

AGENT Vx



Stephen William ROWE

AGENT Vx

Stephen William ROWE

First published in France in 2019

Copyright © Stephen William Rowe

The moral right of Stephen William Rowe to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the author.

Web and contact: <http://www.stephen-William-rowe.com>

Printed in France by: Interface/Messidor, Saint-Martin d'Hères, France.

Dépôt Légal: Bibliothèque de France, Novembre 2018

ISBN. 978-2-9555882-4-6 : Paper Version

ISBN. 978-2-9555882-5-3 : Electronic version

Acknowledgments:

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor John Fothergill and to Paul Philippe Giband, for their inestimable help in proof-reading the manuscript. Thanks to the owners of Lac Perdu, in Quebec for their help and suggestions.

Stephen William ROWE

Biography:

Doctor Stephen William ROWE is an industrial research scientist. He specialises in the physics of ultra-high voltage electrical arcs and electrical insulation.

He is a Fellow of the both English IET and the French SEE and is author and co-author of almost a hundred scientific and conference papers.

An accomplished musician, Dr Rowe is also a prolific songwriter.

Born in the UK, he now lives in in the French Alps, not far from Grenoble

The author's two previous novels, "Bait" and "Hate" describe earlier adventures of Dr William Stone and his friends.

Introductory Note

This story is a work of fiction, inspired by a series of events which really happened to me.

I amused myself by inventing possible consequences of each of these events and by embroidering them with fictional characters.

Apart from these events, everything else is pure fiction. All the characters involved are products of my imagination, and any resemblance of the characters to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

The isolated Lac perdu in Quebec, its islands, rivers and main characteristics, exist as described.

Website: <http://www.stephen-William-rowe.com>

Chapter 1

Swinging my suitcase up into the baggage compartment, I dropped my laptop and folders onto the aisle seat. I then eased myself across to the window, overlooking the wing. The evening flight from Detroit would get me into Montreal at about ten thirty.

I had flown in from Knoxville, Tennessee an hour earlier, where I had attended an international scientific conference.

The presentation I had given of my research work had been well received, and I was naturally feeling pleased with myself. As a freelance consultant, every well-received publication helps boost professional reputation and visibility, and nearly always leads to new contracts.

Admittedly, one distinguished professor had been less than enthusiastic. He had felt it his duty to point out what he considered to be a weak point in my experimental setup. However, I had anticipated this and had, not unnaturally, prepared a convincing defence. The man was eventually forced to accept defeat, which he did with a scowl.

I was naturally in an excellent mood and now looking forward to an agreeable Sunday, wandering around Montreal.

As I opened my computer, a couple of young American women stopped beside me in the aisle.

"Excuse me, sir." The first and prettiest one leant forward and looked me straight in the eyes. "I think you're sitting in our places."

The girl had lovely blue eyes, and I dragged out my ticket, nodded my mistake and slid back out of the seat.

"Sorry."

"That's fine."

"Well!" I joked "You've got the best seats then."

"Really?" She cocked her head on one side.

"Yes. You'll be able to see the wing coming off."

The blue eyes blinked at me, and she shook her head, "Wise guy," she said, slipping herself into my previous place.

This had not been a good opening move on my part. Assuming that people I like the look of must have the same sense of humour as myself had frequently led to a certain coolness in burgeoning relations. However, I never seemed to learn. I sometimes think that the majority of people have no sense of humour at all, so they write me off as peculiar, odd, a crank, or a weirdo.

There was suddenly a noise, and the plane shook. The captain's voice then came over the intercom and announced that a pallet transporter had rammed the fuselage. He was waiting for the damage to be inspected.

"See!" I said, leaning forward and speaking between the seats.

"Wise guy." came the reply from the other girl, who didn't have blue eyes, "Hear that Sandra?" The two exchanged looks and rose eyebrows.

Leaning back, I winced and glanced across the aisle at an impeccably dressed American businessman. The man looked back at me with a pitiful expression, shaking his head sadly. I shrugged back, and he pulled a face again from behind his dark glasses.

We had met earlier in the first-class waiting room and had discovered a shared enthusiasm for cross-country running. The man was halfway through the process of growing a beard and was perpetually scratching at it. Laughing, he explained that he had always had one but had recently shaved it off to please his wife.

"She had never seen me without my beard," He smiled. "But once it was gone, she decided I looked much better with it than without it," he sighed.

We went on to chat about many things, and I told him I presently lived and worked near Grenoble in France. The man had always wanted to visit Paris but had never managed to find the time. Consequently, I did my best to

Agent Vx

promote the place in which I have spent many happy holidays.

Later on, over a glass of cold beer, we discussed possible training runs for my Sunday morning. He even drew me a detailed map, showing the critical turns, not to miss.

We then discovered a shared enthusiasm for botanical gardens. I was further surprised to learn that the man was also one of the administrators of the botanical gardens in Montreal. I now had a free entrance ticket in my jacket pocket.

Sitting back in my seat, I gazed out over the wing then realised that I had left my folder on the floor beside the seat in front. I leant forward once more.

"Excuse me."

I heard a sigh, "Now what?" came the exasperated answer.

"I left my folder on the floor. Sorry. Could you pass it back please?"

The blond leaned forward and retrieved it. On the front of the green folder, I had marked with a black felt tip, Toxic Gases / Nerve Gases. The girl read this and showed to her friend. "Nice thing to be reading mister."

"That's my job. Well, part of it."

"One hell of a nice job! You English?"

"Ah ha," I thought to myself, "this looks like a good opening."

"Yes."

"On your way home?"

"Yes." She handed the folder back between the chairs.

"Good." She said. And that was that.

Nevertheless, snubbed as I was, I was still full of enthusiasm and decided to write up my report, and so leave my Sunday entirely free.

Now, while at Knoxville, I had paid a visit to the world-renowned 'Oak Ridge' research facility. The place is famous for its decisive role in building the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima. I didn't know what went on there today, and I still

don't, but I did know that some of the world's best specialists on toxic gasses worked there.

I'll correct that statement slightly, as the majority of what the general public call nerve gases are not gases at all, but liquids. Mind you that wouldn't make much difference if you happened to be on the wrong end of an attack using these substances.

My presence there, however, was nothing to do with military conflicts and was entirely above suspicion. At least that's what I thought at the time.

I had been commissioned by an international organisation to write the technical annexes of a new document. The latter was to clarify safety concerns linked to the use of a specific synthetic gas. I was also working as a consultant to a big Danish Magnesium foundry which also used this gas. This was because magnesium is extraordinarily flammable and reacts violently with the oxygen in the atmosphere. The processing of molten magnesium is thus carried out under a protecting blanket of an inert and dense gas. The best gas for this purpose is Sulphur-Hexafluoride or SF₆ for short. However, trouble started when someone discovered that its decomposition at high temperatures could create highly toxic by-products. These by-products turned out to be ten times more toxic than most military nerve gases. Even though in everyday situations, the danger was minimal, the press and trade unions got hold of the subject, and all hell was let loose. In cases such as this, the only reasonable procedure is to publish the truth.

First, however, one must get at the truth, and it was for this reason that I had been asked to visit 'Oak Ridge' national laboratory.

While there, I was privileged to see samples of several of the deadliest nerve agents known to man, of which Sarin, Phosgene and Agent-Vx were prime examples.

I was reassured to find that the security precautions surrounding safeguarding, the storage and handling of

these products were truly impressive. Such precautions are, however, not surprising, when once one realises that a single bottle-full would be enough to kill the population of a small town.

Having gleaned much useful information, I was now travelling to Montreal, to meet another respected group of engineers and scientists. In this laboratory, the research scientists were studying the use of SF₆ gas in the electrical engineering industry. Their objective was the protection of maintenance staff, and this was thus much closer to my brief.

The evening before leaving Knoxville it was raining, and I took a walk around the dreary town centre before dinner.

I didn't do this because there was anything interesting to see, but because I was bored stiff. On the way back, I bumped into one of the other participants of the conference. He was doing the same thing and for the same reason.

We didn't particularly appreciate each other, but boredom is a hell of a handicap when far from home on a Friday night. So for once, we ignore each other. We even agreed to eat together, which shows just how bored we were.

Now, my dinner companion was a well-known American scientist but had several shortcomings in my eyes. Firstly he had an overly professional approach to everything and took almost every comment I made in its literal sense. Secondly, he did not seem to have any sense of humour at all and finally. He was not very pleasant to look at.

The evening was inevitably long and tedious. Worse still, I somehow managed to leave the man with the conviction that I questioned the religious rules which formed the foundations of his way of life. He misinterpreted my smiles as sneers and my gestures as signs of hostility against his origins and his beliefs.

I don't know why it is, but I often seemed to be getting into trouble in this way.

Stephen William ROWE

However, compared with the staggering episodes which I was about to live through, this incident would soon seem of negligible importance

Chapter 2

The following morning, I breakfasted quietly in my hotel on the outskirts of Montreal. I lazily leafed my way through the Sunday newspaper then, after scanning the titles, turned my attention to the city street map.

On this, I followed the map for the training run of about ten kilometres that the businessman had drawn for me.

The relatively geometrical layout of the town convinced me that the planned route would be easy to follow and that taking the map along would be unnecessary.

There had been something vaguely familiar about the man, but at the time I didn't attach any significance to it, as one meets so many people when one is a frequent traveller.

I had pointed out that in Montreal, my hotel was on the left bank of the St Laurent river, and he had explained that I merely had to cross the Jacques Cartier bridge, then everything would be very straightforward.

Had I been a little less confident about things, I would have taken the map along, but I wasn't, so I didn't. I expected the run to take me about forty minutes, so I left all my papers in the suitcase.

The day was lovely, so I donned my running shoes, shorts and a sleeveless shirt, and set off. By then it was about ten-o'clock which was a bit late, but then again, I was in no hurry.

The first inkling that my plans were wrong somewhere came when it took me longer to reach the beginning of the bridge than I had expected. I next discovered that this famous bridge was far longer than it had looked on the map and later found out that it is a little over three kilometres long.

At this point, I should have realised that the route traced out for me by the other man must be far longer than the ten kilometres he had announced. Had I done so and revised my plans, I would have avoided a great deal of trouble.

Why I did not, remains a mystery to this day. As it was, I kept straight on up the long straight main road towards the inter-city motorway, where I planned to turn left.

By the time I had got about halfway there, the sun was up, and I was sweating.

At about this time my shoelace came undone, and I stopped by a bench under the shadow of a large tree to tie it. Having done this, I remained with my foot on the seat a few moments, getting my breath back.

Still gazing in an unfocused way in front of myself, I became aware of the lace curtain in the downstairs window of the house in front of me, being carefully drawn aside. A broad-shouldered body and a close-cropped head came into view and scowled at me.

Now, knowing how easy it is to get into trouble on this continent, I thought it prudent to get away before any misunderstanding arose. I turned and started off up the road and, for some reason, a cold, unreasonable fear crept into me. I accelerated as fast as I could up the gently rising hill.

This was precisely what I should not have done because the inhabitant immediately got the wrong end of the stick.

Why fate should have chosen to stop me in front of this house is a further mystery. The owner just happened to be a certain Mister Fortin, of which more later. In any case, I sprinted off, took a left, then a right and a left again then slowed down having covered a good mile. I was now sweating hard under the cloudless sky and regretted that I had come out without anything to drink.

Of course, I was now off my intended route and, without a map of any sort, was more or less lost.

Brilliant!

The most sensible thing to do at this point would have been to ask directions back to the Jacques Cartier bridge and to have called it a day. Why I did not do this is hard to understand — the remains of my ancestor's code-of-honour perhaps, or maybe pure stubbornness.

The result was that I guessed where I must be and headed off following that idea. Luckily for me, I was in excellent physical form. I had been running cross-country competitions almost every second weekend for months, and so felt only a mild discomfort due to thirst.

By some miracle, I suddenly found myself directly outside the gateway of a public garden. I sighed with relief because I remembered this from my examination of the map. Above all, I remembered noting that the numerous roads and tracks marked went right across it and came out again close to the waterfront. Once there, it would be simple to follow the river back to the bridge.

I had now been running for about an hour and a half and was starting to feel that enough was enough. I ran under the gateway and followed the main route up the hill, when I suddenly realised that this was not a public garden at all but a vast, impeccably kept cemetery. Most of the people walking here were in their best clothes, were generally old and above all shot me horrified glances as I ran past in shorts and a running vest, my body covered with sweat.

I was naturally embarrassed at my intrusion into their silent grieving, but what alternative had I? This was the only route I remembered, and my dehydrated mind was focussed on the single task of getting down to the riverside. Once more I accelerated hard, knowing that I should soon reach the summit and then speed down and out of the other side.

However, as I came around the corner of the road at the highest point, I stopped abruptly.

There, straight in front of me, where the road should have dived down the hill, was an eight-foot metal fence barring the way. This unexpected barrier stretched off into the distance on both sides and was not marked on the map. I gazed at this for a moment then without hesitation I ran up to it, and regardless of the horrified gasps from the people nearby, clambered over and jumped down onto the cropped grass beyond. Without hesitating further, I dashed off

downwards and soon joined a tarmac track lined by closely planted Thuja trees which shut out the view on both sides. I ran on under this welcome shadow for some time without seeing anyone. Then, at last, I came to a sharp bend in the road and started to turn when I suddenly stopped short and leapt into the cover of the nearby bushes.

In the near distance, I saw a gateway, which led out onto the riverside road. However, standing by it, I saw two uniformed and armed guards.

"Christ," I thought "Where the hell am I now?" I peeped out from my hiding place. "Oh, bloody hell" I whispered to myself, "now I really am in trouble."

I guessed that I must have got myself into some sort of military camp. I was wrong in this analysis, but I could think of no other explanation at the time. In any case, this smelled of big trouble, if I was found inside a high-security base like this, with no papers etc...

Once again, I was unable to reason clearly and took the only option which seemed plausible.

I waited for the guards to enter their little lodge and close the door. I then jogged down behind the trees until I was within a hundred yards from the gates.

Scanning the doorway for a few seconds, I spotted the silhouettes of the two men moving further into the room. I then left the cover and sprinted down the road and sped past the gate-house at top speed.

I turned the corner, crossed the road and sprinted off as fast as my legs could carry me. From behind me I just had time to hear a cry of Hey! Before turning another corner.

My heart was thumping like a machine gun inside me, and my temples were throbbing. I sprinted around another corner and looking up, my courage almost failed me.

Straight ahead of me, I saw the bridge, but it was still several miles away. This meant I must have at least five more miles left to run and the sun was now high in the sky, and I was aware of the unmistakable signs of severe dehydration setting in. I realised that I would not be able to run much

further, so seeing a signpost above the pavement I darted through a doorway into a cool interior.

I found myself in a dark bar, being stared at by a fat barman and a single seated customer. In any case, I was out of sight now so even if the military guards drove this way they would see no one.

I was sweating, and my arms and face were running with water. I held up my hand to the barman and leant forward my hands on my knees waiting to get my breath back.

After a few seconds, I stood and addressed the barman. "I don't suppose I could ask you for a glass of water, could I?"

He turned to me after exchanging a look with his customer. "This is a bar, not a public drinking fountain."

I was too tired to argue. "Yes, yes I know I'm sorry." I wiped the drips from my forehead. "I'm not from Canada and came out for a run without my wallet or water and got lost."

The two men exchanged glances and tut-tutted shaking their heads.

"My hotel is over the other side of the Cartier bridge."

"The Jacques Cartier bridge." corrected the barman.

"Yes sorry. If you let me have a glass of water, I promise to come back and buy a round for everyone, this evening."

"Ah!" smiled the customer sitting up, "Now he's talking sense eh!"

The barman shook his head in pity and filled a pint glass with water and handed to me.

I took it and gulped down the lot. "God! you saved my life."

He screwed up his face. "Not sure that's a good thing," he grunted.

I handed him back the glass. "Could you see your way to giving me another one?"

He grunted again and handed me the second glass which I emptied almost as quickly as the first.

"I don't know how to thank you."

"That's okay," he said gruffly

I waved my hand and trotted back out into the blazing sun.

I honestly intended to return that evening and honour my promise, but my objective now was to get back to the hotel. In any case, they remembered me for reasons which I could not have suspected at the time, and I gave them a subject for numerous heated debates during the following few weeks.

The run along the water-front route was a dreary one because I had no view of the river at all for the most part. What is more, it was long and straight and devoid of the slightest shadow for as far as I could see.

I was now limping, as my right foot was hurting.

When I eventually reached the level of the bridge, I was once more disheartened, at discovering that I could see no way up onto it, and therefore had to run another quarter of a mile inland, to get onto it.

No, it would have been nice if the story ended here, but it certainly did not.

As I struggled on my left foot started to give me trouble too, something which had never happened to me before. I was an experienced runner but rarely ran on tarmac roads, preferring cross-county tracks which were always softer under foot and thus less damaging to the body. In any case, I had no choice, so I carried on as well as I could, having now covered between twelve and fifteen miles.

At last the road levelled out as it crossed the Saint Helene island in mid-river.

In the distance, I spotted a solitary figure walking ahead of me. The person stopped beside a tall locker, used for storing the repair men's tools, and leaned over the iron girders to look down at the island below.

As I watched, the person put a bag on the locker and took out something which I assumed to be a camera. Then, to my amazement, the figure clambered up onto the top of the wooden locker and leaned over the girder.

"Christ," I thought, "I'd never take a risk like that for the sake of a damn photo."

Agent Vx

And then suddenly the figure was gone. "Balls" I cried, "Must be crazy to get down on the outer structure to get a better view".

It seemed to take an age before I reached the place where the photographer had left his gear. However, what I found was a handbag and a pair of high heeled shoes. I leaned over and looked down, and my mouth fell open.

There on the tarmac, far below me, spread-eagled, was the body of a woman.

If I had been less exhausted by my run, I might have reacted differently, but as it was, I felt strangely detached. I became aware that my mouth was hanging open and I snapped it shut, as a car screeched to a halt below me and people appeared, running from all sides.

I looked on for a few seconds then, jumped back and sprinted off towards my Hotel, leaving the bag and shoes where they were.

Chapter 3

I believe that was the fastest five kilometres I have ever run. To be able to find the energy to do it after such a gruelling morning amazes me to this day.

I dashed into the hotel entrance hall, running with sweat and limped to the desk.

"Hurt your leg, sir?" asked the man behind the counter

"On the bridge..." I blurted out, "A Girl. She just jumped over."

The man behind the desk looked up and nodded.

"Call the police. I think she's dead." I said breathlessly.

The man nodded again, apparently unperturbed by my breathless announcement. "Sunday morning sir." he said and nodded, "It's nearly always Sunday morning."

I gasped, "Don't we need to call the police?"

"Oh no. Not a good idea. That's asking for trouble, man."

He leant under the counter and handed me over a newly ironed and folded bathroom towel. "Here. Dry yourself, and I'll explain. Need a drink?"

I shook my head.

"It's nearly always girls and frequently Sunday morning. There are a lot of unstable people in Montreal, these days you know." He shook his head. "Some of them only want to make a statement. Those climb up the suspension cables to try to get right up there on the summit."

He smiled and shook his head sadly. "They nearly always get scared stiff trying to get up there, and the fire brigade has to come and get them down again." He nodded. "Others are more determined and want to show someone, or the whole world, that they have gone too far. Those throw themselves off the middle into the river. The shock of the cold water usually brings them to their senses, and they are then rescued or save themselves."

Then he shook his head sadly. "Then there are the ones who really feel they have nothing left to live for or are drugged out of their minds or both. Those walk to the high

point above the road and jump. They know that doing this they'll have zero possibility of survival."

He leant over the counter and put a big hand on my shoulder. "I'm Sorry you should have had to witness one of those, man."

I sighed a deep sigh and let my arms fall. "Christ!" was all I could say.

The man shook his head and tutted. "You'd better get showered and dry before you catch a cold, then come back down an I'll give you a beer."

I smiled at him. "Thanks," I said and limped to the lift.

After my shower, I dressed and realised that I felt surprisingly detached from what I had witnessed. It was almost as if I had learnt this second hand from a friend of a friend. I limped my way back down to the lobby, but the man had gone, and a young woman of about twenty had taken his place. I wanted to go over the matter in more detail with the man who had seemed friendly and experienced, but this was apparently out of the question with such a young person. Instead, I asked if they happened to have any cream for sprains in the tiny little general shop they had just inside the main doors.

Amazingly they did. The tiny shop had all sorts of things and more surprisingly still, exactly what I needed.

"Lots of people go running on Sundays from here, so we keep all that sort of thing handy." she smiled.

The tube cost me next to nothing, and I went back up to my bedroom and spread a big dollop of the strong-smelling stuff on each foot, massaging it in with one hand and drinking cold beer from the mini-bar with the other. I then lay back on my bed and watched the news on the TV for half an hour.

When I did get up, I was amazed that neither of my feet hurt anymore and that I could walk normally. I hadn't expected the stuff actually to do what it was advertised to do, and I have never found anything which was so effective since.

All the same, I must admit that it smelt powerful though and was probably so hellishly bad for the environment or for humans, that it has since been withdrawn from the market.

Anyway, feeling much better and almost as if the morning's events had not happened to me but to someone else, I went down and ate a hamburger in the bar accompanied by another beer.

I had planned to visit the botanical gardens that afternoon, so I checked out the route. The girl in the bar said it was "miles and miles" and anyhow much too far to walk. Too hot also." She turned to the phone, "Best to get a taxi. Want me to call one?"

I decided that this was the most comfortable option so a few minutes later I was whisked away and back across the bridge again. Just before leaving, however, the woman at the desk called me, "A phone call for you Doctor Stone."

"For me?" I was astonished because I didn't think I had told anyone where I would be staying. Taking the phone, I heard a smooth, professional female voice.

"Doctor Stone, I'm so pleased to have caught you. My director..." and here she mentioned the name of a well-known Canadian politician, "asked me to do all I could to locate you."

"Ah!" I said, "Why was that."

"Well," she went on smoothly as if reading a text "he has heard a lot about what you are trying to do about straightening out the question concerning toxic by-products."

"Ah!" I said again.

"He would very much like to see how he can help get things moving over here. As you probably know this is one of his pet subjects, along with reducing stockpiling of dangerous substances."

I had never heard of this but was not against discussing the question.

"He has a big meeting this evening." She continued, "and would like to invite you so that the two of you can dine

afterwards.” She hesitated. “Would that be possible Doctor Stone?”

I said it would, and she gave me the address and the time, then rang off.

Well, a free meal, paid by a prominent Canadian politician, was not to be scoffed at, but I was not unduly impressed. I was however astonished that he should have been able to locate me. In any case, I had three or four hours free and intended to enjoy them by seeing what Montreal’s botanical gardens had to show me. Furthermore, I had a free VIP entrance ticket...

The taxi dropped me off at the main entrance in the corner of the gardens.

Now as botanical gardens go, Montreal boasts a big one as they go. It covers several square miles and in summer is a delightful place to spend an afternoon, looking at the magnificent displays of flowers and shrubs.

The rose gardens are excellent, as are the various thematic gardens.

Perhaps the main feature at Montreal is a vast arboretum, containing thousands of trees. The disadvantage, however, is that to enable senior citizens to visit the gardens, they have organised a constant series of guided tours on miniature trains. This would have been acceptable had they not felt it necessary to add loud-speakers to them blaring out an incessant commentary amplified to a volume compatible with the age group for which it catered. The noise naturally entirely spoils the peaceful atmosphere of the gardens for everyone else.

It was when walking down one of the long shady avenues, however, that a part of the many litres I had drunk since that morning, needed to be released. Unluckily, I was by then right at the far end of the gardens and a long way from the public conveniences.

Looking about me and finding myself alone, I ducked behind the trunk of a big tree and proceeded to answer the call of nature. However, no sooner had I begun the task with

an unsuppressed sigh, then one of those accursed train-loads of tourists swung into view around a corner.

I ducked back out of sight and tried to keep the trunk between myself and the train as I finished the job in hand.

“Now on your left,” bawled out the speaker “you will be able to see a magnificent example of the genus”

The train slowed, and a hundred faces turned to study my tree. I flattened myself against the rough trunk in an attempt to remain hidden.

However, due to the length of the train, it was evident that this was going to be impossible, so I hurriedly tucked the troublesome appendix back into place.

Twenty or so senior citizens glared at me, wondering what on earth I was up to trying to hide from them behind a tree.

One thing was clear to them all, and this was that I was indeed up to no good. I was probably one of those horrid drug addicts doing whatever such degenerates do in a public garden.

Disgraceful!

For the second time that day I felt it better to avoid any trouble in case they decided to complain, which of course several of them did intend to do, and in the strongest possible terms.

Under the circumstances, having completed my tour of the gardens, I walked as rapidly as possible back to the entrance and sacrificing my visit to the garden’s shop, took a relaxed taxi trip back to the hotel.

As I jolted my way back across the city, I reflected with a smile that fate had certainly thrown a good number of unusual events across my path that Sunday.

Had I had an inkling as to the incredibly devious use to which those events were going to be put, I would indeed not have ventured out that evening.

But how on earth could I have imagined that I was on the very eve of the most perilous episode I would ever have to live through.

Chapter 4

The attack was launched that afternoon at precisely five thirty-four.

At that time, the conference hall contained more than five hundred enthusiastic people.

For my part, I had slipped out of my seat to get my camera from my coat pocket, before the main speaker made his appearance. Annoyingly though, the girl in the cloakroom couldn't find my jacket and fate decreed that I should step around the counter to help her.

I had noticed her hang it somewhere towards the back of the long narrow room, but there must have been four hundred other garments there. While searching, we heard a sharp click, and the fire doors which separated the cloakroom from the hall swung closed.

We exchanged shrugs and went on looking.

The guards from the main lobby slipped into the dark at the back of the hall and were leaning expectantly against the wall. They were waiting with anticipation to hear the outspoken politician's speech. They didn't agree with his ideas but knew that his appearances were always well worth witnessing. This would provide them with exciting titbits with which to spice up many boring evening meals to come.

Consequently, they didn't hear the bolts on the two sets of doors leading into the hall, slide into place.

The guards outside the building had moved round to the east-facing wall of the building, well out of the sun. From that position, they had an uninterrupted view of the wide stone steps leading up to the entrance doors and over the paved square below it.

No one would stir now for an hour or so, and they knew that they could smoke and chat quietly together in the shadow until the first of the participants began to leave.

Naturally, they did not hear the click as the two sets of heavy glass doors bolted themselves.

The only person who heard anything at all was a tramp. He was urinating against the fire escape door behind the building, and the sharp clack as the security bolts slid into place caused him to splash his shaky hand.

When we eventually found my jacket, I fished out my camera and made for the door.

I pushed it, fully expecting it to swing open, but it didn't budge. Turning to the assistant I shrugged, and she nodded, stepping forward to push the over-ride button beside the door.

Nothing happened.

We exchanged looks, and both tried to push the doors as hard as we could. Even the security bar did not engage.

Through the circular windows let into the two doors, we looked out into the hall, intending to attract the attention of one of the participants. However, at that precise moment, the main speaker entered, accompanied by cheers and a thunder of applause. I blew out my cheeks in exasperation, while the girl picked up the intercom to call the hall technician to come down from the lodge and let us out.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "the line's dead."

I was about to bang on the door when she touched my arm. "We'll have to wait till he's finished now. Can't go making a row in the middle of his speech."

I sighed and blew out my cheeks again in exasperation.

"Don't worry," she said "he always says the same stuff anyhow. You can read them in any paper tomorrow. At least we can watch, and we'll hear clear enough when he starts to shout. He always gets worked up and shouts. Like one of those crazy preachers".

We took a window each and settled down to watch.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen," he smiled, "anyone need me to introduce myself?" A roar of laughter and applause went up.

At the same moment, I spotted a fine mist or smoke which had started to drift down from the ceiling high above the speaker.

Agent Vx

“What’s that?” I asked the girl.

“Search me? That new air conditioning system they installed probably. They can add room perfume to it.”

At this moment, the speaker nodding approval for the applause, took a deep breath to commence his first attack. However, he didn’t get that far. He clutched his throat and quickly looked across at his bodyguard. He then made a dive for the side door. He crashed into it with all his force, but it didn’t open. He looked back wildly as the rest of the assembly started to cough and splutter and look about wildly. The mist continued to float gently down and thicken, and there was suddenly a rush for the doors.

As I watched, the speaker fell to the floor, his limbs twitching and his face contorting in a horrible uncontrolled manner. In a flash, I knew what was happening.

The hall was being attacked with nerve gas.

The mist, billowing and swirling, was now reaching out its deadly tongues toward our door. Within a few seconds, dozens of the participants reacted identically to the speaker and the floor was soon strewn with a horrible mass of contorted, quivering bodies.

The only substance I knew which could act like that was Agent Vx, and I knew that there is nothing deadlier on the planet.

An eerie silence fell.

With Vx poisoning, screaming almost immediately becomes impossible, and there remained only the dull thumping noise as hundreds of limbs banged uncontrollably against the obstacles around them.

“Get away from that door. Quick.” I shouted, but the girl remained frozen as if glued to the window. “Get back, or you’ll have no chance.”

Agent Vx acts by interfering with the transmission of signals between nerve cells. It forces the transmission channels into an “always-on” mode. This overloads the brain with an uninterrupted flow of data from all parts of the body. In most cases, the first organ to overload and stop is

the heart, and this can happen in a few minutes if the exposition is high and an antidote not administered rapidly. "Christ" I gasped.

I realised that the locked doors must be part of the plan to ensure that escape and possible recovery were kept to an absolute minimum. I leapt back from the doors, pulling off my sweatshirt. I then poured the contents of two complimentary bottles of water over it and wrapped it around my mouth and nose. Next, I pushed a table into the farthest end of the long cloakroom and grabbing a full-length raincoat, put it on. Finally, I gathered up a pile of coats, climbed up onto the table and piled the clothes over myself, making a protective tent over me.

I knew that Vx was denser than air and would accumulate in low areas in the absence of a current of air. I also knew that in vapour form, it could enter the body directly via the respiratory tract, but also through the eyes and the skin. The eyes and skin were slower entrance routes but could lead to death just as well if help was not rapidly forthcoming.

A few seconds later I heard the girl try to shout and then a thump as she fell, followed by the horrible tell-tale thumping as her entire body started to twitch and jump.

I have never come so close to praying in my life. If that vapour could penetrate my makeshift protection tent, I would die in the same horrible way.

I closed my eyes tight and forced myself to breath slow, shallow breaths, through the layers of water-saturated fabric across my nose.

Soon everything would become silent. The clouds of vapour would continue quietly settling on the inert bodies in the hall, like morning dew, and penetrate the bodies making survival impossible.

It was highly improbable that enough antidote would be available to save so many people and, in any case, it would come far too late.

Agent Vx

If you have enjoyed this initial chapters, the full e-Book can be purchased online in the AMAZON bookshop