

Between November 1st and November 30th, 2007, thirteen people participated in creating a collaborative novel. I was one of them. Thirty chapters in thirty days, each chapter written and then recorded by one person, before another person picked up the thread of the story where the previous one left off. There was no advance outlining or plotting. Alan Drake started us off by introducing us to rock climber Liz McKenna, and hinted at some family secrets before Liz went out for a walk, hiking up a trail toward the summit of a mountain which ends at a vertical drop known as Beelzebub's Washboard. As she nears the top of the trail she hears a rumbling behind her. We pick up the story at that point.

The Yellow Sheet

The last few paragraphs of Chapter 1 by Alan Drake (November 1st, 2007)

Her thoughts were pushed aside by the sound of a low-rumbling wind. Could the earth itself be trembling? It reminded her of something her drunken brother-in-law said at last week's fundraiser. How inappropriate Chuck could be. He was going on with his predictable, improbable tales, the lives of the pioneers, his ancestors. But suddenly, he made an unexpected switch. He launched into a string of horrid stories. Atomic testing in the Southwest. Whole towns came out to view them. They were family gatherings — Fourth of July fireworks. Hundreds of families watched from down-wind as the rough clouds billowed towards them, dropping blankets of radioactive dust on mothers and fathers, children and grandparents. Innocently, spectators brushed the dust off with their bare hands, as casually as they would beach sand.

But this was Montana. Nothing like that had ever come to Montana. Or would. Liz had a goal and nothing was going to stop her from achieving it. She picked up her pace, once again walking directly into the wind.

Behind her, the sharp sound of gravel being kicked caused her to swivel around quickly.

No. Nothing was going to stand in her way. Certainly not the two women standing stock still on the trail a few hundred feet behind her. No, nothing would stop her, not even the mushroom cloud blossoming on the horizon up-wind from her, behind the two women who were now running towards her.

Chapter 2 picks up where Alan's left off.

Chapter 2 by Michael Sirois (November 2nd, 2007)

There are times when the mind can't register an event, because the event is so foreign to our normal sense of reality that it's unable to process what it is clearly experiencing. This was one of those times. The mushroom cloud that Chuck had conjured for everyone so often in his drunken stories had just entered Liz's reality. A nuclear weapon had exploded only eight miles away, and the shock wave was moving towards her.

This was also a time when her training took over, ignoring the words "This can't be happening" that continued in an endless loop inside her head, because — at that moment — her body knew what she had to do better than her mind did. Moments ago she had reached the top of the steep, winding trail, and had stopped at the edge of Beelzebub's Washboard, a nearly vertical 2,000 foot rock face that she had been climbing for the past two years, mostly because her husband, Derek, had once told her she couldn't possibly do it. Before common sense could rear its ugly head and make her hesitate, she slung the strap of the duffel over her left shoulder and under her right arm, then stepped off the ledge, spinning in mid-air to face the cliff.

As gravity took over and she started downward, her arms automatically stretched toward the cliff face. Her shoulders and legs tensed, awaiting the jarring impact that was going to arrive in another fraction of a second, but as she dropped below the ledge, she still had time to notice the two women, still moving toward her like insects caught in molasses.

She thought, "They'll never make it," but their movement appeared to shift into high gear just before reality grabbed her once again in the persona of the jagged granite that snatched her fingertips from the air and slammed itself against her face and side. Fighting to maintain a grip, and ignoring the pain, Liz kept rotating until she was square with the cliff, and could feel the toes of her Merrell trail shoes grip, then slide, then hold fast to ridges in the granite. Her fingers burned fiercely, and the muscles in her arms felt like they were going to rip apart, but they finally settled into place, and she was secure for the moment. "What the hell is going on here?" she thought.

Detective Jennifer Toomey and her partner, Alice Beltner, felt the detonation rumbling through the ground before they heard or saw anything. Jennifer had been scanning the area, as she had been trained to do.

“When tailing someone, focus on the target, but keep your eyes moving, left and right, behind you and in front of you.”

She noticed a man crouching behind a large boulder off to her left, looking through a pair of fancy-looking surveillance binoculars at Liz (or Rock Woman, as Jennifer referred to Liz in her reports). The man’s dark brown pants, jacket and cap did a good job of blending with the surrounding terrain, keeping him pretty well hidden, except for the white sneakers he was wearing. They might as well have had neon lights on them, they stood out so much. Jennifer was glancing back to the right, to signal Alice that they had company, when she saw the shocked look on Alice’s face.

She heard Alice cry out, “Run!” and in the same instant she spotted the unthinkable black cloud blossoming out of the ground miles behind them.

What do you do when you might be in the blast radius of a thermonuclear device? Do you just stay there and wait for the fireball’s shock wave to reach you and blast the flesh from your bones? Do you try to shelter behind something, hoping that it has enough mass to shield you from the blast? Do you stop to puzzle out the various possible ways you might either die or survive an incident you never imagined might happen to you?

No, you let instinct take over, and you do whatever it screams in your ear, or whatever your partner screams, which in this case was “Run!” So, the two women turned together and started moving toward Liz, knowing their only choices seemed to be a nuclear bomb blast or a huge cliff.

Jennifer had seen the odd little twist Liz had accomplished in mid-air, and knew there must be a reason for it. Reaching the edge, a few feet to the left of the spot where Liz had disappeared seconds before, Jennifer reached forward, and – touching the ground with her right hand – spiraled outward and slid over the edge. Facing backward now, Jennifer could see Liz, clinging to the rock face four or five feet below her and to her left. Digging her fingers into the cliff, she grabbed and lost and grabbed again, until she managed to slow herself enough that she was holding on with her right hand, parallel to Liz, but just barely. Her feet were swinging wildly and her left hand couldn’t seem to find anything to grasp.

“Above your head,” the voice shouted. “Above your head. To the left.” It was Liz giving her directions.

Jennifer stretched and grabbed wildly, and found a sharp groove in the rock that she could wedge her fingertips into.

“Now your feet. Probe the rock for anything you can slip your toes into.”

Jennifer complied, trying not to show how badly she was shaking. Within moments she had found small ridges that the toes of her boots slid into nicely, but knew she wasn't going to be able to hold on long, especially with the ground vibrating so strongly.

The Man in Brown Clothes and White Sneakers was on the run too, only he had a third option the others didn't. He was moving as soon as the two women were, but he was only concerned with reaching Liz in time. When he started, the women were actually a little closer to her than he was, but they were running slightly uphill and he was off to one side, on a level with Liz, but out of her line of sight. He felt he could probably reach her before the two women could, and – if he pushed himself – maybe even before the blast would.

Now, we're talking about a matter of seconds here, but a few seconds can actually be quite a long time. Most people assume that the explosion of an atom bomb nearby would mean instant death for anyone within a range of twenty or thirty miles, but the truth is that a great many factors can influence how bad the blast is, how quickly it moves, and who lives and who dies. If a bomb is exploded in the air close to the ground, the heavier air and whatever material is available to absorb the radiation (people, wood, rocks, metal, water) will be overheated and vaporized instantly, then (as the material expands from the heat) will be pushed outward from the blast center, causing the shockwave that knocks down almost anything in its path that isn't tied down (people, wood, rocks, metal, water). How hard it hits any particular material will be determined by a few factors: how big the bomb was to begin with (there are baby nukes and oversized angry Hulk-like nukes), how much really large material is in its way to slow it down, and how far away the material is from the blast center (because the shockwave will dissipate over time and distance). If the bomb is exploded high in the atmosphere, where there is very little air to push around, it has a very different effect. The radiation ends up being converted into x-rays and ionized gamma rays more than anything else. This bomb was exploded about eight miles away, in a lake, past the low valley they had just climbed.

Brown Clothes Man knew that the two main reasons people die in nuclear explosions (whether immediately or slowly afterwards) were from the shock and the heat from the blast or from thermal radiation. The blast was the quick and painless way to go, instant incineration if you were close enough. The radiation was the choice no one wanted to make. Again, depending on how close you were to the center of the blast, you could die within hours, linger for days or weeks, or linger for many excruciating years. If you were very far away, but received a large dosage of radiation, the effects could surface many years later in the form of various cancers. Any way you looked at it, this wasn't the best time to be in this particular spot. If they couldn't avoid the blast and couldn't get away before fallout radiation reached them, they wouldn't grace the covers of any beauty or fashion magazines, ever.

Of course, Brown Clothes Man didn't have time to think about any of this. Not about the size of the blast, the prevailing winds, or the time and distance it would take him to reach Liz at the cliff's edge. Not about the fact that he had grabbed his sneakers because he had misplaced his hiking boots in the dark. Not about the hat that he gave an automatic tug to as he stood up, pulling it lower down on his forehead, securing it for the leap forward.

The hat, which he wore constantly, was a source of puzzlement for many who met him. They always wanted to know what the NYS stood for. He usually obliged them with an answer tailored for his locale. If he was in New Jersey, he would say "Why, it means 'New York Sucks', of course." If he was in Texas, he'd reply, "Not Your Stetson." Just six months ago, at a rock concert, an attractive young thing had asked him about the cap, and he told her it was the name of his band, the Nihilistic Yellow Squirrels. She had seemed impressed. Either it was a good name for a group, or she was too stoned to know the difference. Of course, none of these names were even related to the real name behind the acronym, and – at the moment – he really didn't have time to think about any of that. He also didn't have time to realize that this was a relatively small nuclear device, although that would occur to him soon enough. For now, he just needed to get to Liz on time. What he didn't notice in his push forward was that Liz had already stepped off the cliff, so when he looked up and saw her gone, his step wavered and he almost stumbled, but he was too close to the cliff's edge and over he went, headfirst as he had intended, but without Liz in his arms.

Scant moments before Brown Clothes Man made the leap into space, Alice had also arrived at the edge, just on the other side of Jennifer. She saw what Jennifer did, and knew

she would never be able to do the same, but — turning around — she crouched down and tried to inch her way off the edge. Unfortunately, she crossed one foot over the other and began a slow tumble backwards into thin air. Brown Clothes Man saw none of this, because he had been running, head down, focused on the spot where Liz had been a few seconds before. The reason he leapt so easily outward was because that was why he had come up here in the first place. He had been camping in the area for months, keeping an eye on Liz. When she wasn't outside, he often came up to this area to do base jumping. He had been packing his chute near the plateau edge, when he saw Liz start her climb far below, so he strapped his chute on, hid in the rocks and waited. He hadn't intended to reveal himself to her yet, but he felt it was sheer luck that he had been able to be here for her now.

Although they wouldn't know it for a while, these four people on the edge of Beelzebub's Washboard had a few things going for them. This wasn't a huge bomb, so its blast radius would be relatively small. It had been submerged underwater, in Flathead Lake, eight miles away, when it went off. This wouldn't be good news for the towns bordering the lake, towns like Elmo or Dayton or Rollins, and it would flatten Wild Horse Island, but it would end up being good news for people slightly farther away, because the lake's water and the island would dissipate much of the shock wave, causing the ground to shake more, but sending a smaller shock wave through the air. Since there were light breezes coming in from the Northwest, much of the radioactive fallout would drift away from them, towards Wyoming instead of British Columbia. If they could avoid direct exposure to the blast and continue to move further away, they might have minimal exposure to the radiation. Unfortunately, none of them knew this yet, and had just made choices that left two of them hanging to a cliff face for dear life, one falling through space, and a fourth tumbling slowly through the air twenty feet below.

As Brown Clothes Man vaulted into space, just thirty-two seconds after Liz noticed the mushroom cloud, and leaned toward the only body he spotted dropping away below him, Liz looked up from her perch on the rock face as he flashed past. No, it couldn't be...

“Derek?”