch too."**

**"Rivers why don't you... Go get a cup of coffee and hope the shift ends before the Pope shows up."**

**"That won't happen."**

**"How can you be so sure?"**

**"Wrong kind of church."**

**\*\*\*\*\*out of place \*\*\*\*\***

**Reduced to a flight of three, the Red squad listened to its ranking member as he described the tactics they were going to use in their upcoming campaign.**

**\*\*\*\*\*8**

**\*\*\*\*\* lost fragment in search of a segment\*\*\*\*\***

**He wished he was a colonel , at least, so he could really tear the sergeant's head off. A berserk major didn't really faze the man, especially since he well knew that he was not to blame for the bad news he had just delivered. Tearing the man's head off wouldn't make things any better, but it certainly was a natural reaction.**

**"A secret government project was**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**"So what's so important that I had to leave the managing director with steam coming out of his ears?"**

**The lawyer smiled his seamless smile, arched an eyebrow and said, "Come with me." as he led her up the flight of stairs into the sanctuary.**

He always claimed that being a great lawyer meant you had to have a sense of the dramatic. The church was illuminated only by a few candles, and the muted late afternoon light that filtered in through the stained glass windows. Music, soft, but full, glorious, almost celestial, came from the loft above them.

He led her up the aisle and when they got near the altar, he turned and gestured towards the source of the music.

"So they've got a great choir, I don't..." She stopped as a shape launched itself over the rail and swooped down over the pews towards them.

Joshua landed with a flourish ten feet in front of her.

Waiting until Hilary composed herself, the lawyer spoke, "I told you there was a big story. Actually there are a number of stories, all of them big. We have, as you can see, a rather large creature that is new to nature. We have a government project gone amok. We have a new class of beings who can think and speak. We have elements of the U.S. Army in pursuit -- with intentions of destroying these creatures as a part of a massive cover up."

Hilary prayed that she wouldn't faint. She knew her mouth was hanging open, but that was all right. He was right. It was a number of huge stories. She hardly knew where to start.

"What," she gasped at last.

Joshua answered, "We were created at an Army laboratory in Montana. We were designed to be a new generation of weapons."

"Bats?"

**"Bats were chosen because of our mobility and stealth. And because we are frightening."**

**She decided she would do a lead in on the steps of the church. You couldn't open with a shot of a huge bat swooping through the nave of a church.**

**"A secret government project gone amok," she liked the word the lawyer had used, "has revealed a strange story."**

**The camera shifted back to bring Reverend Bill into the picture. "We begin with the pastor of a small neighborhood church who had his normal routine shattered when an old friend arrived today seeking sanctuary for herself and ... This is where the story gets strange, and a group of genetically engineered beings who had been created in a secret Army laboratory in Montana. These beings who were created as a new class of weapon that would eliminate the need for humans to go into battle, escaped from the tightly controlled government installation and are being pursued by elements of the U.S. Army."**

**"Reverend, can you describe these beasts?"**

**"It's hard, without sounding like a character in a science fiction movie. They are bats, huge blue bats."**

**"What else can you tell us about them?"**

**"They can think, and talk."**

**This is where they had to shift the camera over to the bats, Hilary thought. If they didn't they would lose the audience. She had already decided to leave out**

their musical talent for now. She wanted a shot of them swooping, in formation, down onto the lawn. There was just enough light if they hurried.

Patrolman Rivers watched from across the street as the pretty blond who he'd seen on the news, but whose name he couldn't remember, directed the cameraman to move out onto the lawn. Then at a signal a flock of birds came flying out of the church. They turned and settled onto the grass in front of the camera man.

He wasn't paying too much attention to them until he realized they weren't birds. "What the hell." He reached for his radio, but stopped remembering the last exchange with the sergeant.

The major was in a truckstop giving his men a bathroom break, and grabbing a bite while the vehicles were being fueled. He watched the newscast and realized he'd underestimated the woman. She'd gone and opened up the whole can of worms. One part of him wanted to contact the general, but he knew that maybe if he could...

The screen showed the outside of a church. A signboard proclaimed it to be 'Holy Apostles Episcopal Church'. "Find out where that church is," he snapped, sending two lieutenants scrambling for a phone directory.

It took ten frantic minutes to round up the men, find someone who claimed he knew how to get them there, and to get the convoy going again.

**The Major had decided that subtle was not possible, so he directed the trucks to block off the whole block. He sent half the men off to establish a perimeter and led the rest towards the church.**

**Patrolman Rivers had been about ready to head back to the station when the hulking green army trucks had growled up the quiet street. Having spent two mostly miserable years doing meaningless menial tasks under the thumbs of a variety of psychotic petty despots, Rivers did not like the army.**

**Crossing the street ahead of the soldiers, he took a position in front of the church. From behind him came the words, "I'm glad you're here officer. I believe these soldiers are about to violate a variety of federal and state laws starting with the US Constitution.**

**Rivers took a quick look behind and saw a man who could only be a lawyer coming out of the church.**

**Squads of troops had moved off around the grounds, and now an officer led a group directly at him. The officer said, "Move aside. This is government business."**

**The lawyer who had come up behind him, but was remaining on the church grounds said, "Ask them for a warrant or other source of authority."**

**"We don't need a warrant, National Security is at stake here." The officer took another step forward which brought him to within six inches of the patrolman.**

**He was wearing a cocky attitude, the very attitude Rivers had longed to shove somewhere the sun never shone for two years. He lifted his radio.**

**"Officer needs assistance, Holy Apostles Church." Then he stood a little taller and said to the major, "Without a warrant you've got no authority here, dogbreath."**

**The radio went crazy with a stream of questions and orders. One, then another, siren came through the still evening air.**

**The major took a step back, and said to two soldiers behind him, "Take him."**

**The men were armed. Under the rules governing the use of firearms Rivers knew he was justified in drawing his weapon. He kept it pointed down as he said, "Don't do it."**

**The two soldiers stood still and looked at the major for instruction, but behind them a couple of others raised their guns and pointed them towards the cop.**

**Rivers could hear sirens coming towards him, and wondered if he was going to be the first officer killed in a shootout with the US Army. He watched the Major's face as he looked around trying to assess the situation.**

**Down at the end of the block a police car screamed to a stop and Rivers heard a cop yelling. More sirens were converging and he began to think that he might get away with this.**

**The major said, "We don't want to hurt you, but we've got to get into that church."**

**His radio came on, "Andrews, state your situation."**

**"I am facing a group of armed men who want to make an illegal entry into the church. They claim to be soldiers but I have seen no id. They don't have a**

warrant."

He wanted to see what was going on at the roadblocks, but didn't dare take his eyes off the Major.

"Maintain your position. We're involved with some soldiers ourselves."

When the television lights went on he almost fired his weapon. "Jesus, don't do that."

The soldiers blinked. But didn't lower their weapons.

"This is Hilary Phillips reporting from the Grounds of Holy Apostles church where A SFPD patrolman is holding off a squad of armed soldiers who are here to exterminate the creatures which have taken refuge in the church."

She was pretty sure they wouldn't shoot her. She also knew that she was on the road to snagging a Pulitzer if she was able to interview the Major.

She moved a couple of steps closer, but couldn't bring herself to get between the guns. "Major, why is the U.S. Army invading an Episcopal Church in San Francisco?"

The major's head snapped around as though he was seeing the camera and her for the first time. "We have reason to believe that there is some stolen government property inside the church. It is top secret, a matter of national security."

She couldn't help herself, "If you watched the six o'clock news you know it's not a secret any more, Major."

He hesitated, then replied, "You don't know half of it lady." Then to the cop he said, "Do you know how foolish you look resisting the authority of the United

**States Government?"**

**Before Andrews could answer the lawyer said, "do you know how bad it looks for the U.S. Army to attempt to trample the constitution. You took an oath to defend and protect the constitution, do you remember that?"**

**The major did. And he knew the man was right from a legal point of view, but he also knew that he couldn't back down, not with the bats just a few feet away. Once he had the bats back he'd let the Army lawyers worry about if it was legal. He gave a signal and four soldiers vaulted the low fence that enclosed the church grounds.**

**Why couldn't he have gotten a dumb cop, he thought, as he watched the patrolman move back to the steps of the church. He shifted his gun to the soldiers, "Halt."**

**The soldiers stopped. One of them called, "Sorry Major, I'm not getting shot for this."**

**If the camera wasn't there the major realized he might have risked putting the cop out of commission with a shot in the leg or somewhere. But he wasn't going to get away with shooting a policeman especially not on television. Not when the cop had reinforcements coming.**

**He should have grabbed the camera, he realized. But now it was too late. He turned to his lieutenant, "Make sure our perimeter is secure. Nobody in, nobody out." He gestured to the sidewalk, "Form your line here."**

**He waved the four soldiers back over the fence.**

Within an hour the quiet little street, which driver training schools liked to use because it had so little traffic, had turned into a full fledged circus. Police cars and television vans provided a secondary roadblock beyond the Army trucks.

The night was broken by a hundred two way radios squawking. The soldiers held the newly arrived media and the police away from the entrance to the church. The major achieved a small tactical victory when he dispatched three men to disable the van which was transmitting Hilary's feed to her station. Unfortunately this move was captured live and transmitted as it happened. The picture of soldiers breaking into the van followed by a suddenly black screen was marvelously dramatic footage that was repeated by the network for the rest of the evening. Hilary kept broadcasting audio using her cellular phone.

Inside the church Joyce was trying to calm the bats.

On the steps to the church the lawyer sat next to Patrolman Rivers who had, at last, holstered his pistol and was sitting because his knees were shaking too hard for him to stand upright.

"You did good. I'm going to talk to the mayor tomorrow and tell him that. Your job is to protect the citizens of this city from unlawful attacks, even if it's the US Army. A lot of men would have backed down."

Patrolman Rivers wondered if it would mean a promotion. A lot of careers had been made on less. He prayed that he'd picked the right side. But most of all he was glad that some over-eager soldier hadn't started shooting.

**Rivers was told to sit tight. The police commissioner was on the phone with the pentagon and that there would be instructions soon.**

**Since there wasn't much to do now they had a stalemate, Joyce had the bats demonstrate their full range of musical talents for Hilary and her camera crew who, because they had little to do, filmed it.**

**"This stuff they picked up listening to some tapes I have, God knows what they could do if they had some real teaching."**

**The Major had opened a radio link with a local base that, in turn, patched him into the net. His immediate orders were the same as the cops, to sit tight. But there was an added provision. If he or his men got a clear shot at the bats they were to take it.**

**By nine the mayor had arrived in the company of the police chief. In front of the assembled cameras he said that he was officially requesting that the Army leave. "The pentagon has been unable to give us a good reason for your continued presence here. My legal staff has recommended that we, for the moment honor the sanctuary that has been offered by the church. If you can produce a warrant for the arrest of any one we will reconsider this."**

**It was at this moment that the bats reached the crescendo of a beautiful Mozart mass. The songs carried out the windows in the church and were captured by the microphones. The mayor turned towards the church and as the notes faded,**

said, "But somehow I don't think these creatures are a threat to the public safety."

The legal teams were divided into groups. One group began to work on what rights the bats might be entitled to. As sentient beings how could they be considered property? Certainly they could not be considered to be the same as a jeep that had been stolen. This team found there was a lot of legal precedent, but that most of it had been frivolous. People routinely left their estates to dogs and cats, one businessman had put a goat on the board of directors of his company.

Another group began to work on the question of sanctuary. They were joined by two professors the bishop had summoned from the seminary.

There were federal and state statutes to be considered. Constitutional issues danced through the conversation. To a person the lawyers loved it. It was the kind of case they could put on their resumes. Once the professors got used to the noise and the chaos they too attacked the issues with a joy.

Leaving a lieutenant in place with orders to do nothing except keep the Bats from leaving, the major rode back to the post where the base commander was waiting. The driver was a young soldier, not entirely dry behind the ears, who had not learned that there are times when talking can be dangerous. "Boy what's that all about? I've never seen so many cops and reporters in my life."

When the major did not answer he went on undeterred, "There's deep shit happening at the base too. The C.O. really went off about something. They've

canceled leaves and have put the base on alert. Then he comes charging out of his office and tells me to come and get you and bring you back."

"Did he say why?"

"I don't know sir, except he was, according to his orderly, talking to a big brass at the pentagon."

The major knew his uniform looked as though he'd been wearing it for three days. He knew that he was not going to present a very good image to the base C.O. He could also count on the man being pissed off at having his Friday evening ruined by some Major out of nowhere.

The C.O., a one star General, was beyond pissed. He was waiting in his outer office, and started in on the Major as soon as he entered the room. "What the fuck are you doing out there Major?" He took a breath then continued. "I've been in the Army twenty three years and I've never talked to as much brass as I have in the last twenty three minutes." He pointed to the door to his office, "They're holding on a secure line in there."

The major picked up the phone, "This is Major Robbins."

The voice at the other end was crisp, as crisp as a starched uniform telling him that the general, would be with him in a moment - it took less time than that.

"Major, this is General Haggarty. First I need to know what your present orders are."

**"Sir, my orders are to capture the experimental prototypes that escaped from Fort Hollins. Failing that I am to eliminate them."**

**These orders come from your commanding general?"**

**"Yes sir."**

**"Well major, it looks like you're having a bit of trouble carrying out those orders."**

**"Yes Sir," he said wondering at the touch of humor that was evident in the remark.**

**"Well Major I've ordered the local commander to put troops at your disposal. However things have gotten a bit more complicated now that the press is involved. We have a special detail on its way but it will not be there for a few hours - so you are in charge until you are relieved."**

**"Yes Sir." That meant nobody else wanted to get within ten miles of this**

**"Your orders remain essentially the same. However it would not do to have your troops dispatch then in full view of network television cameras. Should an opportunity present itself you should take it. However you are not to take any aggressive action and civilian casualties are to be avoided at all costs. You may use force to keep them from leaving."**

**The morning papers went wild with the story. "Invaded!", read one while the other's headline screamed "LEAVE OUR BATS ALONE." Inside a story began, "SFPD showed an understanding of our city's tradition of sheltering the persecuted**

by standing up to the U.S. Army in a tense armed confrontation. “

It was a beautiful Saturday morning and a large number of the city’s residents were seized with the idea that it might be interesting to walk over and see what was going on.

As they walked they talked and discovered their common impulse, and by nine thirty a hundred fifty thousand people were crowded into the streets around Holy Apostles and the television and radio stations began to report it as, "a huge spontaneous demonstration of love and support."

By ten thirty that had become a self fulfilling prophesy and it was turning into a gigantic impromptu picnic.

The bats had been up most of the night being alternatively tutored in the fundamentals of law and being taught a variety of music. Joyce was still afraid that the soldiers might shoot the bats if they showed themselves, but the lawyer, said, "They'll never be safer. They've got two hundred thousand bodyguards out there.

The crowd had started chanting "out of the belfry," and after instructing the bats the lawyer opened the church doors and spoke into the microphones.

The crowd let out a roar as the bats launched themselves and, keeping to the airspace over the church yard, flew up to a perch on the steeple.

Joshua had disdained the offer of a microphone, explaining that their transducers had been designed to be used as a weapons system.

As the realization that the bats were singing swept across the crowd, it fell into silence. They started with a couple of quick classical pieces that showed their range, and then launched into, "I left my heart in San Francisco," followed by, "I ain't going to study war no more."

The crowd joined in the chorus and windows rattled through the neighborhood.

Hilary who had climbed up inside the steeple and was filming the concert from a trapdoor, knew that she had her Pulitzer. From the steeple the sea of faces was an incredible sight. She was proud of her city and proud of the bats who were displaying a musical virtuosity.

They finished off their set by doing a section of the Ride of the Valkeries as they swooped in tight formation over the crowd.

As the events around her took a life of their own, Joyce took a minute to try and figure out what was going on with her. The Jim who had told her his dreams and fears on the drive across Utah had gone back behind the cowboy facade. She didn't know if it was being in San Francisco, the hoopla, or the fact that they had gotten to the place in a friendship where the next step was to admit that there was something more going on.

Joyce was helping the priest's wife in the rectory as they assembly lined sandwiches for the growing crowd inside the church grounds. There were now three lawyers

working with ZZZZZX, two priests who were studying the sanctuary question. And as the Bishop had put it, somebody was bound to ask if the bats had souls, so they were ready with a plethora of mostly contradictory biblical quotes so they could avoid having to answer the question. Hilary's film crew which now had a satellite dish behind the church that had been brought by the traffic helicopter which broke at least 15 FAA regulations getting it there. In addition there were two members of Greenpeace who had parachuted onto the grounds, and a member of amnesty international who had somehow slipped past the cordon of soldiers.

"So are you and Jim, what do you call it these days, an item?"

Joyce laughed, "No. He's reverted to cowboy and that means I'm in line behind his pickup. I draw the line there."

"I know what you mean, too bad though, he seems nice."

"Yeah, we came close, for a while there... Damn it I always seem to come close. When we were driving across Utah following a full moon and being chased by the forces of evil it was romantic and he was almost human there for a while. I mean he told me things he was afraid of and we even talked about his dreams."

"But not yours."

"Mine? No, we didn't get to that."

"Well?"

"Well?"

"What are they?"

"My dreams?, "she paused and spread mayonnaise across four slices of

bread, "I guess I've been in get through today mode. When I was trying to get out of the city I dreamed of Montana. I guess I dreamed of finding somebody, independent, but not too and all that stuff."

"And now?"

"I don't know. I had this wild thought last night that I don't have to go back. It looks like the bats could actually make some money with their music. I was thinking that I could get Joshua to hire me as their manager or something. I want to stay with them - at least for a while."

You like him don't you?"

"Who?"

"Joshua, forgive me, one of the occupational hazards of being a preacher's wife is watching other people. I've learned that the eyes tell you a lot."

Joyce spread tuna salad across the slices near her to avoid having to look at the woman. "I like him. He's a remarkable creation. It's interesting."

"And he loves you."

Joyce lost her grip on the knife and it fell with a soft splat onto one of the almost finished sandwiches. "What?"

"Maybe I'm wrong, but I've seen him watching you, and it's not a neutral look."

"Well maybe like a dog or something?"

"But he's not a dog."

"No, he's not. But I don't think he's capable of love."

"I got up early this morning and went over to the church. I needed to pray,

and this is pretty funny, for the strength not to kill my husband."

"Why?"

She laughed. "Look at me. I'm in the kitchen making sandwiches and he's out there giving interviews with a TV bimbo. He's going to be famous for this and I'm going to get tuna fish hands."

Joyce nodded, remembering him in an interview earlier, "He did seem to be enjoying himself."

"Any way, that's off the topic, when I was in the church I heard this voice and it seemed to be working on a poem. I didn't hear much because he heard me and stopped, but it was one of the bats they were up in the loft. And like I said I've see him watching you."

"I liked it better when you were off the topic," Joyce started slapping the top pieces on the sandwiches.

\*\*\*\*\*insert a piece on the end of the siege.

\*\*\*\*\* Segment of a concert

\*\*\*\*\* record company

\*\*\*\*\* Major goes on sub

\*\*\*\*\* Govt comes to visit

^^^^^^ Jocko / Hil / Joyce calls June Anne

%%%%%%%% oyce meets with doctor searches for answers

%%% there is none.

Jocko had never met a woman like Hilary. She wasn't any prettier than June

Anne, but she carried herself like she was. He knew that looks weren't the only thing about June Anne, and he knew that he probably didn't have a chance in hell with the TV Newsman, but with his bachelor hood headed for the matrimonial penitentiary he felt the urge to have one last crime spree.

The thing was she needed him. Being head of security was the perfect job, because in a big way he handled access to the bats, and access was about as important as things got. Hilary thought she had some special rights because she was the first one to interview the bats, and as her station said in its promotional spots, the woman who had the guts to stand up to the US Army and help save the bats.

Her question to the Major, "Why is the US army invading an Episcopal church in San Francisco?" was broadcast fifty times a day as an ad for the six o'clock news. If she hadn't been so busy she could have enjoyed being a hero. But she couldn't get in to see the bats without approval from Jocko.

Hilary had thought Jocko was a jerk the first time she saw him and realized he was trying to look down her dress. She'd heard his tale about killing the red bats at least ten times and was determined not to interview him. Now he was making it hard for her to get to the bats and that was really starting to piss her off.

\*/\*\*\*\*\*

bats0123...

The soldiers who stood guard duty in the underground laboratories were used to strange sights. They did not think about them much - if they had an opinion it was that they considered themselves lucky not to be assigned to an outside post

where they were subject to frostbite in the winter and a large assortment of biting bugs the rest of the year.

It was simple job really. If the scientist had the right clearance they were to be admitted and then ignored. The men had been told that they didn't want to know what was going on in those laboratories, and that if they accidentally discovered any top secret information they would be transferred to a base in Greenland where they would have no chance to be a security risk.

Most nights a disheveled older man wearing a dirty white labcoat that was pulled to the side by the weight of the pint bottle in the side pocket, and walking with a distinctly unmilitary stooped shuffle would pass the sentry as though he was a piece of furniture and would enter the lab. They knew better than to challenge him because somewhere in one of his pockets he had a badge that identified him as the project leader of the set of labs known as Sierra.

Knute Hawkers with three Phd's was of Scotch /Norwegian extraction, he had never been known to say anything more than, "good morning," or "ummm," to anyone, entered the lab and said, "Good evening children."

He proceeded to turn on a sophisticated music system, and, after selecting a CD, he pulled the frozen embryos from their racks in the freezer and inserted them into the specially constructed lab table that allowed him to work on them without defrosting them. He set his bottle along side the embryos knowing that the super cooled argon would quickly chill it to the proper temperature.

He chattered to the little glass dishes as though they were a kindergarten class gathered in front of him.

**"For the time they pay me they can make me turn you into abominations, but in my own time I can do what I can -- to do what God would have intended if He had had time to get to it and if we had not interfered.**

**"When you grow up and are soaring through the skies you will play music that is worthy of that name. They want me to limit your intelligence, because they say the will make you better warriors, but you, my creations, will, be the ultimate in every thing that I can control" He raised his arms over his head and then spread them apart, "You will be the creation that will make the world take notice." Some nights his speech said, "Take notice of me." those were the nights when the bottle was only half full when he got to the lab. Other nights he finished the sentence with, "Take notice of the wonders of life."**

**"That ugly fiend, my nemesis McCarthy the terrible claims he will make the ultimate war machine. The best he'll ever be able to do is build robots. I on the other hand will make a creature that will not only be able to take over a country, but will be able to lead it to levels of enlightenment and culture unmatched anywhere on the earth. My friends you will be so talented you will make nations weep."**

\*\*\*\*\*

bats0127

The doctor's air of self confidence seemed pretty thin as he said, "There are a number of possibilities, I'm afraid, and I'm not sure I can do anything to counter them. If there was a capsule attached to them somewhere I could surgically remove it. If it were under the skin I could do the same thing, but I can't find anything of the sort and I examined him thoroughly. He's a remarkable, I don't know what to call it even. Animal, which we all are, is accurate, but it somehow seems demeaning. Creature evokes memories of dreadful movies, maybe being." He shrugged and adjusted his glasses, "anyway it makes no difference. I'm going to put him in a cat scan just because we should document this being, and maybe we'll pick it up there or in the MRI, but I don't have much hope for that. The men who made him, and it feels strange saying that, anyway they had access to a lot of resources, and if it were me I would have enclosed the bacteria in a cell of some sort that was programmed to die. I don't know if they can do that you understand, but if they can make him they can do some rather extraordinary things."

He shook his head, "What really worries me though is what might happen. He raised his eye glasses so they rested on his broad forehead and then said, "If this is true, it goes down in history as one of the most evil acts man has ever taken. It's a deliberate cold-blooded mass murder aimed at civilians and soldiers alike. Until you can determine if it's a bluff or not then I'm afraid that, at the very least, you have to consider some sort of quarantine."

"No." She knew they were not talking about quarantine.

**"You may not have a choice, if the public hears about this, and they have a definite right to, they can make it so it would be the only safe place."**

**Joyce snapped her mouth shut before she said something she'd regret. He was right. She thought about the kids at the last concert the ones that adults could get into only if they were brought by a kid. She wanted to deny it, to pretend that it wasn't there and that it would go away. She'd tried to do it a few times in her life and it had never worked. She'd had a child in one of her classes who had tried to pretend that she was getting fat rather than fixing to have a baby. That hadn't worked either.**

**"So what do we do?"**

**"We do the cat scan and the MRI and whatever else we can think of and see if we can see anything. Then I've got to call Atlanta."**

**Atlanta?**

**The center for disease control.**

**"It is that serious isn't it?"**

**"It scares the hell out of me."**

## **JOCKO AND HILARY**

**bats0129**

Hilary still wasn't sure why she was having dinner with this character. It wasn't work related, she had already pumped every bit of useful information out of him. It was, she decided, because she was pissed at Harvey who had put his career ahead of her again. If he hadn't she wouldn't have been free to say yes when Jocko had, in his very own way said, "Hey you want to have dinner sometime, I always wanted to get to know one of you women who do a man's job, you know?"

It also had something to do with the fact that she was finding the men she associated with boring. They all talked about the same things, usually something about themselves, and, if she closed her eyes, she wasn't always sure who was talking. Besides, there was a certain something about this man that attracted her. Maybe, she admitted, it was that he was so unsuitable that she felt safe. There was no way she could make a mistake with THIS one.

There was certain charm about him, in a rather rough cut kind of way, she thought as she avoided listening to his lecture about the relative benefits of various guns. The moment she was really looking forward to was when the waiter brought them the bill. Matisse's thought it common to place prices in the menu where they might get interfere with your decision. He'd noticed it, saying, "This must be a class joint," trying to keep his voice light, but showing a certain tension in his voice.

She was pretty, though Jocko thought she could dress a little sexier. The food was good except that they gave you pretty small portions. He wondered how much

this dinner was going to set him back and whether it was going to get him anywhere with her. He wasn't sure why he was doing this rather than going after one of the music groupies. After all it was his last chance, the message from June Anne in his box at the hotel had listed a flight number and an arrival time shortly before noon tomorrow. In their last conversation she'd said, "Either you come home, or I'm coming to get you."

From her point of view it made sense, it's just that now that he'd seen the world outside of Clarkstown he wasn't so sure he was ready to settle down yet. Back there he'd thought all his wild oats had been sowed, but maybe, he thought as he looked at Hilary, it was because he'd run out of challenges.

"I hear your fiancée is coming tomorrow."

How the hell did she know that? Jocko had to work at not choking on a piece of something that tasted good, but was still unidentified. He nodded, remembering that she was a reporter.

She remembered the look when in sixth grade Mrs Kelly had caught the boys in her class in a planned prank that involved putting a frog in her desk. Their faces gave it all away. And they knew it.

Sometimes wine mellowed her out, but sometimes it seemed to dial up a connection with another, angry part of her. It took her only a second to decide to go ahead with it. "Hey, it's ok. If you weren't attached, then I'd be worried." She pinned him to his chair with a look, it had been a while since she'd really mugged a date, "What we've got is a woman who got stood up by a jerk, and you with

whatever is going on with you. I don't think I even want to know what the is so long as you understand that tomorrow morning the coach becomes a pumpkin."

He had a blank look, and she didn't know if he missed the analogy, or was still reeling from her knowing about June, whatever it was.

She took another sip of wine, a larger sip than the vintage deserved. It was going to have to be his room at the Carlyle, because she sure as hell didn't want to have to worry about getting him out of her place in the morning.

Jocko had thought he was sunk when she'd dropped the brick about June Anne, but when she kept on he began to wonder what he'd gotten himself into. Still, he thought, he wasn't the kind of man who would kick a woman like her out of bed.

As they'd entered the room he'd made a grab for her, but she danced out of his grip and called room service, ordering champagne, cheese and crackers and a basket of fruit.

Then after putting the phone down she stood with her hands on her hips and looked him up and down the way he had looked at a lot of women, but not as he'd ever been looked at by one. "Why don't you go take a shower, and shave while we're waiting. I want you clean and smooth."

With that she turned and pulled the drapes open to reveal the skyline.

He'd just finished shaving when he heard the bathroom door open behind him. Her hands lit on the tops of his shoulders and then slid down his arms until

they gently gripped his elbows. She turned him and in the mirror he saw that she was wearing only a real sexy black bra and panty set. "My turn," she said in a half whisper. "Go lie on the bed I'll be with you in a bit." As he passed out the door she snatched the towel from around his waist and said, "I hope you like it when the woman's on top."

She had lingered a little in what she had thought would be a quick shower, and when she opened the door into the half darkened bedroom she was, for a moment, afraid that the wine had put him to sleep.

She moved slowly and quietly across the room towards the bed, "I've never been to bed with a hell-cat before," he said with a slight country drawl followed by a low chuckle.

Two quick replies came to mind but neither was quite right so Hilary kept quiet. Instead she pulled the sheet back and stood for a moment looking at his body. She bent forward and placed a finger on his lips. He responded by kissing and sucking, and she hoped he'd get the message. With her other hand she toyed with him working his nipples with her nails and then working her way down his stomach. Bending over she presented other parts \*\*\*\*\*maybe I should wait on this scene. It might be fun to write it with my honeybunch one of these days.....\*\*\*\*\* In anycase at work I'm a little hesitant.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **EARLY FLIGHT SCENE**

a fragment from another place

Once they got on the interstate Joyce relaxed a little. She reminded Jim to stay within the speed limit because, "Every trooper who sees this bus will be looking for an excuse to stop it."

"That's not so. so long as we're moving they probably don't give a shit. You got to remember the potential paperwork on something like this will keep a cop filling out forms for three days. I had a brother in law who was a cop and he used to tell me that there were certain things he'd go ten miles out of his way not to see."

Joyce didn't really believe him, but pretended to.

Back in the bedrooms the bats were being briefed by Joshua. "Squad 1 goes out the back door and Squad 2 takes the front. If you exit is blocked try the other. Once out do the scatter pattern and listen for my signals."

**bats0130**

**It seemed like one minute she had been a battered puppy learning how to lick the wounds of her failures in the healing silence of the Montana forest, and the next she was a high powered persona with two secretaries, a press agent, a regular agent, a lawyer so high powered that traffic lights seemed to go green for him, and a phone that never stopped ringing.**

**\*\*\*\*\*joyce meets scientest**

bats0301.

"I used to think I was lucky for having got a man who was as brilliant as Keith was, but starting on the second date I began to wonder?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's kind of funny now, but we were at this concert, Mozart, I think, he'd gotten the tickets somewhere, and all of a sudden he starts mumbling, pulls out a pen and starts going through his pockets looking for something to write on. He couldn't find anything so he pulls his shirt tail out of his pants, twists around and puts it on that little armrest between the seats and starts writing. It is a very awkward thing to do, and he ran out of room soon. He was starting to unbutton his shirt when I realized that it was time to go."

She smiled and took a deep breath, "I later learned to carry a small clipboard in my purse. He's so amazing when he gets on a roll." Her expression shifted to sad, "I can believe some of the things I've heard. He would lose sight of almost everything when he got involved." She paused and bit her bottom lip. "He didn't think things through sometimes, like the time one Thanksgiving when he turned the kitchen into an impromptu chemistry lab four hours before my parents and a lot of other people were coming over for dinner. I was so afraid he'd go off to the lab and not come back that I didn't want to tell him to get out, so I made dinner on two burners and half the kitchen counter." She smiled and a gleam came into her eyes as she continued, "Later when it was time for dinner I had to hit him on the head with a wooden spoon to get his attention." She paused, "And once he got involved with those damned bats it got a lot worse. Do you know I didn't see him

for more than ten minutes total last April and half of May."

Joyce nodded, she had once had a workaholic boyfriend who had, in a moment of honesty, told her that he was more interested in his work than he was in having a relationship with her. "Don't take it hard, it isn't as though I've got another woman," he'd said.

That comment had made her want to kick him, and she might have except that he'd chosen her telephone answering machine as the means for delivering the news. She brought her thoughts back to the now, and decided that there was a good chance that Keith wouldn't even think of her request as strange. He would, she hoped, would simply see it as something of a challenge. Now all she had to do was find him.

"So I guess you don't know when I could talk to him."

"Actually you're in luck. He should be here in a few minutes, and I know he wants to talk to you, he was very grateful when you helped them escape a couple of months ago. he really loves them you know?"

Joyce nodded, that was encouraging, and for the first time she began to think that her plan, the plan that had come to her after two drinks to many, and less than totally satisfying sex with Lyle, just might work.

"So you're the woman who came to the rescue of my children?" His voice was a lot louder than it needed to be since they were standing a couple of feet apart. "I'm really glad to meet you. It would have been a shame for them to have been

wiped out before the world could hear their music." He stopped and bobbed his head up and down a few times.

"I was glad to do it, and I wanted to talk to you about doing it again."

His eyes focused on hers, "It can't be done, they made me put the mechanism into the cells. There's no way to get around it. I hated to do it, but..."

"That's not what I meant. I was thinking of a new generation. Maybe we could take some eggs from Justine and..."

"Can't do it that way, the viral destruct is in every cell, that includes the eggs and sperm. But, it is interesting that you thought of it, because when they gave the order to put the virus in I took some and froze them. I've even got them stored in the freezer," he nodded his head towards the kitchen.

"The trouble is," he continued, "that finding the right host isn't as easy as you might think it would be. That part of it wasn't my responsibility, although I did try to stay up on what they were doing, but they had a lot of problems with it."

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\* plot decision point.....plot decision point \*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\* plot decision point.....plot decision point \*\*\*\*\*

???? does she do it herself or does she go out and buy herself a LLama?????

LLamas are funny and dumb.

Having Joyce be pregnant has got some issues attached to it. And It might really turn some people off...Especially because she is the heroine the positive likeable character. It might be too far out, but it is not ENTIRELY out of

**character.....**

**It's got to be a LLama because of size problems. Possible a large kangaroo, but then there's the marsupial - mammal thing. Maybe a YAK they're pretty funny too, but I think Llamas are better...**

**\*\*\*\*\* plot decision point.....plot decision point \*\*\*\*\***

**\*\*\*\*\* plot decision point.....plot decision point \*\*\*\*\***

**\*\*\*\*\***

**"Listen to this one, 'Last night's concert was not what this reviewer expected. Although I had been aware that these creatures possessed musical ability, I went as a skeptic trying to listen through the hoopla that surrounds them. What I heard, humbles me. They are, to put it simply, musically talented and accomplished beyond, well beyond, any thing I have ever experienced. A number of their pieces were so sublime as the critic in me was roused and I, along with the rest of the audience simply sat mesmerized. As a result I can not report about the technical aspects of their work, except to say that there are no terms for a lot of what they are doing.**

**I was a witness to the shattering of musical frontiers, and consider myself privileged to have been there. During the concert, in the few moments that I spent not enraptured, I spent some time imagining myself in the audience when Mozart was taking music to new heights.'"**

**"Who wrote that?"**

**"Carlson."**

**"Carlson? That's almost as amazing as the concert, he has something bad to say about everybody. He takes pride in having slammed the greats."**

**"Well he did say that he was not convinced that the aerial acrobatics served any musical purpose."**

**"Other than to introduce the Doppler effect into a piece."**

**"I know that, but he had to say something bad."**

\*\*\*\*\*

The men from the record company looked as though they could have been from an insurance company. "You have to understand that we believe we are taking a substantial risk."

Slick cut him off as smoothly as a waiter pouring a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, "I thought we were going to make this easy. There is no risk. First, we're talking talent and ability the likes of which you have been dreaming of. Then we have to wonder how much being the lead item on the network news three days running is worth. Then there are the covers of Time and Newsweek and half the other magazines on the rack." He paused, "You are paying a fair price for a very valuable commodity. You want to play games and put a hundred clauses into the contract, or do you want them at your studios tomorrow ready to record an album that can be in the stores in what, two weeks?"

"But if the court gives them franchise this whole contact becomes invalid."

If the court gives them franchise it won't be soon because they aren't asking for it.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Shouldn't I be worried about what all this is costing?" Joyce swept her hand in an arc taking in the rather plush surroundings in the suite.

"It is costing a lot, and if the front desk asked you to pay right now you

might have a problem, but after tomorrow afternoon I think I can safely say you will never have to worry about bouncing a check again."

"That scares me. It doesn't seem right, I mean why should I get the money, I'm not the one who is earning it?"

"Think of yourself as their guardian. We've been through this before."

"I know, and I don't like it. An hour ago Jocko comes to me wanting to hire some more security. I'm willing to bet that these are guys he met in a bar, and he wants to put them on salary at a hundred fifty dollars a day."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him that I did not see the need right now, and that I wanted some way of checking on the backgrounds of the men we've already hired." She paused and shook her head, "I am pretty sure one of them was smoking a joint backstage last night. I told him about it and he got real defensive, then he goes into this, 'I'm the chief of security,' bit and tells me that he refuses to accept responsibility unless I allow him to run what he called, 'my outfit,' as he saw fit."

"So what did you do?"

Joyce smiled, "When I was in New York I learned that sometimes it's best to attack from behind, so I called his fiancée and sent her a ticket, she should be getting here in an hour or two. At least that will keep him out of bars."

Slick shook his head, "There are times when I'm ready to write you off as being impossibly naive, but then you turn around and respond perfectly. But seriously, you should consider putting a professional in charge of security, I can..."

"Let's see what happens, I have a feeling that June Anne is going to take a

**look around, and if she's not seduced by the fancy stores, she's going to grab him by the ear and drag him home with her."**

"Where the fuck were you when I had time for you?" She knew she wasn't making any sense, but making sense wasn't the point. Convincing Lyle that she didn't need his haunting abandoned puppy dog eyes following her was what she had to do. She felt really guilty. None of it was his fault, and if things were any different she would have been happy to have continued to explore the romantic possibilities that existed between the two of them. She had used him too, He was the one who had located the LLamas, gone off to determine if they were in estrus and then had accompanied them on the chartered plane back to Montana where she'd taken delivery and dismissed him with a cryptic, "Thanks, I'll see you in about a week."

The deal with the Army was that no one was to know. The final show was a week away, and so far as she knew things were proceeding with out a hitch. She wanted to say, you'll understand in eight days," but knew she couldn't risk it. A part of her wondered if when it was over she might find a way to resurrect the affair, but she knew it would be hopeless, besides she would have three pregnant llamas to worry about.

bats0305

**You've got no choice, as far as I see it. We can play the law for all it's worth, but if what he's saying is the truth, and right now I do not know that it is, but if it is then the law takes a decidedly different view of things. I also have to say that in good conscience I could not take any action that would imperil thousands maybe tens of thousands of people."**

**Joyce nodded. She knew. There was no choice.**

**"Ok, but I want to be sure there is no cure these bastards have on the shelf that they're not telling us about. How do we know there isn't one.?"**

**We don't.**

**I also want doctors to confirm this whatever it is that they are supposed to have. I want the best doctors in the country, not some quacks. She looked around the small conference room and shook her head, " I want you to tell them that I also want the chance to record as much of them as we can. Just because they are going to die in three months doesn't mean that they have to kill them tonight.**

**"Hi Joyce, "Joshua seemed to know that something was very wrong, because his voice grew softer in tone and volume, "What is it?"**

**She didn't think she was going to be able to get it out her lips seemed swollen, her throat closed, "Joshua, the army says they put something in you that's going to..."**

**"Going to kill us? Yes we know"**

**"You know? It's true?"**

**"Yes, it was a part of our training, that if we were used on a mission we were to find appropriate areas once the process started so that the disease would spread to maximum area."**

**The matter of fact manner in which he told her this yanked her out of her sadness.**

**"You knew about this?"**

**"that's why I tried to tell you not to schedule any concerts after June."**

**Look Joshua, this is very important, did they ever tell you, did they ever hint that there might be a way to stop this from happening?**

**"No quite the opposite, they said that we were the first of the groups to have this, what did they call it, capability I think. Anyway it was a part of the whole process. But you don't have to worry they said they had a way of preventing the disease from spreading, we even practiced going into the decontamination facility."**

**She wanted to scream, "how can you be so calm when you know you're going to die." Instead she said, "You're so calm."**

**batsend1**

\*\*\*\*\*

The music, displaying a power which reached inside and made Joyce forget to breathe, was haunting and eerie. In flawless formation the flock circled the microphones set on the very edge of the caldera. The technicians, who could be unhappy with the sound quality in a state of the art sound studio, had ceased their grouching as they bent to capture this final performance.

When they dove the music deepened evoking dreaded dark images which were followed by strains that swelled her heart as they climbed through the clouds of mist that spilled out of the crater. She had thought she had run out of tears the night before, but the breeze, surprisingly cool this close to the equator, told her that her cheeks were wet again.

There had been no rehearsals, at least none she'd been privy to, so she had no idea how much longer it would go on. Every time they reached a point of major feeling she had the idea that it would be the last, but incredibly they continued taking the concert and the audiences emotions to a painful plain.

They had climbed so high on the last movement they were mere specks, "This has to be it," she thought with a shudder and tried to avert her eyes. They dropped in single file closely spaced. The sun shining through their translucent wings they switched to a passage from Mozart's Requiem as they plummeted towards the crater.

"No, God NO," she cried softly as they passed her heading down towards the pool of molten lava that it had taken a team of scientists a week to decide would

effectively end the possibility of the plague.

And then there was silence, a dreadful silence that was broken only by the rumblings of the volcano. She found she was unable to move.

Nobody else on the mountain top was moving either. The cameras continued to point towards the fiery red pools. The recorders and digitizers continued to operate picking up only the rumbling of the lava and the gentle hiss of the trade winds.

A part of her wanted to be in those pools, a part of her wanted to run down the steep slope of the mountain screaming putting as much distance between herself and the memories as she could. She wanted to be back up on the ridge in Montana the night before the bats came, but she knew that was one place she could never face again.

With an effort Joyce moved, first one leg and then the other until she fell into the rhythm of walking as she headed towards the van that waited to take them down the mountain.

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End plus As she walked she thought of the llamas and then smiled at her insurance policy, and though she knew it was not possible she imagined that she could feel that which she knew would become the next Joshua, growing inside her.

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????? alternate first meeting - out of place some if not6 most can be used here not as

**first meeting?????**

## **Chapter**

**first meeting - out of place       the next night he returned with the others. She finds the collars.**

**New scene**

**The chopper pilot loved being able to stick it to the group he genarically called the bastards.**

**Timing problem??? does this go here??? no**

**we have eliminated the interview early on - the piece did not get run but some of this can be used later I would gurss. but probably not worth keeping. Have need for more interviews in S.F.**

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**Major Robbins and the capture team had set up base in the Pinecone Inn and were availing themselves of the limited pleasures in the Pinecone Lounge when the tv over the bar grabbed his attention. Special News Flash.**

**Dan Rather was looking very earnest as he pointed to a Map of Montana. Robbins asked the bartender to turn it up.**

**"An incredible story. A story with implications that there may be a government cover-up involved is coming out of the remote woods of Montana. This film was taken at a church picnic. It is an amateur film, and we are first going to**

show it to you in its entirety. It will speak for its self."

"Oh shit. He grabbed a quarter off the bar and handed it to the lieutenant next to him. Call the base, tell them what's going on."

The film was jerky, and looked like one of those bad Japanese horror movies from the fifties, except that it was pictures of giant red bats, his giant red bats. He was dead meat. He'd told the general there were no videos. The secret was out.

There were some incredible shots especially as the man jumped out of his truck and blasted three of the beasts from the sky as fast as he could fire as another swooped down on him.

At least the general was going to get a chance to see how they faired under battle conditions, he thought as the image of a senate investigation danced before him.

Mr. Rivers, I have to complement you on your quick thinking and fine shooting. Do you have any idea where these creatures came from?"

"No sir, At first I was afraid it was a sign that I should start going to A.A., but later when the government fellow came around, I began to think they might be behind it."

"Could you tell me what the government man, as you describe him, said to you.

"He told me that I would keep quiet about it if I didn't want the IRS nosing into my life. I wanted to keep one of the kills and have it stuffed, but he told me that was impossible.

**"And Reverend what did he say to you?"**

**"He told me he worked for the government on a secret project. I knew that much because the car he got out of had army markings on its bumper. He told me that it was in the national interest to keep this quiet, that if we told people there might be panic."**

**"And why did you decide to go public?"**

**"Because I think there is a menace out there. Because I think that keeping quiet about things like this is exactly what we should not do."**

**The bartender turned from the television, "Ain't that some shit?"**

**The major agreed with him, and was glad he was fifty miles from the general's rage. It was time for a command decision. He slid off the bar stool and said to the Sergeant next to him, "We're out of here, but not all at once in a rush. We'll meet in the parking lot at the motel in ten minutes." His only hope was to disappear into the woods and come out when they'd finished the job they'd been sent to do.**

**\*\*\*\*\* where to put this exactly**

**"I've never been to a fortune teller before."**

**"And you are nervous."**

**"Well, yes, but I suspect it shows."**

**"Most people who come here are nervous. Usually for some combination of four reasons." She raised her hand and ticked them off on her fingers as she spoke, "First people usually do not seek out someone like me when things are going well in their lives. Second, fortune tellers, a term I like to avoid if I can, have, shall we call it a slightly disreputable reputation and they do not want to be conned. Third, if on the other hand, I actually have some powers, that too is scary. Finally if I have the powers, do you want to hear what I have to say? What if I give you bad news?"**

**"I guess that about sums it up." Joyce looked around, "This is not quite what I**

expected.”

You expected gypsy in a full skirt in a shabby room with two folding chairs next to a card table? That does not sound like anyone who has any special abilities. I, on the other hand, have been in this office for a little over five years. Before that I occupied a smaller office in this building with a view of an airshaft. This desk,” she patted the large oak piece, “is not going to be moved out at midnight. I am short on the traditional show, but long on results. Let me repeat that last question - Are you sure you are willing to accept bad news, if that is what comes?”

“If that is what comes, yes. I am hoping you will find another way.”

Joyce paused, “Now a question for you can you tell me why I came?”

The woman smiled, “I get that a lot, and I could give you the stock response, to answer questions on things which are sorely troubling you, but I’ll cut through the BS. I know its about the bats, and to be fair I know that because I’ve seen you on television. I can sense in you some real trouble, and there is more which we can get into, but there is a matter of business first.” She waved her hand indicating the office, “I have overhead, a mortgage to pay, and mouths to feed. I charge the same fees as the psychiatrist down the hall. That is a hundred-thirty-five dollars for a session of forty five minutes.

Joyce nodded and opened her purse. “I don’t suppose you’d consider trading for tickets to tonight’s show?”

“Of course, but I’ll need four, and because they are so impossible to get , I’ll give you four sessions for them, and I’m afraid you’re going to need them.”

After passing the tickets across the desk Joyce asked, “Well?”

“I know that something is very wrong. At the moment, on the surface, things could not be better. The government has pulled the troops back. The concerts,” she touched the tickets with her finger, “are sold out. Albums are in the works – and the fools who came up with this plan are having to defend themselves from the religious right, the senate, and at least 80 percent of the people. You are something of a cult hero.”

Like I said that is on the surface. The thing is there is no long range picture. None. Are the bats sick? Will they be assassinated? Or something else? “ she pushed back from her desk, “I will have to research this. It may take a while. You are welcome to stay, but you will need sit quietly,” she gestured to the couch underneath some bookshelves.

Joyce said nothing and moved to the couch and watched as the woman took her suit jacket off and hung in a closet next to the door. She removed two wooden cases, each slightly larger than a cigar box from a shelf above the hangers and put them on the desk. They were made of polished wood with brass corner fasteners and a complicated clasp. She came over to the couch, studied the books above Joyce’s head and removed a large frayed volume and took it to the desk also. Opening it she leaned over the desk, flipped forward and back, found a page which she read, then she flipped to the back of the book and left it open at a page which had rows of numbers.

Returning to her seat she opened one of the wooden cases and assembled a small tripod about a foot high out of some brass rods. Deliberately she then hung a small crystal

on a silk thread. It swayed slightly as she turned her attention to the other box from which she removed a piece of blue silk which was wrapped around a deck of cards. Joyce had to restrain herself from asking questions.

She started to handle the cards fanning them and doing a shuffle, when she stopped, placed them on the cloth and re-opened the first box from which she removed a handful of small crystals. She scattered them on the desk to the side of the tripod and then placed the cards in their midst.

At this point she seemed to go into some sort of trance, though Joyce imagined she might be meditating. After five very long minutes the woman opened her eyes, noted Joyce's gaze with a nod and picked up the cards. She did not further shuffle, but instead laid out a very involved pattern – all face down on the other side of the tripod.

Grasping the tripod by two of its legs she gently lifted it and placed it on the dealt cards. The crystal swung. After a long moment in which she watched it carefully, she picked up one of the cards and turned it over.

She did not show it to Joyce, but she stared at it for a few seconds before placing it to the side. Again she lifted the tripod but this time she held it over the cards watching the crystal intently. After a few seconds she let go with one hand, reached over and picked up some of the loose crystals and then placed four of them on the cards. Finally she placed the tripod off to the side and then, without turning them over placed the cards in a square around the one which lay face up on her desk.

For the next minute she disassembled the tripod and placed the crystals in the box with it. It was not until she secured its hasp that she turned to Joyce, “come here, we will see this together.

Death is inevitable, you did not need come to me to learn that. In this case, however it looms. She moved slowly to turn over the cards surrounding it. I sense that these too are not unknown to you. The plan is,” She tapped three of the cards in turn with her forefinger, “in place. The outcome is certain. Except.” She pointed to but did not touch the remaining card which lay below the others. Except, in the universe there are often exceptions to the rule. I with my talents am one of those, I am able to see others which can not perhaps change the main event, but which can do something to lessen its sting. Imagine an army trapped in a valley ringed by mountains. The enemy is stronger and defeat is inevitable, almost all is lost, except there is a cave, narrow, and dark, twisty and confused which leads out of the trap into the plains beyond. There is no way the entire army can escape, but one or two if they know where to look for the opening, might make it through.

It is that cave, that passage, we are seeking.” She pointed to the cards at the other three corners, do not waste your time fighting them. They are ordained to win, and besides you have no time to waste in fruitless efforts.