ALPHABET SOUP

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CHAPTER 1

Mark Hill sat in his car and stared at a windowless brick building. The night air touched him with icy fingers causing him to shiver. His respiration was beginning to fog the glass giving the beige, three-story edifice a dream-like quality. For the third time Mark reached for the ignition key and, for the third time, he allowed his hand to drop, the key still unturned. The fuel gauge taunted him, daring him to warm his vehicle and risk not making it to the nearest gas station. He should have purchased gasoline yesterday on his way home but he had procrastinated knowing that he had fuel enough for one more day. He could have filled his tank this morning--he had had plenty of time, but the ice on his windows argued in favor of waiting for the afternoon sun. Now he regretted his decision to delay refueling. After sitting in the dark parking lot for over two hours he was stiff with cold. It was too late to go for fuel now. The guard would soon arrive and the building would be opened.

He shouldn’t have arrived so early. The events that led him here at such an ungodly hour played and replayed in his thoughts. Debbie, his wife, had been standing outside the bathroom door when he emerged from the shower. “You have got to go see a doctor,” she had stated, but Mark knew that she wasn’t suggesting that he visit a general practitioner.

“You mean a shrink. If you want me to go see a shrink, why don’t you say ‘shrink’?”

“Okay. Yeah. Go see a shrink.”

“I don’t need a shrink. I’m fine.” Mark knew that he wasn’t fine but he didn’t want to see a shrink either. He didn’t want to admit to his wife that he might be a little crazy. He didn’t want to risk his career in cryptography. If his commander had the least suspicion that he might be straying from the path of good solid sanity...Well, he really didn’t know what would happen to him. “I’m fine,” he repeated without conviction.

“You’re fine? You’re acting normal?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Yeah, I’m acting normal!” Mark knew that he shouldn’t have raised his voice, but he was angry. Not angry with Debbie, but with himself. Debbie was just worried about him but he wanted to make her understand that he could conquer his demons without staring at the ceiling from a psychiatrist’s sofa.

Debbie reached for his hand but Mark jerked it away. The irritation at being shunned was reflected in her voice. “Do you think it’s normal to get up at three in the morning and take a shower that lasts for nearly an hour?”

“I needed a shower.”

“You took a shower before you went to bed.”

“No, I forgot to get a shower last night and I remembered that I needed one.”

Debbie rubbed her hand along his jaw. “You didn’t forget to shower last night. If you had, your face would be scratchy.”

Mark knew that she had caught his lie. She knew his ritual well. If there was one thing that had stuck with him after Basic Training, it was that you always do the three Esses before you go to bed. Shit, Shower and Shave. In that order, and every night--no exceptions. “Okay, I didn’t forget to shower but I was sweating and I don’t want to stink when I go in to work.”

“You weren’t sweating. And you shower in the middle of the night three or four times a week. I’m worried.”

Mark thought he had been able to slip out of bed unnoticed all those other nights. He had tiptoed down the hall in order to use the shower furthest from his sleeping wife. He had believed that he was able to slip back into bed without awakening her and raising suspicions. He should have taken Debbie into his arms and assured her that everything would be okay. He should have promised that, if his *condition* didn’t improve soon, that he *would* see a shrink. Instead he shouted, “You’ve been keeping tabs on how many showers I take? I’ll take a shower any time I damn well feel like I need one!”

Mark stormed back into the bathroom, twisted the spigot and stepped back under the spray. It had been a stupid, childish thing to do. But he sometimes did stupid, childish things when he was angry. His action, this time, was especially stupid because he had already used all the hot water. As he stood shivering in the icy spray, rubbing soap over gooseflesh, he tried to think of any possible way to diffuse the situation without admitting that he was being a real asshole. He wanted the argument to be Debbie’s fault so that he wouldn’t have to be the one who apologized. But the argument was entirely his fault and that too made him angry.

The shower was quick. The towel wiped away the icy wetness that clung to his body but still left it damp and chilled. When he opened the door, Debbie was still standing in the spot where he had left her. “That’s another shower. Aren’t you going to write it down somewhere? I wouldn’t want you to lose count!”

“You’ve got to see a doctor. I’ll call and make an appointment for you.”

“I don’t need a doctor. I just haven’t been sleeping well and a shower helps me get back to sleep.” Mentally, Mark heard one shoe hit the floor. He clamped his lips shut before he allowed the other shoe to fall. He hadn’t been sleeping well because of the nightmares. He could never quite remember the dreams but he always awoke feeling slimy and sticky. The only way he could rid himself of the notion that he was covered in something vile was with a shower, a long and hot shower. He always turned the water to the highest temperature that he could stand. And he always stayed until the water was beginning to run cold. And when he was finished, the vague misty horrors of the nightmare, whatever they might have been, no longer tormented him. He could return to bed and the elusive horrid vision would not again disturb his sleep--that night. But tonight he was not going to get back to sleep.

Apparently, Debbie also saw the other shoe about to fall. “Are you having nightmares?”

“Hell no! I ain’t having no damn nightmares. And I ain’t going to talk to no shrink just because I’m having a little trouble sleeping.” Having nightmares was one of the BIG FOUR. Talking in your sleep, sleepwalking, and bedwetting rounded out the list of things that were almost certain to relieve a person of their security clearance. His nightmares were his problem and he would deal with them.

“If you’re having nightmares, the doctors can help.”

Debbie didn’t know about the BIG FOUR. “I am not having nightmares!” Mark dragged on his tee shirt and underwear. Without thinking, he also grabbed his socks and began pulling them on.

Debbie asked. “Why are you putting on your socks? Are you going somewhere?”

“Yeah! I’m going to work.”

“It’s too early to go in. If you can’t sleep, sit down and turn on the TV. I’ll make you some breakfast.”

Mark knew that Debbie had been making an effort to ease the tension and end the argument. He should have sat in front of the TV in his underwear and socks and allowed Debbie to scramble him some eggs. He should have talked to her and assured her that he was okay. He should have told her about the nightmares and why the BIG FOUR prevented him from seeing a shrink. Instead, what he had done was slip on his shirt and to grab his necktie. It required four attempts to knot the tie. In silence, Mark finished dressing, grabbed his hat, keys and security badge and was out the door.

His skin was still damp and the bitter cold was a shock. Why the Hell was this night so damn cold? San Antonio weather could be so unpredictable. It had been in the fifties the night before but tonight his windshield was covered with a heavy frost. Mark plucked a credit card from his billfold and tried to scrape the ice from his front glass. Once he had cleared a hole just barely large enough to peer through, Mark jumped into the car and headed down the drive. Almost before he was out of sight of his apartment, the hole frosted back over. He pulled onto the shoulder and waited until the defrost cleared a strip that he could see through by crouching low in the seat.

And now Mark sat, stiff and cold. Ice crystals were beginning to form on the inside of his windshield. What he should have said and done continued to loop through his head. It had been stupid to storm out of the house leaving Debbie to worry. He was sad and miserable and he knew that he was totally at fault for his current situation.

Finally, Mark saw the bright glare of headlamps sparkling on the frost. He turned the ignition switch, not enough to start the engine, but enough to allow him to lower his window. The vehicle that had just arrived belonged to Airman Rock, the security guard. Rock was not his actual name but that was the name everyone used when referring to him.

The name “Rock” had been bestowed upon this unfortunate Airman after he mucked up an attempt at opening the building one morning. The normal procedure was to unlock the glass front doors and relock them from the inside. The next step was to plug in the telephone and dial the security police and exchange the day’s pass codes. When permission was given, the guard would then open the inner vault door and disarm the vault alarm. More pass codes were exchanged and the phone would be disconnected. A similar procedure was used to close the building in the evenings.

But Airman Rock had made one little mistake. When he plugged in the phone, he had leaned against the vault door before dialing the security police. The vault door was touch-sensitive and alarmed. Before Rock had dialed the last digit, the Air Police had arrived in the parking lot and were pounding on the glass doors. At that point, Airman Rock would have probably received a minor verbal reprimand and that would have been the end of it. But he made his second mistake.

The arrival of the security police had rattled Airman Rock and he was suddenly struck stupid. He could not remember the combination to the vault door. What he should have done at that point was pick up the phone and call his supervisor to come and unlock the vault. His supervisor would have opened the vault door and probably given Airman Rock a well-deserved ass chewing on the spot. But then he made his third mistake.

Airman Rock pulled a folded slip of paper from his billfold and used scribbled numbers written thereon to open the vault door. At that point the security police blocked the entrance to the building and called Rock’s commander. A full-bird colonel arrived a half hour later and Airman Rock was escorted out onto the parking lot to confront him.

In front of the instructors and students, the colonel asked the airman, “I just have to know one mother-fucking thing. When the Hell did you get your billfold reclassified as a Class B Vault?” When Rock didn’t reply, the colonel continued, “Your billfold *is* a Class B Vault isn’t it?”

Airman Rock’s lips moved, inaudible to all but the colonel who continued, “If you write down the combination to this building, it either has to go into a burn bag or a Class B Vault. Is your billfold a burn bag?” More inaudible lip movement.

The colonel tuned to a master sergeant who had just arrived. “Does this good for nothing, piece of shit, *rock* belong to you?”

The Master Sergeant saluted as the Colonel turned. “Yes, Sir.”

“Well, get him out of here. Get that damned combination changed so these people can get to work. And I want you behind that security desk for the rest of the day.”

Airman Rock had been escorted out of the parking lot leaving his vehicle behind. He was not seen in the Crypto Training Building for two weeks. Some speculated that he would never be back. When he did return, no one asked what his punishment had been, but it had probably been fairly severe. The entire time he was missing, the master sergeant opened the building and was behind the security glass every day. He buzzed instructors and students through the inner door and only answered greetings with a grumbled, “Morning.” Mark assumed that the guard duty had been the master sergeant’s punishment for the airman’s incompetence. And in the military, “shit rolls downhill.” So the airman’s punishment was unlikely to have been pleasant.

When Mark saw Airman Rock begin working the combination lock to the vault door, he exited his vehicle and briskly walked up to the steps leading to the entrance. He was joined by two other instructors who had just arrived. The three waited at the bottom of the steps until the opening ritual was completed. The glass doors would not be unlocked if anyone stepped beyond the imaginary security line that marked the bottom step.

Once the doors were unlocked Mark was the first to enter. The sixty-eight degree interior temperature felt like a blast furnace in comparison to the bitter cold he had just endured. He held up his badge for Airman Rock. “Morning, Airman. I’ll need the key to room 306.”

Rock glanced at the badge and plucked the key from a hook. “Morning,” he mumbled. After Mark had signed for the key, it was passed through a slot under the bullet-proof glass. Mark was buzzed through the inner door.

Mark’s fingers were still numb when he reached the door to the instructor lounge for his section. Clumsily he clipped his badge to his collar before unlocking the door. He really didn’t like being the first to arrive but the cold had driven him indoors. Being the first meant that he had the key in his possession. The key had to be hung inside the security cabinet in the lounge. Opening the cabinet required that the contents be inventoried and checked against the list of items that were contained inside. Marks unresponsive fingers turned the combination lock only with difficulty. Left, right, left, right and then left back to zero.

As Mark finished the inventory MSgt. John Erwin, the shop supervisor, entered the lounge followed by SSgt. Don Martin and Sgt. Jim Hebert (pronounced Hey Bear). John was about to start a pot of coffee but was distracted by the ring of the telephone. No cell phones were allowed inside the building; the phone was an old-fashioned black Bakelite landline. John pressed the receiver to his ear. “26.” The number was not some obscure code. The various sections in the building were responsible for teaching maintenance and repair on many different cryptographic machines. The machines all fall into one of three major categories. A “KW” encrypts only digital text data. The text might be the antiquated 5-bit Baudot (which is the origin of the word Baud) or it could be either 7-bit or 8-bit ASCII. A “KY” encrypts voice data only. These machines are optimized to deliver voice quality telephone service equal to the best landline signals. The quality has to be perfect. The balance between peace and Armageddon could depend on heads of state being able to clearly understand one another. The last type of crypto equipment is a “KG.” It encrypts any data, audio, video, photos, text. If it can be digitized, the KG will securely transmit it. Although the KG is an excellent all-purpose crypto machine, it does require additional equipment to digitize the data before it can be encrypted.

Each piece of crypto equipment is named by combining the two-letter type designation with a 1 to four digit number. A machine might be a KG13. If the call had been to the KG13 section the phone would have simply been answered, “13.”

John listened for a moment and then told the caller, “Okay, make it in when you can,” and cradled the receiver. “That was Holly. She’s going to be a little late.”

“Doughnuts!” Mark, Don and Jim voiced in unison. It was an unwritten rule in the shop that if you were going to be late, you were expected to bring in doughnuts. Habitual lateness was not to be tolerated but occasional tardiness was a treat for the remainder of the shop.

“I’ll need someone to cover for Holly. Who doesn’t have a class?” John asked.

Mark answered, “I dropped my class Thursday. I don’t pick up another until day after tomorrow. Do you know what block she’s covering?”

“I think they’re doing practice bugs on the ORBC. But if you can’t figure out where to pick up on what she’s doing, just babysit her students. She said she’d only be about twenty or thirty minutes late.”

As the clock crept toward the 7 AM hour, most of the remaining members of the 26 section arrived. At one minute of seven only three instructors were still missing. Holly was going to be late so her absence was accounted for. Don asked, “Has anyone heard from Donna?”

John answered, “Donna won’t be here. She dropped her class, yesterday.”

“Dropping” a class meant that it had graduated and would be moving on to another section for another course of instruction until the last “drop” when they would be sent to their next duty station. The 26 section had an unwritten policy. When an instructor dropped a class after six weeks of intense training with anywhere from six to a dozen students, he was given a day off to recuperate and do a mental reset.

Sgt. Holly Mastromonaco was late and A1C Donna Frawner had just dropped a class. That only left SSgt. Larry Ireland. No one asked his whereabouts. He had gone to Wilford Hall, the base hospital, three weeks ago because he had been experiencing extremely painful headaches. If anyone knew when, or *if,* he would be back, they weren’t telling.