

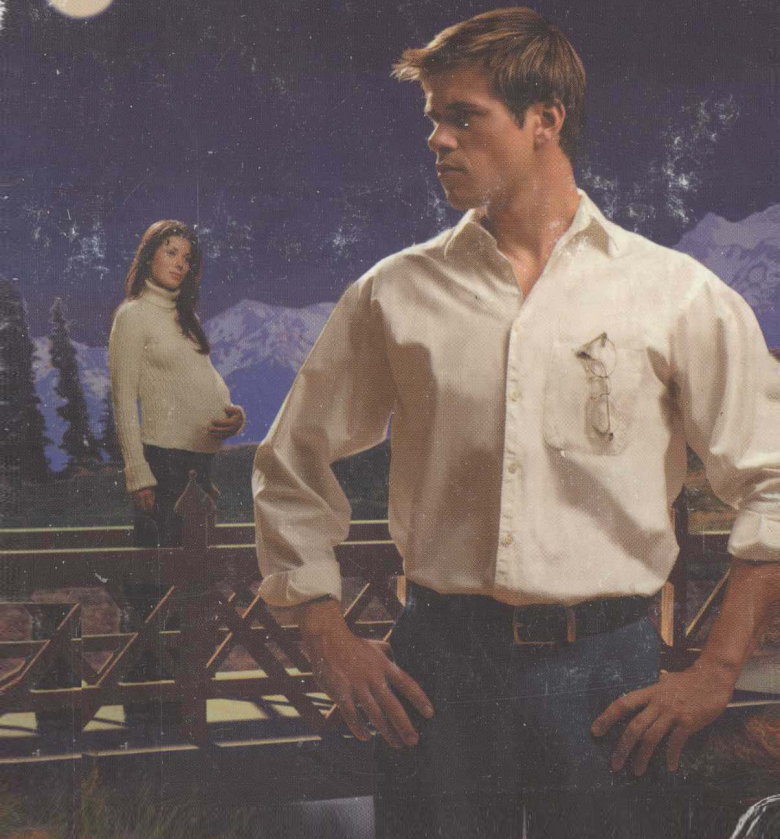


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The Agent

Lynn Erickson



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THE AGENT

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"I can sugarcoat everything or I can be blunt. Your choice."

My God, he's direct, Meg thought. She almost said, *sugarcoat everything. I can't take the cold truth*. "Please be as blunt as necessary" came out of her mouth, and she prayed she wouldn't regret her words.

"Okay." He stood comfortably in Meg's living room, and his eyes held hers. "Your husband's missing." He paused for a moment, then continued. "There are a lot of people out there who'd give good money for his research. They'd pay for it, and if they couldn't buy it, they might use force to obtain it."

"Force?" she repeated weakly.

"Abduction, perhaps. Threats of physical violence."

She knew that Howie's vaccine research was valuable and she also knew the relationship between a vaccine and a biological warfare agent—flip sides of the same coin. But to think anyone would abduct *Howie*.

"Mrs. Afferton—" the agent's voice broke into her thoughts "—I realize this is upsetting, but it's important that you know the whole story. The reason I'm here is to find your husband, negotiate his return if necessary and ensure that you are not used as a pawn. But for now, I think you should get some rest."

Meg turned away. She placed a hand on her stomach and wondered whether a child really grew within her. Hers and Howie's, a tiny new life, deep in her womb.

Get some rest, the agent had said. She wondered if she'd ever rest again.

Dear Reader,

Sometimes we come up with a story that is too close to the truth for comfort. Sometimes we downright scare ourselves. Who would have known, as we wrote *The Agent* only months before the events of September 11, 2001, that our world would change so much? Who would have known bioterrorism would become a real threat?

The Given Institute exists exactly as described, and we conducted a chilling interview with the director, a doctor who listed all the possible biological warfare agents and how they could be spread. We invented the country of Turghistan, but ones like it figure largely in the news these days.

Perhaps Canadian Customs—on high alert—would have detained a man like Howie Afferton when he entered the country, because he appeared suspicious. Perhaps not. Perhaps this story *could* happen, made even more dangerous in today's world.

And it all started with a *what if*?

We hope you enjoy *The Agent*.

Regards,

Carla and Molly (Lynn Erickson)

The Agent

CHAPTER ONE

MEG AFFERTON'S HUSBAND did not come home from his seminar at the Given Institute on that Friday in July. At first she thought he'd gone out with his colleagues for a beer or two at one of Aspen's trendy bars, but by the time seven o'clock rolled around, she began to get worried.

The day was already chalked up in her mind as one of the worst of her life. Howard had woken early and wanted to make love. She'd felt her flesh shrink when his hand slid beneath her nightgown and sought her. She'd closed her legs to him. To her husband.

Was *that* why he hadn't come home yet? Was he brooding, punishing her?

Then, before he'd climbed into the shower—his expression granite because he hadn't gotten his once-a-week sexual *fix*—she'd admitted to him how unhappy she was and that she was considering taking a break—time by herself to think things out.

"And what does *that* mean?" he'd demanded.

What a coward she was. Instead of telling him she was afraid their marriage was failing, she'd said, "I just need to get my head straight, Howie. I told you. I'm not happy...."

But in typical Howard Afferton fashion, he had

sneered at her. "God, Meg, what more do you want from me? Blood?"

Now she thought back on the scene and wished she'd told him the truth. That she craved warmth and affection and respect. A loving partner for life.

Yes, he must be punishing her by being late. She was certain of it, because Howard was a punctual man. Always organized, scrupulous, the absolute antithesis of the absentminded professor, although he was a scientist, a brilliant biochemist. He never stayed out without calling Meg; he liked his meals on time, his sheets ironed, his shirts on hangers, light starch, his shoes shined.

Yet the fact remained: he wasn't home.

She walked to the front window of their condo again, looked out onto Hyman Avenue, peered down the tree-shaded street in the direction from which Howie would be returning from the Given Institute. The shadows of the tall cottonwoods lay in stripes across the street. *Prison bars*, Meg thought for a moment, then chased the errant thought away.

His seminar, titled Emerging Diseases and Global Medicine, should have been over at four. He'd told her he'd be home by five, because people might hang around to ask questions. Two hours ago. No phone call. No Howie. Nothing.

She glanced at the stove, where her special gourmet dinner sat, ruined now. Needing to make up for her coldness in bed, wanting to explain her discontent in a civilized manner, she'd spent all afternoon on that dinner—Howie's favorites—broccoli soufflé, shrimp scampi, new potatoes in butter and dill. And the rhu-

barb custard pie he loved. Well, the pie would keep, the potatoes she could microwave, but the soufflé had fallen and the shrimp lay cold and limp in congealed butter.

Where was Howie?

They'd been married six years. She'd met him when she went to work as a lab technician for his biotech company in the University of Colorado's new Health Sciences Center.

Married the boss, yes, that's what she'd done. He'd been handsome, older, brilliant. Anglo-Irish, he'd told her. From Boston. Tall and reed-thin, black hair and blue eyes that gleamed with intensity, a masculine, high-bridged nose. He'd gone to Harvard for graduate school. *Harvard.*

She was so flattered, so grateful to Howard for marrying her, she had never, in six years, dared to question anything he did. Until this morning, that was.

Seven-thirty. She paced and worried. "Where are you, Howie?" she asked the empty condo.

On top of everything, Meg's brother was staying with them. Brian was only twenty, twelve years her junior. Meg had invited the surly, spoiled and unhappy boy to visit her in Aspen, figuring their mother, who'd never been able to handle her younger child, needed a break. But Howie, Meg knew, wasn't terribly keen on having her brother around.

Was that another reason Howie hadn't come home? Because Brian was here? Oh, my God... Last week Howie had thrown a fit when Meg had planned an overnight camping trip with her brother. She'd planned the outing hoping she could have a real heart-

to-heart talk with him. Just Meg and Brian and the Rocky Mountains. But Howie had told her that he expected her to attend a cocktail party in *his* honor at the institute that evening.

“Did you conveniently forget?” he had asked coldly. “Is your brain turning to mush?”

So the camping trip hadn’t materialized. And Brian wasted his time sleeping late, watching TV and hanging out on the picturesque pedestrian malls of Aspen.

She remembered something her mother Lucy had said, hope strong in her voice. “Maybe Brian could find a job for the summer in Aspen. I know they need workers up there.”

Well, that was true. Housing—and thus employees—was scarce in the mountain resort. Summer activities—sightseeing, hiking, camping, fishing and biking—kept Aspen as busy as it was in the winter. The rodeos and jeep rides, the town’s fine dining and shopping, the Aspen Music Festival with its two months of superb classical concerts in the brand-new tent with its white peaked roof mimicking the surrounding mountains. The Physics Institute, where learned physicists debated black holes, quarks and the Big Bang Theory of the universe. And, of course, the Given Institute, a think tank extension of the University of Colorado School of Medicine, a private enclave in the heart of Aspen dedicated to the sharing of cutting-edge developments in the fields of biotechnology and human health.

But Brian hadn’t been interested in working. He’d lost his summer job in Denver, neglected to finish the course work he’d left dangling at the end of his soph-

omore year at CU in Boulder. In Howie's words, he was a bum. In his mother's, he was troubled. To Meg, he was her baby brother. She'd been more of a mother to him than Lucy, who'd given up any effort to discipline the boy after the death of her husband eleven years ago.

Oh, God, where was Howie?

The worst part of it was that Meg was starving. Too sick with concern to eat, but still, she was hungry. Her body didn't care that Howie wasn't home; her body required sustenance. And she knew why. Meg Afferton was almost positive she was pregnant.

After dinner had been prepared, she'd put on a pair of khaki slacks that were growing tight at the waist, and an emerald-green blouse, which she knew flattered her coloring. All to assure Howie's good mood, because she'd planned on telling him tonight that she'd missed two periods, which made her about three months pregnant. She had to know what the future held.

And her husband wasn't home.

All right, she thought. How long do I wait before I start calling his friends? How long? If she panicked too soon, everyone would think she was unhinged. A man is a couple of hours late, and his wife instantly assumes a calamity?

But Howie was never late. Never. Not unless he called.

She moved around the living room, touching things. He had been lecturing at the institute for several years now, but he'd only bought this condo recently. In previous summers they'd stayed at a funky

old ski lodge right on Main Street. A noisy affair at best.

"How can we afford it?" Meg had asked when Howie had told her he'd purchased the condo. She knew full well the astronomical prices of real estate in Aspen.

"Don't you worry," he'd said. "We got approval of our last funding request, so Jerry and I gave ourselves raises."

The condo was one in a building of four units, an unpretentious three-bedroom place, at the base of the outcropping called Shadow Mountain on the west side of Aspen Mountain. Only a few blocks from the Given Institute and Aspen's downtown malls.

It had come completely furnished and renovated by the previous owner. Meg would have liked very much to have chosen the furniture herself, to have picked out carpet and paint and cabinets, but Howie was pleased with the earth-toned utilitarian decor.

"Perfect," he'd said. "Easy to keep and easy to rent out when we're not here." And that was that.

She moved into the kitchen, picked one shrimp from the pan and ate it, standing over the stove, chewing slowly, feeling the garlicky flavor burst on her tongue. Feeling utterly disloyal. A traitor.

Thank God Brian was out. He loved the nightlife in Aspen. Even though he was still a few months under legal drinking age, he hung around downtown, slipping into bars if he could get away with it, Meg supposed, or using a phony ID. Right now she didn't care; she was only grateful that he was not home making sarcastic remarks.

She could just hear him. "Wow, sis, it's like two whole hours since the big man was supposed to be home. Maybe he got lost. Want me to send out the bloodhounds?"

She looked out the front window for the umpteenth time and pushed Brian from her thoughts. Howie might walk in any second. He wouldn't pull a stunt like this over her behavior this morning. There was some other explanation for his lateness. There had to be. Something logical, important.

Still, wouldn't he have phoned?

Another woman? No, she thought. Ridiculous. Howie loved her. He'd never been interested in other women. He liked his home life, his routine. He liked being able to discuss technical problems in his research with Meg. Except for his once-a-week sexual needs, he was not particularly romantic; he was not the least bit spontaneous. No, it couldn't be another woman.

But even if he did come home, if he walked in the front door right now, the mood was ruined. She couldn't talk about her hopes and doubts tonight, much less a possible pregnancy. And that made Meg nervous. She'd been steeling herself to confess to Howie for a month now. She wasn't at all sure how he'd take the news, either. Although he'd never actually said he didn't want children, Meg knew he had no fondness for kids, their noise, their mess, their need for attention. He didn't much like his partner Jerry Riggs's two children, and they were old enough to be reasonably behaved. Whenever Meg had brought up the subject of children, Howie had in-

variably said, "Later. Plenty of time. Later." End of subject.

No, Howie wouldn't be thrilled at all, but she hoped he'd warm to the idea. A baby. *Don't worry, she'd assure him, I'll take care of it. You won't have to do a thing, Howie, honestly. This could be the miracle cure for our marriage.*

She could almost hear him. "You're on the pill. How in the devil did you get pregnant?" Angry, with that hard voice and cold blue stare that frightened her. That almost always made her want to take back whatever she'd said or done to prompt his disapproval.

She would never tell him that she'd been unable to keep down the pill for several days when she'd had the flu a few months ago—that was her secret. Hers and the baby's.

The phone rang. Her heart seized, then loosened. Relief washed away her fears. *Howie, it was Howie.*

But it was not her husband; it was one of his friends from the institute, wanting to set up a tennis game the next day.

"I'm sorry, Tom, but Howie isn't home," she heard herself say, the polite wife, not the near-hysterical woman who screamed inside. "Can I take your number? I'm sure he'll be home soon."

She carefully wrote down Tom's number on the notepad by the phone, where Howie always checked for messages. "Um, Tom, you haven't seen Howie this evening?" Her voice trailed off weakly.

No, Tom hadn't. Was there anything wrong?

"Oh no, nothing. Howie's, um, he's a little late. I was just wondering..."

Stupid, she thought when she hung up. Asking Tom. Of course he hadn't seen Howie. The words had come out of her mouth without thought. Just as Howie pointed out so often: "You don't *think*, Meg. You're a chump. Everything that goes on in your brain just comes out your mouth."

Not true. If only he knew how many times in the last month one thought had been on the tip of her tongue. How many times she had *thought*...and not let the words come out?

Were other women afraid of their husbands?

She never objected to anything Howie said or planned for them. His reaction would be too... uncomfortable. He would never hit her, God forbid. He'd never laid a hand on her. He was not a *physical* person. He was an intellectual. And a shrewd businessman. But he did intimidate Meg. He had from the beginning.

As soon as they were married—in a simple civil ceremony in Denver's city hall—he'd asked her to stop working. When she'd demurred, he explained that he wanted to cherish her and take care of her. Not work her to the bone like his father had done to Howie's mother.

"But I like working. What would I do all day?" she'd protested.

"Whatever pampered women do," he'd replied, and when she'd refused his request, he'd sulked and turned his disapproving gaze on her until she had given in and quit her job at the lab.

Six years. She'd taken to reading and long walks and music appreciation courses. Once she'd suggested

she get a dog for companionship, but Howie was allergic. Cats, too. Even birds. He'd finally—just last year—agreed she could work as a volunteer at Presbyterian-St. Luke's Hospital one day a week. She often put in two or three days a week, though, because her fellow volunteers knew they could count on her to fill in for them. Howie complained, and she always promised she'd get her schedule down to one day—which somehow she never did.

The minutes dragged, slow and ponderous, full of unnamed fears. Still no Howie. Her heart beat the seconds off in a heavy cadence. She walked onto the back deck that looked out at the bulk of Shadow Mountain. It was growing dark, the sun far down on the horizon, the sky a deep, pure sapphire, the air smelling of cut grass and flowers and pine trees, dust motes dancing in a bright sliver of light that reached through the trees to gild the redwood decking. Somewhere a backyard chef was grilling meat on a barbecue, and the scent floated on the cooling air. From a tree nearby the contented cluck-cluck of a robin readying itself for bed.

She loved Aspen. It was a beautiful, exciting place. Sometimes Howie took her to a restaurant or to a concert or an art film at the stately, century-old Wheeler Opera House. Of course, she and Howie attended many institute social affairs—her husband's colleagues were fascinating people. But mostly Howie liked a settled, routine life. Home and hearth, as he liked to put it. Peace and quiet and dinner on the table at precisely six-thirty. His desire for routine, he'd told her, was due to an insecure and unsettled