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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Palmer, Catherine, date.

Fatal harvest / Catherine Palmer.

p. cm. — (Fatal harvest series ; #1)

ISBN 0-8423-7548-1 (sc)

1. Food industry and trade—Fiction. 2. Mission children—Fiction. 3. Fathers and sons—Fiction. 4. Starvation—Fiction. 5. Ranch life—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3566.A495 F38 2003

813'.54—dc21

2003005687

Printed in the United States of America

09 08 07 06 05 04 03

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



one

MATTHEW STRONG BIT THE CURLICUE off the top of his dipped, vanilla ice-cream cone. A shard of chocolate shell came loose and dropped right onto his jeans pocket. He glanced at the Princeton University recruiter in the driver's seat beside him. The man's gray eyes were focused on the turn into Jaycee Park, so Matt flicked the melting chocolate onto the floor of the brand-new Cadillac.

He wished he looked older than sixteen. If he'd known these two men were going to take him out of class today, he might have gone to a barber. As it was, his curly black hair fell well below his ears and over the collar of his shirt. He had on his blue-and-gold striped tie, as usual. His mom had given it to him before she died. He wore the tie every day, and the mustard stain below the knot was impossible to conceal. That, along with the blob of chocolate on his jeans, made him look like a food-fight casualty.

"A perfect score on the ACT," the recruiter said for the second time since they'd left Artesia High School. The man was solidly built and had a blond crew cut. His immaculate red tie stood out against the pin-striped gray of his suit. He drove toward a pair of

handball courts that had been built between the empty running track and the deserted softball diamond. "For a sophomore to perform so well is amazing."

Matt eyed his cone, wondering if he should attempt another bite. Why hadn't he ordered a sundae in a plastic bowl? Still, this wasn't too bad a deal. He had gotten out of his trigonometry class and had been treated to ice cream from Dairy Queen. In return, he would spend the next hour listening to this man and his colleague in the backseat tell him how great Princeton was. They'd probably show him some brochures and give him a pep talk. They'd go on and on about how much they wanted him to enroll and how many scholarships they could offer.

For a couple of months now—ever since he had gotten his ACT results—Matt had been flooded with phone calls and letters from universities. He wasn't too surprised at the score. One of his counselors told him he had the highest IQ ever recorded in the school system. These Princeton men were the first two college recruiters who had actually shown up looking for him, but he expected more would follow.

He would have liked his father by his side to help the conversation along. Matt could talk for hours about things that interested him—computers, logarithms, Latin grammar, the shifting of the earth's tectonic plates. Feeding the world's hungry filled his thoughts these days, and he was hard at work on a plan to accomplish that goal. But small talk? Forget it. For chitchat at school, he relied on his best friend, Billy Younger, to fill in his fumbling silences. But Billy was still in class, and Matt's father was never around. He'd be out on the ranch right now, plowing or feeding cattle or something.

"So you're interested in computers," the driver said. He pulled the Cadillac to a stop behind the solid concrete wall of the handball court. "We understand you're able to do some interesting things with a computer, Matthew."

"Yeah. Especially since I met Miss Pruitt. She's my computer

tech teacher." Matt pulled on the door handle and stepped out. At least this way, the chocolate bits would fall onto the ground instead of his jeans. "She doesn't have the latest hardware at school, but her software's okay. The main thing is, she knows the technology."

"Is this Miss Pruitt the one who helped you hack into the Agrimax mainframe?"

Matt paused at the unexpected question. "Uh . . . no, I didn't . . ." The two recruiters took a step closer, their eyes trained on his face. "I sent some e-mails . . . How did you know about Agrimax?"

"Did Jim Banyon give you those e-mail addresses, Matthew?"

The second man laid a hand on Matt's shoulder. He was tall and beefy, with an acne-scarred face and a football player's thick neck. "Answer our questions, boy."

"What do you mean?" Matt stiffened as the man backed him into the cold gray wall of the handball court. "Questions about my college plans?"

"About Agrimax."

"It's a food company. A conglomerate." Was this some kind of a test? Why did Princeton want to know about his research on feeding the hungry? How had they found out what he was doing?

"Agrimax is one of the world's top three suppliers of food," Matt rattled off, breathless and nervous, feeling like he was at a Scholar Bowl competition. "They have a global network of growers, processors, and retailers. They own hundreds of smaller companies, and they—"

"Who gave you access to the Agrimax mainframe?" The beefy man's grip tightened on Matt's shoulder. "Was it Jim Banyon?"

This wasn't what he had expected at all. Recruiters were supposed to lure you with nice offers, weren't they? Suddenly tongue-tied, Matt swallowed hard.

"Did Jim Banyon give you those e-mail addresses?" The blond man shoved him hard into the wall. His shoulders hit the concrete, and he gasped. "Answer me, kid."

"Addresses for the Agrimax executives? No, I . . . I got those myself. I opened a database. But not the mainframe. I don't hack, sir. I would never break into anyone's private computer system. You can tell Princeton that I—"

"You're writing a term paper. Where did you get your information?"

"How do you know that? Did you hack me?"

"We're doing the asking! Who told you about Agrimax? The genetic developments. The terminator genes. The cloning."

"It's all on the Internet. Anybody can—"

"Do you know Jim Banyon?"

"Yes, sir. He has a ranch near Hope. He used to work for Agrimax before he retired."

"What information did he give you?"

Matt stared down at the cone in his hand. The vanilla ice cream was oozing between the cracks in the chocolate shell and running onto his fingers. "Excuse me, sir," he said. "You're from Princeton, right?"

"Yeah, right." The blond man smirked at his companion. "Maybe he's not so bright after all. Look, kid, somebody downloaded a lot of data from the Agrimax mainframe. Technology. Patented information. Secret formulas. Was that you?"

"I told you I would never—"

"Shut up and answer the questions." The beefy guy grabbed a handful of Matt's hair and yanked his head to one side. Matt jerked in pain, and his cone fell to the ground. "Who has the information?"

Matt's mouth went dry. *Think. Think.*

"Answer me, kid!"

"I don't have it," he mumbled.

"Who does?" The scarred face came closer. "Does Banyon have it?"

"I don't have it! I promise."

"Who's got it?"

The man slammed Matt's head against the concrete. Bright lights swam before his eyes. He thought he was going to vomit. Or pass out. He tried to breathe.

"Search him!" the blond barked.

The beefy man grabbed Matt's arm, swung him around, and pushed him up against the wall. With one foot, he kicked Matt's legs apart.

Like a policeman. Like someone trained.

The man was going through his pockets now, taking out the keys to his pickup and then shoving them back. His wallet. They thumbed through it. Thieves? The men studied his driver's license, credit card, student ID. Then they jammed the wallet into his pocket.

"He's clean." The beefy man turned Matt again, one hand pinning his chest to the wall. "Somebody in this armpit town stole our data. Did you take it, boy? Or was it Banyon? Did he give it to you? Answer me!"

"No," Matt managed.

"No, what?"

"I don't have it!"

"Where is it?"

Matt couldn't breathe. He was going to die. "I . . . I don't have it."

With a roar of anger, the man grabbed Matt's shirt, swung him away from the wall, and then hurled him full force into it. His head smashed against the concrete. The sky flashed a brilliant white. His knees buckled, and the shining light faded to blackness.



"I'm starving."

The familiar bulk of a teenager leaning into Cole Strong's refrigerator could be only one person.

"Hey, Billy," Cole said as the kitchen door banged shut behind him. "Josefina made tamales yesterday. Zap yourself a few of those."

"Thanks, Mr. Strong." A celery stick in his mouth, Billy Younger straightened with the plateful of tamales and a jug of milk. He nudged the refrigerator door shut with his heel as he headed for the microwave oven. "You should have seen what they tried to pass off as lunch today at school. A pretzel with cheese sauce! Can you believe that? Matt and I talked about ditching trig and driving over to the Bell, but we didn't do it."

"You guys better not ditch trig." Cole set his Stetson on the counter and reached for an apple from the bowl. He had been plowing since lunch. The spring had been unusually wet for southeastern New Mexico, and now, in early May, he was behind. "You both have your sights on Harvard, MIT, or Stanford. Can't get into those places if you ditch your high school classes."

"Yeah, Mr. Strong, but you know Matt. He's gonna get in wherever he wants to go." Billy took the steaming tamales out of the microwave. "A couple of college bigwigs were at school today wanting to talk to him. Probably trying to convince him to skip his senior year." He shook his head. "So where is Matt, anyhow? We were gonna meet after school and go to Dairy Queen to talk about the mission trip to Guatemala. My dad doesn't want me to go. I waited for Matt, but he never showed."

Cole glanced down the long hall in the direction of his son's bedroom. It was unlike Matt to back out on anything he'd planned with Billy. The two sixteen-year-olds had been best friends since kindergarten, and nothing could separate them—not peer pressure, girls, sports, or even their increasingly divergent interests in life.

"Hey, Matt!" Cole barked down the hall. "Billy's here. You better come get a tamale—they're going fast."

Billy paused in wolfing down his snack and gave a wide grin. "Yeah, Matt," he shouted, his mouth full, "you stood me up, dude! What's with that?"

When his son didn't answer, Cole headed toward the bedroom. In the rambling adobe house that sat at the center of his large ranching and farming operation, terra cotta saltillo tiles kept the floors cool in summer and warm in winter. He trailed one hand along the undulating whitewashed wall.

"Matthew?" The door was open, and Cole stuck his head in. As always, his eyes took in a jumble of comic books, telescopes, computer equipment, dirty clothes, athletic shoes, and empty pizza boxes spread over every square inch of his son's large bedroom. Matt claimed that he alone fueled the orange soda industry. As evidence, empty cans lay scattered around the room. Trails of ants scurried into and out of the open tab holes.

Josefina had flatly refused to continue cleaning Matt's room. She even made a half-serious vow to quit her job if Cole ordered her to set foot in his son's domain. She adored the boy and had worked for Cole since his wife died eight years earlier. But as she liked to say, "I got my limits, Mr. Strong."

Scanning the room to make sure he could distinguish boy from junk, Cole shook his head. "He's not here, Billy," he called. "You sure you just didn't miss him at school?"

"No, sir, he was not there. I waited fifteen minutes." Billy joined Cole in the doorway. "I figured those college recruiters messed with his head. You know how Matt gets rattled by stuff like that. And he's been so weird lately anyway, with that research paper he's doing. Weirder than usual, I mean."

From anyone but Billy Younger, this statement would have made Cole bristle. He realized his son was different, but he wished others weren't so aware of it. Reading easily by age three, Matthew had also excelled in math and science. But the boy's social skills were worse than poor. Shy, gawky, nervous, Matt didn't help himself by regularly obsessing over one thing or another. Though he was a good-looking kid, with his mother's dark hair and his father's blue eyes, he had never been on a date and could claim only one close friend.

"What's the paper about?" Cole asked.

"You haven't heard him talking about it?"

"I don't think so."

Cole felt uncomfortable not knowing his son's activities, but he had a ranch to run. Taking control after his own father's death, Cole had barely saved the operation from bankruptcy. Now profitable, it had been cited by journalists and lawmakers as one of the finest examples of a family-owned ranch in the state of New Mexico. But the hard work had taken its toll on Cole's relationship with Matt—not that there had ever been much to build on.

Cole had acknowledged long ago that he and the boy had little in common. When they ate together, dinner was a mostly silent affair. When they went on a road trip, Matt hid behind a pair of sunglasses and the headphones of his portable CD player. In church these days, Matt sat with Billy and the rest of the youth group. Summers were no better. Matt spent all his free time parked in front of his computer, and unless it related to ranching, such current technology bewildered Cole. There had never been a strong relationship between father and son, and now it was almost nonexistent.

"He's writing about food or something," Billy said, wading into Matt's bedroom—as if walking across old issues of *MacWorld* and *PC Gamer* were perfectly ordinary. He approached the tangle of cords and computer equipment piled on his friend's desk. "It's like world hunger, you know? The term paper is for English, but we get to choose any subject we want. So Matt gets this idea from Miss Pruitt, who's like his guru. She teaches computers. Miss Pruitt is cool, though. She goes on all these mission trips with her church. And she really feeds the hungry."

"I haven't met Miss Pruitt."

"She's intense." He leaned over Matt's computer and pressed a key. The screen switched from a pattern of morphing colored shapes into a field of text. "You don't want to take her classes

unless you like to work. She expects a lot out of you, but Matt's into that kind of thing. He's always going in there and talking to her."

"Does he have a crush on her?"

"A crush!" Billy laughed, and Cole realized the term was a little out of date. "No, sir, you don't get a crush on Miss Pruitt. I mean, it's not that she's ugly, okay? She's just . . . wow, she's intense. That's all I can tell you."

He peered at the screen. "This is it. This is the first draft of Matt's term paper for English. It's about how these huge food companies are controlling the world."

"What?" Cole frowned. "Food companies doing what?"

"Come on, Mr. Strong—you sell all your beef to Agrimax, don't you? And your chile goes to Selena Foods, which is owned by Agrimax. Your alfalfa? Who gets that?"

"Homestead. Agrimax owns it."

"Okay, Mr. S, you're with me now." Billy was scrolling through text as he spoke. "I wonder where Matt's laptop is."

"Laptop?"

Billy gaped at him for a moment, as if staring at an alien. "It's that little computer he takes everywhere—about the size of a briefcase. Some people call it a notebook, you know?"

"That gray thing is a computer?"

"Hey, Mr. S, welcome to the twenty-first century. It pops open, and it has a screen and a keyboard inside. It has a battery, so it can go anywhere. Are you tracking with me on this?"

"I'm with you." Cole recalled the machine that his son lugged around along with a graphing calculator and several other gadgets whose names and functions were a mystery to Cole. As with all of Matt's equipment, the laptop was in a constant state of being "upgraded"—which, as far as Cole understood, meant he wrote countless checks, and then Matt bought and installed various circuit boards of all shapes and sizes.

"The laptop is probably in his truck," Billy said. "It has a

newer version of his term paper on it. Matt was showing me yesterday. He learned all about these food companies on the Internet, you know? And he went to see that guy who ranches near Hope—what's his name? who retired from Agrimax?"

"Jim Banyon?"

"Yeah, him. And Matt interviewed Miss Pruitt about her work with famine relief."

"What does famine relief have to do with Agrimax?"

"See, what happened is this. Matt's doing his research, and he gets this big idea that his term paper can be more than just a school assignment. It's a plan for Agrimax to help feed the hungry. So he starts crunching all these numbers on his computer, and he's e-mailing everybody—completely obsessed, you know? He can't talk about anything else. Anyway, the other day he tells me he was wrong about Agrimax helping feed the hungry. He says they're only gonna sell their food to the highest bidders, and they don't even want to hear his ideas. Basically they told him to back off."

A prickle ran down Cole's spine. "Back off? What was Matt doing?"

"Writing to them and bugging them—stuff like that." Billy straightened. "I told him to chill out. Just forget the whole thing. Write the term paper and get the usual A, and then drop it. But you know how Matt is. He gets these—"

"Obsessions. Yes, I know." Cole raked a hand back through his hair, damp from being under his hat all day. "Do you think Matt is in trouble, Billy? Legal trouble?"

"I don't know, Mr. Strong. He said they were threatening him."

"Threatening him! Why didn't he tell me?"

"I told him he should, but Mr. Strong, you're always out plowing, or on the road to Albuquerque to see your girlfriend. Matt doesn't much talk to anyone but me."

"You and Miss Pruitt." Cole left his son's bedroom and took

the long hall in five strides, as Billy followed. “Where’s the phone? Why does he always move the blasted phone?”

“Use mine. But I already tried calling him, Mr. Strong. He’s got his turned off.”

Cole took Billy’s cell phone and began searching down the list of numbers Josefina had written on the chalkboard near the refrigerator.

“You don’t know Matt’s cell number?” Billy asked, a tinge of disbelief in his voice. “Here, give me the phone.”

Billy punched a couple of buttons—clearly he had his best friend’s number programmed into his phone. “Hey, Mattman, where are you? You said we’d go to DQ after Spanish. I’m out at your place, and your dad’s semi-freaking about you. So call me, okay?” He pressed another button. “I left him a message.”

Cole hurled his apple core into the trash can. He *did* have to plow. The ranch took most of his time. And yes, since meeting Penny Ames, he had spent what spare time he had in Albuquerque. Now that they were engaged, she required a lot of his attention in planning the details of their fall wedding. She had chosen Tahiti for the honeymoon, and she insisted that Cole go ahead and get his passport, their tickets, and a new set of luggage.

Having a woman in his life again took time and energy, but Cole held every hope that Penny would bond them into the family he wanted—for himself and for his son. He felt more than a little guilty about the lousy job he had done as a father. But Matt had never been an easy kid to parent—wandering in a strange world of his own making. Cole had tried to understand the boy, but the older Matt got, the more distant their relationship grew. With the purchase of his first computer, Matt retreated almost completely into a realm of information, entertainment, and communication. Cole had left him alone, grateful his son was occupied and apparently happy.

He sighed. “I’ve got to finish that field. We plant next week.”

"Yeah, sure, Mr. Strong." Billy's brown eyes registered disappointment. "Tell Matt to call me tonight if he shows up."

"What do you mean 'if he shows up'? Of course he'll show up." Suspicion gnawed at Cole. "Where do you think he is, Billy? Tell me the truth."

"I don't know. Maybe he had a wreck. He's not that good of a driver, you know."

Cole clenched his teeth at the image of his son trapped inside a mangled truck in an irrigation ditch somewhere. For years, he had tried to get Matt out in the fields to practice his driving. The boy wasn't interested. But the minute he turned sixteen, of course, he insisted on getting his license. Cole had given his son the use of one of the ranch pickups—an old green Chevy with a rusty bed and balding tires.

"The only road he drives is the one between the high school and the house," he told Billy. "And you just got here. You'd have seen the pickup if he'd wrecked it."

"Yeah." Billy thought for a moment. "He might have gone out to see Mr. Banyon in Hope. The whole Agrimax thing, you know."

Cole grabbed the phone book from the counter and leafed through the Hope directory. Billy handed him the cell phone, and he dialed.

"Banyon," a voice said on the other end.

"Jim, this is Cole Strong—Matt's dad."

"Oh. Uh-huh."

"Listen, Matt didn't come home from school today, and I was wondering if he might be out there visiting with you."

"No." Banyon breathed heavily into the phone. "Uh, no. Tell him not to come out. Not to do that."

Cole paused, concern working its way up his spine. "You okay, Jim?"

"Uh." There was another pause and more labored breathing.

"No. Not . . . not really."

"Is there anything I can do for you? Do you need a doctor?"

Another silence. "Just . . . uh . . . tell Matt not to come. Definitely not to—"

The phone went dead. Cole stared at Billy.

"What's with Mr. Banyon?" the boy asked. "Is he sick?"

"I'm not sure." Cole tapped the phone book, weighing the idea of asking the sheriff to look in on the man. Banyon was in his sixties, but he appeared to be in robust health—not the type to have a heart attack or a stroke. Maybe he was struggling with his farm. On retiring from a white-collar job at Agrimax, Jim Banyon had bought land in New Mexico and was trying to grow cotton on it. Many local farmers had gone belly-up in recent years, and Cole had not predicted great success for his new neighbor. The depression and despair these men felt at the loss of their land and livelihood had led some to alcohol and others to the brink of suicide.

Uneasy over his son's whereabouts, Cole found his thoughts drawn to his work. It was the one thing that had seen him through his wife's illness and death, the growing estrangement from Matt, and the surge of emotion he had felt on meeting Penny.

"Well, I'm gonna head out and look for Matt," Billy said, grabbing the last tamale from the plate. "He might have gone to the library and forgotten what time it was."

"That would be like Matt."

"Yeah." The boy picked up an apple and dropped it into the pocket of his baggy jeans. "If he's not there, I guess I'll check the computer store. He's been eyeing this tiny USB flash drive he wants to buy. Sometimes he just goes over there and stares at it. Or maybe—"

"Wait. A US . . . B . . . what?"

"It's a gizmo that stores information." He paused. "Mr. Strong, Matt's the one who can tell you about computer stuff. Don't you ever ask?"

"I'm asking now. I'm asking you."

"A USB flash drive is a piece of computer hardware, but it's cool because it's so tiny you can hang it on a key chain. Like the size of a pack of gum or something." He held his thumb and forefinger a couple of inches apart. "You plug it into your computer's USB port—" Billy paused, regarded the obviously inept adult before him, and then rolled his eyes—"Universal Serial Bus. A USB port uses hubs to let you attach stuff like printers, digital cameras, game pads, joysticks, keyboards, and mice to your computer. And mini drives."

"All right," Cole said, trying to envision these electronic gadgets that were so commonplace to Matt and Billy.

"So you plug the mini drive into your USB port, and then you can load tons of data onto it—a whole gigabyte of information, which is way more than a floppy disk can hold. It's big-time expensive for a storage device, but Matt wants it because he's got so many programs. I think he's going to ask for it for his birthday."

"I see." Cole wondered how to translate "big-time expensive."

"Maybe Matt's over at the school talking to Miss Pruitt about his paper. He does that a lot. And I guess I could drive out to Hope and see what's up with Mr. Banyon. Or you could go."

Cole considered this option. Surely Matt hadn't gone far. He'd be home soon. "I'd better get back to that field," he said. "Call me when you find him, okay, Billy?"

Resentment flickered in the boy's eyes. "Mr. Strong, you don't even know where your phone is."

As Billy stalked out of the kitchen, letting the screen door slam behind him, Cole sucked down a deep breath. He thought of the field, half plowed. The ranch hands waiting for his return. The cows ready to calve. The seed that needed planting. The afternoon sun dipping toward the horizon.

Grabbing his Stetson, he headed out the door. "Billy, wait up!" he shouted. The boy braked his pickup.

"I'll check the library," Cole said. "You go to the computer store."

Billy grinned. "I'll meet you at Miss Pruitt's classroom in an hour—207 in the main building. She'll be there—she always works late."

Cole climbed into the car he kept for town trips. "An hour," he muttered. "That shoots this day."



"Please feed me." The small boy, his dirty face streaked with tears, held up a bowl made from an empty gourd. "Give me food, sir."

Josiah Karume could not resist laying his hand on the child's tiny head. How old would this boy be, he wondered. Five . . . or ten? Malnutrition had so withered and stunted his body it was impossible to tell. His dark skin stretched over the bones of his skull, and his parched lips—ringed with flies—were pulled back from his small white teeth. With a head of sparse orange hair and a swollen abdomen, the boy looked like so many other walking skeletons in the long line of refugees that snaked out behind him.

As Josiah scooped up a dollop of cornmeal mush fortified with protein powder and vitamins, someone tapped him on the shoulder. He poured the mush into the boy's bowl before turning to see who wanted him now.

"A phone call for you, Dr. Karume," his aide said.

Josiah handed his ladle to the man and hurried across the dry, sandy ground toward the makeshift Somalian headquarters of the International Federation for Environmental and Economic Development. As chairman-elect of the organization, he was forced to spend most of his time dealing with mountains of red tape in the Africa bureau of I-FEED in Khartoum, Sudan. But Josiah relished the rare opportunity to visit the camps where his hard work actually paid off.

"Karume here," he said into the phone that sat on a rickety card table inside the office.

"Josiah, this is Vince Grant."

"Vince! How good of you to phone. What news do you have for me today?"

"I'm just returning your call from Tuesday. Wanted you to know I'm still working on transportation. We've got the cornmeal at our Kansas facility, but the logistics are sticky."

Josiah's heartbeat faltered. "The paperwork in Khartoum is complete, Vince. I'm certain I shall have no trouble with the Sudanese authorities."

"I hear you, Josiah, but I just can't move the product without having all my ducks in a row."

"Ducks?" Though he'd obtained his undergraduate degree in London and had completed his doctoral work in Texas, Josiah still found American idioms confusing.

"I can't do anything until I've got the official papers in my hand," Grant clarified. "You understand the risk I'm taking with my stockholders. If I move this cornmeal, and it gets stuck in Khartoum . . ."

"Yes, yes. Of course I understand. Let's see, today is Thursday. I leave tomorrow morning for a conference in Paris, but I shall do all in my power to see that you receive official copies of the documents by the first of next week."

"Great. That's terrific. Well, I've got a meeting here in about five minutes. So how's the family?"

"They are doing well, thank you. And yours?" Josiah stared out the window at the blowing sand. As the sun beat down on the refugees, a young woman suddenly let out a wail and staggered out of line. Falling to her knees, she clasped her baby to her breast.

"Well, both girls are off at college, and my son's polo team won—"

"Excuse me, Vince," Josiah cut in. "I have an emergency here. I shall be in touch."

Setting down the receiver, he shook his head. As he left the

office, he could hear the other women begin to keen. But they would not leave their places in line to lend comfort to their comrade. They were hungry, after all, and it had become commonplace to mourn the death of yet another child.



"I'm famished." Jill Pruitt bit into the Big Mac her colleague had carried in from the fast-food strip near the high school. "Mmm. Hey, pass the fries."

"Fries? Jill, I'm surprised at you!" Marianne laughed. "I thought you were strictly a broccoli-and-turnip-greens girl."

"I can go for the occasional lard-soaked French fry," Jill said, giving the math teacher a sly grin. Jill's fellow instructors at Artesia High School knew all about her dedication to famine relief and her interest in computers and technology. But there was a lot they didn't know, and she enjoyed throwing them off-kilter once in a while.

She scanned the row of grades in her ledger, enjoying the symmetry of the numbers. "You realize most of what we're eating in these burgers was grown outside the United States," she spoke up. "Including the beef."

"Not again, Jill. Could we just finish figuring these midterm grades and go home? It's Thursday. My favorite show is on tonight, and I refuse to miss it."

Jill took another fry. "When you grill a burger, the only part that's American is the fat that drips onto the coals. The rest comes from who-knows-where."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You told me before." Marianne sipped a soda as she punched grades into her calculator. "You won't be eating any burgers when you get to Pakistan, you know. Holy cows, and all that."

"Pakistanis are Muslims, girl. It's Hindus who don't eat beef."

"Whatever. So when do you leave? Aren't you going to take a break after school lets out?"

"A week, and then I'm outta here." Jill thought about her battered old suitcase—already packed with cool cotton dresses and a pair of sandals. Unmarried at thirty-six—a long-term relationship had ended the year before—she had set aside her longing for a husband and children to concentrate on other interests. Seven years ago a short mission trip to Honduras had lit a fire inside her. She had seen poverty, hunger, homelessness. She had felt the suffering of the people.

From then on, her life had been different. Everything became centered on obeying Christ—on putting her faith in action. The coming trip to Pakistan particularly excited her. As a volunteer with the International Federation for Environmental and Economic Development, she would go to the very heart of the country's most desperate area. She had renewed her passport, gotten her vaccinations, and was champing at the bit to get on with the adventure.

"I'm so pumped about this trip, Marianne," she said. "I can hardly wait. Six weeks in Pakistan! I'll be right across the border from Afghanistan. Can you imagine?"

"You couldn't pay me enough to go there. I can't believe you spend your hard-earned salary to volunteer in places like that. I admire your dedication, Jill, but frankly, I'd be too scared."

"I love it. Did I tell you a group of my computer tech kids signed up to take care of my garden the whole time I'm away? They are so good. It's like they're doing their part, you know?"

Jill tucked a blonde corkscrew curl behind her ear and frowned at a row of grades. Matthew Strong was falling behind in Web site-design class again. Matt had so much raw talent, but he typically failed to turn in several assignments each term. She had watched this pattern for two years, and she worried that this time he might bottom out altogether.

"Have you ever had Matthew Strong in class?" she asked Marianne.

"I've got him in trig right now. Weird kid. But brilliant. He could do anything he wanted—if he'd bother to turn in his homework."

"Same thing with me. I hope he hangs in till the end of the year."

"Did you hear about his ACT score? Good grief, he could go to MIT today if he wanted. A couple of college recruiters showed up at my classroom this afternoon to talk with him, and he never came back. So there goes another homework assignment."

"Matt's only a sophomore, for pete's sake." Jill took another bite of her burger. "These colleges need to back off and let him be a normal teenager."

"Matthew Strong will never be a normal teenager."

"If his father paid more attention to him, he might learn some social skills. His mom died of cancer, you know. The dad is hardly ever around."

"Lots of kids have absentee parents, but they don't turn out like Matt. What about that tie he wears all the time?"

Jill tucked the ringlet behind her ear for the hundredth time that hour. Even as she reached for one last fry, the curl popped back out and bounced around her chin. "It's just Matt's style, I guess."

"Style? That tie is gross beyond belief." Marianne snapped her gradebook shut. "Done! I'm taking off. You'll be okay here, I guess."

"No problem. I'm almost through."

As Marianne grabbed her purse, she paused near Jill's chair and leaned down. "Uh-oh. Speak of the devil," she murmured. "I hope this is for you, Miss Pruitt, because I'm gone."

Jill swung around to see a tall, broad-shouldered man step into the classroom. His chambray shirt and faded denim jeans complemented dusty cowboy boots and an old leather belt. He took off his hat to reveal a thatch of short, spiky, brown hair, and he was looking at her with a pair of blue eyes that could belong to only one man.

"Matthew Strong's father." She stood and thrust out her hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"Cole Strong." His grip was firm, his palm callused. A working man.

"I'm Jill Pruitt, computer ed. And that was Marianne Weston, Matt's trig teacher. You'd better run if you want to catch her."

"You'll do," he said. The blue eyes bored into her. "I'm looking for my boy. Seen him today?"

"He was in my class this morning. Why?"

"He didn't come home after school. Billy Younger tells me Matt likes to stay late and talk to you."

Jill sensed a thread of suspicion in the man's voice. "He drops by between classes or at lunch. He's been working on a term paper—"

"Food, yeah, I know. Billy says you fired him up on it."

"I mentioned my work with hunger relief. Matt was interested, so we discussed it. I gave him some names and addresses to use as sources. Have you checked with Jim Banyon out at Hope? He—"

"Matt's not there." Cole turned his hat in his hands. "Billy says he got crossways with some Agrimax honchos. He was trying to push your ideas on them, and they warned him to back off."

"My ideas?"

"My son doesn't know anything about famine relief, Miss Pruitt."

"Oh yes he does, Mr. Strong." She returned his appraising gaze. "He uncovered a wealth of information, and he's very excited about it."

"Obsessed, you mean."

She bristled. "I wouldn't call it that."

"You would if you knew Matt."

"Excuse me, sir, but I do know your son. I know him very well."

"Then where is he?"

She paused to collect herself. In fifteen years as a teacher, she had faced a lot of angry parents. Frustration, concern for a child's GPA, confusion about assignments—all these things drove them to

confrontation at the school. Jill had learned to back off, take it slow, and insist on civil treatment. But the dominating stance of this man, the hostility in his voice, and the insinuations he had tossed out were getting on her nerves. If he were a more involved parent, she would sympathize with his concern. But she knew for a fact that Cole Strong had shown little interest in his son's life at school before now.

"I'm not sure where Matt is, Mr. Strong," she told him. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm averaging midterm grades."

"Did he go to all his classes today?" He took a step toward her.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have access to that infor—" Jill caught her breath. "Wait a minute. Two men . . . college recruiters, I think . . . asked to meet with him during his trigonometry class. Marianne—Mrs. Weston—told me he never came back."

"Who were these guys? Which university?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, look it up." He gestured at her laptop. "You're the computer wizard. Open the file or whatever, and find out who got permission to take my son out of class."

Despite her irritation with Matt's father, she felt a stab of concern about the boy. "I don't have code access to office documents, Mr. Strong."

"Then break the code. Isn't that what you've been teaching my son to do?"

"Sir, I do not appreciate your tone. And I can assure you—"

"Look, lady." He stuffed his hat onto his head. "My son is missing. Do you get that? Matt did not come home from school, and he's not there now. Billy Younger and I have combed this town and haven't found hide nor hair of the boy. Now you're telling me two strangers showed up at school and took my son off some-place—and he never came back? And I'm supposed to be nice and polite about it?"

Jill swallowed. "I'll call Mrs. Weston at home. Maybe she can tell us who the men were."