

The year is 2114.

Someone has stolen a dangerous, potentially violent humanoid clone, capable of unimaginable telepathic powers. That someone accomplished the impossible—transportation of the clone's physical body across inter-dimensional boundaries. The clone remains hidden in the dark recesses of a previously unexplored dimension.

Alan Fletcher, a class A telepath is the only human capable of tracking that clone.

As Alan digs deeper into the strange dimension, he sees the lives of those he loves threatened. He discovers his friends are his enemies. He discovers how important the clone is—not only to his own life, but to his very universe.

But how can he find this clone? And how can he use it?

**DEATH JAG**

A. C. Ellis  
and  
Jeff Slaten

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For *Janet* and *Kaye*

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Originally published in 1979 by  
Manor Books, Inc.  
45 East 30th Street  
New York, New York 10016

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## CHAPTER ONE

3 October, 2114

8:04 a.m. Mountain Standard Time

The uptown conveyor gave slightly beneath Alan's feet as he stepped from the Colorado Boulevard platform. A shiver ran up his spine and a wave of nausea crested in his stomach. Elbowing his way through the rush hour crowd, he kept his feet moving in the awkward shuffle necessary to reach the faster moving center strip, then stood sweating beneath his powder blue jumpsuit, balanced on the tottery tripod formed by his good leg, his cane, and his plastic-braced leg. The work-bound straights closed in around him, enveloping his light five-foot-six-inch frame in a solid wall of unrelenting flesh. He could smell them—big, hulking idiots, little more than animals. Being this near straights always made him feel uneasy.

The harsh clatter of the straights' surface thoughts became suddenly unbearable to him; they seemed somehow louder and more intense today than ever before. Petty jealousies and hatreds filled Alan's mind, the jumbled memories of fights with spouse or boss, financial worries and fears of sexual inadequacy, and millions of other thoughts from red passion through gray dullness and shading into black despair. All horribly mundane thoughts, yet they raked his mind like steel talons, slashing across raw nerve endings. It felt like large chunks of his brain were being torn from his head and thrown to the straights as food.

Alan fought only halfheartedly to push the crowd's thoughts from his conscious mind. He knew his attempts would be futile; without the aid of a thought shield, he could never hope to drive the intruding thoughts into his unconscious where they would generate relatively little pain, and the effort left him drained and shaking. Finally, he tried to ignore the thoughts, blocking them with those of his own, pleasant memories of Robin and the Foundation. It worked. Not well, but it did work.

He brushed the back of his hand across his forehead and it came away wet with cold perspiration. The hangover was always bad, but the one he had this morning was a real prize winner. His muscles and joints throbbed with a deep ache and a vicious spot of white fire pulsed behind his eyes. His throat was dry and raw from several days of nausea; his stomach muscles were still tight and sore. Even his crippled leg ached worse than usual from sleeping on it wrong. He could not recall having felt this bad since after his first jag.

The Foundation psychologists called it dimensional-disoriented withdrawal, or D.D.W. But to Alan—and every other scanner—it was simply a hangover. There was only one cure for it: rest, four or five day's worth.

And there was the dream. He had had another last night. At one time, the recurring dream of the merry-go-round had bothered him, but it no longer did. Alan had gone to Dr. Hillthorpe, the Foundation's chief psychiatrist. Hillthorpe had told him not to worry about the dream, that it was something entirely normal. That, in fact, many people

who repeatedly found themselves in high-stress situations created such dreams in their subconscious minds to isolate them from whatever was disturbing them. Another's isolating dream location would not be the same as Alan's—a brilliantly painted merry-go-round in a beautifully lawned park—but it *would* be a place where the dreamer, for one reason or another, could feel completely safe. For some reason, buried deep in Alan's youth and long forgotten, he felt unthreatened on the merry-go-round. Whenever his mind had trouble coping, at least in sleep he could find peace in the dream.

Alan had nearly called in sick this morning, extending his paid hangover leave an extra day. It would have been easy to stay in his apartment, wrapped in the protective cocoon of the thought shield installed there. But at the last moment, holophone activated, he had decided against it. The Foundation frowned on its scanners taking more than the three days leave specified in the union contract, and Alan knew he could easily find himself without a job. He was one of the Foundation's most talented scanners, yet there were simply too many class A telepaths waiting for an opening for him to take that kind of chance.

*That would be just fine*, he thought as he ran a hand through his thinning brown hair. "Mr. Alan Fletcher. I see here you're an ex-scanner. But your data-dot specifies no other unique qualifications. I'm sorry, Mr. Fletcher. The Foundation can no longer use your services." He wouldn't stand a chance in any of the other psi fields, he knew that. His other abilities, teleportation and telekinesis, were far too underdeveloped, and at age thirty-four he was not at all likely to develop them.

And the idea of taking a straight position, one totally unrelated to psionics, was absolutely unthinkable.

*I could go back to law school*, he thought, *and maybe eventually apply for a judgeship*. There was still a large demand for telepathic judges. But he simply would never do it; he would never go back to school. He had been too long away from the classroom, and his interests were no longer there.

But just being a class A telepath—or telekinetic, or any other variety of psi—in no way guaranteed one a position in the Foundation. There was also the P.Q.F., or prime qualifying factor. Alan's P.Q.F., that extra *something* that had opened a position for him nine years earlier while he was studying at Harvard, was an extremely high survival rating. When he had applied he had not known he possessed such a thing. He wasn't even sure he knew what it was now. All he knew for certain was that it had shown up in his initial testing and, apparently, it worked.

Someone slammed hard into Alan from behind, shattering his pattern of thought. His good knee buckled and he nearly went down. Regaining his precarious balance, he turned to the man behind him.

Alan had had a smart remark ready, a few well selected words about the other's rather uncertain parentage. But the man he faced stood well over six feet tall and muscles

bulged beneath his dark gray work jumpsuit. His hands were the size, shape, and nearly the color of sledge-hammers, and a hardness around his eyes told Alan this straight would take no lip from a puny psi.

Alan bit back his prepared insult and found himself making an apology.

When he turned back around he noticed the conveyor had already passed his stop. Grumbling under his breath, he struggled through the crowd to the slower moving edge of the conveyor and stumbled onto the next platform. The impact of his landing sent a lance of pain up his bad leg and brought swirling spots of white light before his eyes. He pushed the pain aside and began the walk several blocks back to where he should have gotten off, then north three more blocks to Colfax Avenue.

The walk did not clear his head, as he had hoped it would. Although it was still fairly early in the morning—about 8:30—the throbbing white eye of the sun had already filled the air with its suffocating heat. It burned in his lungs and the usually enjoyable walk became a chore.

*Probably ninety in the shade*, he thought, wiping perspiration from his face with his sleeve. The Weather Techs had screwed up again. The forecast for today had called for fog in the early morning, changing to rain by seven o'clock. But weather alteration had been possible for only a few years now, and he imagined even the Weather Techs were entitled to a few mistakes.

As he walked, Alan looked west, to the mountains. The front range was a cool, misty blue, and the taller peaks behind it were clothed in a thick blanket of snow. Alan had spent many happy years up there, hunting and fishing in cool valleys where he could have sworn no other human had ever set foot. He had grown up in those mountains, tending his father's sheep, and every time he saw them like this, from a distance, he knew how much he missed them. He missed that simple life he had traded so many years ago for college and eventually the Foundation. But he knew he could never again have that kind of life.

By the time he reached the Foundation building his clothes were soaked with perspiration.

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AMERICAN PSIONIC FOUNDATION, read the phrenic sign. The screaming red letters remained in Alan's mind only a few seconds, then quickly disappeared.

Alan tilted his head back on his shoulders and looked up, squinting against the glare of the early morning sun. From where he stood, he could see the entire three hundred fifty story height of the above-ground portion of the building. Although the view was impressive, he realized there were twice as many floors below ground as there were

above. The subterranean levels housed the Foundation's larger equipment, as well as some of its more classified labs.

Instantly his head began to clear and the aches that laced his body subsided. This building, more than anywhere else in Denver—or in the world, for that matter—was his home, his life, everything he had. The shabby and small one-room apartment on First Avenue, for which he paid incredibly exorbitant rent, was little more than a place to sleep off his hangovers. And, as fond as his memories were, he could no longer call his father's sheep ranch home; he hadn't been back even for a visit in almost twelve years. Besides, the ranch couldn't give him what the Foundation offered. The Foundation was Alan's work, his family, one might even say his god.

On average, Alan spent one hundred twenty hours on a jag. Then he would put in another five hours trying to battle off the horribly painful physical and mental symptoms of the hangover in order to get his final report out while everything was still relatively fresh in his mind. Rogers would almost always have something to be cleared up—a few points Alan might have left out of the report or failed to make absolutely clear. And finally he would be off to the apartment to try to sleep off the hangover in time for his next scheduled jag.

At times it all seemed like a vicious circle, like he would be forever trapped in this horribly hopeless position. The leave never seemed long enough for him to completely sleep off a hangover, and he often wondered if he could go on. But then he would go on another jag, and it would all be worthwhile again. He was addicted.

There were several overpowering reasons why Alan so loved being a scanner for the Foundation. Only while on a scan, during those precious few hours or days spent on a jag, did he feel truly alive. There was excitement. There was danger. Something in his mind opened up while he was scanning and he *knew* he was someone special; he was doing something very few others could do.

And, there was Robin.

The straights' thoughts bombarded his mind in a fresh assault as he stood trembling outside the Foundation building. Limping, he stepped through the building's softly glowing pellicle door. The membrane gave, parted, then resealed behind him.

Immediately, the voices in his head ceased. It felt as if someone had suddenly thrown a switch and every straight in Denver had simultaneously dropped dead. He gave silent thanks to the Foundation engineers and architects for developing the thought shield and including it in the building's plans. And to the psychologists who had trained all two hundred and fifty thousand plus of the Foundation's employees in thought suppression techniques, he bequeathed a world of gratitude.

His steps echoed loudly as he walked through the large, empty entry hall. Putting his left eye to the lens in the wall, he allowed the computer to scan his retinal pattern. The

color of the gravity lift's pellicle door changed from red to green, indicating it had become a selectively permeable membrane under the computer's control.

"Hey, wait!" came a female voice as Alan was about to step through the membrane. He turned and looked across the entry hall.

It was Robin Green.

Robin was the union steward for Alan's shift—blue shift—and in spite of the fact that she was only twenty-three, having started at age six, she was one of the Foundation's most experienced scanners. She had been paired with Alan for assignment on many occasions. In fact, lately all Alan's assignments had been team scans, most of them with Robin. He certainly didn't mind. Robin had added something special to every jag they had ever shared; some totally unexpected occurrence always seemed to materialize, adding still more excitement to what was a fascinating profession to begin with. When he scanned with her he always became involved in something interesting, and he always became aware of possible solutions he might not have thought of had she not been present. She seemed to act as a catalyst to his abilities. As a team, they had never had a dull scan.

Lately, however, there had been something wrong. Within the past year, Robin's abilities had become somewhat dulled. Not horribly so, but enough to cause Alan to worry. Although she was normally a highly competent scanner, she had recently gotten them both into several very tight scrapes. Alan had been able to extricate them on each occasion with only the most dazzling footwork and the utmost difficulty.

But Alan realized it was probably but a temporary—if somewhat prolonged—slump in her abilities, and soon she would again have them back up to the Foundation's high standards. He had said nothing about it to her, and he had made up his mind that he would carry her as long as was necessary.

Alan pushed the thought from his mind and studied the girl before him. He noted her blue-and-white-sun suit clad figure as she approached. He eyed her tanned, sleek body as one might a vintage bottle of wine. Her short blonde hair seemed to radiate an internal glow all its own. And those legs! Long, slender, flawless brown. She was several inches taller than Alan.

Robin kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Good morning!" she said. "Glad you could make it, Al. You looked pretty ragged last time I saw you." She smiled easily.

Alan nodded and returned the smile. "You know what they say. The better the jag, the worse the hangover."

"You don't really look much better now. What say we go down together, okay?" She put an eye to the lens, then turned and rested her hand lightly on Alan's arm.



Together they stepped through the gravity lift's membrane.

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Again Alan's gaze fell on Robin's firm, young body as they floated side by side down the shaft. She was the girl Alan had dreamed of as a kid, the girl he had never met until it was too late. True, part of her attraction was purely physical; she was young, blonde, extremely beautiful. But her physical attributes were not the vital ones. More important were the facts that she was intelligent, witty and a psi.

Alan knew he did not stand a chance with her, mostly because he did not allow himself to. Oh, they had made love, once, on their first team scan together. It had been a difficult assignment, and they had both come near death several times. When they had finally succeeded in completing the assignment, before they left their host bodies, the two suddenly flew into each other's arms and made wild, passionate love. But that had been in host bodies, not in their own bodies, and after they had returned to their own dimension they both shrugged it off as something they had done during the high stress of a particularly difficult dimensional jag—nothing to think twice about. Alan could not know Robin's thoughts on the episode. He would never allow himself to peep her mind; that went totally against everything he had been taught, an unforgivable breach of etiquette, and he respected her too much to do it. All he knew was that he would never make love to her in his *own* body. That he could not do, as much as he might wish he could. He felt a strange guilt at the fact that he was a cripple.

Besides, she was living with someone. And from what Alan could gather, it was a serious relationship.

*What a waste*, he thought as they descended into the subterranean levels of the Foundation building.

He had met Robin's friend, Ralf Tanner, only once. It had been at the Foundation party last New Year. According to Robin, Tanner was sixty-one years old, and Alan considered that far too old for her, although he was nearly twelve years her senior himself. He could tell there was very little sex between them, if any at all. But each did seem to supply *something* the other needed. There was something special between them, something that looked like it would last. Something Alan realized he could never share with Robin.

Tanner had not seemed the normal sort of straight. Oh, he had played the part rather well, admiring and at the same time hating the psis for their ability and the status it gave them. But it had seemed to Alan only that, a role he was expected to assume, a part to be acted out. Somehow, there was something mysterious and even a bit sinister about Tanner. Alan had felt a slight trace of it when he had tried to peep the other's mind, an action he became ashamed of as soon as he had attempted it. But what he had encountered was strange indeed. He had found he could not penetrate Tanner's mind. His

probe had been stopped by a black barrier, a wall of cold nothingness that reflected Alan's own mind back at him.

And there had been something else, something strange about Tanner's gaze. His eyes didn't quite focus on Alan or anyone else in the room.

The gravity lift changed direction and began tracking horizontally as they reached their sub-level. Alan looked up into Robin's eyes. She was looking into his.

"Maybe you'd better save that energy, for the scan," she teased. "After that last jag you may need it.

Alan nodded and the corners of his mouth turned up in a halfhearted grin. *We are friends*, he thought, *close friends*. At least he had that. And that was one of the most important qualities in a scan team. In order for them to work effectively together, each member had to trust the other completely.

Together they stepped from the gravity lift. "Coffee?" Alan asked.

"Sure. You look like you could use it. Besides, I already know what my assignment is going to be. I called before I came in." She gave him a secretive pixie smile. Alan knew that could mean only one thing.

"Team assignment?"

"Yep, the dynamic duo. Bad Man and Robin." She took Alan's arm and drew him closer, nearly supporting him as they walked.

They were silent on their way to the cafeteria. Alan was occupied with wild speculation of what the assignment might be, and equally wild anticipation of any assignment with Robin. He knew she was silent because she was only too aware of what the anticipation was doing to him, and she was enjoying it in a not-very-innocent way. She knew what she had, and how to make the best of it. That was part of what made her such a good scanner—her natural ability to use all her assets to their ultimate.

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The lights in the cafeteria were too harsh, reflecting brightly off the stainless steel walls and compounding Alan's already excruciating headache.

The coffee was an evil brew, strong and bitter. He had never found coffee as bad as that served in the Foundation cafeteria. It was laced with all sorts of vitamins and medication prescribed by the Foundation physicians, and he knew that was what gave it such a foul taste. But that knowledge didn't make it taste any better.

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