

CHAPTER ONE

Michael Neilly placed the phone back in its cradle and wondered what the call from Calvin Greves might mean. Greves, an old FBI colleague, was minutes away and wanted to meet "...on issues important to both of us." This was not something Neilly had planned or wanted on a bright spring morning when he was finally satisfied that the sketches of the St. Alban's remodeling project were right. He felt a knot of anxiety rising in his stomach. Greves had hinted of something linked to Jack Sutton's death, something that had to be heard.

When Jack had been killed, Neilly felt as if a door had closed suddenly on a favorite room, sealing it off forever. The gritty noncom had once been his ears and eyes in the ways of military staff politics. Sutton made the low-level Intelligence section they'd manned in early '80s Korea effective in ways the twenty-three-year-old Neilly could not have conceived, much less managed. Their mutual respect had grown into a friendship that outlasted twenty years until that windy, rain-sodden, October night when someone put a bullet through Jack Sutton's head.

Never accept the official attitude. It doesn't belong to anybody. Value anyone who knows that. Sutton's voice reached him even now, a year after the murder. The crime remained unsolved. Neilly's loss and Jack's wife's and son's grief remained unrequited. It had been Sutton who had drawn him to Morton City when he had quit the Bureau—when his first marriage failed. The two crises were seamed together in his memory.

Neilly had longed to settle somewhere among honest, ordinary people. He wanted to put his neglected architecture degree into practice against his continuous disillusionment with his post-army years. The small town in central Washington State had seemed the right choice. He'd met Trudy Smith, a hazel-eyed

blond, whose easy smile and sharp wit captured him at a town meeting he had not succeeded in avoiding. They were married a year before Sutton's murder and the happiness they shared had softened the shock. Still, when Sutton was killed, Neilly noticed that a feeling of anxiety began to permeate the town as though to parallel his own loss, while apparently unrelated to its immediate cause. Few people had really known Jack Sutton. He had been an humble man of good works without popular recognition. Neilly sat quietly, wondering what umbra shadowed the public spirit as if it were bound to his own.

He broke his reverie and finished the check of his sketches, and then closed them into a vinyl folder. The larger altar platform, the new baptistery, and the redesigned social hall would satisfy Father Sims and assure the assent of the building committee. It was not the sort of thing he'd done before, but it was a good contract. He set the folder aside as the doorbell summoned. Shortly, he opened the door to welcome Calvin Greves.

"Mike, I'm glad you were home." Greves stepped inside as Neilly shook the proffered hand and spoke as warmly as he could.

"Glad you called, Cal, it's been a while. Come in." Neilly led Greves through the living room into the study he'd fashioned from an extra bedroom at the rear of his small house.

"Take the armchair. What can I get you, coffee?"

"Coffee is fine, thanks. Sugar, no cream." Greves sat down, laying his jacket and briefcase on a small table. He looked around the room. "Not bad, Mike, maybe I ought to retire too."

"My life's been better here, Cal. Maybe they *could* get along without you."

"Sure, but I'm not ready to let them. There's too much facing us now, both at home and abroad—all the troubles that have sprung up since Waco, you know."

Neilly knew all right.

"I was about to arrange a design conference this morning, Cal, but it can wait," he said, as he left to get the coffee.

THE MIND KEEPERS

His life had been good in Morton City and he wanted to keep it that way, keep doing the work he'd been schooled for and had abandoned for years: work he had now finally reestablished. He was glad Trudy was busy at school. Whatever Greves had to say, he hoped he'd be done with it quickly. He poured two cups from the coffeemaker he kept going most of the day, got out sugar and the non-dairy creamer and returned to the study.

Greves was thumbing through one of his design magazines.

"Must be a satisfying profession, Mike."

Neilly nodded, sipped his coffee, and waited for the other to declare himself. The clatter of someone delivering a load of lumber across the road carried through the open window. Neilly stood, closed it, and got to the point.

"Is this really a social visit, Cal, or are you here on Bureau business? What is it you have to say about Jack Sutton?"

Greves looked sharply over his raised cup.

"Just a hunch I have, Mike. Let me get to it in my own way. Besides, can't we just be friends for five minutes after all these years?"

"Sure, but is this really about you and me?"

"In one way, if it weren't, I wouldn't be here, Mike. But yes, I need your help on something. I think if you'll listen I can convince you there's a human duty involved. If it's not yours, it's still mine and someone else's. But I know you, Mike. I hope we'll be together on this."

"It's not just the Bureau, then? Something personal?"

Greves shrugged. "Will you listen?"

Neilly knew the man. He knew he would have to wait for whatever the hunch was that involved Sutton. He calmed the edginess from his voice.

"I know you're a good man, Cal. I'll listen, but I have to tell you my attitude hasn't changed toward what I saw the Bureau turning into—a paramilitary force with the powers of a secret police agency."

“Neither has mine, and I think I know more about your anger than anyone else’s in the organization and how it affected your family. I know you had a hard time with the Bureau’s background, COINTELPRO and all, when you first started. And I know the Waco mess seemed like the last straw to you. That’s the human aspect of the organization: people screw up. You can’t just ignore all the things that have gone right...”

“I missed the Murrah Building bombing. I’d already quit,” Neilly said grimly.

“So you did,” Greves said. For a moment his face reddened. He shifted restlessly, leaned forward as if about to retort, then relaxed and settled back again. “I didn’t come here for an argument, Mike. I need your help in this town: Morton City, Washington. Right here. Right now.”

There was muted desperation in his words. Sympathy and curiosity weakened Neilly’s resistance. He regretted mentioning the Murrah Building.

“Okay. I’m listening. How does this involve me?”

“It starts with the project at Yellow Butte. What do you know about that, Mike?”

“I’ve heard things about it. Nobody’s heard much more than gossip.”

“It’s being built by a loosely organized consortium of industry and it is controlled by the government through the Pentagon. The Eramond Corporation is the main contractor.”

“Eramond—computers and electronics?” Neilly began to sense what Greves was worried about. “How do you mean loosely organized?”

“Congress has too little effective oversight on directed energy technology. You can count the congressional experts on the fingers of one hand. Without careful oversight, Eramond might dominate more than the project. I’m disturbed by the man representing Eramond here. If what I suspect is true, we’re dealing with people likely to abuse power.”