

**MOST PEOPLE DON'T REALLY WANT THE TRUTH.  
THEY'RE JUST LOOKING FOR ANSWERS THAT CONFIRM  
THEIR PREJUDICES.**

The background of the cover is a mosaic of a smiling face. The top half of the face, including the forehead and the upper part of the eyes, is composed of light-colored, irregular mosaic tiles. The bottom half, including the nose and the wide, open mouth, is composed of dark-colored, irregular mosaic tiles. The overall effect is a high-contrast, pixelated representation of a happy expression.

# **THE FACADE**

**MICHAEL S. HEISER**

## **NOTE TO THE READER:**

EVERY PERSON REFERRED to herein, except for the characters, is real.

Every quotation attributed to such persons is genuine.

Every technology noted is operational; only the applications remain uncertain.

Every formerly classified Top Secret document\* referred to and reproduced herein actually exists.

Every ancient text discussed by the characters is authentic.

Every point of exegesis is backed by sound biblical scholarship and is in no way contrived.

Which means . . .

That nothing in this book is true, but it's exactly the way things really are . . . and will be.

\*Several documents are reproduced for the reader at the back of the book. For better viewing, go to [www.facadenovel.com](http://www.facadenovel.com).

## **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Elohun—e-lo-heem

Beney elohim—be-nay e-lo-heem

Helel ben Shakar—Hel-lel ben Sha-kar

Zaphon za-fone

Nachash—na-kash

Nephilim—ne-fi-leem

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WRITING A BOOK is never a completely individual undertaking. As many writers could and have testified, there are many people along the way that prove vital to such a project's completion. *The Facade* is certainly no exception.

I would like, first, to thank the one truly indispensable person in helping me finish this novel: my wife Drenna, in whose honor the dedication is written. Without her sacrifices of time and energy in caring for me and our children, I would never have been able to write *The Facade*.

I would also like to thank my preliminary readers, those individuals who donated their time to reading the first draft of *The Facade*, and whose comments and suggestions along the way have been both encouraging and stimulating: My wife Drenna, my parents (Ed and Jan Speraw), Doug Vardell, Roger Black, Linda Melin, Janet Sommers, Mike and Gail Olesen, Tom Walsh, Jon Terrill, Lucy Burggraff, Lynn Marzulli, Stan Deyo, Rob Holmstedt, Shane and Erin Latham, and Don and Evelyn Loewen. Others who read portions of the manuscript or offered other forms of support are Ashley Green, Jim Sheard, and Jeff Gerke.

Special gratitude must be showered upon my friend, Doug Vardell. Doug not only read the manuscript through half a dozen times, but also provided crucial help in editing and was a constant encouragement. His input was vital to *The Facade* seeing the light of day.

Lastly, I wish to also thank SuperiorBooks.com, Inc. for their vision in making it possible for writers such as myself to further their writing careers.

"The nations of the world will have to unite, for the next war will be an interplanetary war. The nations of the earth must some day make a common front against attack by people from other planets."

General Douglas MacArthur  
*New York Times*, October 9, 1955

## CHAPTER 1

The greatest test of courage on earth is to bear defeat without losing heart.

—*Robert Green Ingersoll*

THE PARKING LOT was completely empty, save for the solitary, rusted compact parked slightly askew in its stall, and a black Bonneville idling in a remote, dimly lit corner of the lot. All of the businesses in the unpretentious strip mall had been empty for nearly an hour, the lone exception being the bookstore that the two men in the front seat of the black sedan watched intently. They sat motionless, exchanging no words, patiently waiting for the man inside to close up business for the evening. From behind their dense, blackened sun-glasses, their cold, unsympathetic eyes riveted on the door from which their quarry would soon emerge. This would be effortless; they'd done it hundreds of times.

The two heads turned in unison, following the lone figure approaching the front door from the inside of the still-illuminated store. After months of surveillance, his large-framed build was by now familiar: several inches over six feet, broad-shouldered, slightly overweight.

His wavy, dark brown hair was cut short and unimaginatively styled. His circle-shaped glasses gave him the scholarly look he no doubt preferred, but the high forehead and receding chin made him visually unimpressive. The unsuspecting man turned out the lights, locked the shop door behind him, and turned and walked toward his car, oblivious to the automobile drifting silently toward him, headlights off. The sleek sedan suddenly accelerated recklessly, screeching to a halt alongside the startled figure. The man turned toward the car, visibly unnerved that he had been unaware of the vehicle up until now. The black-tinted driver-side window slowly descended while the man hesitated, his heart pounding. The driver's partner cocked his door open silently.

"Excuse me, Dr. Scott," the driver said stoically from the window. "My partner and I need to speak with you."

"Do I know you?" the man queried tensely. He wasn't sure which was more unexpected, the car or being recognized by someone he knew had no hope of identifying.

"No sir, you most surely do not."

"Who are you then? How did you know my name?" the man asked with some apprehension.

"We know a great deal more about you than your name, sir," the driver deadpanned.

"Are you guys cops?"

"No sir."

"Show me some ID, then."

"We don't *carry* any," the man sitting in the passenger side replied, suddenly

emerging from his seat.

"Then I guess this conversation is over," the man said trying to hide his fear.

"No sir, it's not," the man in the passenger side said as he deftly moved to the front of the car. The driver immediately threw open his door and positioned himself behind their target, blocking any escape. Both were dressed completely in black.

"No need to be alarmed, sir. We have no intention of harming you, at least unless you give us no choice."

The man hesitated again, unsure of what would happen next. He knew he couldn't take both of them in a fight, and they were most likely armed. "What is it you want?" he asked quietly, trying to relax, after a few strained seconds.

"Your country needs you, Dr. Scott. We're here to pick you up and transport you to your destination."

"You must be kidding," Brian protested, his fear now giving way to aggravation. "If you guys really knew anything about me you'd know how ridiculous that sounds. Who in the government needs me oh wait, let me guess, the President, right?"

"In a manner of speaking," the driver monotoned and glanced at his partner.

"Well that's different! It's about time he returned my calls!" Brian exclaimed mockingly. "Really, guys, if you're not going to arrest me or something I'm going home."

"Please get in the car," the driver's partner intoned dispassionately. "We have our assignment, and we're prepared to do our job."

"Give me a break," Brian sighed in annoyed disbelief. "What if I won't go with you?"

"But you will," they both said in eerie unison.

"Sorry, but I won't, not without a good reason, anyway."

"We can do this with or without a scuffle, sir," the driver spoke once again, in what seemed to Brian an almost robotic way. "Your compliance will be gained, I can assure you. My partner is rather skilled in compliance measures."

Brian looked at the driver's companion, who stood motion-less but ready before him. Although he couldn't see them, he felt as though the man's eyes were probing him, mind and body, searching for any vulnerability. His fear returned.

"Sir \_in the car, please," the driver motioned to Brian.

Brian hesitated again for a brief moment, and then acquiesced. He had no real choice. He breathed a prayer as he got into the car.

"We apologize for the inconvenience," the driver offered after they were on their way. "We'll see to it that your car is towed to your apartment."

"How thoughtful," Brian mumbled, and leaned his head back on the seat and sighed. *Now what?* he thought to himself. *As Oft isn't complicated enough already. Just once I wish something would happen to me that's just a little predictable.*

The thought suddenly struck him that these men had to be lying. For all he knew he was the victim of mistaken identity, and might be in terrible danger. But he had no enemies that he knew of—and if these men meant any harm, they had certainly passed up a perfect opportunity in the parking lot. *They also wouldn't be doing what they're doing now,* he mused, peering through the darkened car window. Brian watched in suspicious incredulity as the car pulled up at a fast food speakerphone, and the driver placed an order for three drinks. He could make a break for the restaurant or another building, but what if that only put other people in harm's way? He glanced at the open lock on his door

as the car drifted to the pickup window' and took a deep breath. He could feel his heart racing. He clasped the handle and glanced toward the front seat. The driver pulled the drinks through the window, and Brian let go of the handle and wiped his brow nervously. The driver's partner took two of the drinks, and Brian heard the familiar sound of the straw piercing the lid.

"Here," the man said in his customary canned tone as he handed Brian one of the cokes. "Just to show you we're not all bad."

"Right," Brian replied, taking the soda, "this would convince anyone."

Brian looked away and quietly took a few sips. Neither man in the front touched their drinks. Brian said nothing as the car headed onto the interstate. Ten minutes passed before he broke the silence.

"So how long have you two been watching me?"

There was no answer.

"Are you sure you aren't looking for another Brian Scott, maybe one who deals drugs or owes somebody some money?" Again there was no reply.

"You know, you guys remind me a lot of the Blues Brothers," Brian said dryly, trying to draw a reaction.

"We know exactly who you are," the driver's partner said, his voice taking on an annoyed inflection. "You're Dr. Brian Scott the Ph.D. bookstore clerk," he said cuttingly. "You're also a man who must enjoy being a lifetime student, since he's going back to school again. What do you think going to seminary will do for you? I have a cousin who went through one a few years ago. He's at Walmart now," the man jabbed sarcastically without bothering to turn around.

Brian didn't respond to his captor's stinging reply. He didn't know which he resented more—the tone, or the fact that he had actually been spied on. He didn't feel like getting into an argument or explaining his career choices or his recent vocational disappointments. "I'd like some answers," he finally said, yawning as he changed the subject. "Where are you taking me?"

"We're not authorized to answer that question," the driver answered, and glanced in the rearview mirror at his sleepy passenger.

Brian barely heard the response. He suddenly felt disoriented, and could hardly keep his eyes open. The driver's partner glanced over his shoulder into the back seat just in time to see their passenger collapse on the seat.

"Nighty-night, Dr. Scott," he said smugly.

"The makeup of our country's far-right militia groups is not so easily categorized," the young, auburn-haired woman, smartly dressed in a creme colored mock tunic dress, explained to her audience as the slide projector whirred and clicked, producing the next image. "Militia groups are actually made up of a variety of sub-movements, including apocalyptic Bible-thumping cultists like David Koresh, Constitutionalists, tax protesters, and more 'reasonable' Christians enamored with their conspiratorial world view. By some estimates, as many as five million Americans retain membership in a militia group."

At the back of the nearly filled auditorium, a well-dressed couple listened quietly where they stood. The speaker continued her lecture, the direction of which had turned



toward a denunciation of the mixture of politics and religion.

"She's going a little overtime," the man commented as he straightened his tie.

"The crowd doesn't seem to mind," his companion noted, arms folded across her chest. "She certainly doesn't take any prisoners. Check out the slide."

The man shook his head. The screen featured a caricature of Pat Robertson, complete with the insignia of the Third Reich on his upper arm. "I'd give anything to see the good undersecretary face-off with her; she's brutal," the man noted, his lip slightly upturned in a suppressed grin. The woman nodded.

"My own suspicion," the speaker continued, "is that if you eliminated the so-called 'born-again' Christians from these groups, they'd collapse overnight. Their leaders are the ones who give intellectual weight - and I use the term loosely - to a good deal of militia ideology. They cloak hate and white supremacy in respectable garb, and sell it to disgruntled Americans who believe in the myth of a Christian America."

The lecture lasted a few more minutes, the mostly late-teenage audience politely applauding at its conclusion. The couple began to move toward the front of the auditorium against the flow of the sizable crowd. They waited as the woman answered a few questions put to her by an audience member, and then approached the speaker.

"Good afternoon Dr. Kelley," the man said extending his hand. The speaker shook it as well as his partner's.

"You two are with the Bureau, right?" she asked with a plastic grin.

"Well ... we do work for the government," answered the woman, unable to conceal her surprise. "Are we that transparent?"

"Let's just say I'm getting used to it. I've worked for the FBI on a few assignments, and I always seem to be contacted like this. Never a phone call or a lunch invitation, which is just as well, mind you. Always popping up after lectures or classes. Is that somewhere in the training manual, for dramatic effect maybe?"

"We won't take much of your time, Doctor. We're here to present you another assignment."

"You're here to 'present' an assignment'? I think it's more polite to say 'offer.'"

"You'd be correct if that's what it was," the woman remarked curtly.

Dr. Kelley eyed them suspiciously for a moment. "No thank you. Don't get the idea that I'm not grateful, but I really don't need the work."

"Oh?" the man asked in feigned surprise. "How can that be? This is your last summer term lecture, and you've been granted a leave-of-absence for the fall."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," she replied. "I have several more lectures scheduled for July, and they don't give that much time off to someone who hasn't earned tenure yet."

"But the paperwork is in your own briefcase," he answered with a confident smile. Dr. Kelley looked at him incredulously, then opened her case.

"Inside the upper sleeve," the man coaxed.

She pulled a manila envelope from the case, opened it, and scrutinized the contents, a look of puzzled concern creasing her face.

"The university letterhead is quite attractive," the man's partner noted in feigned admiration, "but the Dean really ought to improve his penmanship."

"What's going on here?" she demanded, startled.

"We have a job for you. Your presence on a particular project is a very high priority."

"I don't like being manipulated."

"But you certainly don't mind being sought out," the man retorted.

"Dr. Kelley," the female agent jumped in before the Professor could respond, "your reputation has preceded you, and is no doubt well-deserved, but you would be wise to be less hostile. You may even be glad you've been selected."

"Is that so?" Dr. Kelly argued, recovering her composure. "I think I just made up my mind. You can both go straight to hell."

The woman angrily slammed her briefcase shut and grabbed her slides.

"Apparently you didn't hear my partner clearly," the man said coolly, grabbing her by the arm. His partner took another manila envelope from her purse.

"Get your hands off me!" she snapped, her green eyes ablaze with hostility.

"Not until you see this," the woman said, handing her the envelope. The man released his grip.

"I'm not looking at anything. The only thing I'm going to do is walk out of here, and if either one of you touches me again, I'll scream."

"If you're interested in keeping your academic career, you'll want to see the contents of that envelope," the man said, blocking her path. "Personally, *if you* want to throw away tenure, not to mention any hope of ever securing another appointment, it's your business. Take the envelope, or you might as well go back to your office and start packing."

The young woman flushed once more with anger, and she ripped the envelope from the woman's hand. She opened it, pulled out a small stack *of* papers and began reading. Her complexion paled as she flipped hurriedly through each sheet.

"None of these accusations are true!" she exclaimed shaking the papers in his face.

"Of course they aren't," the man agreed pleasantly, "but you'll never be able to prove otherwise. We've manufactured an entire paper trail in support of what you're reading. Now, you can either come with us back to your apartment, or we can mail a copy of what you're holding to your department chair. It's your choice."

"This is blackmail!"

"In a way," he agreed again, "but do you honestly think that we'd be so up front about it if there was any chance it wouldn't work? You were right when you pegged us as working for the Bureau, but let's just say we're moonlighting for a higher authority. You simply have no idea who or what you're dealing with."

The young lecturer stared at them in disbelief, but recovered quickly. "You know, teaching at Georgetown has some advantages, one of which is getting to know some powerful people."

"Ah, yes," the man answered, "you must be referring to the distinguished Senator on the university's board, whom I believe- correct me if I'm wrong you met at your department's Christmas party last year."

"Well . . . yes," she confirmed, "how "

"How did we know? Oh, come on, Professor," the woman smirked. "Do you think our choices for important projects are made in a few days? You've been closely surveiled for months. In fact, the Senator's attendance and interest in your career were arranged by us as a fact-finding procedure. The Senator was paid for his services, as usual. If you don't believe us, call him right now." The woman reached into her purse, drew out a

cellular phone, and offered it to the stunned scholar.

The three stood in silent confrontation. The young woman inserted the pages back into the envelope with a sigh of resignation. "Let's go," she muttered, pushing by them, swearing under her breath.

\* \* \*

"Mr. Secretary," the secretary's voice echoed over the intercom.

"Yes," the seated figure answered with a sigh, making no effort to divert his gaze from the window behind his desk. "The Colonel is here, sir."

"Send him in and hold the rest of my calls until he leaves."

"Yes, sir."

The office door swung open and the trim, rugged, statuesque Air Force officer entered quietly and removed his hat. Though just having entered his sixties, the Colonel conveyed the energy and vigor of a man half his age. His sparkling, penetrating blue eyes accentuated the fading blond hair left atop his whitened scalp. The man behind the desk didn't move, his gaze fixed on the Washington panorama.

"Good morning, Neil," the officer greeted energetically, standing erect in his dress blues, awaiting visual recognition. There was no response.

A few seconds elapsed before Neil Bandstra broke his gaze at the clouds outside his office window. He hadn't been looking at anything in particular. As he turned to face his highly decorated caller, his drawn face betrayed a tired, distracted owner. The Colonel couldn't manage to conceal completely his surprise.

"When's the last time you had some sleep?" the Colonel asked as he seated himself.

"A day or so."

"You really need to get some rest. We have a lot of work to do."

"Yes . . . we certainly do."

"Still thinking about the tour, eh? You know you're not atypical, Neil. I did the same thing. I've seen people who've spent their whole lives spinning lies to cover up something they'd only been told about just crumble when they finally witnessed the truth as you did. But I know you're different."

Neil stared uncertainly at the soldier from behind his desk. Compared to the alert and dapper Colonel, he was a wreck, tie and collar undone, his suitcoat thrown across the chair next to the officer's. The paperwork on his desk awaiting his attention remained untouched in the same pile from the evening before. He was physically and emotionally fatigued. "I'm still a little curious why you even wanted to risk exposing me to all this. After all, you and I haven't exactly seen eye-to-eye in the past."

"I not only knew you could take the exposure, but I need someone within official channels whom I can trust. You're one of the few people I know who isn't interested in kissing my ass or anyone else's in the military. It'll be refreshing - and essential - to have someone on the project that will provide blunt, honest evaluations. As for your current preoccupation, you'll be just fine. The Group never okays anyone if there is even the slightest doubt."

"Thanks," Neil managed with a weak smile. "It's not often your whole view of life changes overnight. I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"No doubt. But when it really sinks in, you'll begin to imagine the incredible

possibilities, and--"

"And the threat to the nation's stability to our whole way of life, really?" he interrupted, leaning back in his chair.

The officer paused awkwardly and the room fell silent.

"I do have good news for you," the Colonel resumed after a few moments. "Your request has been honored and secured."

"Thanks so much, Vernon," he said gratefully with obvious relief, his countenance lightening.

"Glad I could help."

"The Group had no problems with what I wanted?"

"Interestingly enough, no. I've been with them for twenty years, and they usually chaff a bit at adding personnel to a project they haven't hand-picked."

"But in this case . . . ?"

"In this case it only took a day or so to get approval. I didn't even get quizzed on the addition. I think they realize that after all this time they know I don't pick people whose judgment can't be relied upon. I have to admit, though, I am a bit curious at the choice from your perspective. There's no doubt that someone in this area is absolutely critical, but you could certainly have asked for someone with much more stature."

"Once you hear what he has to say you'll know why I wanted him. In my mind, he's the best person we could get for this. And he can be trusted. For sure he won't know what hit him, but he'll adjust."

"He won't have any choice," the Colonel reminded him. "I know you don't like the idea, but we're going to have to break all of them in slowly. We can't just tell them the whole truth up front."

"We've profiled all of them psychologically; they should be able to handle it."

"Sometimes tests fail—we profiled you as well, but only showed you the truth after conditioning you over time."

"Right ... " Neil said softly, tapping his desk with his fingers, ` ... the truth."

The Colonel got up from his seat and took a step toward the door. "The President is holding up his end of the plan. He's scheduled to make even more trips to raise awareness regarding global warming, but he doesn't know why he's doing it yet. The Group hasn't decided on when he'll be informed. You're our highest contact within official government channels. You answer to no one but me."

"Understood."

"I'll let you know when the decision has been made. We can't risk national security—"

"In the hands of the Commander-in-Chief?"

The Colonel sighed and looked at the floor momentarily. "I know how it sounds, but we work this way all the time, and we both know it's necessary. I know he's a personal friend, and I promise you, Neil, he'll be brought up to speed when it's time. The Group won't ignore him. In fact, they believe his popularity in the polls will work to their advantage. They just need to ensure that they'll retain control after full disclosure. This has to stay in the hands of people who know what they're doing, not people who need to get re-elected. And above all else," the Colonel said in a low voice as he reached for the doorknob, "Central Intelligence and the Joint Chiefs must be kept completely out of the loop. We can't take any chances."

"I know."

## CHAPTER 2

"I will prepare, and some day my chance will come." —*Abraham Lincoln*

BRIAN SAT UP groggily and waited for his eyes to adjust. For a moment, he was startled by his unfamiliar surroundings, but then the memory of his abduction came rushing back. *Where in the world am I?* There was a night stand next to the bed, on which lay his glasses, an alarm clock flashing "12:00," and a small lamp, the room's only illumination at the moment. Putting his glasses on, he cautiously left the bedroom, emerging into a fairly spacious, three-room furnished efficiency apartment, but one that lacked appliances and any attempt at decoration, save for a dozen bookshelves. There was no telephone. He looked at his watch in disbelief. The time was nearly 7:00 p.m.; he'd lost almost a day but to what? The main living area was choked with dozens of boxes, all labeled in black magic-marker with his last name and general descriptions of the contents. Even his filing cabinets were there. Other than the furnishings, the only item that wasn't his own in the room was a computer system already set up on a desk. There were doors at either end of the room, each with handles instead of knobs. Brian noticed immediately that the door closest to the sofa had some type of electronic locking mechanism that resembled a calculator, along with a small red light that flashed at a regular interval. He tried the handle on the door, but it was locked securely. "Looks like they want me to stay for dinner," he muttered to himself. He didn't dare touch the buttons on the affixed keypad.

Staggering slightly he headed for the second door on the far end of the room and tried the handle. The door opened to a full bath-room. Thinking a shower would help clear his head, he relieved him-self and, after a few minutes of searching through the boxes, found his toiletry items and undressed. As the spray hit his face, his thoughts drifted to the recent past. He had to admit that his life was in near total disarray. The upheaval that had begun two years ago when he'd lost his parents now seemed to have climaxed. His mind kept telling him that the God he believed in was truly good, but his heart still periodically stumbled into the quagmire of doubt.

What was cruel about his parents' deaths was the fact that they had lost their lives on the day he had walked the line for his Ph.D. Even more cruel was how they had died. The day was sup-posed to be one of celebration, the triumphant climax to years of study and determination. It had promised to be a day of reconciliation as well. His parents had never understood his desire for an academic career, much less his field of choice. In fact, they'd never under-stood *him*. Someone interested in books in a proud blue-collar family just didn't fit in. Working in the family's landscaping business during his high school summers hadn't helped, either. He eventually came to understand that this arrangement had been part of a plan to groom him for the family business; he was the anointed successor. This all made sense to his parents, since Brian was the only child. He just had no desire to spend his life manicuring shrubs and sod.

Brian wistfully recalled the day he had told his parents he planned to attend college to study ancient history. Explanations of his aspirations to become a college professor and to travel through the Mediterranean fell on deaf ears. He was soft and lazy, his father had retorted angrily; and was abandoning the family. His mother openly lamented that throwing away the opportunity to walk into a profitable business was proof that her son hadn't an ounce of common sense. Of course, by the time of that conversation, he'd become accustomed to being misunderstood, and even ignored. He'd lacked the good looks and the drive to inebriate himself on a weekly basis, the two prerequisites for acceptance in the right cliques in high school, and managed to graduate without going on a single date. Even the kids who liked him thought he was odd. They were going to be doctors and lawyers; he was bent on wasting his education on something that wouldn't earn him an income worth bragging about. None of this had mattered to him, save for the confrontation with his parents. Deep down, they were the only people whose opinion ever really mattered.

His performance in high school and the obligatory entrance exams earned him acceptance to his first choice among colleges, Johns Hopkins University. Predictably, the accomplishment elicited no excitement from his parents. In fact, the only thing that generated any response at all during his undergraduate years was the news that he'd "gotten religious" and was attending a Presbyterian church. His parents were staunch Catholics, and treated his departure from that fold as further evidence of either his rebellious attitude or incurable "book smart, life dumb" disposition. They were quick to erroneously conclude that he wanted no part of the family heritage, and now sought to judge them. The punishment meted out was an emotional apathy to-ward him. They never said it outright, but the message was clear that he was no longer welcome. He drowned his loneliness in study. Were it not for the camaraderie of a professor at the university he eventually met at an inter-faith forum, his college career would have transpired in near total isolation.

Brian turned off the water and leaned with both hands against the wall of the shower. Watching the steamy mist dissipate and the water drip from his nose, he pondered the irony that it had been his faith that had slowly built the bridge back to his parents. The thing that had driven the deepest wedge between them eventually served to suture old wounds. He'd striven at every turn to honor them, maintaining contact with them through cards, letters, and phone calls, even though the initiative was never reciprocated. He solicited their input on important decisions, kept them abreast of his progress, and pre-tended that they were still a real part of his life. The first hint of change had come when he graduated third in his class from Johns Hopkins, an achievement that resulted in a full fellowship to do his graduate work at the prestigious Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. The honor, dutifully noted in his hometown's local paper, prompted the only phone call from home that Brian received during college. The brief acknowledgment of what he had accomplished made him work even harder, turning his devotion to his studies into near obsession. He would make them proud after all. He could hardly contain his excitement when the day his degree would be conferred came. His parents had promised to be there. He smiled at the memory. Tragically, the only time he saw them was after the ceremony they'd missed was long over, when he was called to the city morgue to identify their bodies.

What followed in the next year was nearly as unimaginable. Shortly after burying

his parents, he'd been offered an appointment at a small, non-denominational "Christian" college teaching Old Testament and biblical languages. The money wasn't good, but he hadn't cared. Teaching was all he'd ever wanted to do. He eagerly took the job and moved south, believing the move would mean the start of a new life. *Christian*, he smirked ruefully. The way he'd been treated was anything but. He had heard horror stories from other academics he'd met at conventions about administrators who, though well meaning, were not academically minded. He'd paid little attention, since he never suspected the notion of academic freedom was optional and that his views on anything would ever be cause for anyone's concern. But after a parent of one of his students objected to a few comments he'd made in an article, he found himself fighting unsuccessfully for his job.

Brian shook his head as he zippered his jeans. He still couldn't believe that an issue so ignored and misunderstood by people of faith had caused such a ruckus. He had tried repeatedly to understand why his views were deemed questionable, particularly when the topic was not specifically addressed in the Bible or by any major denomination. The worst part, though, was that the leadership at the college had made the issue public, ensuring that his contract would not be renewed for the following year. Despite his impeccable resume, he was rejected by every college or university with which he subsequently interviewed. Colleagues tried to console him that the narrow-mindedness was exceptional, and that other institutions would welcome his services, should an opening ever occur, but after two years of frustration Brian had decided that if he were to stay in ministry it would have to be in the pastorate. Lacking a theological degree and any other direction, he'd moved back home to Pennsylvania to enter seminary. It was a far cry from where he'd been. The job at the bookstore was barely sufficient for his needs, and since the seminary didn't offer scholarships, he'd have to go into debt to earn a divinity degree. Not that he cared--at least he was around something that reminded him of the career he wanted. Unfortunately, he'd enrolled in summer school, which began in a few days, yet here he was, apparently in the middle of nowhere for no telling how long. Brian leaned on the desk in his new living quarters, his eyes filling with tears. It was really beginning to look as though his life had no purpose. *If you faint in the day of adversity your strength is small* the proverb echoed inside his head. There *had* to be some purpose for all of this.

Suddenly he heard a loud click behind him. What he had presumed was the front door opened, the red light now extinguished. Brian stood up. A lone figure attired in a gray business suit, nearly as tall as Brian, stood in the doorway, briefcase in hand.

"Good evening, Brian," the man said with a sincere smile.

"Neil!" he exclaimed in joyous relief, and strode toward his visitor. The two exchanged a brief but strong embrace. During Brian's undergraduate days as a freshman at Johns Hopkins, the two had met at a forum dealing with Jewish and Christian interfaith dialogue, to which Brian had been invited by a roommate. It wasn't Brian's first encounter with someone who took his faith seriously, but it had been his first exposure to a serious Christian who was also a bona fide scholar. Dr. Bandstra was a tenured Professor of International Relations at the time, and Brian had been amazed that someone outside of his own field of ancient Near Eastern studies was so conversant with the critical study of the Bible. Neil gradually assumed the roles of spiritual and academic mentor, challenging Brian to examine what he believed and to put the texts he was studying into the crucible of historical inquiry. Neil's sober yet reverent approach to his religion managed to give



Brian reasons to believe and the courage to take God out of the cell in which scholars and fundamentalists had imprisoned him. Upon graduation, Brian moved on to graduate school, and Neil accepted a job with the Defense Department in Washington. In the nearly ten years since that time, the two of them had kept in touch periodically through phone calls and email. Neil's expertise and sterling reputation caused him to steadily rise through the ranks of his new administrative career, and three years ago, at age fifty-five, he had advanced to his current position of undersecretary to the Secretary of Defense.

"You don't look too bad, considering," Neil said beaming.

"Considering this has been one of the strangest days or couple of days, I guess--of my life," Brian said with a grin, his mood dramatically changed.

"I'm sure it has. I hope you were treated well if you weren't I want to know about it."

"I'm in one piece, but since you asked," irritation surfacing in his voice, "I don't like being drugged. I can't see how anyone has the right to do that to someone."

"I know it's disorienting, but I'm afraid it was necessary," Neil said, his look turning more serious.

"Necessary?" Brian looked at him quizzically. "What's going on, Neil?"

"That's why I'm here," he said, seating himself on the small couch. Brian sat on the floor, his back to the wall, listening as he put on a pair of socks. "I can't tell you everything just now that I'm sure you'll want to know," he continued, "mostly because it's classified. Believe me, I know that'll be frustrating for you, but you must trust me."

"Where are we, the Pentagon?"

"No—their rooms have bars on them," he answered with a chuckle.

"Then where?"

"That's one of the things I can't tell you, at least at this point. Everyone who's been brought here in the last few days as part of this project was drugged so as to maintain the secrecy of this location. You may be allowed to know eventually."

Brian looked at him uneasily.

"Brian," he said with a pause, "you're here on my specific request. I almost want to apologize to you for it, but I needed you to be part of this assignment. This will introduce you to some of the details—although painfully few I have to admit," Neil acknowledged, as he opened his briefcase and handed Brian a small folder.

Brian took it and looked at the cover. Aside from his embossed name, there were only the words: Above Top Secret: Level 32.

"Wow, this is kind of neat, Neil."

"I doubt if you'll think so in a few days," his friend noted in a somber tone. "In fact, you'll probably ask me again what you're doing here, but for different reasons."

"You know that if you need me, I'm here for as long as it's necessary."

"Thanks, Brian. I knew that's what you'd say, but it's still a relief to hear it."

"So what is this?"

"I'll give it to you as straight as I'm able. You've been chosen to be part of a team that will be working on a solution to a problem that will irreversibly change life as we know it, not only in the U.S., but all over the world."

"Come again?" Brian asked, stunned at his friend's announcement.

"A little less than a year ago," Neil continued matter-of-factly, as one used to trading information of great magnitude, "one of the FDA's top animal biochemists

detected something unusual in the government's dairy cattle."

"Cows, Neil? What do I know about cows? Is this about a Mad Cow Disease epidemic or something?" Brian asked.

"Actually it's something potentially but hopefully not inevitably much worse. And we of course know you don't have any expertise in the immediate area."

"Well clue me in on what my field has to do with this at all. I'm an Old Testament scholar and a linguist, not a scientist. How am I even remotely qualified to be here?"

"I can't provide you the specific answers right now not because I don't know, mind you, but I'm not the one who's been authorized to tell you. It's just the way bureaucracy and protocol work, unfortunately. Even if I could tell you specifically, the scientific aspects to the problem are well beyond me, too. Tomorrow morning you'll meet the rest of the team and receive a preliminary briefing—which reminds me, don't forget to set your alarm; the time's on a schedule in the folder. All I can tell you without making the issue more obtuse is that we're facing an environmental crisis that's linked to roughly 40% of the nation's dairy and beef cattle."

"I'm sure you won't be shocked when I tell you that none of this makes any sense to me," Brian confessed. "How could cows cause an environmental crisis or change the world as we know it?"

"You'll find out soon enough. You've been given a very high security clearance one that is necessary to even be admitted to this facility. For now we need to go over a few other items."

"Such as?"

"For starters, this is officially a military operation, so your access within the facility is still restricted to certain areas. The military often recruits outsiders like yourself for specific tasks, although such recruitment nearly always targets scientists. When the military does this, they like to break people in gradually, and always under an extremely careful watch. It's kind of a studied paranoia, really. Even though I have a fairly high governmental position, I'm still a civilian, and it's taken some of the people associated with this project a good deal of time to get used to having any civilian participation at all."

"Aren't we all on the same side?" asked Brian.

"Of course," Neil answered with a smile, "but you have to realize that the military and the government are just like the business or academic worlds. There's a lot of internal competition, even mistrust, of colleagues. Rivalries, petty grudges, office politics—they're all part of the picture."

"I see . . . are you sure you can't say any more? I feel totally out of place."

Neil looked at Brian pensively. "I feel pretty confident saying that your faith will be tested more severely than it has to this point . . . even with your circumstances," his voice trailed off as he broke eye contact.

"Why is that?" Brian asked, growing more apprehensive. He wondered how his friend could be so sure.

"To be honest," Neil began anew, "You'll hear things . . . learn of things that will make you wonder how . . . how God can truly be in control of our lives. That's all I can say. I know you don't understand now, but your contribution will be vital, first to your country, but also to me personally."

"Have these `things' created doubts . . . about your faith, Neil?" Brian could hardly

believe he was asking the question.

"Well . . . No . . . I mean I guess I wouldn't use those terms . . . I'll confess that I'm feeling some spiritual anxiety right now, but I have a strong inclination that there are answers to my questions. That's where you come in."

Brian looked at his mentor, somewhat alarmed at what he was hearing. "I won't prod, then. I don't want to put you in a compromising position."

Neil smiled. "I know. I wouldn't have gotten to my position if I didn't honor protocol. There are times I wish I could say more, and this time is certainly one of them. I'm working on clearing the way for a greater flow of information to all the team members, but for now we'll all have to be patient. I'm confident that we'll be able to disclose more information in a few days. We were supposed to have a few more months before the team needed to be assembled, so things aren't in the best of order yet. So as of now—please forgive the broken record—I can't answer why the Defense department is involved."

Brian nodded understandingly. "What makes you so sure you'll be authorized to tell us more?"

"Because I have a great deal of authority over this project. I still have my own superiors to report to, but they've been very pliable. *They* got you when I asked."

"Yeah, they sure did."

"At any rate," Neil returned to the previous question, "the project group is composed of eleven individuals. Seven are scholars from a variety of disciplines, three of whom are scientists who have already been here at the facility for close to ten months. Their preliminary findings are part of what your project introduction contains, and are also why we're in kind of a hurry-up mode. The other four individuals, including yourself, were selected as our research dictated. These remaining members include myself, an Air Force colonel who's actually the project leader, and two other base employees. You'll meet your academic peers tomorrow morning at 9:00 a.m. when Colonel Ferguson gives his initial briefing."

"I suppose I'll be expected to have read this by then?"

"Absolutely. It's not Hebrew or hieroglyphs, but try and stay interested," Neil kidded.

"You know I will."

"In regard to your accommodations, you no doubt have noticed that your whole library is here with you."

"I guessed as much. Everything's kind of disheveled," Brian remarked.

"Sorry again, but things needed to be done quickly. We also took the liberty of backing up your entire hard drive."

"So where are the closed circuit cameras?" Brian asked facetiously.

"I got them removed."

"I hope you're kidding."

"I am," Neil chuckled again. "I know you probably feel otherwise, but you shouldn't feel like you're a prisoner. You're actually a VIP here."

"Makes me wonder what they do to people who aren't invited."

"Trust me, no one ever gets here uninvited."

"Well, since I'm so free, can you tell me how to get out of the room?"

"Oh yes," Neil answered, reaching into his shirt pocket, "I'm glad you reminded me." He retrieved what had the appearance of a credit card and handed it to Brian. "Just

swipe this through the card reader face up, and then punch in your numeric ID on the pad. You'll need to do the same to open doors that lead directly to the conference rooms that team members will be using. To get out of the room or open it for someone else, you'll need to punch in the same number. Yours is 2929—the last four digits of your social security number. Don't let anyone else know it."

Brian nodded. "How do I know where the permissible areas are?"

"There aren't that many, but if you want to know now, there's a floor plan in your notebook. It shows a layout of the section of the facility that you're authorized to use. Basically, the map shows only the location and number of other team member rooms, meeting areas, a recreational and exercise facility, and cafeteria. There's also a laundry room."

"Cafeteria? That'll be my first stop."

"I think you'll find the food above average, and it's open twenty four hours, but you can't always get hot items. You could go now if you like. I'd go with you but I have some other duties this evening."

"I think I'll get my junk in order first," answered Brian.

"By the way, the security system only allows you one at-tempt at opening a door from either side. If you use the card incorrectly, or punch in the wrong code, the MPs will be alerted to an at-tempted security violation."

"What happens then?"

"You'll be detained for questioning by the head of security. He knows who's supposed to be here and what areas they may access. The MPs aren't privy to anything that's going on here, they just have their orders. You won't have a problem unless you try to go some-where you shouldn't."

"Don't worry, I won't."

"You should also know that, while you can get online, you won't be permitted to email anyone outside the base. Your email pro-gram is already set up with the addresses for the other personnel associated with the project, including a steward who can get you any living necessities. You won't be able to log on to any newsgroups, chat rooms, or bulletin boards. Access to the web is for research only. Oh, and there's one more thing you need to know about security."

"What's that?" asked Brian, a little overwhelmed by the restrictions.

"By all means, don't ever run from one of the MPs. They're all highly trained, elite Marines."

"What's your point?" asked Brian, "I wouldn't even think of trying something like that."

"I only mention it because they have orders to shoot anyone who appears to be attempting to escape the facility. They may try to run you down, but they don't have to."

"Thanks for not skipping that small detail," Brian quipped, "although I can't imagine anyone not liking it here."

"I know you're not used to this kind of environment, but the security we have here is justified by what we're protecting."

"I guess I'll just take your word for it. What about paying my bills, getting mail—that sort of thing?" Brian asked, changing the subject.

"We've arranged for your mail to be sent to a servicing location. You'll get mail—opened, as you might guess—every week. As far as your bills, you won't have to worry

about them anymore."

"What do you mean?" Brian wondered aloud.

"You'll hear more details tomorrow. We've electronically transferred all your financial resources to a banking facility the Defense department uses. Everything is intact, and, as you'll be briefed tomorrow, the government will compensate you financially for your service. If you don't mind my saying so, I know you could use the money."

"You're right, I could. Things just haven't panned out the way I'd hoped. I'm working on a book that will hopefully generate a little extra money."

"That's marvelous—I hope it works out for you," Neil said in an encouraging tone. "I'll have to mention it tomorrow during introductions."

"Thanks, but it's not that big of a deal."

"Maybe it will be," he winked, and then again became serious. "I feel like I have to apologize again that I couldn't get to your parents' funeral," Neil added, feeling a twinge of shame. "Being out of the country on occasion is part of this job, and the trips always seem to come at inopportune times. It also bugs me that something else hasn't opened up since the fiasco down south."

"Yeah, me too."

Neil looked at his watch and stood up from where he was sitting. "Time to get on with my other visits," he said snapping his briefcase closed. "Remember, if you need anything, just email the steward. Even at this hour it's fine; the system is constantly monitored."

"How reassuring," Brian joked. "I have to tell you, Neil, this whole setup makes me a little queasy. I can't help but get the distinct impression that the only people who'll know that I'm still alive will be those connected with this project."

Neil looked at the floor for a moment, and then turned his attention back to Brian, "Precisely." He slid his card through the card-reader and punched in his code. When the pulsating light froze and changed color, he turned the handle. "I'll see you bright and early tomorrow," he said placing his hand on Brian's shoulder. "It really is wonderful to see you, Brian."

"And you."

\*\*\*

It took Brian nearly three hours to get all his things in order, nearly twice as long as he'd initially expected. His mind kept wandering back to his conversation with Neil. He'd lost his enthusiasm for a late night visit to the cafeteria after Neil affirmed the extent of his newfound anonymity, opting instead for a hot cup of tea and some fragmented cookies he kept in one of his filing cabinets. Despite his friend's assurances that all the "precautions" were necessary, he was alarmed at how easily the government could erase any trace of his whereabouts. He hadn't asked, but he figured that it was very likely that the government, using its unobstructed access to his social security number, tax records, and anything else about him, had stored away his life electronically, making it next to impossible for anyone on the outside to find him. The truth was, no one except his landlord and boss would ever notice he was gone. The former had his money, and the latter would just hire someone else. If anyone wanted to find out where he'd gone, there was no one that would put forth the perseverance it would surely take. That realization

left him with a disturbingly vulnerable feeling. He had every confidence in Neil's judgment and friendship, but it was obvious that there was a great deal about this assignment that he hadn't been told.

The contents of the folder Neil had issued him consisted of little more than schedules, a floor plan, and the names of the other scientists and scholars on the team. The list of potential topics for discussion on tomorrow's agenda—global warming and the ruminative and reproductive systems of cattle—were of little interest to him. At around midnight he decided to play some solitaire on his computer, but soon got bored with that. He was wide awake, a state due primarily to all the sleep that he'd gotten already, but also to his anxiety over his circumstances.

The thought dawned on him that, although his folder contained a list of participants and their respective fields of expertise, it contained no information on their academic backgrounds. Brian decided to spend some time searching online in the hope that he could find more information on those who would be his colleagues for the foreseeable future. The results were predictably unfruitful—not one of the names produced any meaningful hits other than their professional affiliations or email-addresses—until he typed the name "Mark Chadwick," the team's bovine biochemist, into the search engine. Although there were several individuals sharing the name, several links to long lists of publications made it apparent that Brian had found at least one team member. Brian glanced disinterestedly at the screen, cluttered with articles and research reports for which he had no academic frame of reference. Suddenly one title grabbed his attention. He hurriedly clicked on the reference and hastily read the online abstract, his eyes widening with each paragraph. After a few moments he sat back in his chair, his mind racing.

"This just has to be a coincidence ... " he whispered to himself. "But ... what if it isn't?"

## CHAPTER 3

"The harder you work, the harder it is to surrender." —*Vince Lombardi*

THE NEXT MORNING Brian awoke fully refreshed, despite the fact that he hadn't been able to fall asleep until after 3:00 a.m. Energized by the revelation of the previous evening and a renewed sense of resolve to take Neil's advice and trust him, he hastily showered and pulled on the only things that approximated dress clothing that he had: a purple button-down shirt and a pair of khaki pants. Neil wanted him here, and had no reason to let anything adverse happen to him. He removed the page in his folder that contained the facility's floor plan, stuffed the rest of the folder and a few other items for note-taking into his backpack, and punched out of his room.

As the door closed behind him, he was confronted by an inordinately long hallway, which Brian estimated to be at least a hundred yards. A glance at the floorplan told him that the cafeteria was situated at the far end of the passageway. As he embarked, Brian noted a number of other doors dotting the hallway. Those closest to his own room were noted on his map, and he drew the conclusion that these were the accommodations of other team members. The only other rooms marked on the page lay close to the cafeteria itself, and were variously marked according to the functions Neil had mentioned the night before. Along the way there were dozens of other doorways, all of which were solid, allowing no visibility as to where they might lead. He wondered why Neil had actually bothered to warn him against running from an MP. There was simply no place to run, and there were no guards in sight.

As he reached his destination, the wonderful aroma of fresh eggs and bacon captured his senses, and reminded him that it had been nearly two days since he'd last eaten. To his delight, breakfast was served buffet style, and he availed himself eagerly. He bowed silently over his meal, and then began to survey the room as he ate. It was much smaller than he'd expected, only housing a dozen or so tables, and had an almost antiseptic feel to it. Beside himself, there were five others dining, four of whom were men. Two trim, impeccably groomed graying men sported the familiar Air Force officer's dress, while a third, more aged gentleman, who seemed to be somewhat agitated, wore a drab olive suit. The final male member of the assemblage was a tall, lanky black man in a white lab coat, whom Brian guessed to be in his early thirties. The man's high cheekbones held up a pair of dark, horn-rimmed glasses, and his large, smiling mouth, set with perfect white teeth, drew Brian's attention immediately. He waved his long arms in exaggerated gestures as he talked, but no one at his table appeared very interested. His faded jeans and designer sneakers couldn't hide the fact that he would certainly be judged a typically nerdy scientist. The woman, smartly attired in stylish light-gray pleated slacks with a matching jacket, was also black and in the same age range as himself and the slender scientist. Her close-cropped hair made her rectangular face appear broader than it actually was, and the faddish, dark narrow glasses she peered through gave her what Brian guessed was an intentionally sassy look. None of them paid Brian the slightest attention, save for the black scientist.

Brian went back to the buffet at about the same time the men across the room

arose from their table, leaving the lone woman to finish her breakfast. The military brass and the suited man filed out past him silently with nary a glance, but the fourth man stopped as soon as he reached the place where Brian stood.

"Well, Dr. Scott," he said extending his hand eagerly, "glad to see you're finally up and around, man!"

Brian set his tray down and shook the man's hand firmly.

"Guess you're wondering how I know who you are," he continued, anticipating the question. "I'll tell you while you finish your breakfast. Go ahead—sit down and finish. I don't intend to make either of us late. Colonel Ferguson is fanatical about punctuality."

Brian returned to his seat accompanied by his unexpected guest. "So what's your name?"

"Malcolm Bradley—no relation to Milton or Omar, of course; wrong color."

"No kidding," Brian remarked with a grin.

"I discerned your identity by simple deduction, actually," the man continued cheerfully, as Brian took another mouthful. "The team got permission from Dr. Bandstra to have a late night meeting over some snacks two nights ago—boy was that interesting. It's too bad you weren't there. Dr. B excused you since you were still sleeping off your, uh, transport to our location."

"Yeah, I was. I've spent most of the last two days reading my eyelids. So what happened that was so noteworthy?"

"Let's just say some people are less than thrilled to be here. You'll know what I mean when we get together this morning. I don't imagine attitudes have changed over the course of only another day. Anyway, I already know the other scientists in the group, as I was `recruited' with them ten months ago. Of the four non-scientists, two are female in gender. Dee over there seems nice enough, to me any-way; I just met her. Only the other one is worth a second look, though. Since none of us are going anywhere soon, I hope to get lucky. Brainy babes are the best kind, if you know what I mean."

"I can only guess; I'm sure I don't have the benefit of your experience," Brian replied as he salted his eggs.

"Just wait until you see her—thick reddish hair, bobbed to the chin, not too tall, about 5'5", and everything just perfectly pro-portioned. Simply scrumptious, man."

"I'll try my best to stay out of your way."

A perplexed look creased Malcolm's face, as Brian took a sip of orange juice. "Hope I didn't offend you, man. Are you gay? I mean, that's okay with me if you are. I've got other gay friends, so I'll try—"

"No, I'm not gay, Malcolm," Brian said, shaking his head. He could tell his companion didn't let tact get in the way of either his curiosity or enthusiasm. Brian liked him already.

"Oh . . . okay, I've got it. I remember your field was religion or something like that, right? I'll bet you're a minister or something. That's it—another man of the cloth. Man, I'm sorry—I'll watch my mouth. You won't hear anything like that—"

"Take it easy," Brian interrupted his prattling. "I'm not a priest—and what did you mean when you said `another?'"

"We've already got a priest on the team, man."

"You're kidding why is that?"



"Beats me—why do we have you?"

"I give up, why?"

"Aww ... !" Malcolm grinned.

"I have no idea why I'm here, if you really want to know."

"Hmmm . . . it is kind of odd," Malcolm mused, rubbing his chin. "So is sex, like, against your beliefs? Sorry, but I'll be wondering about it until you tell me; I'm like that—I just have to know. I don't bother people or get in their face, but people are interesting, you know. If you're bugged just tell me—Malcolm can take it. I never met anyone who thought so that wasn't a priest or holy man."

"You still haven't," Brian informed him between bites. "No, Malcolm, I don't have a problem with sex. I just believe it should be kept within marriage."

"Oh ... well, that's cool." Malcolm said, still curious. "That must be awfully difficult."

"What?"

"You know, a life of abstinence. I can't imagine it."

"And I don't want to. Actually, it's been easy. It takes a woman you know."

"Uh . . . yeah . . . I don't get it."

"Practically speaking, my religious mores are beside the point. My standard would only be a challenge if the opportunity presented itself. Can't say I've ever been in the situation."

"Oh ..." Malcolm replied a little uneasily. "We can talk about something else. I'm kind of interested in religion, too. Did you read *The Celestine Prophecy*?"

"I'm relieved that you have other interests, Malcolm. And, yes, I've read the book. Now I have a question for you."

"Shoot."

"Is the confinement here getting to you? I mean, do they let you out much?" Brian asked, with an amused smile.

Malcolm chuckled. "Not if they can help it! Truthfully, they have us holed up in labs most of the time. The other scientists on this project and myself haven't seen much of each other, lately. In the beginning, we did, but now we're sort of isolated, you know, working on individual topics for data gathering and experimentation within each of our specialties. I'm lucky to see a civilian, even at meals." "You had breakfast with those men this morning. Aren't they your friends?"

"An act of desperation. Getting any of those guys to say two peeps is almost impossible. They spend so much time guarding their little secrets that they think everyone outside their little cabal is trying to milk them for information. It's pathetic. To make matters worse, the other scientists don't seem to go out of their way to sit with me or shoot the bull even when we do cross paths."

"I find that really hard to believe."

Malcolm smiled understandingly. "I really don't usually just blather on like this, honest."

"Bummer. I was kind of hoping you did. Just keep it clean and you can gab all you want to me."

"Thanks," Malcolm said appreciatively. He looked at his watch. "You still have a few minutes."

"Right," Brian responded as he hurried to finish his meal.

"Here comes Dee," Malcolm noted dutifully. "She's sharp, but watch out for her temper. She and the Colonel got into it last night and it wasn't pretty."

No sooner had Malcolm's comment ended than the woman Brian had noted at the table appeared at his side. She was tall for a woman, a few inches under six feet, and was on the chubby side.

"I see you've met Malcolm," she grinned.

"Yes, he's been very entertaining."

"Now you know what Jar-Jar Binks evolved into," she quipped, glancing over at the butt of her joke. Brian laughed heartily. "Deidre Harper," she said, extending her hand.

"Brian Scott," he answered, shaking her hand.

"The trays go over there," she informed him, looking at her watch.

"Right I've heard about Colonel . . . what was his name?" "Ferguson," she replied. "Ah, yes—charming man," she added with transparent disdain.

"So, do either of you know what's going on here?" Brian asked as he stood up and pushed in his chair.

"I don't, and other than the fact that we're somewhere in the southwestern United States," Deidre butted in, "Malcolm doesn't know squat either."

"To the contrary; I know everything," Malcolm said confidently as they started toward the open doorway of the cafeteria.

"You do?" Brian stopped, startled. He was eager to learn if his suspicion was correct.

"Well, they haven't officially told me anything beyond what they've probably told you, but I've been here ten months, and I've got it figured out."

"Oh," Brian said, trying to hide his disappointment. The three of them walked down the corridor toward the conference room.

"I see you don't believe me, but I won't hold it against you. It's exciting to have you and the other non-scientists here, Dr. Scott. According to my theory, your presence indicates either resignation or desperation. You do know that the plans for the original makeup of this team included only scientists, don't you?"

"No, I didn't," answered Brian, a little curious as to why Neil had omitted this detail. He also wondered how much his colleague knew about his background.

"It's true," Malcolm chirped. "They thought we'd solve the problem."

"And you couldn't, huh?"

"Actually, we did better than that—or worse, depending on one's perspective. We succeeded in isolating the real cause of the immediate problem—at least that's what the enigmatic 'Group' congratulated us for. Unfortunately, we've hit the wall on our attempts to uncover the source of this catalyst. It's my opinion that a solution is unattainable, at least in terms of our current scientific knowledge—or to the extent of the information they've given us. What we did was bring this fact to light and, it seems, force some kind of decision. So, in a way, we did provide an answer."

"That answer being that you're basically out of ideas—at least to this point?"

"Precisely," Malcolm grinned as he carded the door and opened it for Brian.

The conference area was quite a contrast to the austere atmosphere of the rest of "the Facility," as it had been so dubbed by Neil. The walls were undecorated, but pleasantly pasteled in aptly coordinated colors. There were eleven high-backed, burgundy

leather chairs surrounding a large, polished, black marble table. Brian looked around the room, taking note of the team's membership. Several of the team members were scattered throughout the room, engaged in hushed conversations among themselves. One of Malcolm's foursome, an apparently high ranking Air Force officer whom Brian now presumed to be Colonel Ferguson, stood behind a podium situated at the head of the table. Behind him a large viewing screen was suspended from the ceiling. The Colonel's attention was captured by Neil, who stood next to him, his back toward the door through which Brian and Malcolm had entered. Malcolm took one of the empty seats, and Brian was headed for one of the remaining chairs when someone grabbed his arm from behind. Startled, he turned abruptly, his gaze falling on the unfamiliar face of a thin, balding, elderly priest. The old cleric was a good bit shorter than he was, and conveyed the impression of frailty. His eyes brightened in response to Brian's attention, his ebullient smile seemed to stretch the corners of his mouth beyond the tip of his gaunt, tapered nose.

"Excuse me," Brian said, "Were you sitting here?"

"Not at all, Dr. Scott," the priest said politely. "I just wanted to meet you before we got started. My name is Andrew—Andrew Benedict."

"It's good to meet you, Father," Brian said pleasantly, and shook the priest's hand. To Brian's surprise, the grip was strong and sure.

"Please call me Andrew. I've spent more years in the class-room than days in a parish. The Church and my Order deemed my gifts more appropriate to a life of study than pastoral ministry."

"Is there necessarily a difference?" Brian asked good-naturedly.

The priest smiled and shook his head. "There shouldn't be. How refreshing to find someone with my own viewpoint of scholar-ship. Well said, Doctor."

"Brian."

"Very well. You know, Brian, our paths nearly crossed last November at the American Academy of Religion meeting. I went to hear you read your paper, only to discover you'd been scratched from the program. I was quite disappointed."

"So was I ... I couldn't afford the plane fare, so I had to cancel."

"Unfortunate . . . but providential." Brian couldn't hide the hint of surprise on his face at the priest's choice of words.

"Don't look surprised. You Presbyterians don't have a corner on sovereignty!" the priest chuckled.

"No offense meant."

"None taken. I should tell you," the priest said in a lowered voice, as he looked past Brian in the direction of the Colonel. "I've read your dissertation through several times. Some of my own academic training is in the area of Semitics as well. A brilliant piece of work, really."

"Thanks. You're one of the few who've taken an interest. The microform service hasn't exactly had a run on them."

"It's not unusual," the priest shrugged.

"Well, it's to be expected. There isn't exactly an abundance of scholarly interest in the perspective from which I argued."

"That is true, although you have your admirers. John Paul found your arguments utterly absorbing."

Brian gasped in amazement. "You mean to tell me the Pope actually read my

dissertation?"

"Oh, yes, I recommended it to him. He wasn't a Hebrew scholar, mind you, but he had a rudimentary knowledge of the biblical languages. Actually, he spoke a good number of languages, and was something of a linguist. We had several conversations to that end. I helped him digest as many of the technical points as I could."

"Wow," Brian whispered, still in awe. "What about the current Pope?"

"Between the two of us," the priest's mood suddenly became more sober, "he isn't half the man—intellectually or spiritually—that John Paul was. I wish that somehow the three of us could have met before he passed on."

"I had no idea anyone was even paying attention to my work."

"Someone is *always* paying attention, Doctor," Father Benedict replied with cryptic smile. "You would do well to remember that."

The Colonel cleared his throat, and the team members not already seated began moving toward the table.

Father Benedict motioned for Brian to take a seat next to him.

"Thanks," Brian responded, "It was great meeting you. Could we have lunch together after we're done here?"

"That would be delightful!" the priest whispered enthusiastically.

"If I could have your attention," the Colonel intoned tersely. "Now that all the appropriate parties are present, we can get to know each other properly. I'm sure you remember some of your comrades' names from the prior evening, but today's program will include more formal introductions. I also trust that the atmosphere this morning will be a bit more cordial. And in case you're wondering about the two vacant seats, the rest of the team will be introduced to you when that becomes necessary."

Neil opened his briefcase and withdrew a stack of 10x13 manila envelopes. He rose from his seat, glancing at the label on each envelope and handing it to its designee.

"Please wait to open the materials Dr. Bandstra is handing out. We'll be getting to the contents therein momentarily. I want to first introduce myself again briefly for those who were not present at the other meeting, and bring some preliminary details to your attention. My name is Colonel Vernon Ferguson," the officer continued, "and I'm a thirty-two-year veteran of the United States Air Force. I'm a former combat pilot and intelligence officer. I have an earned doctorate in aeronautics, and taught for several years at the Air Force Academy. You've already all met Dr. Bandstra, one of the Defense department's undersecretaries and the civilian director of this project. He answers only to myself in the chain of command. I trust you will all give him the appropriate respect."

"What about the Commander-in-Chief, or maybe even that Constitution thing?" Deidre interrupted sarcastically, visibly agitated. Brian was taken aback by her transparent hostility, particularly in light of the contrast to his own introduction to her just a few minutes ago. It didn't take too much imagination to presume her interjection marked a continuation of the antagonism to which Malcolm had alluded.

"Ah, yes, Dr. Harper," the Colonel said with a confident air, "I see that you're determined to pick up where you left off. I apologize once again for the painful disruption this project has caused in your life, and I sympathize with your concern for legal protocol. Tell me, Doctor, you are familiar with the phrase 'plausible deniability,' are you not?" he asked condescendingly.

The woman responded with only a smirk, arms folded across her chest.

"Well then, for your benefit as well as the rest of your colleagues, I must inform you that your government, at least as you are familiar with it, has no knowledge of this project. Plausible deniability is, in this case, absolutely plausible. Using another term you may have heard, this is a `BlackOp,' or `black budget' operation. Every dollar spent on this project is undetectable to those who hold the purse strings of congressional budgetary oversight. Oh, they know that a specified amount of your tax dollars goes to under-the-table projects and programs; they just don't know what they are in most cases. In reference to this undertaking, the few individuals who de-sign such projects—my own superiors—are sworn to the highest level of secrecy amongst themselves and have permanent anonymity, in that their names are never recorded on any memoranda. They are therefore effectively insulated from the investigative power of the General Accounting Office. Which reminds me for the sake of discussion, I will refer to my own superiors simply as `the Group.' It is certainly true, Dr. Harper, that the President, as well as most of the elected members of Congress, have no knowledge of what you'll be working on. And, contrary to what you may be thinking, it's all entirely legal. If I deemed it necessary, documentation from both the National Security Decision Directives and United Nations Security Council Resolutions could be produced for your reading pleasure."

"I want to see them!" she demanded defiantly.

"Now, now, Doctor," the Colonel patronized, "I'm sure you must be disturbed that many of the liberal politicians and pacifist organizations you so admire would willfully sanction this kind of operation. Just imagine, a globalistic, sovereignty-stealing organization like the UN years ago providing the legal means by which we can circumvent some of their most cherished goals."

"You arrogant bastard!"

"Please, Dr. Harper," the Colonel interrupted calmly, "Let me remind you that we have clergy present."

The woman slumped back in her seat with a defiant sniff.

"The entire rationale I sketched for you," he continued, "has been in existence since the Forties. Then President Truman had the foresight to move certain operations beyond the grasp of his own office, since the duties of that office are often carried out under political duress or expediency, depending on one's perspective, and the outcomes of national elections."

"The public has a right to know .... whatever it is you're hiding," Dr. Harper continued, not content to let the Colonel have the last word.

"No it doesn't!" the Colonel suddenly erupted, and slammed his fist onto the podium, jolting his antagonist in her seat. "We're talking about matters of national security which have always been exempt from public or journalistic scrutiny. No one has a right to know anything concerning this project except those of you in this room!" he bellowed, abandoning the podium. The room fell completely silent, the team members bolted upright to their chairs like a bunch of scared marine recruits on the first day of boot camp. Brian unconsciously held his breath as he watched the Colonel stroll around the table like General Patton inspecting his troops. Malcolm's description of the tension had been only the tip of the iceberg. Brian wondered again what he'd already missed.

"And if you do your jobs well," the Colonel continued in a calm, assured voice, "if you're worth the confidence your country has taken in you, if you're really as good as

you think you are, the public you—and I—care so much about will get what it really wants: the security of the status quo. You represent the key to guiding the citizens of this country through a terrible crisis of which, at the present, they are blissfully unaware."

The Colonel sauntered back to the podium and straightened his uniform. Brian hadn't appreciated the tongue-lashing any more than anyone else in the room, but he couldn't help admiring the man's commanding presence.

"Now," the Colonel resumed his introduction, "if you'd like to find out why I've bothered to reveal this much to you already, and what exactly you've been selected to work on, I'll thank you ahead of time for withholding any irrelevant comments or questions. Is that understood?"

Brian almost expected someone to salute with a 'Yes Sir!', but no one at the table moved or spoke.

"Good. Look around you at your academic colleagues. You'll notice something immediately—the seven of you, with the exception of the good father, are in your thirties. Besides something as obvious and superficial as your age, you all possess earned doctorates from some of the most prestigious universities in the world, and are regarded by your professors and the Group as the brightest young minds in your respective fields. Each of you is also single and has no children. In addition, your parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles are deceased. You have been continuously surveiled for at least two months, and in some cases much longer. The content of your conventional mail, email, Internet usage, and phone records all helped us conclude that none of you has any relationship with anyone that could be considered close. Do any of you have any notion as to the significance of these criteria?"

The Colonel paused for a moment, but the scientists and scholars sitting before him remained silent. With smug satisfaction, the Colonel answered his own question. "We were not only looking for sharp minds, but individuals who would not be readily missed, at least not right away. Most of you have mainly casual acquaintances: classmates, employers, and colleagues, for example. Next, we looked for specialists who had worked for the government before, or who were employed by companies with government contracts. Once that criterion was met, it was a relatively simple matter to arrange temporary leaves of absence. A few of you live more isolated lives, and hence presented a minimal risk. This project will last a while, and we've taken every precaution that your whereabouts will not be looked into, and that your absence will not cause undue concern. As you already know, you will be allowed to contact the 'outside world,' but we won't allow undue frequency, and your mail, conventional and electronic, will be unfailingly monitored. You will not be allowed phone privileges."

"Why did you go through the trouble to transmit our financial records under government accounting," Brian ventured to ask, eyeing the other team members, "or is that just something that was done to me?"

The panicked expressions on the faces of several of his associates revealed to him immediately that this was a new revelation to the others. Only Father Benedict seemed detached. "No, Dr. Scott, you are not alone," the Colonel replied looking Brian in the eye, unperturbed by the inquiry. "The Group has indeed taken the same liberty with each of your records."

"What the hell do you think you're doing!" Dr. Harper exploded again, only this time her sentiments were immediately echoed by a majority of the others.

"So glad you asked, Doctor," the Colonel, unflappable as ever, answered. "The facility in which you are housed is completely equipped with a full hospital, and staffed by one of the military's top personal physicians. Consequently, your health insurance has been assumed by the military. Your regular salaries are being electronically funneled to new personal accounts according to whatever schedule your outside employer has created. Your monthly bills have all been converted to an electronic payment format, each payment being de-ducted from you account. Lastly, \$75,000 has been placed into your individual savings accounts as payment for your services on this project. I realize that the amount is less than some of you are accustomed to earning, particularly those of you in corporate research and development. It's also considerably more than some of you are accustomed to earning," he added, his eyes darting in Brian's direction. "All in all, I think you'll agree that it is adequate compensation. Do you have any objections, Dr. Harper?"

"How do we know this isn't just a pile of crap?" she asked skeptically.

"A private access code to your accounts was sent to your computers via email this morning. You can use it to access those accounts and verify what I've said. Please remember to open the message by this evening, since we will be deleting it at midnight from the system. Dr. Scott, does that satisfy your curiosity as well?"

Brian nodded readily, more than a little overwhelmed by the amount.

"I take it that the rest of you are more at ease now?" the Colonel asked reviewing his audience. No one uttered a word.

"Good now on to the next line of business. I'm sure you won't be surprised when I tell you that it is mandatory that you take an oath of secrecy before I go any further. The security oath required for this level of clearance is on the first page of the materials enclosed in the envelopes before you. Please remove only the first page and sign the form. I'll collect them now." The team members began opening their envelopes.

"What makes you so sure we're going to sign them?" a striking, auburn-haired woman seated next to Dr. Harper asked, her envelope untouched. Dressed in a double-breasted olive business suit, she was unmistakably the referent of Malcolm's earlier comments in the cafeteria. Her perfectly oval face was surrounded by impeccably bobbed hair, styled off her forehead to reveal an understated widow's peak. The speaker's now-pursed lips had a barely discernible pout, and her green eyes were positively mesmerizing. She wore little makeup; she didn't need it. Malcolm hadn't exaggerated.

"I believe you already know the answer to your question, Dr. Kelley. You have no choice."

The Colonel's bold statement caught the attention of every-one. Expressions of anger and annoyance formed again on the faces of the team members.

"He's right," the woman quipped, turning her attention away from the Colonel's gaze to the others seated at the table. "Unless I miss my guess, the rest of the contents of the envelopes in front of you contain a blackballing scheme similar to the one handed to me when I was, how do you say, 'recruited' for this 'patriotic' venture." Her voiced dripped with sarcasm, but her look told everyone she wasn't kidding. Save for the old priest, the others immediately withdrew the contents of their envelopes and began shuffling through the documents therein.

"This is unconscionable!" a wiry, bearded man with curly red hair exclaimed. "These are absolute fabrications! I've been here ten months already, why is this necessary

now? What are you trying to do, ruin my career?"

"How many years do you suppose you can live on \$75,000?" Malcolm spoke up cynically, scanning the contents of his envelope. "If anyone in my profession ever saw this I'd be completely unemployable!"

The mood of the team grew more irate, but the Colonel had yet to make any attempt to intervene. Brian looked up from the pages he had drawn from his envelope. He looked directly at Neil, whose attention had been riveted on his friend as soon as he'd reached for the envelope. There was sorrow in the older man's gaze, but his expression also pleaded for understanding. Brian held his tongue.

The Colonel finally motioned for quiet, and began to speak once it was obtained. "You should all know that the Group has no intention of ever making any of these materials public. You have our word that, as long as you abide by your oath of secrecy, none of what you've read will ever surface. On the other hand, if you refuse to sign the oath, sabotage the project in any way, whether during your stay here or upon fulfilling your service, or divulge any information concerning the project at any time as long as you're alive, these records and others will be made public."

"How long does it take you guys to dream up this bunk and produce the paper trail making it appear legitimate?" the red-haired man growled angrily. "And I still want to know why this wasn't necessary when we began our work. I've done other jobs for the government, and I've never had to sign anything like this before!"

"You've also never had this high a security clearance, Dr. Chadwick." Brian took immediate note of his identity.

"I would have told you at dinner last evening," the Colonel continued smugly, "but I didn't want to ruin your meal. The material is, of course, completely untrue. But thanks to the magic of electronic information retrieval and storage, it is a painfully easy thing to, say, fatten your bank account and alter the records of your employer to make it appear as though you have a problem with embezzling, or that you cooked the numbers on the research project that won your company a key government contract, or that you plagiarized in your dissertation the possibilities really are endless," he explained matter-of-factly. "And I haven't even gotten to the sexual peccadilloes we could concoct for any one of you which would be, shall we say, less than career-enhancing. Others in this group, however, do not have a back-ground so pristine as yours, Doctor, and hence no imagination was required. The IRS, for example, would be more than interested in income that was never reported, which, I hardly need to remind some of you, could be bloated with just a computer keystroke. As I reminded Dr. Kelley, you simply have no choice but to cooperate. And, once again, the reason this was unnecessary ten months ago is that you were operating under a substantially lower clearance. Your research in that time has led to the Group's decision to seriously upgrade the importance of this project."

"Why don't you just kill us?" Malcolm cracked bitterly.

"Let's just say we hope that won't be necessary," the Colonel replied in a disturbingly staid tone. "Consider this alternative a good faith gesture."

The room again took on a subdued atmosphere. Dr. Chadwick slumped into his seat and absentmindedly played with one of the curls in his hair. Brian watched him curiously, waiting for yet another verbal volley to spring from his temper. Several of the team members reached into their shirt pockets for pens and signed the oath. Brian was one of them. One by one, the others reluctantly followed suit.



"Dr. Bandstra," the Colonel broke the silence, "would you be so kind as to collect the papers—and please make sure that the signatures are legible."

Neil rose from his seat and made his way around the table. He paused at Brian's chair only long enough for the two of them to exchange a questioning glance.

"I know that none of you are in the mood to really contemplate this," the Colonel began once Neil returned to his seat, "but these hardball tactics are necessary. I regret that this kind of precaution has to be taken to assure compliance, but the Group deems it essential. You will soon be privy to some of our country's most highly sensitive material which, if leaked to the public, would surely cause widespread panic. If it's any consolation, Dr. Bandstra and I are also under the same potential duress. What we need to stress is not how your connection to this project can damage your career if there is a security lapse, but the fact that it truly represents the opportunity of a lifetime. I know it sounds hollow now, but you'll soon agree that peers all over the world would give a great deal to be in your place. Wouldn't you say so, Neil?"

"Absolutely," he answered firmly. "It's a privilege to be associated with each of you, and to be part of such a pivotal undertaking. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else, doing anything else. What we protect is worth the security we give it."

"With that said," Colonel Ferguson said, his attention still on Dr. Bandstra, "why don't you introduce everyone, Neil. We have quite a team."

"I suppose you can explain this!" the pinstriped, graying, middle-aged man snapped contemptibly, scattering a half dozen faxes across the polished, brown table toward his burly, heavily side-burned associate. The man's pudgy fingers pawed at the documents, gathering the strewn pages toward his seat, a look of consternation forming on his face, while his suited accuser strolled silently atop the room's plush carpeting around the table's twelve chairs.

"How can this be?" he muttered, sifting through the sheets in his hand, his curiosity having given way to confusion. "The texts pointed to this location; I'm sure of it! You're underground scans must be flawed."

"They're absolutely precise, you bumbling fool!"

"How dare you address me in such a way!" the stocky man thundered, bolting from his seat. The well-dressed man continued his stroll without so much as a glance toward the object of his scorn.

"Need I remind you who you're speaking to!" the offended man blustered. "I'm the leading Scandinavian folklorist; *no one* knows more about these legends than I do!"

"Yes, so we've heard more than once! If that's the case, then why haven't you been able to produce the results for which you were hired?"

"These things take time!" he protested loudly.

"And that's precisely why you were brought here to Mount Weather!" the first man snarled back, coming to a halt behind the chair directly opposite the accused and adjacent to the door of the room. "Give me time! Give me unrestricted access to your sources! Give me quiet!" he mocked, waving his arms. "You've been given months ... and you've failed!"

"I found the cave didn't I?" the scholar complained, his anger shifting to anxiety.

"That *is not* enough! In view of your subsequent failures we can't even be sure

you've even done that!"

"Give me more time!" he appealed. "I know the ancestors are there!"

"The Agenda is underway. The ancestors were needed only for propaganda. The line is secure without them."

"I know that!" the Professor sputtered angrily. "The ancestors are just propaganda."

"Of course," the suited man agreed, his eyes narrowing, " ... but their impact must be felt at the time of disclosure, not years down the road. You've convinced us to find someone else more capable."

"You don't understand! Deciphering runes isn't predictable like your science! These fragments weren't created and deposited by natural forces; they were written by living, breathing, human beings whose logic and cryptic rationale we can only guess at!"

"Hmmpf ... an unfortunate oversight on our part. Your work here is done, Dr. Nilsson," the well-dressed man informed him matter-of-factly, placing his hands on the back of one of the chairs and leaning forward.

"No! I've devoted my whole life to this search!"

"Then I guess you have no reason for living," he sneered. "Wha—what?" he stuttered. "Are you threa—"

Without a word the man pushed himself erect and exited the room, leaving the dumbfounded scholar alone.

Dr. Nilsson stewed for a few seconds and then angrily threw the report to the floor. "You've picked the wrong person to trivialize . . . I'll see to it that you never benefit from my work," he growled under his breath. The enraged scholar grabbed the edge of the table to push himself away, but to his astonishment his chair refused to move, as though bolted to the floor.

"What the he—"

His own frightened gasp cut short his expletive. The terror within him built to a silent crescendo. He wanted to scream, but the sound refused to emerge from his gaping mouth. He gazed in trans-fixed horror at his own reflection in the polished veneer of the tabletop, and that of the hideous figure towering behind him. Completely immobilized, Dr. Nilsson watched the monstrous reflection glide around the edge of the table until the figure to which it belonged stood directly in front of him.

*You have failed us for the last time*, the entity's thoughts invaded his mind.

Immediately the helpless man's mouth clamped shut and his limbs shot outward, leaving him in a grotesque cruciform position. There was no expression on his executioner's face, but he could feel the laughter emanating from the powerful form.

*Don't.*

The faint plea surfaced in the victim's mind only seconds before his face smashed violently forward into the solid oak with a terrific force. The man's head jerked backward, blood streaming from his broken nose. Again and again, arms still outstretched, an unseen energy slammed the Professor's face into the unyielding, stationary surface. Blood and mucus splattered against the walls and the room's lone decoration, a burnished, brazen solar disk, hung directly behind the defenseless victim. Several additional unneeded thrusts preceded the release of the lifeless corpse, his face a featureless, unrecognizable mass. The assassin turned dispassionately toward the wall at his back and passed through it.

## CHAPTER 4

"Technological progress is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal."  
—*Albert Einstein*

NEIL TOOK SEVERAL stapled pages from his briefcase. "These descriptions are listed in no particular order, so please acknowledge your presence to the rest of the group when I reach your name. First, we have Dr. Malcolm Bradley. Dr. Bradley earned his masters and doctoral degrees in Environmental Sciences from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Malcolm specializes in the evolutionary adaptation of ecosystems, and was hired as a full-time researcher at MIT upon the completion of his graduate education five years ago. He has three books to his credit, one of which is part of a juvenile series on the environment."

"Seated on my right," Neil continued, turning his attention to the bearded, red-haired scientist, "is Dr. Mark Chadwick. Dr. Chadwick is one of the nation's authorities on bovine biochemistry and pathology, having earned both his Ph.D. and doctorate in veterinary medicine from Montana State University six years ago. He has been the recipient of several National Science Foundation grants, and has assisted the FDA on a number of studies associated with bovine hormonal stimulation, reproduction, and pathology. He has also served as a consultant overseas, and authored nearly two dozen scientific papers."

Brian listened intently as Neil continued to read the abbreviated resumes of the panel assembled in the room. The Colonel had been correct; it was indeed an impressive group. In addition to the gregarious Malcolm and Mark Chadwick, who reminded Brian more of a lumberjack than a veterinarian, the third scientific specialist on the team was a man named Kevin Garvey, a Cal Tech graduate in atmospheric chemistry employed by the EPA, who had spent the last year also working with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Among the non-scientists there was Deidre Harper, whom no one would have any trouble remembering. She was the team's only foreign doctorate, having recently received her Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh in psychology for her work on group hysteria. She'd also been heavily involved in anti-war demonstrations during the Gulf War, as well as a host of other activist causes.

Brian could not help being struck by the apparent lack of a common denominator between all these disciplines, not only as they stood in relation to each other, but also in relation to his own field. It was positively mystifying. If the others were not thinking along the same lines by now, they surely would be once Neil got to him. His thoughts were interrupted by Dr. Bandstra's recognition of the stunning and outspoken Dr. Kelley.

"Seated to my left," Neil motioned as he flipped a page, "is Dr. Melissa Kelley. Dr. Kelley's bachelors degree is from the University of Notre Dame, and included double majors in religion and history. She moved on to the University of Pennsylvania, where she earned her Ph.D. in American Studies with an emphasis on American religious history. Her dissertation was on apocalyptic religious beliefs among militia groups in the United States, but her specialty includes apocalyptic beliefs of American religious groups

in the 19th and 20th centuries. She recently authored a book on this subject."

"To Dr. Garvey's left is Father Andrew Benedict. Father Benedict has a most interesting and varied background. Father Benedict took his undergraduate degree from Villanova University with a double major in physics and philosophy, and then went on to Loyola University in Chicago, intending to go into physics. About half way through his MA program, however, he felt called to enter the priesthood. He finished his masters degree, and then joined the Society of Jesus. Upon taking his vows and receiving ordination, Father Benedict was sent to Rome to study at the Pontifical Biblical Institute. While there he earned masters degrees in Intertestamental Studies and Theology, and then finally completed his Ph.D. in theology with a specialization in Ecclesiastical Ethics. He subsequently taught at the Institute for just over twenty years. More recently, he has been active in the Diocese of Tucson, Arizona, and as an adjunct professor of religion at the University of Arizona. Father Benedict has also served in diplomatic capacities for the Vatican, most often in the area of religious dialogue between Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and was a personal friend of Pope John Paul II."

"Lastly, and to the Father's left, we have Dr. Brian Scott." Neil said, putting down his papers and fixing his attention on his friend. "Brian is a creative young scholar, whose career I have followed since we met at Johns Hopkins University twelve years ago. Brian didn't major in my own field of international relations, but instead earned his bachelors degree in Near Eastern studies, where he excelled in Biblical Hebrew and in the primary languages of the ancient Near East, such as Babylonian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Aramaic, and Sumerian. His academic record at Hopkins earned him a prestigious Century Fellowship at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, from which he earned the MA and Ph.D. in the study of the Hebrew Bible in its ancient Near Eastern context. Brian is proficient in the translation of a dozen ancient languages, has authored several peer-reviewed articles on Semitic grammar, archaeology, and Old Testament interpretation, and is at work now on his first book. He's also a man whose friendship I would never want to lose, and one of the few people whom I can honestly say changed my own life."

Brian felt a twinge of embarrassment at the introduction, but smiled gratefully at his friend and leaned back into the soft leather of his chair. His attention shifted to Malcolm and the other two scientists whom Colonel Ferguson requested to change seats with several of the other team members, so as to position them around the head of the table on either side of the podium. He watched with curiosity as they began to chat among themselves. *Finally, we're going to get into some specifics.* The contents of his envelope had indeed been upsetting, but Brian had resolved again to trust his friend, and Neil's kind words had helped reassure him that, even though he knew he'd been drawn into something way over his head, he would at least have some-one to pilot him through it. The Colonel suddenly halted the conversation with the scientists and returned to his position at the podium.

"If I could have your attention again," he asked, "our discussion will be resumed and directed by the scientists on the team. The floor is yours, Doctor."

"Hi," Malcolm smiled and waved awkwardly, his elbows on the table and hands clasped under his chin. "I'm sure you'll all be relieved to finally find out what's brought us all here," he began, "al-though I'm equally sure you won't be glad when you know. You may want to turn in your notebooks to page five," Malcolm continued. The team

members complied.

"I'm fully aware that to most of you whose expertise lies outside the hard sciences, the majority of the pages that follow will be a pretty mind-numbing bunch of statistics, formulas, and chemical equations. You can blame the Group for its thoroughness, I guess. At any rate, the pages written in plain English were authored by yours truly, or were downloaded from the Internet from the National Resources Defense Council and the EPA. My goal this morning is to present the dilemma that lies before us as easily, but accurately, as I can. In doing so, topics will inevitably arise and hopefully questions will be asked—that will require the expertise of my colleagues. Please feel free to interact at any time. If something isn't clear, don't hesitate. We aim to please," he chuckled.

The audience was silent, save for the sound of the Colonel clearing his throat. A few shifted in their seats.

"Well ... " Malcolm sat up straight, taking the cue, "you've all no doubt heard from Dr. Bandstra that the problem before us has something to do with the environment. I'd like to assume that terms such as 'ozone depletion,' 'greenhouse effect,' and 'global warming' are part of your working vocabulary. Unfortunately, most people I've met who use these terms have little or no idea what they actually mean. Since I want to be sure everyone is on the same page, please indulge this brief introduction to several of earth's environmental maladies."

Malcolm took a sip of water and continued. "Any explanation of ozone depletion has to start with chlorofluorocarbons—CFCs for short. CFCs are industrial chemical compounds made of chlorine, fluorine, and carbon, invented in roughly 1928, that made things like household and auto refrigeration possible. They also served as propellants for dispensing aerosol spray. It took almost half a century before anyone began to wonder what happened to all the CFCs re-released into the atmosphere. Up until the 1970s, scientists took no concern at this question, since there was nothing in our atmosphere that caused CFCs to break down into their constituent chemicals. It was discovered at that time, however, that 10-15 miles up, in the earth's stratosphere, ultraviolet rays from the sun did break CFCs down. The chlorine atoms released in this natural process then chemically inter-acted with ozone, an unstable form of oxygen that surrounds the globe at that altitude. The result of this atomic rendezvous was that the ozone was destroyed. Now who knows what ozone does?"

Malcolm looked out over his audience expecting a response. He obviously loved the attention, and his enthusiasm was outweighed only by his cluelessness that he was annoying. After a few uncomfortable seconds, Brian obliged him.

"It protects living things on earth from ultraviolet radiation."

"Thank you Dr. Scott! Nice to know you're not as narrow as your resume portrayed you."

"You're welcome, I think."

"Ever since this revelation, scientists, politicians, environmentalists, and industrialists have been engaged in a vociferous de-bate as to the reality and extent of ozone depletion. Current scientific study has marked the polar regions among the most affected, but by no means are they the only serious depletion areas. Since the late seventies and early eighties, as our own atmospheric chemist, Dr. Garvey, could tell us, CFCs have been replaced by other chemicals called HCFCs hydrochloroflourocarbons. If

you're paying attention, you'll note the presence of fluorine in that compound's name, which means that it too breaks down ozone, albeit at a much lower rate."

Malcolm began to explain the chemical breakdown process, and appeared to be on the verge of a chemistry lecture when Melissa Kelley mercifully interrupted him with a question.

"Isn't it true, though, that ozone depletion is still controversial? I read an article in the Washington Post a few years ago that seemed to dismiss the fears about ozone holes."

"There's no denying that it's still controversial," Malcolm responded, "but that's mainly because of the tirades of conservative politicians and talk show hosts who despise people like me. I'll admit there are some eccentric environmentalists, but I'm not in that group."

Several soft chuckles echoed through the room.

"The fact is that the only reason ozone depletion is even debated today is because steps were taken twenty years ago to retard its rate of destruction—steps that, until recently, were having a small but real impact," Malcolm noted, his voice taking on a more somber intonation. "The fact is," he said quietly, "is that our stratosphere will be shot to hell in a few years if those of us in this room fail."

The room fell silent, as Malcolm surveyed each face. His own expression had changed to that of utmost seriousness, and his listeners peered intently at it, noting the shift in attitude.

"Life on earth has a basic choice: if the stratospheric layer of ozone that filters the sun's ultraviolet rays weren't there, we'd all be roasted by ultraviolet radiation. If the tropospheric layer were gone, we'd all freeze to death. I don't care to die either way, personally."

"Your explanation is frightening," Dr. Kelley interrupted again, "but I think it's true that most people won't take the long look. They simply aren't going to be motivated to act now to prevent a tragedy that's hundreds or even thousands of years away."

"I share your cynicism, Melissa—may I call you Melissa?"

Dr. Kelley nodded, much to Malcolm's pleasure.

"How do you think they'd react if it were less than fifty years away?"

"You're not serious."

"Right again. The actual figure is that the earth is roughly thirty years away from serious environmental catastrophe."

"Oh come on, Malcolm," Melissa chided. "That's ridiculous. How in God's name is that supposed to happen? I thought all the world's wonderful scientific minds had this problem under control."

"We did," a soft male voice entered the conversation. Dr. Garvey turned on his microphone. "At least we'd like to think we had turned the corner. But we weren't counting on running into some-thing like we did ten months ago."

Melissa sat back in her chair, a skeptical look still etched on her face.

"Do you mind if I elaborate, Malcolm?" Dr. Garvey asked politely.

"Be my guest, Kev," he answered.

Kevin Garvey looked over the table and prepared to address the team. He was a small-framed man, the kind most people would have labeled wimpish. His face bore a calm, serene expression, his short, oily dark-brown hair combed neatly to the side. He seemed to Brian to be what Mr. Rogers must have been like in his thirties. All that was

missing was the sweater, replaced by a short-sleeved summer dress shirt. The team had already witnessed the tempers of several of its members. Dr. Garvey, on the other hand, was a thoughtful, no-nonsense scientist, who gave every indication of being in complete command of his field and of himself.

"Ozone is only one greenhouse gas," he began reflectively. "Another is carbon dioxide. As you know, carbon dioxide is primarily produced by man, through devices like the internal combustion engine. Deforestation also contributes to its presence, since it reduces the number of trees that draw carbon dioxide out of our atmosphere. And the absorption of carbon dioxide by trees and plants doesn't rid the atmosphere of that greenhouse gas; it merely converts it. Animals eat the plants that absorb carbon dioxide, and then they in turn release methane, another greenhouse gas, when they excrete what their bodies don't metabolize."

"I don't understand something," Dr. Harper asked, looking at him over the top of her narrow glasses. "If ozone is being depleted, how can we have an increase in warming over the earth?"

"Well, it's the ozone in the stratosphere that's primarily being depleted. The ozone in the troposphere is holding its own."

"But even if it wasn't `holding its own,'" Dr. Harper followed up, "it sounds to me like the other greenhouse gases, like the methane you mentioned, would take its place due to the forces you just described. It seems to me that we'd be okay—we lose some ozone, but gain some methane . . . right?"

"I see your logic, and I'll try to address it. You are essentially correct that there would be a trade off that would appear to keep us at an environmental equilibrium—but again, the replacement of ozone would only be occurring inside the troposphere, not the stratosphere. Therefore, even if the missing ozone were replaced in one region, the upper region, the one that protects us from ultraviolet radiation, would still be in a process of depletion. We've recently had dramatic evidence that this is happening on a worldwide scale via amphibian deformations, namely freshwater frogs."

"I thought that was due to a viral infection," noted Father Benedict.

"Oh, we've got a viral problem, to be sure, but not one that causes frog deformation," he responded. "That's just the story the media chose to give the public. They forgot to mention that frog deformation wasn't just happening in the Midwest; it's happening world-wide. That would be a pretty busy virus, and when is the last time we heard of a worldwide virus attacking the ecosystem? That story would also require us to believe that the biological conditions for such a virus are the same worldwide."

"That is a stretch," the priest admitted.

"Then you get the picture. All of this is immaterial, since the real issue before us now is methane accumulation, and hence global warming."

"As Malcolm mentioned, global warming is caused by the retention of heat in our troposphere induced by the increased presence of gases that inhibit the release of heat. The gradual warming effect has been termed the `greenhouse' effect on the basis of the obvious analogy. Methane, or CH<sub>4</sub>, is one of these so-called 'green-house gases,' and is very common. About one-quarter of the methane emissions caused by human activities comes from domesticated animals. CH<sub>4</sub> is released by cattle, dairy cows, buffalo, goats, sheep, camels, pigs, and horses. Total annual methane emissions from domesticated animals are thought to be about 100 million tonnes. We refer to this as `human activity'

since the amount of cattle and their careful feeding are directly attributable to human efforts and need for mass domestication."

"That seems to be an awfully high amount," Brian opined.

"The figure I just gave you is considered average, and is no cause for concern. The amount of methane recycles itself nicely under normal conditions, since it has only about a ten-year life cycle in our atmosphere before it breaks down into non-harmful constituents. The problem is an alarming spike in the amount of methane currently being produced by the large animals, specifically cattle."

Dr. Chadwick waved silently, catching Dr. Garvey's attention. The latter nodded his approval for a contribution to the discussion.

"I'm sure you're all aware that animals release methane in two ways: through their waste material and by passing it gaseously from the bowels," Dr. Chadwick noted. "The amount of methane that an individual animal produces depends on a number of variables: the species, age and weight, health and living conditions, and the type of feed it eats. Dairy cows in developing nations, for example, produce about 35 kilograms of methane per head per year, while those in industrialized nations, where cows are typically fed a richer diet and are physically confined, produce about 2.5 times as much per head. The 'normal conditions' Kevin referred to is the average output that domestically raised cattle and other livestock contribute to atmospheric methane: roughly 15-20% of the total methane emissions caused by human activities. Seventy percent of that figure comes from cows. Other human sources of methane are, naturally, our own bodies as we consume vegetation and animal products as well."

"Let me get this straight," Melissa interrupted suddenly. "We've all had our lives disrupted and careers threatened over a bunch of cows farting?"

Despite the serious tones of the two scientists, several of the team members, Brian included, couldn't contain their amusement. Laughter broke out around the table, but was abruptly quelled when the Colonel rose from his seat, visibly agitated.

"No, Dr. Kelley," he said in a scolding tone, walking slowly in her direction, "You're here because Dr. Chadwick has detected a disturbing problem, one which if uncorrected, will have dire consequences for the whole planet. Why don't you finish, Mark," the Colonel said, now positioned behind Melissa's chair.

"Of course, sir. Our problem is that methane levels within the latitudes from, oh, say, the Dakotas to the Canadian border, are approximately twenty times above normal. A colleague of Kevin's detected high readings two years ago in Wyoming, and considered it anomalous at first, but after repeated monitoring, he verified the situation. I've also cross-checked a few other areas around the globe, and those levels were also higher than expected, although not quite as high as what we have in our own backyard."

"Why didn't we hear about this on the news?" Dr. Harper asked.

"My colleague and I are employed by the federal government," explained Kevin, "which means we report our findings to our superiors and they in turn make any decisions to publicize those findings. In this case, it was deemed advisable to study the problem further. We've done that, and in a year's time the levels in the atmosphere over the large area mentioned have shot up even more dramatically. Temperatures at sea level have also risen nearly half a degree. That may not seem like a lot, but it's alarming to someone who studies this sort of thing."

"Hasn't anyone else measured the temperature rise and looked into its cause?"



Brian inquired.

"Sure, but we've tried to cast some doubt on the figures."

"Why would you do that?" Brian rejoined.

"We didn't want too many people looking into what was going on," Colonel Ferguson offered, unsolicited. "You see, we know where the extra methane is coming from, but we aren't sure why it's happening."

Mark continued his explanation. "The methane is coming from beef and dairy cattle in the geographical region already mentioned. Kevin and his colleague, along with the EPA, figured that large ruminant animals was the logical starting point, and that's where I come in. About a year ago, I was asked to examine some randomly selected cattle from this region to see if anything out of the ordinary showed up in their biochemistry. I focused my own experiments on the biochemical functions of the digestive and excretory processes. I know what I'm going to say sounds incredible, but we're sure. It turns out that somehow a large number of cattle examined have a heretofore-unknown biochemical catalyst in their intestines that combines with the methane molecules. When the animal expels gas or waste, the new compound released into the atmosphere is about ten percent greater per animal and doesn't break down according to normal processes. In short, our tests indicate that what tens of thousands of head of cattle have been expelling for two years, at least as we're aware of it—it may be longer has an atmospheric life four times that of its previous counterpart. The new compound gas being released by these cattle will take forty years to dissipate, instead of ten."

"Before we move on, each of you need to realize the implications of what Mark has just laid out," Dr. Garvey spoke up. "First, our atmosphere has and will steadily accumulate more methane. Second, this increase will be exponential due to the constant, or regular rate of bovine feeding and excretion—cows will continue to eat, digest, and expel as before—measured against the lack of the breakdown of the greenhouse gas in the troposphere."

"It's also exponential due to another, more alarming factor," Mark broke in again. "We've discovered that this new chemical trait is being passed on to offspring."

"That would seem to suggest direct genetic manipulation," Father Benedict interjected. "Evolution seems to be out the question; there just hasn't been enough time. If this had been going on for a hundred years, global warming would be overwhelmingly apparent."

"Very true. In fact, we wouldn't be here to even discuss it," said Malcolm.

"Forgive me, people," Dr. Kelley interjected, "but I don't see a crisis. So the earth gets a little warmer as time goes on. I'm sure in the twenty years that Malcolm used as his panic figure, one of you or someone else could come up with a way to either break down the gas or fix the cows."

"Your analysis is uninformed," Colonel Ferguson answered harshly, before anyone else could respond. "The increase we've been alluding to could be as high as a half degree every two to three years. Do you have any idea what a two degree global increase would mean to the earth?"

Dr. Kelley sat back in her chair and crossed her arms, deliberately avoiding visual contact with the Colonel.

"I'll be more than happy to tell you," he continued in his calm, yet authoritative tone. "Let's keep things simple. What do you suppose would happen to the polar ice

caps? Chances are a good deal of melting would occur. If you asked Malcolm, he could tell you that polar melting has already begun, as indicated by the two chunks of the Ross Ice Shelf that recently broke off—both of which were larger than the state of Delaware. Significant melting would cause sea level to rise. If sea level rose several feet globally—again, Doctor, you must think globally—every continent would lose tens and even hundreds of miles of coastline. Additionally, with higher temperatures, greater evaporation rates would follow, which would produce violent meteorological changes. In short, we wouldn't need to worry about losing Los Angeles to an earthquake, since it would be underwater."

"I get the point."

"Oh, there's much more, Doctor. Did you know that roughly one-third of the world's population lives within sixty miles of a coast-line?" Dr. Kelley again remained silent. "I didn't think so," the Colonel continued in his calculated, condescending way. "Assuming that most of those people had ample warning that their homes would be under-water, and thus migrated inland, where do you imagine that they'd live? How would they find new jobs? And just think of what all the flooding, incredibly severe weather, and intensified heat would do to crops worldwide. A good portion of the world's food supply would either be washed away or wither in the heat. The entire food chain as we know it would be altered, with devastating results. And where do you suppose all that sea water would wind up? Some of it would mix with lakes and rivers, thereby decreasing the amount of fresh water used for both irrigation and drinking, not to mention hydroelectric power. We might also want to consider the disease factor in the rise in temperature. Insects, like mosquitoes for instance, would flourish in the warmed climate, especially with so much standing water in the picture. We could naturally expect a proportional rise in malaria and other insect-borne illnesses. Heat stroke and respiratory problems would be endemic."

He paused and looked out over Dr. Kelley's chair at the team members. There was no mistaking the alarm etched on everyone's face. The scenario outlined by the Colonel was terrifyingly logical, and everyone intuitively sensed he had just scratched the surface.

"Let's ask our psychologist what she thinks might be the impact of forces like these on our society—and on world societies for that matter," the Colonel suggested, still not content to let the matter drop. "Dr. Harper, why don't you give us a brief analysis off the cuff?"

"Well, some things are quite obvious," she began. "Massive famine, poverty, malnutrition, population displacement, and disease would stress world governments to the breaking point. Using your coastal population figure for perspective, if only one percent of the current world population were to be displaced, some 45 million migrants would be created. Remember Kosovo? That was a crisis involving around a million people. Do the math—the economic and social disruption would be unimaginable. Agriculture and industry would have to be restructured completely. The increased need for social welfare alone would bankrupt those programs overnight, and the people who would be hardest hit immediately would be those who are pre-dominantly in lower incomes already, which would mean minorities. The potential for violent racial conflict is obvious. It would amount to a basic war for survival between the haves and have-nots. Can you imagine large groups of displaced minority populations being forced into predominantly white areas? Those areas being infiltrated would have their own problems

with all the stresses you've brought up. We'd have hundreds of California-Mexico hotbeds of resentment. Dr. Kelley would be able to conduct plenty of militia group research then! Psychologically, I think people would exhibit a variety of coping mechanisms, mostly counterproductive: depression, withdrawal, cynicism, denial, anxiety, and most of all, aggression. The only thing stopping it would be government intervention with services, but where would the money come from? To pay for all this, taxes would have to be raised dramatically and who could pay them? Or, money would have to be siphoned from everywhere else in the national budget. I imagine that the military would suffer dramatically in that process," she said, glancing at the Colonel with a smirk, "unless it would *be* the government at that point."

"It wouldn't only be government," Kevin Garvey re-entered the discussion, "how would industry cope? There'd be no way in an economically challenged nation that private business could supply so many jobless with employment."

"It really is a disturbing scenario," Father Benedict said in a resigned tone. "The cumulative crises of racial strife, strain on police forces, overwhelmed health and agricultural providers, sanitation, and a struggle for even basic life necessities would devastate national economies and completely destabilize governments. This kind of upheaval would bring out the worst, not the best, in people. It's positively—"

"Apocalyptic?" Brian wondered aloud. Several heads turned in his direction. Neil, however, sat looking down at his reflection on the table, strumming it silently with his fingertips. Many of the others seemed caught off guard by the suggestion. Melissa's expression, however, was pensive, almost contemplative.

"He's right," she said. "This would truly be a worldwide catastrophe. Humanity could not survive anything like this in a fragmented state, such as the world currently finds itself. The only way legitimate solutions could be formed and successfully implemented would be if the world's nations acted in unison, without self-interest. The alternative would be chaos."

"My sentiments exactly," Colonel Ferguson observed, gently turning her chair at an angle so he could address her face to face. "So you see, Dr. Kelley, you're not here because cows fart, are you?"

"No, I'm sorr—"

"You're here," he cut her off in a controlled tone, "along with the other nonscientists, to stimulate our thinking as to how we can handle the crisis when it comes, providing a way to avoid the catastrophe isn't found. Is that clear?"

"Yes . . . it is."

"I assume," Brian said, squinting in thought, looking at Colonel Ferguson, "that in light of your comments, the nonscientists on the team are really here for damage control—correct?"

"In a way. Our current knowledge of the problem at least gives us the encouragement that we have some time to attack it."

"I also assume that our scientific colleagues have been entertaining hypotheses as to how the changes in these cattle have come about. On our way here, Malcolm seemed to think that our presence here was some kind of admission of defeat. But he also mentioned that Dr. Chadwick and he had formulated an idea. I'd like to hear it."

The Colonel gave Malcolm a piercing glance, and looked over at Mark, who shrugged his shoulders in response. "I'm afraid Malcolm spoke prematurely," the Colonel

said. "We really aren't able to articulate a viable answer to that."

"Aren't able or aren't willing?" Deidre Harper asked suspiciously.

"Sir," Brian interrupted the Colonel, who now directed his gaze in his direction, "I don't know exactly how to say this, I mean I don't want to be disrespectful, but—"

"But what, Dr. Scott?" he asked curtly.

"But you're not being forthright," he answered carefully. "By your own admission you know what's causing the predicament, and so does Dr. Chadwick. And, judging by what Malcolm has shared with me, I don't think it's a stretch to say that all the scientists have more than an inkling of what's creating this danger. I understand you may not be ready to inform us, but I'd at least like a candid reason for the secrecy. It seems to me that the 'cloak and dagger' treatment is counterproductive. We ought to all be on the same page."

A hush fell over the room. Brian expected an acrimonious response, but instead the Colonel stood erect and strode thoughtfully back to the podium.

"Vernon," Neil interrupted. "I know it's ahead of schedule, but I think it's apparent they need to be told."

The Colonel remained silent. Neil continued. "We've done extensive personality profiles. I've stated before that I felt conditioning could be minimal. You have the authorization."

"Conditioning for what?" Dr. Kelley inquired in a concerned tone.

"I'm perfectly aware of my parameters," the Colonel said in response to Neil, bypassing Melissa's question. He suddenly directed his attention back to Brian. "So, Dr. Scott, I take it that your little excursion on the Internet last evening is what allows you to draw your conclusions?"

"Yes . . . it is," Brian answered. Despite being told about the monitored computer use, he still couldn't help feeling spied upon, and although he shouldn't have been, he was taken aback that the monitoring had already begun.

"So you've arbitrarily connected Dr. Chadwick's earlier work with our genetic anomaly?"

"Yes, but ..."

"On what basis? Where's your evidence?"

"I haven't got any other than your reaction this moment—and Neil's. Call it a hunch."

"Would someone please tell the rest of us what this is all about?" Dr. Harper asked, making no attempt to hide her annoyance.

"I think I'll leave that to Dr. Chadwick," Colonel Ferguson replied, still staring at Brian. "Your hunch is warranted, Doctor. I don't like being challenged, but your initiative deserves commendation."

Dr. Chadwick looked apprehensively around the table. "Well, based upon my research of some years past and an examination of our randomly selected heifers, we are absolutely positive that the genetic change can be directly linked to what our government would officially call . . . well . . . violent animal slayings of indeterminate causation."

"Come again?" Dr. Kelley queried impatiently. "In English, please."

"Cattle mutilations," Brian answered. "Cattle mutilations."

## CHAPTER 5

"It suddenly struck me that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet Earth. I didn't feel like a giant. I felt very, very small."

—Neil Armstrong

"YOU CAN'T BE serious!" Melissa exclaimed incredulously.

"I'm afraid I am," Dr. Chadwick responded in a resigned tone. "I know how it sounds, but a high percentage of cattle reported as having been mutilated share the same kind of genetic alterations as those herds we've determined are most responsible for the methane increase."

"Why hasn't this correlation been detected before or has it?" queried Father Benedict with undisguised suspicion, his brow furrowed with concern.

"First of all, the genetic alteration isn't something you'd ever detect unless you were looking for it," the biochemist explained, directing his attention toward the priest. "The genetic change isn't some-thing that produces some visible mutation, like growing an extra limb or something of that magnitude. What we're talking about, in oversimplified terms, is a minute change in genetic coding that tells the intestines to produce, say, lots of chemical `A,' and less of chemicals `B' and `C.' The result is a chemical reaction that creates large quantities of the more durable gaseous compound. What we didn't know for some time was what triggered the alteration in chemical production. It's actually quite fascinating—like watching an evolutionary arc in process."

"You're suggesting then that these genetic abnormalities have occurred naturally?" the priest followed up, his eyebrows raised in skepticism.

"Well .. " he paused, "that is something we considered seriously," he said uncertainly, looking at his scientific colleagues, all of whom remained silent.

Brian sighed loudly and slumped back in his chair, shaking his head.

"I take it you aren't satisfied with an accidental explanation," the Colonel commented, looking in Brian's direction.

"Hardly."

"Who are you to question the data they've compiled?"

"I'm not questioning anyone's data. It seems to me that the evolutionary explanation is an assumption to which one could retreat in order to form an interpretation of the data. Besides, I didn't hear that Dr. Chadwick or his colleagues reached that conclusion."

"You haven't any scientific credentials," the Colonel continued, ignoring Brian's observation. "You're out of your field."

"And I'd be out of my mind if I accepted such a lame conclusion," Brian replied in an annoyed voice. "It seems much more plausible that an outside agent would be forcing such change than some random event."

"Maybe he doesn't like the interpretation because it's evolutionary," Melissa opined with a smirk. "Many religious people just can't handle the reality of the

evolutionary process."

"And many secular intellectuals won't face the illogic of evolutionary theory," Brian rejoined quickly. Melissa opened her mouth, more than ready to engage his remark, but Brian didn't give her the chance. "For the record, I make no apologies for believing that the universe shows marks of intelligent design, an intelligence that I would attribute to a Creator-God. I also reject what scientists would refer to as biological macroevolution, though many 'religious types' believe it is acceptable to their theology and choose to say that God started the evolutionary process after the initial creation. On the other hand, I also believe that the universe is as old as most mainstream scientists believe, and that the earth is also millions of years old. If you aren't aware that one can be a creationist and accept these other ideas, then your disdain for creationism is based on stereotypes, not honest disagreement or research. We 'religious people' are often the ones accused of being narrow, but I'll bet you haven't read anything critical of evolutionary theory say Behe's book *Darwin's Black Box*, or some of Michael Denton's works, like *Nature's Destiny—have you?*"

"No, I haven't, but that's irrelevant."

"It isn't relevant to be current on the problems of a theory that forms the basis of your worldview? I hope you're not serious. I don't think it's an overestimate to say that the majority of people in the United States that have a professional interest in either biochemistry or Darwinism have read Behe. I'm sure that the scientists here have at least read the reviews in the *New York Times* or *Nature*. If these books do anything at all they demonstrate that Darwinian evolution is far from being a done deal. Would that be a fair assessment?" Brian asked, looking at each of the scientists.

"Yes, that's fair," Kevin Garvey answered. "There are, of course, non-creationist answers to Behe's contentions. I have to admit that those responses have been quite unpersuasive. My own estimation is that answers will come along as Darwinist biochemists struggle with Behe's case."

"You mean you hope that will be the case, since the alternative means embracing intelligent design," remarked Brian.

"Yes," Kevin continued. "I think evolution will provide its own answers. In any event, let me say again that I share your opinion about the validity of Behe's criticisms, but not your optimism that Darwinism has been dealt a deathblow. And I'll anticipate your come-back and admit that my own judgment isn't based on data, but extends rather from my own choice of worldview."

"Honest enough," Brian noted, and redirected his attention to Melissa. "In case you're interested, Melissa, these works are about the biochemical improbability of Darwinian evolution. Despite the fact that you don't seem to be current on the debate, I'm surprised that you don't see the illogic of this explanation. If the changes occurred as part of an anomalous but natural process, what possible link could there be to the cattle mutilations? Does an organism only evolve *after* the mutilation? How would the host pass the alteration on once it's dead? Did the organism cause the mutilation? My views on evolution are irrelevant to the discussion. If I could be so bold," he added, turning to the Colonel, "could we just dispense with the evasiveness? In view of the incoherence of any natural explanation linking the mutilations and this organism, I'd like to see Dr. Chadwick look us all in the eye and tell us the connection is coincidental instead."

The Colonel flushed with anger, and an explosion appeared imminent, until Neil

reached over and grasped his arm, nodding to Dr. Chadwick.

"With all due respect to the Colonel," Mark began, "all of us who've been here from the beginning are nearly at our wits' end over this thing. The Colonel is in charge of this project, and we haven't been able to produce for him like we'd hoped, and I'm sure he anticipated. I don't blame him if he's on edge. If I could speak for him for just a moment, I'm sure he doesn't like months of work to be taken so lightly and, frankly, neither do I. No one is more disappointed than him at the current stalemate. As our work progressed, he was confident that what we were dealing with was just some random aberration, something that earth's global environment had seen before and to which it would adapt over time. He encouraged us toward testing that hypothesis, but we're now sure that this problem is new and unique."

"How is it that you can be sure at this point?" asked Dr. Harper.

"Mostly because of the fact that the methane alteration has been unerringly linked to the genetic changes we've mentioned. If the changes were created randomly, there wouldn't be this kind of uniformity; there would be gaps in the data into which other causes would be inserted upon discovery. It does appear that some outside mechanism has forced some sort of biochemical mutation."

"What do you mean by 'outside mechanism'?" the psychologist followed. The expression on her face told Brian she was maneuvering toward a suspected conclusion.

"I hate to interrupt, but I have to admit I'm somewhat lost," Father Benedict broke in before anyone could respond. "I've only a rudimentary knowledge of what 'cattle mutilations' involve. Could one of you elaborate?"

The Colonel rose from his seat once again in response to the priest's request. Without a word he headed for a closet door opposite the wall over which the viewing screen had been lowered. "We hadn't planned on getting into this subject so quickly, but I guess this is as good a time as any to get on with it." He unlocked the door and pulled out a cart, atop of which rested a slide projector.

"We have several dozen slides to show you," he continued as he carried the projector's remote control to the podium. The seasoned soldier touched the podium console and the lights dimmed. "I hope none of you are very squeamish. If that's the case, do the best you can to follow; I really can't excuse anyone. Dr. Chadwick and I will take any questions you might have along the way."

The Colonel proceeded through a historical survey of cattle mutilations in the United States, complete with facsimile documentation of military investigation into the problem. After about ten minutes the first slide of a mutilated specimen appeared. The Colonel handed the remote to Dr. Chadwick, who took over the discussion.

"Mutilations are most common in states whose economies are geared toward the dairy and beef industries—states like Wyoming, Colorado, and Montana. The typical mutilation has several characteristics. The dead animal is found totally or nearly totally drained of blood, but with a complete absence of blood found anywhere on the ground around the body. You'll notice from the slide that various incisions are always found on the corpse as well."

"In some cases, body parts like the nose, lips and tongue are removed. Sometimes one eye and several teats are also missing. But in nearly every case the rectum and vagina are cored out. Here's a good close-up," he continued as the next slide appeared, drawing gasps from several team members. The photo showed a very deep hole in what used to be

the heifer's rectum. Incredibly, the hole was perfectly circular and smooth, as though created with some kind of unthreaded, hollow drill. There was no sign of tearing anywhere around or in the wound.

"Mother of God, who would do something like that?" Father Benedict said, staring at the slide.

"Some mutilations are performed by cults for use in satanic rituals," interrupted Melissa. "The sexual organs are the most desirable for those purposes. The rest have been attributed to animal attacks."

"Those are nice theories, Doctor," Mark responded, "but they're little more than desperate explanations. Does the picture on the screen look like an animal attack? Where are the teeth marks? These cuts are made with surgical precision. There's no gnawing or tearing such as would be indicative of a predator—not even tracks leading to or away from the body. Many cases have bones so clearly bisected that there is no visible bone fragmentation, and where internal organs or structures have been removed, no surrounding musculature was disturbed. What you're looking at gives every indication of extremely rapid, efficient, and precise cutting. It should be perfectly apparent that animals could never have left these kinds of wounds. I've actually examined several myself where the edges of the wound have been *cauterized*. Perhaps you can tell me which cults you know of have access to surgical lasers."

"I could produce hundreds of pages from licensed veterinarians and other professionals that would testify to animal attacks," she countered.

"No doubt you could. If you're interested, the next time you look into the subject, let me know if you find my name on any of those reports. I've issued several that reached the same conclusion, only I lied."

Melissa wasn't the only one surprised by the admission. Mark's scientific colleagues appeared especially startled.

"It was my job," he continued with a shrug. "I was hired by the military to investigate the mutilation phenomenon and come up with an explanation for what was going on. The cult and predator explanations were understandable to the general public, and convenient. Besides, what else could the explanation be? I still don't really know how to explain most of the cases."

"So you just lied?" Malcolm burst forth in a contemptuous tone. "What kind of scientist lies to the public?"

"A very good one," said the Colonel in Mark's defense. "I know Mark can speak for himself, but I see nothing wrong with the approach we took. The public interest was our primary concern."

"Of course—the military always takes the moral high road," quipped Dr. Harper. Melissa sat back in her chair, a look of thoughtful concentration on her face.

"Let's not allow this to get personal," Neil jumped in. "Frankly, we've got bigger problems than that. I think we need to get back to the subject at hand. Mark, can you, Kevin, and Malcolm get us all up to speed on the rest of your research?"

"That should take all of the next two minutes," quipped Malcohn.

"Dr. Bradley ..." Neil interrupted, annoyed by Malcolm's tone.

"He's right, Neil," Kevin Garvey spoke up calmly, and you know it."

Neil looked at the soft-spoken scientist grimly, and then turned to Dr. Chadwick.

"Of course," answered Mark. "In the last year or so that we've been working



together on this project, Kevin, Malcolm, and myself have succeeded in pinpointing the catalyst behind the biochemical changes we've outlined for you this morning, but we don't know where it came from. We knew that the presence of identical genetic anomalies in these mutilated cattle couldn't be a random coincidence. What we're dealing with is a heretofore-unknown virus that was somehow contracted by the cattle and then passed on genetically. Although we can't be sure, judging by the number of cattle we presume are "infected," the contraction of the virus probably occurred decades ago. It's only because there are so many altered cattle at the present time that the environmental effects are now noticeable."

Dr. Garvey sat forward in his seat, a sign that he wanted to add something. "When we discovered the viral anomaly you've heard about," he said clearing his throat, "we postulated that it might have been caused by radiation. We started our search for a cause using cattle from the aforementioned geographical areas linked to the methane buildup. We began testing large herds which grazed near military installations which housed nuclear weapons, as well as those near other facilities that emitted a great deal of energy, including ultraviolet radiation of environmentally permissible levels. Unfortunately, and to our surprise, the results were mixed—not every animal had the virus, and in a few cases, only a minority of the herd had contracted it. The only conclusion we can draw is that nuclear and ultraviolet radiation are not related to our dilemma."

"So there you have it, ladies and gentlemen," Malcolm chuck-led nervously, "your best and your brightest are totally clueless as to how to keep the earth's population from frying like worms on an Arizona sidewalk once the atmospheric dissipation runs its course. No . . . wait a minute," he added sarcastically, "I've got a solution! Why don't we enlist the help of our capable military in nuking all the cattle in the Great Plains? That should buy us another decade or so, even with nuclear fallout!"

"Could we please avoid the sarcasm?" Dr. Garvey asked quietly.

"Really," Neil echoed his sentiments, but in an angered tone. "Your whole attitude is completely counterproductive."

"But am I wrong?" asked Malcolm smugly.

Neil glanced over at the Colonel, who pushed back his chair, stood up, and approached the podium once more. Everyone in the room watched in surprise as a door in the wall behind the podium slid open in response to his touch of the console, a door that blended perfectly into the wall and had been invisible to the unsearching eye. Without so much as a word, the Colonel reached into the opening and withdrew two large covered boxes with the now familiar "Above Top Secret" stamp on them. The Colonel proceeded to remove eleven black 4-inch notebook binders from the boxes, each filled to capacity.

"The answer to your question, Dr. Bradley, is yes you are in fact wrong," the Colonel announced, standing erect behind the podium, "which brings us to the reason we've assembled this team ahead of schedule. We and by that I mean myself, Dr. Bandstra, and the members of the Group know exactly what the source is for the mystery virus you've so ingeniously detected for us, and your efforts have been quite instrumental in our acquiring that knowledge."

"What?" Dr. Chadwick exclaimed in disbelief. Everyone in the room looked equally incredulous. Even the placid Dr. Garvey seemed disarmed by the revelation.

"Please pass these notebooks along to the person seated next to you," he continued nonchalantly, handing notebooks to each person seated nearest on either side

of the podium. "Two months ago," he began with a glance at Dr. Chadwick, "you presented your data to me, along with your initial suspicion that what you'd discovered may be linked to the mutilation phenomena. That conjecture alarmed me much more than I let on, and immediately created a fear of my own about what was going on, a fear that I somehow felt would inevitably be confirmed. I informed the Group immediately, and gave them a full report on your research. It took until a week ago to receive both your own final set of conclusions and corroboration from the Group, as well as the final authorization for Dr. Bandstra and me to enact their contingency plans for just such an emergency. Part of those plans was to assemble a team to achieve the Group's response goal. You are that team."

"And just what is that goal, sir?" Dr. Harper demanded in an agitated voice.

The Colonel looked out across the table. There was a queer mixture of anxiety, enthusiasm, and determination in his eyes. "The environmental crisis about which you've been briefed is real and, as Dr. Scott suggested, there's an element of damage control in all this—but you won't just be working on how to inform the public of an environmental breakdown. Your ultimate mission," he said, taking a deep breath, "is to lay the foundation for the human race's acceptance of the reality that life exists elsewhere in our solar system, and presumably throughout our galaxy."

The team members sat stunned around the table like speech-less mannequins, the Colonel's words reverberating in their ears. None of them, including the scientists who'd already logged hundreds of hours at the facility, had expected this. Brian could feel his heart pumping wildly in his chest as he tried to process what he'd just heard. He glanced quickly over at Father Benedict, who appeared anything but enthused. The old priest's drawn and expressionless face continued to unnerve the younger scholar. *What is he thinking?*

Brian's eyes then darted to the three scientists at the table. Mark's eyes conveyed the fact that he was genuinely stunned, even frightened. Brian could read the annoyed skepticism forming on the faces of the team's other two scientific members as they began to recover from the initial shock. Brian turned his attention to his friend.

"Is this for real, Neil?"

Neil turned to face Brian. "I'm afraid so," he said strumming his fingers on the table.

*Afraid so?* Brian was momentarily puzzled by the pessimistic response, but his earlier conversation with Neil quickly came rushing back to memory.

"What about the mutilations? . . . How do you explain them?" Mark asked in a subdued, hollow tone, a confounded expression crossing his face.

"We did them . . . that is, they were part of a black project," Neil confessed uneasily. "Despite the deceptive nature of our cover story, we had honorable motives," he added, looking at Malcolm, who rolled his eyes.

"It's true—on both counts," the Colonel backed Neil. "There's nothing mysterious about the so-called 'mutilation phenomenon'; we did them, and we've been doing them for years."

"But why—what's the point of starting the mutilation phenomenon as Americans have come to know it, and then recruit scientists to prop up a bogus explanation?" asked Melissa. "I don't get it."

"That's because you weren't aware of the bigger picture," the Colonel interjected.

"The military first noticed the virus your colleagues have been studying in the seventies."

"Are you saying," Dr. Garvey intoned incredulously, his calm demeanor giving way to transparent emotion for the first time, "that we've been repeating classified research for the last ten months?"

"Yes, for the most part," answered the Colonel.

"Why?" Malcolm wondered aloud. "Did you guys need to find new ways to waste taxpayer income after the public found out about the \$500 toilet seats?"

"Dr. Bradley ..." interjected Neil.

"Yeah, I know let him explain. This ought to be interesting."

"As I was saying, we discovered the virus under discussion by accident while conducting unrelated tests in the geographical areas already noted. We had no idea what the virus did, since there were no discernible effects on the cattle, and also because biochemistry as a discipline was in its infancy. Your work here really was in some ways a leap forward."

"I feel so proud," quipped Malcolm.

"I'd like to hear this," Father Benedict said, his voice showing some irritation. "We're all well aware that the military is often anything but forthright with the public, but that is often for the best. Most of you weren't even born while our country was in the throes of World War 11, and have no feel for the necessity of secrecy at governmental levels. I'm not arguing in favor of naivete, but let's at least wait till we hear the Colonel fully before we pass judgment on the legitimacy of these things."

"Thank you, Father," the Colonel said appreciatively after a short pause. "As I said, we had no idea what the virus did in the cattle—but we did know where it came from, as a result of the space program."

"I hope this isn't going where I think it's going," remarked Melissa.

"As I was saying," the Colonel continued. "Our scientists were able to develop a test for the virus, and we did this randomly and secretly, using federal regulators to conduct such tests. In 1974 we developed ink that could only be discerned under ultraviolet light to mark cattle that tested positive. I believe Dr. Kelley's research will validate that decade as the beginning of mutilations as a widespread Midwestern phenomenon."

"But why kill the cattle? Why the rectal cores and removal of the sexual organs?"

"In a nutshell, not knowing what the virus did was enough of an incentive to kill the animal. We were afraid if we let the animals live something might happen to the milk and beef supply—that it might cause some disease in people. We took those body parts somehow related to the digestion process, and the sexual organs were needed to see if the virus was transmitted in reproduction. Consequently, that fact was something we knew prior to Dr. Chadwick's work. We cored the rectum as part of our research to see whether the animal's waste could conceivably affect crops and ground water."

"Why not just test the waste?" asked Brian.

"Like I said, we were going to kill the animal anyway. We needed waste material and genitalia for our research. We just developed an efficient process to get everything we needed all at once."

"But how were you able to do it—the surgical wounds, the bloodless site, the lack of footprints?" asked Dr. Garvey.

"And more importantly," added Melissa, "why go through the trouble just for

some virus that you didn't know with certitude was causing any trouble?"

"Actually, the mutilation procedure is pretty easy," answered the Colonel. "We couldn't mimic an animal attack—tooth and claw marks, saliva, etc., even though we knew we were going to use that explanation, simply because most people who'd never seen an actual mutilation up close would buy it. We also couldn't just go around shooting the animals, since our goal included harvesting body parts and not simply killing the animal. We decided to use unmarked and unlit helicopters to go into remote ranching areas and simply pick up the cattle. Once we located a herd, we'd find our target with ultraviolet light, drop a harness to restrain the animal, send one or two men down to the ground to secure the specimen, and pull it up into the chopper. Inside we would rapidly remove the body parts we wanted with an ultrasonic scalpel."

"A what?" asked Mark.

"Ultrasonic scalpels separate material by molecular displacement, essentially 'vibrating' the molecules apart."

"Wait a minute," Mark jumped in, "you mean to tell me you have a scalpel that just vibrates apart solid material? I don't believe it."

"It's true. A company named Ultracision has supplied these scalpels to the Defense Department for over two decades. They can even cut metal so finely that they polish the cut surface edges like a mirror."

"So that's why there's no residual bleeding?" Melissa guessed.

"Right. Lasers burn tissues, but these scalpels seal capillaries and tissue. The technology also enables sutureless closings. When we'd finished with the specimen we'd conveniently drop the animal to the ground a hundred yards or so away from where it was taken, eliminating any footprints. Sometimes we flew to altogether different locations for the drop. Whatever it took to minimize the physical evidence."

"This sounds crazy," Dr. Harper said skeptically. "There's no way you could keep doing this without getting caught or someone catching on."

"Who says people haven't?" the Colonel said cockily. "We couldn't go completely undetected forever."

"He's right, Deidre," Melissa commented. "There have been many reports of black military-style helicopters in the vicinity of mutilations."

"Exactly. We were only vulnerable in the air. We weren't going to get caught on the ground, because the examiners worked for us. Locals who had different opinions wouldn't get anywhere, either. Local media would start to ridicule them sooner or later. And if we had to we'd turn to the expert opinion of nationally renowned experts like Dr. Chadwick who were on our payroll."

"But like Melissa asked," said Dr. Harper, "why go through the trouble?"

"Because the virus is from space," the Colonel answered. "It's proof that life exists elsewhere in our solar system."

"That isn't true," Dr. Garvey challenged. "Viruses aren't really organisms—We don't even really know if they're truly alive or if they're some kind of 'micro-machine.'"

"Well ... ," Malcolm broke in. "What you've said is only partially true, Kev. Microbiologists haven't been able to classify viruses conventionally, and they aren't organisms like bacteria, for example. A virus isn't strictly alive or dead. But the existence of a virus from space does argue for life in space."

"How so?" asked Dr. Garvey.

"Well, a virus is able to perpetuate its kind by infecting the DNA of living organisms and converting their cells to virtual 'virus factories.' It's hardly conceivable that a virus could have remained viable without living material with which to perpetuate itself. It simply couldn't survive without living cellular material within which to replicate itself. I'd say if you have a truly extraterrestrial virus, there has to be life out there somewhere."

"How do we know it's actually extraterrestrial?" asked Father Benedict.

"NASA discovered the same virus in microbes in meteorites," Neil replied.

"You're not talking about ALH84001 are you?" asked Dr. Garvey. "If you are, then you have no proof at all."

"What's ALH8 . . . whatever?" Melissa queried.

"The so-called Martian meteorite that NASA paraded before the mainstream media a couple years ago," answered Kevin.

"The one that supposedly had microbial life within it; you know, it looked like an insect larvae under the electron microscope," Malcolm chimed in. "A sulfide study by some scientists from Arizona State and Cal Tech on that meteor pretty much proved there was no bacterial life in it."

"No," the Colonel responded, "I'm not talking about ALH84001. Surely you don't believe that's the only candidate for extraterrestrial life in NASA's arsenal."

"I guess we only know what you guys allow to be made public," answered Malcolm.

"True, and for good reason. NASA and the U.S. Military have been working together to slowly acclimate the public to the idea of life in space, so the policy has been to dangle a few of the question-able carrots under the nose of the news media before getting to the proof-positive specimens."

"So what makes a specimen proof-positive?" asked Father Benedict.

"We have roughly a dozen meteorite samples that contain gaseous compounds that do not occur in combination on earth," explained the Colonel. "Of those samples, three contain the virus."

"Give me an example of such a compound," Dr. Garvey asked politely.

"You know Kevin, if I didn't know better, I'd say you're treating this discussion like I'm a Ph.D. candidate in my final oral exam," the Colonel said in an annoyed tone. "Silane, arsine, and phosphine are good examples Si14, AsH3, and PH3 respectively. How did I do?"

"Just fine," he answered, looking over at Mark Chadwick, who said nothing, leaning back in his chair once again, unconsciously fingering the curls in his hair. "If those compounds are in the specimen, I can vouch that he's right. Those don't occur naturally on earth anywhere."

"If our scientists don't grasp the reasoning behind keeping this information from immediate public consumption, as opposed to a gradual conditioning process, I'm sure our humanities scholars do," the Colonel added, turning in the direction of Brian and Father Benedict. "More than anyone else here, Dr. Scott, you should appreciate the delicate nature of the issue."

"I do," Brian responded. "Many religious people, especially the more conservative expressions, just wouldn't be able to handle the idea that life existed elsewhere in the universe, even at a microbial level."

"Come on," Dr. Harper interjected, "why would anyone lose their faith over a virus?"

"For the same reason many people turned their backs on the church in the 17th century," Father Benedict replied. "That was the era when, building on the work of Copernicus, Johann Kepler and Galileo proved beyond doubt that the universe as they knew it was not geocentric, but heliocentric—the planets didn't revolve around the earth as the church taught, but around the sun."

"Right," Brian continued the priest's thought, "Since the church taught such a doctrine—erroneously, I might add, since the Bible makes no such specific claim—people were confronted with not only the realization that the church could err, which in their minds meant the Bible could err, but also that the earth was not the center of God's attention—it wasn't the focus of the created universe."

"Not only that," the priest proceeded, "but the very fact that the universe was knowable, that it wasn't the impenetrable, mysterious dwelling place of God as had been assumed, created doubts in people's minds. It was sort of a blow to the collective ego."

"So your solution was to lock those people up or torture them using the inquisition," Melissa said coldly. "That kind of barbarism is just one of the reasons I reject Christianity."

"Melissa," Father Benedict said in a calm voice, "surely you realize that not all Catholics then and now think the same way—Kepler was a Catholic; did you think he was a Muslim or an atheist?"

"No, but . . .

"But nothing—your decision to turn your back to God was ill-advised. I am a Jesuit and proud of it, but I have no trouble acknowledging that my order has erred terribly in the past, succumbing to the forces of corruption and powerlust. Jesuits are human, not divine."

"Fine, Father, but don't insult me by pretending to know why I think Christianity is nothing more than a delusion," she said firmly, but in a controlled voice. "I have other reasons you know nothing about."

"How sad," the priest replied, shifting his attention back to the larger question. "Like the 17th century, the knowledge that life exists elsewhere in the universe would create a paradigm shift in humanity's thinking today, particularly if intelligent life is out there."

"No one said anything about that, Father," the Colonel re-plied, "but I think we could all agree that it would be logical."

"Especially with a force as powerful as evolution," Melissa added scornfully, glancing at Brian and Father Benedict. "Just think of the impact that would have on religion. After all this time being told that they were the unique creation of God, it turns out that humans are an inferior species in the cosmos. Doesn't do much for biblical accuracy, does it?"

"Only if one accepts your misunderstanding of what it means to be created in the image of God," Brian replied, growing irritated with Melissa's contentious manner. "To be honest, I'd have to agree with your assessment, at least as far as the impact on people's theology. Most conservative Christians and Jews would be troubled as you say, since the whole doctrine of the image of God has been largely misunderstood for centuries."

"I suppose you have the answer," she scoffed.

"It's not a question of my being smarter than anyone else. Contrary to what you're implying, I don't have that attitude. The reason this doctrine has been intellectually bungled is because the church's articulation of it has been based on the English Bible, not Hebrew grammar. Just like in the days of Kepler, the truth of Christianity would be dealt only as much damage as poor articulation of biblical theology would sanction. Actually, I'd be thrilled if someday intelligent life was discovered elsewhere. It would be fascinating, and wouldn't affect the uniqueness of humanity's creation or status in any way."

Melissa appeared surprised, and in the few brief seconds Brian allowed himself to scan the room, he could tell she wasn't alone.

"Brian has authored an article on the subject that details his views," Father Benedict coyly divulged, still looking in Melissa's direction. She detected his unspoken challenge and returned it with an icy glare.

"Yeah," Brian recollected aloud, "my article ... the one that got me canned. It was on the theological implications of extraterrestrial life."

"You lost a job over an article?" Deidre asked in disbelief.

"My first, and probably last, teaching job," he muttered.

"You should have sued—what about academic freedom?"

"I don't really want to get into the specifics," Brian squirmed uneasily. "I didn't think it was the right thing to do. Besides, I may have won but it wouldn't have cured the head-in-the-sand attitude that caused the problem. Curing Christians and other religious types of their unwillingness to think beyond the theological paradigms they live by but rarely examine won't be accomplished in a courtroom. They've got to have enough guts to let God out of the box."

## CHAPTER 6

"Throughout history, it has been the inaction of those who could have acted; the indifference of those who should have known better; the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most; that has made it possible for evil to triumph."

—*Heile Selassie*

BRIAN WAS RELIEVED to get the initial briefing out of the way. The rest of the morning had been taken up with a discussion of the tasks each member of the team would have in the project. They would all have one week to prepare their research for presentation. The scientists on the project would be working primarily in conjunction with a military exobiologist in permanent residence at the Facility, a specialist in extraterrestrial minerals and possible evidence for life beyond earth. Their goal would naturally be to attempt to halt the virus's ability to replicate. They had all been escorted to some other part of the Facility as soon as the morning session had ended, presumably to meet their new colleague. Malcolm and Kevin appeared eager to get started, but Mark Chadwick had been noticeably unenthused. Brian couldn't help wondering what was bothering him.

Deidre Harper's work would focus on the psycho-social impact of the truth of extraterrestrial life, while Melissa Kelley would be required to report on how such news would be interpreted among apocalyptic cults. Father Benedict's task would be to apply his back-ground in ecclesiastical ethics and interfaith dialogue to fashion a rationale for ecumenical cooperation among organized religions in the face of the crisis. Brian had been informed that his own contribution to the project would also concentrate on the effect that the revelation of the reality of extraterrestrial life in the universe would have on organized religion. The team had been excused for lunch and had the afternoon free to form preliminary research plans that each would present to the others for questioning during a late afternoon session. For now, he and Andrew planned to keep their lunch date.

"Anything interesting we could talk about?" Brian asked teasingly, placing his glass under the ice dispenser.

"Please," the priest beseeched him in a hushed tone. "Let's wait until we're seated."

"Sure," he smiled, and pushed the button for iced tea. The ice cracked as the beverage hued the glass to the brim. Brian glanced curiously at his lunch companion. He liked Father Benedict, but didn't know what to make of his sometimes secretive, sometimes skittish demeanor. It was obvious that the two of them were part of something of enormous consequence, but instead of the air of apprehension exuded by the old cleric, he found his inclusion in the project exhilarating. His academic career had been extinguished before it had even begun, and he longed for the respect of professional people with whom he crossed paths outside the coterie of his graduate-student peer group. He wanted to feel as though he was part of some-thing significant, rather than spectating before a clique of stuffy, self-absorbed scholars.

The two of them picked up their trays and headed to an isolated corner of the



cafeteria, Father Benedict stared at the clock on the wall as he seated himself. It was barely past eleven, which meant they had roughly five hours until their presence would be required back at the conference room.

"What's on your mind, Andrew?" Brian asked, noting the Father's interest in the time.

The priest didn't answer. Instead, to Brian's bewilderment, he proceeded to remove the Salt and pepper shakers and the napkin holder that had rested atop the table to another location several tables away. He surveyed those present in the cafeteria. The only other team members in the room were Deidre Harper and Melissa Kelley.

"Is there something wrong? Do you have some kind of allergy?" Brian asked.

"No," he answered, "just a precaution."

"You think someone's going to be listening to us? Come on, Andrew." Again the priest left the younger man's question go unattended. He proceeded to run his hands over the undersurface of the table, like a child looking for the piece of gum he'd stuck there earlier.

"I'll say grace, if you don't mind," he added, as though he'd done nothing out of the ordinary.

"Go right ahead," Brian answered, somewhat embarrassed by the priest's odd behavior. The two of them bowed their heads as Father Andrew crossed himself and prayed for God's blessing. He had hardly finished when he reached across the table and touched Brian's hand.

"Son, you must believe me that the task that lies before us is one of utmost seriousness."

"I think that's pretty obvious, Andrew," Brian noted, crumbling crackers into his soup.

"Yes, in the context of what we've been told, the situation is weighty, but . . . I tell you in all honesty that there is much more at stake here. There ..." Father Benedict stopped as a uniformed officer passed by the table on the way to the exit. Brian watched the priest's eyes follow the man until he was clearly on his way down the hall.

"Andrew, what's the reason for all this ... paranoia?"

"I just don't believe we've been told the whole truth about what's going on here, Brian. And neither does Dr. Chadwick."

"I noticed his reaction, too. Could just be sour grapes at being kept out of the loop after all his work for them."

"I don't think so. I didn't read bitterness on his face; it was more like distress. Something isn't right; something has been omitted that we need to know. He isn't buying it, so I suspect we shouldn't either."

"I'm sure we haven't been told everything. When they want us to know more details, they'll tell us."

"You still aren't following me, Brian," the priest said with a hint of exasperation. "I can't help wondering if we aren't being deceived, not merely that we're only being told partial truth."

"Why would you think that? I can't see any reason for your suspicion."

"Well, I can't say I can give you one; it's just a feeling—an intuition."

"You must have some basis for it," Brian remarked and then took a bite of his sandwich.

"Well, such as it is, I'm troubled by the fact that our areas of expertise appear to be underutilized. I mean, if all they needed to keep people from losing their minds over some space mites were your views on the validity of Christianity and extraterrestrial life they could just have gotten copies of your article."

"Oh yeah, my infamous article," Brian shook his head wistfully. "I still can barely process the fuss it caused. It isn't like anyone in conservative religious circles had ever given much thought to how we would deal with actual ET contact."

"Were your detractors offended that you considered contact possible?"

"No it was more my criticisms of the traditional view of the image of God."

"Yes, you were quite disparaging but justifiably so. At any rate, as I said—why bring you on board when they could just access your position at a library?"

Brian chewed thoughtfully, listening to the priest's impressions. "I see your point," he said after a moment. "It does seem that our specialties—and especially yours—are hardly being tapped in relation to the extreme measures used to get us here. And I think you're right about the paper. My now infamous article contains everything I really think on the subject. I don't know about everyone else, but my week will be pretty easy. I don't know what to tell you, Andrew. Do you have any idea why you're here?"

"I wasn't exactly apprehended like yourself and the others. I was sent here; I just don't know why yet."

"What? Sent by whom?"

"John Paul."

"Are you feeling okay, Andrew?"

"This is serious!" he whispered harshly. "I can allow Dr. Bradley his flippancies, but not you."

"All right—I'm sorry," Brian apologized, completely taken aback by the old man's scolding.

"Perhaps I should clarify a bit," the cleric's voice returned to its customary calm. "It might perhaps be more accurate to say I was put in a position by the former Pope to be selected. John Paul directed me to move to Tucson, as the Colonel informed the team members this morning. Once I got there the Pope had already contacted the dean of the university—a very loyal Catholic—and made arrangements for me to teach a few classes as an adjunct, but that isn't the real reason I was moved."

"What was the reason, then? And what does a Pope have to do with American military projects, or 'the Group' for that matter?"

"One question at a time," Andrew noted without diverting his attention from the orange he was peeling. "John Paul had nothing to do with this mysterious Group. The same goes for any direct involvement with the U.S. Military—obviously. He does, however, have friends within that community and the intelligence world as well. I don't know who, mind you, but I know this is true."

"That seems very odd."

"Not at all. I'm sure you're well aware that the papacy has always been politically involved remember, the Vatican is a political entity in its own right. It isn't at all unusual that the Holy See would form friendships over the years with people in these arenas."

"So how did you get here? Do you know where we are?"

"As I said, I was put into a place of opportunity. The American Southwest is full of air bases and other military installations. If there was a project that entailed some

Vatican interest, I would be in an ideal location to assist. It's the kind of calculated pre-planning the Jesuits have engaged in for centuries. More specifically, I was notified by the Vatican to report to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, where I'd be received accordingly. Nevertheless, even though I'm here by design, I was drugged to prevent any orientation as to the direction or time duration of my trip to this destination. For all I know, I never left and we're still there."

"You said you had no idea why you're here," Brian reminded him as he poked through his salad. "Is that the whole truth?"

"You must remember, I'm a Jesuit; we receive our orders and follow them. There are no questions asked, only obedience. I don't know precisely why I'm here, but I have an inkling. I suspect we're sitting atop a powder keg."

A few moments passed with no exchange. Finally Brian could wait no longer.

"Well?"

"What?"

"If you're so sure there's an element of danger to us here and that the Colonel hasn't been forthright, what's your speculation?"

"Brian, do you have any idea what's in Tucson that might link the Vatican and the U.S. Military?"

"Not really."

"The Steward Observatory at the University of Arizona." "I don't understand."

"The Steward Observatory is host to VORG the Vatican Observatory Research Group. It's the stateside headquarters of the Vatican Observatory."

"The Vatican Observatory? Since when does the Vatican have an interest in astronomy?"

"Since 1582 to be exact."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all. Pope Gregory XIII commissioned a committee to study astronomical data as part of the reform of the calendar in that year. Part of the results of this eventual reform was the establishment of three observatories, the earliest of which, the Observatory of the Roman College, was founded in 1774. Did you realize that it was a Jesuit who first classified the stars according to their spectra?"

"No. That's really remarkable."

"Indeed. Credit for that achievement goes to Father Angelo Secchi. Pope Leo XIII founded what we know today as the Vatican Observatory in 1891. The observatory was housed near St. Peter's at first, and then moved to its present location at the Papal Summer Residence at Castel Gandolfo, about 30 miles southeast of Rome. The library at Castel Gandolfo contains more than 20,000 volumes, including the works of Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and Kepler. A second research center, VORG, was founded in 1981. Twelve years later in 1993 construction of the Vatican Advanced Technology Telescope, VATT for short, was completed at Mount Graham. It's arguably the best astronomical site in the United States."

"This is sure a far cry from putting Galileo under house arrest."

"Yes, it is. Actually, another of the reasons for the observatory's original founding was to counteract the notion that the Church was opposed to astronomy."

"I'm curious," Brian said, wiping his mouth, "what exactly is the Roman Catholic Church's position on extraterrestrial life?" "Ah, that brings us to my concerns."

"Are you opposed to evolution?" asked Brian. "We all know John Paul wasn't. I can still recall his big announcement a few years ago more or less placing his stamp of approval on it."

"In a manner of speaking, he did. The Pope was, of course, a theistic evolutionist, and held that humans are special creations apart from the process. The mainstream press, unaccustomed as it is to accuracy in reporting, failed to qualify the Holy Father's remarks sufficiently for the lay public. As far as extraterrestrial life, intelligent or otherwise, I am in agreement with your own views. Not everyone currently inside the Vatican or my own order agrees, however."

"You're afraid that the image of God will be overlooked, aren't you—that a revelation of intelligent life elsewhere will prompt even more people to reject the notion that human beings are the result of divine creation by any definition."

"Yes," the old priest confessed, "our theology is every bit as sloppy on that subject as you contested this morning. One of my tasks at Tucson is in fact to keep tabs on one of the astronomy professors—a Jesuit, mind you—whose views are on the fringe of censure. My background was ideal for the task, so I was sent . . . But that's the least of my fears."

"What could be more problematic than that?" queried Brian.

"Ask yourself for a moment Why build one of the world's most powerful telescopes?"

"I don't know. *What could they be looking for?*"

"That, my young scholar, is a question to keep running through your mind during these proceedings. And while you're at it, ask the logical corollary—what application might there be to the military'? As for myself, I have a speculation that I won't share just yet."

"Seems like a logical leap, if you don't mind my being blunt."

"Is it'? In my mind, I see my own placement at the university, my presence here, and the surfacing of the issue of extraterrestrial life far beyond coincidence."

"I don't know, Andrew. You may be reading too much into things."

"Brian," the priest said in a low, ominous tone, "there is a potent, tireless evil lurking in the Church—in my own Order, mind you; a force of superlative and uncompromising malevolence. I don't know how, but I know it has something to do with this project. I feel it in my bones."

Brian couldn't help notice that Father Benedict's hands trembled as he spoke. The fear in the old man's eyes was apparent, but controlled. He didn't know how to respond, save to place his own hand lightly upon the priest's lean arm.

Father Benedict exhaled heavily, and peered down at his plate. "I'm sorry," he whispered after few moments.

"It's not a sin to be afraid, Andrew."

"I know, but it's essential I maintain my wits."

"I only wish I knew what you were so afraid of."

"If my instincts are correct, you will. I just wish I knew what to expect. I've seen horrifying things during my lifetime I've assisted at dozens of exorcisms—but nothing has so unnerved me as the feeling of dread I've carried with me since I entered this place. You've been the lone bright spot. And if I can't ready myself, I'll be of no help to you."

"Thanks but what do you mean when you say, 'help me?'"

"I don't really want to get into it until I have some reason for thinking it might be more than my own imagination. All I'll tell you now is that I believe the project will ultimately lead to your dissertation, and then beyond—that's the real reason why you're here."

"My dissertation? I don't see any connection to my dissertation and our involvement here. The Colonel was pretty clear that what I'll be doing pertains to my article, not my dissertation."

"You may think that now, and I understand. I still suspect otherwise, but I'll hold my opinions at this point. If you don't think me senile or unbalanced now you most likely would if I divulged my thoughts at this juncture."

"Well . . . I guess I'll leave it at that, if you wish."

"I do."

"Besides, I'd like to hear ..." Brian stopped in mid sentence. "We have company, Father."

Father Benedict turned around in his chair. Melissa Kelley was headed for their table with a noticeably deliberate gait.

"I wonder what she wants," Brian mused, glancing briefly at her toned legs and shapely form, "she looks like she's on a mission."

"I'm sure she is," the priest said, returning to the remainder of his lunch. "I hope you're ready."

"Hi," Brian greeted her as she approached them.

"Skip it," she snapped.

"What's the problem?" Father Benedict intervened, trying to ease the tension that had already surfaced.

"I wanted to tell my colleague here that I didn't appreciate the way he belittled me in our meeting this morning," she tore into Brian. "You'll learn pretty soon I don't take any crap, especially from men who think they have to condescend to professional women. You acted like I didn't have a brain in my head today, and if it happens again, I'll make a spectacle of you that no one here will forget. Just who do you think you are? What right do you have treating me like an inferior!"

Brian sat dumbfounded by the tirade directed at him. He gave Father Benedict an embarrassed look, but he could tell the priest had bowed out of the confrontation.

"Well? Don't you have anything to say? You're not so quick when you don't have the upper hand, are you?"

Brian glanced down at the table for a moment, and then looked Melissa in the eye. "You're right."

"What'?" she asked, surprised by the swift surrender.

"I said you're right. I shouldn't have spoken to you the way I did. I was out of line. Unfortunately, I have a sarcastic bent, and a bit of a temper, and when I get challenged or annoyed by something someone says, I can be curt. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Melissa's flashing green eyes probed him suspiciously, trying to discern his motives. "Do you really think you can dismiss this whole thing that easily?"

"I don't know," Brian said, unsure of where the conversation was going. "I guess I could apologize to the team when we meet again this afternoon. Would that help?"

"Yeah, but then I want you to roll over and play dead at my command."

Brian could feel his anger rising, but he caught himself with the recognition that

she was trying to push his buttons. "Melissa, are you going to accept my apology or not? Whether it ends the matter or not, my response isn't going to change. You're right."

"I feel so relieved," she mocked. "I know your type some-how you'll manage to get people to sympathize with your side. Just stay the hell out of my way!" Without waiting for another response she whirled about and headed back to her table.

Brian's disbelieving gaze followed her across the room. His mind rehearsed the brief conversation, searching for a misstep on his part, but to no avail. His concentration was broken by Father Benedict's sigh.

"Boy is she a piece of work," Brian said, shaking his head.

"She's much more than that, Brian," the priest said, becoming serious once more. "I don't know her past, but my experience tells me she must have been tragically hurt in some way. I've seen few people so nasty in such a situation. She's a very bitter woman. It's a shame really; she's much too young to hold such resentment."

"What in the world could have made her so miserable?"

"I don't know. Just remember, God loves her—no less than you or myself."

The priest's words pierced Brian's heart. He'd been swept away by the events of the past few hours. At first angry and apprehensive, and now absorbed in his position on the team, he'd thought little about how providence might be at work in his life now and in the lives of the others with whom he'd been brought in contact.

"I may be able to find some information on her. If I do I'll pass it along."

"Thanks . . . who do you plan to ask?"

"Oh, I have my own means," he said pleasantly, "after all

"I know, you're a Jesuit."

"Indeed. Now if you'll excuse me."

"Certainly," Brian motioned. "I'll see you in a couple of hours, Lord willing."

"Lord willing," the priest noted, managing a smile.

Brian proceeded with his lunch quietly. His thoughts could scarcely be divorced from Andrew's enigmatic comments. The old priest was a mystery, but Brian knew he had made a friend and an ally in the short time they had spent together. Then there was Melissa. As warm as he felt Andrew's company, a wall of tension had already been erected between the two of them. He was determined not to feel like he had to walk on eggshells around her; he couldn't allow himself to be intimidated, or to be combative. He chided himself for being such a loner, someone so prone to being defensive.

"Brian!" a voice called as he exited the cafeteria. He turned to see Malcolm approaching with Deidre Harper.

"Headed back to your room soon?" Malcolm asked. "Yeah. Doesn't seem like there's much else to do." "Really," Deidre said smugly, her arms folded across her chest. "Let's all squirrel ourselves away in our cells and do our duty for Uncle Sam."

"Do you really hate the government as much as it seems?" Brian asked.

"I'm no anarchist, if that's what you think," she cracked. "As a black woman I have a warranted distrust of the government in general, especially the conservative military hawks around here."

"I don't really know what to think, to be honest with you."

"Let's just say I've seen the government screw enough people to populate a small town. Now it's my turn."

"We're all in the same boat."

"That's where you're wrong. I'm supposed to get on a plane in two days to fly back to Scotland."

"I'm sure you'll get to make the trip sometime," Malcolm said cheerfully.

"It wasn't a tour, Malcolm. I have business that's a lot more important than this."

"How is that?—If you don't mind my asking," queried Brian. Dr. Harper looked down at the floor, arms still crossed, hesitant. "Sorry," Brian offered.

"That's okay. It's nothing that has to be a secret," she said, her eyes misting. "I just had this little court date to gain custody of my daughter. I had her during my final year of my dissertation. Her father and I never married. He's a Scotsman, and I'm not. I didn't think that was a big deal at the time. Unfortunately," she continued bitterly, "he's also a lawyer, and has tried just about everything to deny me custody. Four years of litigation hell later, we've finally reached the last stop in the appeals process, and guess who doesn't show up in court? I'll bet that'll impress the judge. What would you guys think of a single mother like that?"

Brian and Malcolm looked at each other but said nothing. This brief glimpse into her personal struggle made her rage understandable, although neither of them could begin to imagine her anguish.

"That's terrible, Deidre," Malcolm said earnestly. "We had no idea."

"Cruel is more like it," Brian said in disgust. "They had to know what was going on in your life."

"Oh, they did. No doubt about that."

"I assume you asked them to get in touch with your lawyer or the court," Brian continued.

"Of course. I asked them to provide some sort of confirmation that they had done so. Needless to say, I haven't heard a word back."

"Who did you ask?"

"Our imperious leader, the Colonel."

"We need to ask Neil."

"He can't override the Colonel," said Dr. Harper wryly. "I hope you didn't forget the sanctified chain-of-command."

"He won't have to," Brian replied. "He knows hundreds of people in Washington, many of them in Congress. There's got to be someone who could make sure your absence isn't held against you. I'll email him as soon as I get back to my room."

"That would be wonderful. Thanks," she said, her countenance brightening a bit.

"I think he'd know if the Colonel made the contacts, or, if not, would make them himself. Let's go."

Brian turned and headed down the lengthy corridor toward his room, Malcolm and Deidre close behind. Upon reaching their destination, he carded his door and punched in his access code. The three of them went inside, and Brian turned on his computer.

"I really appreciate this Brian," Deidre said as she sat down in one of the room's chairs. "Hopefully something good will come of it."

"I'll pray to that end," Brian said with a smile.

"Thanks again ... You really think that stuff works, don't you?"

"Of course, but it depends on what you mean by 'works.' Most people would define 'works' as getting exactly what they want when they want it as though God is

some kind of cosmic genie. God answers every prayer; it's just that sometimes His answer is `No' or `Wait.' We have to have faith that God will ultimately work things out for His glory and our best."

"Back at you. But I wouldn't put it just that way." Brian gave her a puzzled look.

"Look at him," she laughed, motioning to Malcolm. "I like to think prayer is just mind over matter—the human mind transcending the physical to influence the collective consciousness—you know, your thoughts, together with the thoughts of others, creating reality."

"That doesn't sound very scientific, Dee."

"Dee?"

"Yeah, that's my nickname for you," Malcolm grinned. "Everyone's got to have one. What kind of psychologist are you, anyway?"

"You sure you want to know?"

"That sounds like an invitation to me," Brian replied.



## CHAPTER 7

"Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

— *Albert Einstein*

THE THREE OF them spent the next hour in Brian's room getting acquainted. Brian was glad to have the company. He'd spent most of the last eleven years alone, but had never really adjusted completely. He enjoyed those infrequent occasions when he had visitors. He marveled again at the personality contrasts in the group. For sure Deidre was one of the most acerbic people he'd ever met, but her circumstances humanized her. She was also razor-sharp when it came to quickly analyzing people and their own state of affairs. Malcolm was nearly her alter ego in terms of disposition. He was obviously very intelligent, but was affable almost to a fault, creating a sort of misfit impression upon those who might meet him only in passing—the life of any party without knowing it. Brian enjoyed his company immensely. Watching the two of them interact reminded him of a question he'd forgotten to ask earlier.

"So what were you two talking about outside the cafeteria?" Brian asked, taking a seat on his bed.

"Mostly about our own little `contributions' to the project," Malcolm answered.

"Yeah, it's like they think that now that they've assigned homework we're all going to crawl all over ourselves to please them," Deidre cracked. "I wonder if they'll hand out grades."

"Maybe we'll get detention if they don't like our work," added Malcolm sarcastically.

"So neither of you are taking this seriously?" asked Brian. "I mean, your academic reputations, at least with this group, are at stake to some extent."

"They'll get what they paid for," Deidre replied, "but that doesn't mean I have to like it, or have to be naive enough to think they aren't just using us for some end we don't know about."

"Father Benedict doesn't think they're being exactly forth-right either, but he does think they need us pretty badly. Have you entertained the possibility that they might be truly desperate, regard-less of whether we know everything or not?"

"I can vouch for the desperation part," noted Malcolm. "We met briefly with our new colleague, Dr. Marcus, after the session this morning. Seems nice enough, and he let us know in no uncertain terms that they're clueless as to what to do about our microscopic adversary. I know Mark isn't happy."

"I thought as much, too," Brian added, "but you sound very sure—how do you know?"

"Mark has a habit of playing with his hair when he's upset. Trust me, he's anything but enthused."

"So what do you think?" Brian queried.

"I guess I can say I'm convinced of one thing," Malcolm noted, "their backs are

against the wall. When it comes time to go public with all this and I mean not just that there's life out there, but what that life is going to cost us on this planet without some solution, you're going to have a lot of people in power that are going to be called on the carpet for their inability to save earth's collective ass."

"Like us?" asked Brian

"No. Like you said, you humanities types are here for damage control. You'll get to tell us how often and in what manner people will let us know we're to blame for not having any answers. People have just come to assume that scientists are like gods; that there's nothing our computers, pipettes, and gene-splices can't fix. As an environmental scientist, I've had to tell hundreds of my own colleagues in my short career to have some respect for nature—to understand it doesn't care that we think we're its masters. Scientists can be incredibly arrogant—they feed the God complex as much as the trusting laity. The lack of humility before nature can be very disturbing."

"Then I don't have to tell you," Deidre broke in, "that unless you guys come up with a convenient breakthrough, our social structures will be pressed to the breaking point. Which brings up a curious point that hadn't occurred to me until now. Why do you guys think that the nonscientists in our little clique got assignments related to diagnosing the impact on humanity of the idea of extraterrestrial life?" "I'm not sure what you mean," said Brian.

"As opposed to some kind of research on the impact of the environmental crisis. Your research is to be specifically on religion and extraterrestrial life—it seems they think that'll have more of an emotional impact on people than when they learn the human race has thirty years to live. And then there's Melissa's work on cults whose doctrine revolves around UFO paranoia."

"I don't know what to think, Deidre," Brian finally said. "What's your specialty again—what do they want you to report on?"

"Those are separate questions, actually," she replied. "My report will focus on the psycho-social impact of the truth of extraterrestrial life, not to mention the potential for mass hysteria in response to the havoc the heightened global warming will have on our society."

"I was under the impression that that kind of analysis was your specialty," Malcolm said.

"It's more of a proficiency. I did my dissertation on group hysteria and stress dynamics, but only because it was related to individual phenomena things like flashback memory and post-traumatic stress syndrome. Those are my real interests. I would never have gotten permission to do the study I really wanted, even from Edinburgh. I should have put more work into researching the place I went for my doctorate than I did. I might have gotten away with it at Harvard, but I couldn't get in. Edinburgh looked like the ideal second choice for my interest, but it wasn't."

"And what area is that?" Malcolm followed.

"The alien abduction syndrome," Deidre answered, scanning their faces for reactions.

"You're kidding," snickered Malcolm.

"Nope. I told you I was openminded."

"What do you make of that?" he asked, looking in Brian's direction.

"You didn't happen to go to the conference on alien abductions at M.I.T. did

you?" Brian asked.

"Yes, I did," Deidre answered, pleased at his familiarity with her interest.

"Do you remember the conference, Malcolm?" Brian followed. "Were you still working on your Ph.D. when it was held?"

"Yeah. The thing really caused a stink on campus. Some professors and administrators didn't think it was the kind of thing the Institute should be involved with."

"What did you think?" Deidre wondered aloud.

"Not much. Seemed kind of weird to me. I just assumed it was about debunking the whole thing. You make it sound like it was serious."

"It was. An account of the conference was published after-ward, along with a series of interviews with the keynote speakers and some abductees. Have either of you done any reading on the subject?"

"A little bit, actually," Brian answered. "I read a chapter or two out of John Mack's book."

"Really! Dr. Mack is a wonderful man, and a courageous one. He's taken a good deal of professional criticism for his work." "Who's John Mack?" asked Malcolm.

"A psychiatry prof at Harvard," answered Brian. "He's treated a hundred or so people who claim to have been abducted by aliens. He wrote a best-selling book on the subject based on some of that casework. Needless to say, his research has raised eyebrows in Harvard Yard. I suppose that's why you wanted to go to Harvard—to study under him."

"Absolutely. He told me that my rejection was due in part to the university's efforts to punish him for his views."

"And taking away grad students is a good way to censure him, no doubt," noted Brian.

"You got it."

"I take it then that you have an interest in this kind of thing," Deidre surmised.

"Just in passing," Brian replied. "I only branched over to Mack's book because of my interest in UFOs."

"I suspected as much, what with your catch on Mark's work on cattle mutilations."

"Oh, here we go," moaned Malcolm.

"Take it easy, Malcolm," he chuckled, "I haven't had any alien contact. It's just that I've been interested in that topic ever since junior high. I've probably read ten or fifteen books on the subject."

"You guys just don't seem like the type who'd be interested in this . . . stuff," said Malcolm, "especially you, Deidre."

"Deidre what happened to Dee? You're a little disappointed in me, huh?" Malcolm shrugged.

"I'll tell you what got me interested," she retorted, accepting the challenge. "If you as a black man were married to a white woman before the Civil Rights movement, say in 1961, how much effort do you think you'd put into vaulting your marriage into the public eye?"

"Are you serious? None! I'd just be happy to be left alone, thank you."

"Exactly."

"Exactly what? What does that have to do with all this weird alien crap?"

"The first alien abduction case to be thoroughly studied was the 1961 case of Betty and Barney Hill, an interracial couple who lived in New Hampshire. It was also the

first case where hypnotic regression was used to determine what had happened to the experiencers. If they were making the whole thing up, why do you suppose a couple like that would want scientists, police officers, and newsmen crawling all over them, especially given their unique circumstances and the racial climate at the time?"

Malcolm was silent for a few moments. "I don't know; maybe they didn't care."

"Oh, they cared—their newfound celebrity came at a very high cost. You can do better than that, Malcolm."

"I guess not; seems kinda strange to me."

"I thought so too," her point taken.

"What's this about Edinburgh, Deidre?" Brian asked, watching a subdued Malcolm stretch out on his couch.

"Edinburgh's psychology department has a branch for the scientific study of parapsychology. I wanted training in the field during my graduate work."

"Are there any other places that have anything like that?"

"Duke's got the Rhine Center, but no graduate level classes; then there's UC Berkeley—but California's too strange for me."

"Too strange for you!" Malcolm exclaimed. "Come on, girl."

"So you have an interest in this sort of thing?" she asked Brian, ignoring Malcolm's dig. "Ever had sleep paralysis?"

"Don't mess with me," Brian laughed.

"Okay, let me in on the little joke," Malcolm whined.

"Many abductees experience a complete paralysis of their body while in bed when they are abducted or 'returned' by their abductors," Deidre explained. "The mind is fully awake, but there is a complete inability to move. It's also accompanied by an unmistakable feeling that there is another presence in the room—and I'm not talking about the person who's in bed with you."

"I think it's really fascinating that you've worked in this area," Brian remarked. "I guess I lost interest somewhere along the line," he added, "probably when I came to the point where I figured out what UFOs were—the real ones anyway."

"Real ones!" said Malcolm incredulously. "What do you mean by 'real ones'?"

"Just what it sounds like—the ones that couldn't be explained by conventional science or as hoaxes."

"So you agree with Deidre that there are aliens or something?"

"Wait a minute," Deidre was quick to re-enter the discussion, "I didn't say I believed in aliens."

"And I didn't say I believed UFOs were extraterrestrial, either," grinned Brian.

"Now I'm really confused," Malcolm said, shaking his head. "So what do you guys believe?"

"I think that the reports of genuine UFOs are explainable as secret military aircraft," Brian answered.

"But you just said science—your opinion, not mine—had no answer for those reports."

"I said 'conventional science,' as in the science known to the public. I'm quite sure that the military and the private contractors who bring their designs to reality have very human scientific knowledge that those outside the government loop aren't privy to. I wouldn't even rule out antigravity. After all, even as far back as Edison's era his genius opponent, a guy named Nicola Tesla, was experimenting with that sort of thing."

"Yeah, and when he died the feds confiscated all his experiments and files," remarked Deidre. "I guess they were tired of playing with their old erector sets."

"So you basically think that these things are ours?" Malcolm followed.

"Yep. Some of the books I've read have demonstrated through patents, declassified flight schedules, and other military memoranda that most of the sightings of the forties, fifties, and sixties were either experimental aircraft or secret, high altitude weather balloons. Sony, ET still hasn't paid us a visit; although I think it would be cool if he did."

"Well, that's more like it," Malcolm said, exaggerating his relief "I was beginning to worry about you, buddy. I'm not so sure about her, though."

"Don't write my intellectual obituary yet," Deidre smirked. "I'd have to agree with Brian. In regard to the abduction syndrome, I'll put the burden of proof on you to convince me it's all a crock. Something is definitely going on there. I'm not willing to say what we have on our hands is an alien breeding program or hybridization efforts—that's David Jacobs."

"Who's he?" asked Malcolm.

"A history professor at Temple University. He's the leading mainstream academic authority on UFOs and abductions."

"Mainstream?"

"You've heard of Temple, haven't you?"

"Of course."

"Hey—I'm just telling you who the man is. Anyway, clinically speaking, abductees exhibit the same types of particular behaviors and reactions as people who have undergone intensely stressful situations that we'd never question as real or not. They nearly always produce extremely detailed narratives that have no obvious symbolic pattern, but that betray an intense emotional experience."

"Maybe they're just all emotionally disturbed," retorted Malcolm.

"You mean nut cases. Sorry, but no clinical study will back you up there. They're only disturbed as *a result* of their experience. They typically give no evidence of anything that could clinically be diagnosed as a legitimate mental illness. A few of them have had emotional problems, like depression, but nothing that would produce the psychological trauma of an abduction experience; there's no discernible pattern of psychopathology in the group. Mack's research also indicates that none of the efforts to characterize abductees as a group has been successful either. There are no consistent personality types and no obvious dysfunctional patterns within the immediate family. Abductions do, however, tend to run in families over three or four generations. Many abductees say their experiences began as children and continued throughout adulthood—like they were being studied over the course of their life."

"I also heard these people had their 'visions' or delusional experiences because of sexual abuse—what about that?" commented Brian.

"Untrue. Very few have any history of sexual abuse, and if that were a link, why is it that victims of sexual abuse don't have alien abduction nightmares or recall spaceships under hypnosis? Satanic ritual abuse was another theory that's a little more helpful in creating a profile."

"How so?" asked Brian, his curiosity piqued.

"Well, there are a lot of element matches in descriptions of satanic abuse and alien

abduction—scenery, sexual probing, people in masks, even clinical settings at times. The correlation was the subject of one of the papers at the M.I.T. conference. I have a copy of the proceedings if you're interested." Brian nodded. "Anyway, my criticism of the comparison is still the same. It's one thing to say there are shared elements, but that doesn't explain the majority of abduction cases where the abductees don't experience key elements common to bona fide satanic abuse cases—or the ones where the experiencer *wants* to relive the episode."

"What about the influence of our culture or, more accurately, the subculture that's arisen around all this ET stuff? Movies, TV, you know," asked Malcolm. "So many people have seen little chalky-gray aliens on TV that the image is bound to be contained in their subconscious."

"That's been a strikeout as well. Both studies and casual observations have shown to this point that abductees are unusually unsuggestible. Therapists have tried to trick them under hypnosis by implanting suggestions common in the way aliens are depicted in media, and their patients are simply tenacious in the details of their stories. You know, most people don't realize the whole alien abduction scenario wasn't public knowledge, and hence wasn't in the media. It wasn't something people talked about openly, so the media can't be blamed. The media-saturation argument also doesn't work with cases older than the 1950s, before there was TV, or before Hollywood started cranking out all the alien stuff. Most people who make this argument also don't realize that there are stories of abduction by 'the gods' or little people throughout history, some from even before the time of Jesus. If anything, the cause-effect relationship has worked in the reverse. Add to that the reality that thousands of people across our country—from any era—who have come forward with their experiences all tell nearly the same story, down to the most minute detail. It's really an overwhelming mystery, which is why I found it irresistible."

"You said thousands—where are you getting a number like that?" asked Brian.

"The latest survey of repute is discussed in Mack's book—it's a 1991 survey by the Roper Organization of 6,000 Americans. Percentage extrapolation of the results of that survey suggests that from several hundred thousand to several million Americans may have had abduction or abduction related experiences. Abductions have been reported in nearly twenty countries, you know."

"Good grief," exclaimed Malcolm. "I can see you've done your homework, but I'm sorry—that's really unbelievable. Besides, where's the physical evidence for all this?"

"Well, if you're asking how many aliens have been caught on video doing this, or how many Bruce Willis breakouts there have been, complete with alien body count, the answer is none," Deidre teased him. "The type of evidence we do have—odd rashes, scoop marks, cuts, lesions, unexplained bleeding from the rectum, nose, ear, or vaginal areas, implants that kind of stuff, doesn't prove there are aliens. We know the experience is real, but there's nothing to suggest the experience is truly extraterrestrial in origin. There are a few isolated cases where people have been healed of diseases ranging from minor wounds to pneumonia, leukemia, and muscular atrophy, following what they claim was an abduction."

"Implants? C'mon, woman!" Malcolm said incredulously.

"There have been implants removed from abductees, but they've been unspectacular for the most part—tiny triangular objects or wire thin metal slivers. There's little evidence of rare minerals or common ones in unusual combinations and the few

that would fit into that category can't be demonstrated to have been manufactured anywhere else but earth. Nobody really knows where they came from, or what purpose, if any, they serve—they're not transmitters or any-thing like that."

"At least not the kind we know from `conventional science,'" Brian said with a grin.

"Yeah, right! They may instead be proof that the IRS wants to track you," she laughed.

"You said something about these stories showing up centuries ago. Can you give me an example?" asked Malcolm, skeptically.

"Ever read any fantasy literature—you know, Tolkien, Terry Brooks, that sort of thing?" she inquired.

"Sure."

"Good. You know then that many such works use characters and motifs that derive from medieval legend. Do either of you guys know what the etymology of the word `elf' is?" She looked at Brian.

"Sony," he apologized. "I never learned Latin."

"Man, that's hard to believe considering all the other dead languages you're into. How about you, Malcolm?"

"I just remember them as very small, with narrow faces and big eyes . . . oh boy."

"Let me complete the description for you," Deidre continued. "The Old English is *ad/which* comes from the Latin, *albus*—white or whitish. Get the picture? Little whitish or chalky-gray skinned guys running around with strange, magical powers? Look it up in Webster."

"That," Malcolm said, shaking his head in disbelief, "... is totally weird."

"Like I said," Deidre went on, "the same stories are present in virtually all world cultures. I know of one reputable folklorist, Peter Rojcewicz, who argues that whoever or whatever is doing these things to people, represents a consciousness or intelligence that seems to adapt itself in form and appearance to the culture and the times of the individual who is being targeted. It's just fascinating to contemplate."

"So what do you think is happening to these people?" Brian probed.

"You know," she answered with a sigh, "I haven't got the faintest idea."

\*\*\*

Melissa Kelley marched down the corridor toward her room with a brisk, deliberate gait, still fuming after the morning's exchange with Brian and his apology later in the cafeteria. *I'll bet that clod thinks he's safe now. We'll see about that. We're far from even, and this is far from being put behind me.*

She swiped her card and punched in the pass code. *He'll regret the day he ever dared provoke me.* She stepped inside the dimly lit room and threw her briefcase on the chair opposite the en-trance. Suddenly a man's powerful hand shot forth from behind the door and clamped itself over her mouth with a terrific grip. Another arm entwined itself around her waist, and in one motion, swung her off her feet, carried her into her bedroom, and slammed her face down onto the bed. She struggled to move, but her arms were pinned underneath her body. She was completely immobilized.

"Now listen very carefully, Dr. Kelley," a voice snarled into her ear, "I'm going to let you go in a moment, but you're going to keep your face to the wall. If you make any effort to make visual contact, I'll put a bullet in your skull." The man jerked Melissa's head backward and she felt the cold steel of her assailant's gun press behind her ear. Pain shot through her neck at the awkwardness of the position.

"Do we understand each other?" the man growled through clenched teeth.

She managed a slight nod.

"Good. My life depends on anonymity now that I've contacted you, and as important as you are to my own interests, I sure as hell won't think twice about killing you to save my own ass."

The man slowly removed his hand from Melissa's mouth, but kept his gun nestled behind her ear. Her heart pounding, she labored to catch her breath. "I'm going to get up now, Doctor. Let's hope you're a woman of your word." Melissa felt his weight lifted from her back.

"That's a good girl," he snickered. She could hear the sound of his weapon being reholstered. She turned her head toward the wall and recovered her breath; otherwise, she didn't move. "I'm so pleased to see that you really are capable of controlling your temper," he added with an air of disdain. "I wasn't so sure after your little blow-up in the cafeteria."

Melissa's mind raced through the events of barely an hour ago. Had she seen anyone there other than team members? Had she noticed anyone after she'd left Father Benedict and Brian at their table?

"I can only guess that since your mouth isn't engaged, you must be trying to figure out who I am," her assailant remarked contemptuously. "I was never in the cafeteria, so don't waste your time." "Can I move my arms?" Melissa asked in a subdued voice. "Is there something wrong with your short-term memory?"

"What is it you want then?" Melissa demanded, angrily this time.

"I'm sorry I gave you the wrong impression. I'm here to chat about what I can do for you."

"And what's that?"

"Advise you . . . protect you perhaps."

"Why am I not breathing a sigh of relief?" she said sardonically.

"Be glad you're breathing at all. I could do anything I want to you, Doctor; I think you know the feeling."

"What do you want with me? You don't know squat about me."

"I know all there is to know about you, Dr. Kelley—the things not on your transcripts or your resume."

"Don't feed me that bullshit."

"Things like where you went to school before Notre Dame," he droned casually, ignoring her vitriol, "what happened there, your family's reaction wonderful man, your father—your ensuing sexual escapades if that's the right word for what it is you do. Oh, let me assure you, Doctor, I know *everything* about you."

Melissa stiffened at the revelation, a blend of fury and panic coursing through her. "So?" she finally said, trying to conceal her anxiety.

"So shut up at least give me the chance to help you before you shoot off your mouth. By the time your little project has run its course, you'll need a friend. You needn't



worry about your reputation here, Doctor; I'm not interested in supplementing your biography for your peers."

"Fine," she sighed.

"That's better. The reason I know what I know," he continued, "is because, as a member of the Group, I've not only gathered the information on you, but I've taken an interest in your career."

"Why is that?" she asked quietly.

"It's about debts, Doctor. I do something for you now, you do something for me later—perhaps years later, but you will reciprocate. All you need to know for now is that I have my reasons, and that the Group is divided over the wisdom of your team's project—"

"But Colonel Ferguson said—"

"Don't mind what he says; he's only a mouthpiece. To be more precise, there was considerable consternation over whether out-side involvement is wise."

Melissa squirmed uncomfortably.

"Ahah, Dr. Kelley." She heard the button pop on the intruder's holster.

"I can't help it!" she protested.

"Try harder. You wouldn't be nearly as attractive with a hole in your forehead. Besides, I'll detain you only a few minutes longer." "What a shame."

"You should know, Miss Kelley, that there is someone on your team with, shall we say, divided loyalties."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Some might use the word traitor, but saboteur is perhaps more accurate."

"You mean someone on the team wants to ruin the project?"

"Exactly."

"Who is he?"

"Very clever, Doctor."

"Come again?"

"Trying to prod me into revealing the gender of your mole so you could narrow the possibilities. I expose your attempt only so that you know you're no match for someone who's played this game hundreds of times. Actually, I have no problem telling you that your infiltrator is male."

"Why don't you just tell me who he is if you're so concerned about the project?"

"I never said I was concerned about the project, Doctor, only that I'm here to help you. I'm withholding his identity simply because I haven't figured out yet if he's my adversary or a potential ally. I'll only tell you who it isn't—Dr. Scott is in the clear."

"Why single him out?"

"You forget—I know all about him, too. Of all the people on this team, he'll be the most trustworthy if you run into a problem."

"I thought you were my knight in shining armor."

"I am, but I can't be everywhere."

"What a disappointment," she added sarcastically. "Perhaps this small token of my affection will comfort you. Be advised that no one must know you have it."

"Wonderful."

The mysterious figure reached into his lapel pocket. He tossed a badge onto the

bed near Melissa's head.

"What's that?" she asked, squinting at the object in the faint glow.

"It's an access override card. It will get you into any room in this facility that doesn't require a palm or retina scan, which includes elevators and ground floor perimeter exits. You don't need to punch in a code, just swipe the card. Use it *only* in an emergency. All the Group members have access to any of the rooms, including, of course, your own and those of your colleagues, so usage would not necessarily engender suspicion. The cards are all the same, so it isn't directly traceable to me. Nevertheless, using it creates the risk that those who monitor security may grow suspicious if one among the Group seems to be too interested in the members of your team."

"I can't see where giving me this information or the card benefits you in any way," Melissa observed. "If I've learned anything about your type it's that you don't do anything for free."

"You needn't worry about what I'll gain. My motives and rewards are of no concern to you."

"I see."

"One last warning, Dr. Kelley. I'll be taking my leave now. Remain as you are for three minutes. If you open your door in an attempt to identify me, our next meeting will be much shorter, and far less pleasant—and I'll know if you comply when I check the security logs. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

## CHAPTER 8

"Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved." —*William Jennings Bryan*

MARK CHADWICK GLANCED nervously over his shoulder, imagining the sound of voices outside the lab door. He'd done half a dozen different experiments over the last week, some of them nearly a dozen times. He had to be able to demonstrate to the team members the veracity of his suspicions to sustain his accusation.

He'd been suspicious from the beginning, from the very moment the Colonel put forth his explanation for the cattle mutilations with which he was so familiar. He'd informed his scientific colleagues of his apprehension a day after their new colleague, exobiologist Dr. Ian Marcus, had debriefed them. They were supportive of his intuition, but were out of their immediate fields when it came to verifying his skepticism. Kevin was an atmospheric chemist, and had no experience with viruses. Malcolm had only introductory graduate classwork in either biochemistry or pathology. Confirmation had therefore fallen to himself. Together they'd devised a plan to circumvent security in sharing the results of his work not only between themselves, but also with the rest of the team should that become necessary. If the Colonel and the Group had deliberately misled the team, they had done so for their own calculated reasons. They wouldn't take kindly to someone demonstrating that the emperor had no clothes.

A few beads of sweat surfaced on his brow. He'd had to work quickly, but carefully, when opportunity surfaced; whenever the nearly ubiquitous Dr. Marcus wasn't in the lab. He couldn't deny that his new 'colleague' had freely shared his research, and that it had been quite enlightening and valuable. Nevertheless, Mark sensed he was as much of a monitor as a mentor.

He glanced at the clock as he opened the centrifuge and retrieved his test tube. Marcus was usually back from lunch by now. He needed only add the contents of the tube to the specimen and observe the reaction—just a few more minutes. He could have stopped, but Marcus's tardiness had encouraged him to finish, almost as if he was being given the extra time so as to entrap him when the results emerged. He had an explanation for his activities ready if any questions were asked, but if the Colonel's watchdog took the time to observe the reaction, his excuse would unravel. He emptied the contents of the tube into the dish, stirred it lightly, and then extracted a small amount with a pipette, depositing the contents on a slide. He quickly added bleach to the remainder in the dish, and, after setting the timer on his watch, drew an innocuous substitute slide from Dr. Marcus' drawer in front of him and laid it at the base of the microscope. Should Dr. Marcus or anyone else walk in on him, he would have to switch the dummy with the one that contained his own experiment. The two-minute interval that elapsed before his watch alarm went off seemed like an eternity. He quickly positioned the slide and turned the microscope in a position that blocked it from the vision of anyone entering the room. He adjusted his glasses and peered through the lens.

He was hardly surprised. He'd watched the virus expire before his eyes dozens of

times. Yet there was no sense of victory, only consternation. He quickly removed the slide and deposited it in his shirt pocket as the door opened.

"You skipping lunch again today?" the familiar voice of Dr. Marcus inquired.

"Nope," he said without looking up, deftly placing the dummy slide at the base of the scope. "Just had to take another look."

"And?"

"And I'm hungry," he answered pleasantly, deflecting the intent of the question. He took off his lab coat and draped it over a chair.

"I'll be back in half an hour," he said, reaching for the door-knob.

"Take your time. The Colonel's expecting you in the cafeteria. He asked me to tell you he'd like to chat over lunch."

"Thanks," Mark said softly, and exited the lab.

Father Benedict strolled down the hallway, head bowed, hands behind his back. The past week had been one full of deliberate solitude and reflection, save for the occasional contact afforded at mealtimes. Despite the fact that he still had no concrete answers to the questions that had surfaced in his mind during the team's first meeting, he felt uneasier than ever. Had the team been misdirected again? Was his role in the unfolding drama fortuitous or perilous? Had he said too much to Brian? He arrived at his destination and knocked on the door, straightening his collar. After a few seconds, he heard the familiar click of the secured entry.

"C'mon in," said Brian with a grin, pleased by the unexpected visit.

"Thank you." The old priest went inside and took a seat.

"Haven't seen much of you this week," Brian remarked and returned to his seat at his computer. "I thought for sure you'd be by to at least start a theological argument or something."

"As entertaining as that would be," he sighed with a smile, "I've been consumed with other concerns. Preoccupied would actually be a better term, I guess. Aren't you chilly?" he asked, rubbing his arms, exposed by his short sleeves, taking note of his colleague's T-shirt, shorts, and bare feet. "I'm still not used to not feeling the sun."

"Nah," Brian answered. "Don't you have a cloak or something?"

"I'm not a cardinal, if that's what you're thinking," the priest retorted, amused.

"Not yet—You said you were preoccupied . . . the project?"

"Partly. I can't shake the notion that something bad is going to happen here. I've spent too many years in the field to turn my back on my gut."

"You sound like a war veteran."

"I am—that's what Jesuits do, at least the loyal ones, other than earn degrees. In the old days it was much easier—you usually knew who your enemy was."

"Have you looked at your disk yet?" asked Brian, changing the subject.

"Oh, that no. I haven't even turned on the computer in my room. I'm not much for those machines. It's something I need to pick up when I get the time. Malcolm seemed very jittery when he gave it to me after lunch. All he said was that I needed to use it before tomorrow's meeting, that everyone was getting one, and to say nothing to either the Colonel or Dr. Bandstra. When did you get yours?"

"After supper this evening. Kevin gave me mine, and the instructions were the same."

"Interesting. I'd assume the disks have identical contents then, wouldn't you?"

"Only one way to find out," Brian answered, hitting a few keystrokes. "I worked on mine right after I got back to the room. It had a short letter on it and a program that I think you'll find interesting. Do you have yours with you?"

"Yes, I do. It's one of the reasons I decided to visit. I was hoping you could show me what to do with it."

"Let's have a look."

Father Benedict joined Brian at his desk and drew the disk from his lapel pocket. Brian inserted it into his computer, and searched the drive as the priest watched.

"Yep, they're identical," he said after a few seconds.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It has exactly the same files that mine had."

"What are they?"

"Here's the note," he replied, tabbing to his word processor. He withdrew the disk and returned it to Father Andrew, already gazing intently at the screen. The message read simply:

Enclosed is an encryption program for deciphering the 8-bit .GIF files that you will receive in email this afternoon. They contain information about the misleading nature of our project. Please be prepared for tomorrow's meeting. We must stand together if we are to get at the truth. We will introduce the material when it is our turn to present. Once you have loaded the program and deciphered the files, delete every-thing from your hard drive and reformat the disk.

"What's a GIF file?" asked Father Andrew.

"It's a picture or graphic," Brian answered.

"Why are they handing out pictures?"

"The encryption program they gave us allows you to put messages into pictures without altering their appearance—kind of like a written subliminal. It also allows you to receive such messages and decode the message."

"Hiding something in plain sight—a classic technique in steganography," Father Andrew said with a sly smile.

"Steganography?" Brian asked. "I can tell the term means 'covered writing,' but I get the impression there's more to it than that."

"You're correct on both counts. It's a clandestine communication technique that has a long and colorful history. One of my favorite examples is the fairly ancient practice of shaving a messenger's head, then writing something on his scalp. During the typically long journey to their destination, the hair would grow back enough to conceal the writing in case they were captured or killed. When they reached the intended recipient, their heads were shaved again so the message could be read."

"Boy, that was clever!" Brian noted in admiration.

"I served as a cryptographer during World War II, actually. We used something called the microdot to hide important secret messages. The message was photographically reduced to the size of a period, and was inserted as the dot for the letter 'i' or the dots in

punctuation marks."

Brian shook his head. "The ingenuity of guys during World War II never ceases to amaze me. We're more high tech now, but just as effective."

"We hope, anyway. Our friends have assumed that the computer police will let the pictures through."

"They'd have no reason not to."

"Unless they've done something to create suspicion."

"True enough. Let's hope they've been careful."

"So you have the pictures deciphered?"

"You bet," Brian replied. "There are two of them; both are black and white. One's a picture of some kind of cellular organism, and the other is a diagram of a heifer's reproductive system. The email was rather innocuously labeled `for tomorrow."

"Quite an understatement. They obviously were permitted to reach your mailbox. I don't see how these could have raised any eyebrows," he concluded as Brian opened each picture. "They seem completely relevant," the priest continued, glancing at the images, "what were the messages?"

Brian closed the pictures and tabbed to his word processor, where he'd been pondering the decrypted messages when Andrew had arrived.

The concealed messages together read:

Virus is real. Non-digestive. Probable ET origin. Deliberate Infection.

"Hmmm . . . most interesting," Father Benedict said thought-fully, rising from his stooped position.

"What do you make of it?" queried Brian. "I've been wondering what he means by 'probable."

"I would think that he means the presence of the identical virus on the meteoric material is proof that the virus is from space," offered the priest. "But why would he express uncertainty then?"

"He may be doubting that the presence of the virus on the meteor means the virus is extraterrestrial," suggested Brian.

"How so?" asked Father Benedict. "The correlation seems secure."

"Not really. The proof the Colonel offered for extraterrestrial life which, you recall, was essential for the replication of the virus—was that NASA has in fact discovered meteorites that contain gaseous compounds that do not occur in combination on earth. All those compounds prove is that the meteor is extraterrestrial. It doesn't disprove the possibility that the virus got onto the meteor after it got to earth. The virus could be of earthly origin."

"Yes . . . I see the logic . . . very plausible," noted the priest, rubbing his chin, "but we have to admit that this reasoning doesn't rule out that the virus is extraterrestrial. The match really could be secure."

"True enough, but the evidence the Colonel has—"

"And your friend, Dr. Bandstra, Brian. I know you want to trust him, but he did back up the Colonel."

Brian hesitated for a moment. "You're right," he sighed. "The evidence the Colonel and Neil have given us to this point doesn't force us to buy their story that the

virus is extraterrestrial."

"Mark also says the virus is non-digestive," Father Benedict continued, eyeing his friend. "That's quite important."

"Why?"

"That would mean the cattle couldn't have gotten it by consuming something that contained the virus. I'm not sure since it's not my field, but I think it would also mean that the animal wouldn't have inhaled it either."

"Why not?" asked Brian.

"How could something inhaled ever get into the intestinal tract?"

"I don't know, but I'm no scientist either," the young scholar remarked. "For the sake of argument, let's assume you're correct. How would the virus have gotten into the animal?"

"It would have had to have been introduced by someone by injection, for example," the priest explained.

"Making it a deliberate act."

"Right for what reason, we can only speculate. Someone again, for unknown reasons—isolated either an earthly or an extraterrestrial virus and deliberately infected the cattle. If they knew what the effect would be, it amounts to environmental sabotage. If they didn't know, it's a huge blunder. I just can't figure out why the Colonel would lie about any of these details."

"Who could conceivably have done it, if that's indeed what happened?" Brian wondered aloud.

"It could be our own government," the priest offered. "After all, they've been known to do this sort of thing—the Tuskegee Experiments, for example."

"Yes, I've read about those," Brian recalled.

"And even in the last few years President Clinton's EPA chief uncovered proof that the government fed plutonium to people during World War II, including children, as a way of testing the effects of exposure. Still more recently there's the matter of potentially toxic jet contrails over the southwestern skies."

"Contrails?"

"Yes. It seems our government has apparently forgotten the changes in the U.S. Code that require civilian permission to perform experiments on populated areas."

"Whoa--experiments on people?"

"I know it isn't very exciting material, Brian, but the U.S. Code is worth reading sometime. Up until several years ago, permission wasn't even required. The government could literally fly over a neighborhood or put something into the water to test its effects with-out ever informing anyone."

"Good grief," Brian shook his head.

"Most laws of that nature were meant for a Cold War setting, or the threat of nuclear war. Unfortunately, so few citizens are even aware that Uncle Sam keeps them on the books. Changes do get made, as I mentioned, when people get wind of what's going on. Back in October of 1999 I was in Washington during a rally to end government secrecy, and this kind of problem was one of the concerns. And in case you're wondering, no, I didn't carry a placard."

Brian laughed. "You really seem to get around."

"I go where I'm sent."

"I'll bet you have quite a history."

Father Benedict smiled, but made no effort to entertain the question. "So you see, Brian," he said, steering the discussion back to its origin, "we can't rule out a government project. That would surely explain why it is they don't want us to know the real truth."

"And if it's someone else, it would be very frustrating—even frightening—for our own military to admit they can't do anything about it, at least not yet."

"That's possible the idea that it's someone else—but it seems too radical even for domestic terrorists."

"Why is that?" asked Brian.

"Because they'd be killing themselves ultimately--they couldn't control an environmental catastrophe."

"They don't seem to mind killing themselves now."

"You're missing what I'm saying, Brian. I know they are willing to sacrifice themselves, but in this scenario, they'd be sacrificing their countrymen and their homelands—the very object that drives their behavior."

"Yeah . . . it doesn't seem to make sense, does it? And to be honest, neither does my suggestion that someone on the outside was the guilty party—why not just admit they had a terrorist nutcase on their hands."

"Deliberate introduction of the virus is only one option,"

Father Andrew noted contemplatively. "What if it was an accident?"

"You mean ... what if the infection was due to human error?"

"Exactly."

"And that would have to mean that we brought it here. Maybe it was a shuttle mission. Somehow, one of our own was contaminated and brought it back. From the very beginning of the space program NASA had exobiological precautions in place to combat the threat of extraterrestrial viruses. They had no idea what was up there, and they always take steps to detoxify the astronauts and equipment. Maybe their precautions didn't work."

"You may have pegged it, Brian. They know where the virus comes from, but can't admit it. There's no doubt in my mind that our government would attempt to conceal this. The truth would be more damnable than the cover story."

"There's something that just doesn't fit in with our suspicions of the team's leadership, though," remarked Brian.

"What's that?"

"What advantage does it give them to say the virus is extra-terrestrial? If it's their fault, the fact that it's from space doesn't excuse them."

"I agree. It is more plausible that our government is at fault, whether introduction of the virus was a deliberate act or an accident on their part, and, as you say, it makes little sense for them to concoct the extraterrestrial angle since it doesn't absolve them in either case."

"Well, then," continued Brian, "that would mean we really do have an extraterrestrial virus on our hands."

"Which, if correct and I'm assuming Mark has considered all the things we have—means that we've misinterpreted his cryptogram. His doubts about the virus stem not from the evidence the Colonel and your friend have extended to us, but from a question of who infected the cattle."



"But that brings its right back to our own conclusion—why make it up?"

"We really need to approach Mark about that," Father Benedict noted. "It seems highly likely the virus must be from space and that someone down here either accidentally or deliberately caused this problem."

"Well," said Brian, looking at his watch, "it isn't too late. Let's pay him a visit."

"Good idea."

Brian deleted Mark's message, reformatted the disks as instructed, and shut down his computer. He handed father Benedict his disk as the two of them headed for the door. Brian was about to slide his card through the lock when the priest suddenly stopped him.

"Do you hear something, Brian?" The pair stood at the door and listened. The faint echo of rapid footsteps coursed past their location and abruptly stopped.

"Let's take a look," Brian said and carded out of the room. They got no further than the doorway.

"Sorry, sir," a Marine, standing sentry immediately outside apologized curtly as he blocked Brian's path. "We have a security breach in the facility, sir."

"What exactly is the problem, Marine?" asked Father Benedict.

"I'm not authorized to answer any questions, sir."

"But I'd like to return to my room—could you escort me?"

"No, sir. Our orders are that all team members must remain as they were at the time of the breach of security, sir. You'll have to spend the night here, sir."

Father Benedict turned and the two stepped inside and closed the door.

"I don't like this at all," the priest said apprehensively. "The timing is especially disturbing. I hope Mark and the others haven't been discovered."

"I guess we'll find out in the morning," Brian shrugged. "You can have the bed."

## CHAPTER 9

"What luck for rulers that men do not think."

—*Adolf Hitler*—

"THE GUARD'S GONE," Brian informed Father Benedict upon reentering the bathroom. "I just checked. I wonder when he left."

"Well enough," the priest muttered as he held his jaw for the razor. "How did you sleep?"

"Just fine; the floor didn't bother me at all. I can pretty much sleep anywhere."

"I used to be able to adjust like that. Not any more—too old."

"I'm used to it actually. I didn't have a bed at home anyway. I usually sleep on the futon I have in my office, or sometimes the sofa."

"Office?"

"That's what I preferred to call what was supposed to be my bedroom. I have too many books to fit a bed in there."

"You'd have made a good Jesuit," Andrew observed with a wink, and splashed water on his face.

"You mean hermit."

"I'm curious," the priest began anew, toweling his face, "why aren't you married? It is sort of unusual these days for a man in his early thirties; that is, unless he's either a philanderer or has religious reasons prohibiting it."

"You forgot being ugly," Brian smirked.

"Oh, come now."

"Let me put it this way, Andrew. Remember in junior high school when you'd have 'social dancing' in gym class?"

"Yes, I recall."

"You know how in every class there was always one guy that none of the girls ever wanted to be paired with, or never picked when they were given the choice? That was yours truly."

"That's unfortunate, but it's an awkward age. Besides, you should have gotten over that by now."

"It's just an illustration; I'm not revealing the event that traumatized my life."

"No matter. You still haven't answered the question."

"Actually, I have. I'll admit I was pretty shy, but there were times I got up the courage to ask girls out. None ever accepted, and after a while I just stopped asking. I turned my attention to other, more achievable goals."

"I had to do the same for my calling."

"It's not the same, Andrew. You had to give something up; I just surrendered."

"I can hardly believe you'd ever quit anything," the priest retorted. "It doesn't seem part of your character."

"I know when I'm beaten."

"You've overstated your case--badly, in my judgment."

"You still don't get it, do you?" Brian chuckled good-naturedly, reaching for his toothbrush. "You made the choice to be alone; I had the choice made for me. I don't want to be single, but that's the way it is. And since I don't look at it as a calling, there's no way I'd ever be cut out for the priesthood even if I were Catholic."

"There's still hope, you know," the old cleric said seriously, placing his hand on Brian's shoulder. "You're still young."

"Trust me no woman of sound mind is ever going to take an interest."

"I meant to become a Jesuit," he grinned.

Brian laughed. "You're really a piece of work!"

"Just persistent."

"Good morning, everyone," the Colonel said as he opened the meeting, dressed as usual in full military garb, removing his hat. "I'd like to get things moving as soon as possible." Without hesitation he surrendered the floor to the first speaker.

Deidre and Melissa had been, respectively, scheduled to open the meeting by presenting ten-minute summations on their thoughts related to the task at hand. Nonetheless, the only anticipation welling up inside of any of them concerned how Mark, Kevin, and Malcolm were going to challenge the Colonel and Neil. None of them had, of course, forgotten the loyalty oaths they'd signed and the recriminations that awaited each of them were the Colonel to retaliate. They'd all gotten the same encrypted files, but no one knew how the altercation would transpire or where it would lead. The feeling that such a situation was unavoidable wasn't quelled by the presence of the short, sandy-haired Ian Marcus, a student of Carl Sagan's, whose credentials included a Ph.D. from Cornell and a stint with NASA's Astrobiology Institute. It was easy to think of him as a brilliant but committed lackey. Unlike the rest of the team, who were noticeably dressed down in more mundane summer attire or jeans, he appeared stiff in his dress slacks, bowtie, and lab coat, and sat dutifully next to the Colonel instead of his scientific compatriots. Deidre Harper silently pulled her chair up to the table, and put on her reading glasses.

"I'd like to start out with a brief background description of just what my subfield of mass hysteria concerns," she began. "What most mental health professionals mean by hysteria is paranoid behavior patterns and a sense of powerlessness in relation to authority. Until very recently, many scholars and professionals relegated serious mass hysteria to the superstitious eras of the past. This was in part due to their optimistic assumption that people of our modern era successfully process the events of their lives in accord with the assured results of our enlightened, scientific worldview. Allegedly, the modern, college-educated individual, fully aware of the power of the individual to control one's destiny, is surely governed more by reason than emotion."

"Folks," Deidre announced, looking up from her paper and out toward the team members, "I hope this isn't a rude awakening for any of you, but if you agree with that assessment, it's time to get your head out of the sand and get a firm grasp on the obvious. I think we all remember the way people acted at the turn of the millennium and the way they still lose their minds over mysterious illnesses and vi-ruses like Gulf War syndrome and so-called flesh-eating bacteria. Then there's the coming global weather crisis being

touted on the late-night airwaves which, given our context, may not be so crazy after all. Many people believe we've screwed up the planet so badly that they seriously entertain the notion that humankind may not survive too far into the 21st century. As I'm sure Melissa will also remind us, the nation is chock full of religious cults and countercultures. Finally, we live at a time when stress levels are high and come from many sources; when most people have a strong distrust of governmental authority. Conspiracy-driven shows like the *X-Files* are premised on that cynicism. All of these items are symptomatic of the nation's predisposition to believe things can get out of control in a hurry."

Brian glanced briefly at Father Benedict, who, absorbed in Deidre's summary, didn't return the action. He couldn't help wondering by her comments if her attitude toward the Colonel had changed a little.

"Hysterias arise from some sense of panic," she continued, "in view of the realization that the lifestyle, worldview, and paradigm you favor is being threatened. In the face of that threat, you feel compelled to 'circle the wagons,' so to speak. You see yourself as the last line of defense for your dying dream. A sense of powerlessness overwhelms you as you realize that what you value and consider being the truth places you in a distinct minority. Many therefore retreat to an 'us versus them' mentality in order to cope. We also live at a time when our various media, especially television, inundates its recipients with so much violence and trauma and doomsday forecasting, that many people find it hard to draw any peace and satisfaction from day to day life. Print media can't claim innocence either, since it reinforces an individual's sense of inadequacy through an avalanche of books on dysfunction and a host of various 'unmet needs.' And all of the above gets circulated as never before via the Internet."

Her words were met with an uncomfortable silence. She had set an ominous tone, and the team understood clearly from her short list that her portrayal of the psychological reaction to a plausible, albeit uncertain, doomsday scenario was the proverbial tip of the ice-berg.

"I don't want to reinvent the wheel this morning," she continued. "The first time we met we briefly surveyed the catastrophic effects that the global climatic change would generate in our country, as well as the psychological effects. The America of the nineties was a virtual hotbed of hysteria—and now we're meeting to ask ourselves how the news of an uncontrollable, hostile extraterrestrial virus will affect the people of our country? What the hell do you all think?"

"Are you recommending that we don't tell people about the environmental threat?" the Colonel asked, a little surprised.

"No, of course not. People have to be told, but if we have 20 to 30 years to work on this thing, I'd recommend planning along two fronts attacking the virus itself and planning for the common defense should the virus be unstoppable."

"What suggestions do you have for minimizing the psycho-logical trauma?" the Colonel followed, glancing at his watch.

"Aside from the obvious step of informing more of the scientific community and getting them involved in analyzing the virus," she answered, "I'd advise four courses of action. First," she noted, flip-ping the page on her handout, "since I think the disclosure of primitive extraterrestrial life will certainly produce anxiety, I think we need to be as open as possible as soon as possible. We need to be absolutely up front to avoid a

heightening of the distrust that already exists between the people and the country's leadership. Second, we need to enlist the media for a variety of undertakings; namely reassuring the public as to the acceptability and effectiveness of psychiatry and psychotherapy. Instead of making mental health the butt of jokes, they need to portray it as natural, even desirable. This will help predispose the culture to seeking help as a coping mechanism. Third, we need to reincorporate religion back into the public square, including the schools. The nation will need a stronger moral base than it has to combat the temptation toward anarchist self-interest. Finally, and this goes against much of what I have stood for, the government needs to keep tight control even to the point of silencing—crusaders who would somehow feel called to perpetuate conspiratorial explanations for the crisis via modern communications networks, especially the Internet. In fact, if it's possible, the Internet should be supervised by a government agency, and mainstream religion should be monitored. We can't risk apocalyptic theological explanations reaching the masses—in fact, they should be consistently debunked."

"It almost sounds to me like you're advocating a direct manipulation of religion and the media, as though they would get their marching orders from the government," Neil said candidly, startled by her apparent about-face.

"That's about right, Doctor," Deidre rejoined, surveying the shocked expressions of her colleagues. "The major sociological forces in the country must be channeled toward a predetermined psychological goal."

"Sounds like one big re-education camp," he continued, disturbed by her conclusions.

"I agree," said Brian, "and the first amendment will never tolerate censoring religious views."

"We don't want to get into too many questions yet, folks," the Colonel interrupted. "You can answer if you like, Dr. Harper."

"Dr. Bandstra's analogy has some valid touchpoints. I prefer to think of it as using the means of martial law—which, by definition puts the Constitution in limbo—to control social institutions and speech rights for a benevolent end. Imagine that—we'd have to revert to total trust of the government. I think most of us are aware that the Clinton administration laid the groundwork for an easy transition to martial law, and—"

"Could you elaborate on that?" asked Dr. Garvey, his fore-head creased with anxiety. "Colonel?"

"Go ahead," he permitted, looking at his watch again, "but keep it brief."

"I'll try," she promised, putting down her paper. After a moment of shuffling through the contents of her briefcase, she retrieved a handful of pages. "The Cato Institute and the GAO—"

"What's the GAO?" Brian asked, interrupting.

"The General Accounting Office it's the Legislative Branch's means of investigating whether laws are being complied with. Anyway, Cato and the GAO recently commissioned a study on this by two attorneys, William J. Olson and Alan Woll, entitled 'Presidential Usurpation: Executive Orders As Laws.' Anyone here read it?"

The team was unanimous in its ignorance, save Neil Bandstra, who responded affirmatively.

"If the rest of you had, you wouldn't question my attitude toward the government, believe me. This is scary stuff. Unfortunately, it may become reality and necessarily so. Kind of makes you wonder who knew what and when did they know it," she said cynically.

"At any rate," she returned to the topic, "Title 10 of the U.S. Code, Article 332, allows the President to use the military against the citizenry whenever he deems, and I quote, `that unlawful obstructions, combinations, or assemblages, or rebellion against the authority of the United States, make it impracticable to enforce the laws of the United States.'"

"That doesn't sound unreasonable," the Colonel interjected. "She isn't finished quoting yet," Neil added in a morose tone.

"Thank you, Dr. Bandstra. The Supreme Court has already decreed that only the President has the authority to define what constitutes such a situation. He needs no approval of Congress or his cabinet. He has the authority to act unilaterally to suspend the Constitution should he deem it necessary. Behind the unassuming Bubbasmile of Mr. Clinton was a keen mind. He initiated more executive orders during his term in office than all the other Presidents before him combined."

"What do they say?" asked Brian.

"I don't have the time to detail that for you; you can look it up on the Web. It's mostly boring stuff, unless you know what to look for. A lot of them are aimed at consolidating government agencies under FEMA the Federal Emergency Management Agency. That's so that when—oh, pardon me— If martial law is declared, it will be easy to control everything as before. In the event of a national emergency—and guess who gets to define that—FEMA will be the President's vehicle of control. It's actually rather tidy."

"She's right," Neil interrupted, visibly agitated by the discussion, "and judging by Paul Begala's reaction, the administration thought that was just fine."

"Paul who?" asked Father Benedict.

"Paul Begala, one of former-President Clinton's White House spokesmen. He was quoted in the papers once as saying in regard to executive orders: `You know, stroke of a pen. Law of the land. Kinda cool.'"

"Good God!" Father Benedict gasped.

"Thank you, Dr. Harper, if those are the right words," the Colonel noted grimly, moderating the proceedings. "Dr. Kelley, you're up "

Melissa quickly distributed copies of her speaking outline to her seated audience. "Like Deidre, I'd like to make some clarifications at the outset," she began. "I'm focusing on what to expect from cults and religions in the U.S., whose apocalyptic beliefs would be bolstered by the climatic scenario that lays before us. I consider the extraterrestrial aspect less important. It's true that some apocalyptic cults, like the Heaven's Gate cult, have ufological phenomena as part of their theological dogma. Most of these cults form around the belief that UFOs and their mythical alien occupants are our saviors—that they alone can provide the solutions to our worst problems, to help us make the next leap upward in human evolution. Heaven's Gate was unique in believing that death meant joining the aliens as they passed by the earth behind the Hale-Bopp comet. You'll recall that 39 members of that particular cult committed suicide in hopes of being taken up into a giant UFO mothership. Cults and doctrines like this are rare, though. I admit that news

that an extraterrestrial virus is causing the global climatic changes may be a catalyst for the appearance of more UFO-related cults. It's hard to tell when you're dealing with people whose link to reality has been severed."

"A much more germane threat," Melissa continued, "are those cults and religions which would behave in the manner suggested by Deidre. Convinced that the end of the world is upon us, these groups will believe it's their mission to spread the word of doom far and wide—to prepare for Armageddon. They will quote their idiosyncratic interpretations of the Bible, or the prophecies of their leaders or some assumed prophet of the past—Nostradamus and Edgar Cayce come immediately to mind. This will only inflate the numbers of the hysterical. I would also add that when we inform the world that the cause of the coming distress is environmental, we will immediately be viewed by many groups as in league with the devil—especially by those in the fundamentalist Christian camp."

"Why in the world would anyone draw that conclusion?" asked Neil in an annoyed tone. Melissa looked over at the Colonel.

"Sorry for the interruption," Neil apologized. The Colonel nodded to Melissa.

"Briefly," she elaborated, "what I said is true because the religious right has made the terms 'environmentalism' and 'New Age movement' synonymous. Any leadership to solve the crisis on the part of those perceived as 'New Agers' will inevitably be opposed and decried. Even worse, when the solutions we've already alluded to begin to be implemented—from the extreme of martial law to the beginning baby steps of global cooperation—you can expect horrified shrieks of 'one world government!'"

"Sounds like that's what it'll amount to, to some extent," interrupted Brian, also annoyed at her caustic tone. "Just a thought not a question," he added quickly before she could respond.

"Please continue," motioned the Colonel.

"Of course," she said curtly, shooting an unseen glare at Brian, who was scribbling a note on his copy of her handout. "I'd like to break the rest of my summary into four parts: (1) characteristics of apocalyptic cults; (2) contemporary examples of such cults; (3) the interface between apocalyptic beliefs and American militia groups; and (4) some proposals for minimizing the effects of such groups as it relates to our project."

"First I want to describe the characteristics of apocalyptic cults. In most of these cults, a white male leader totally dominates every aspect of the membership's private and community life. He perpetuates his leadership by eccentric interpretations of either his own visions or of the Bible. Everyone outside the cloister of the cultic fold or theological position is demonized. In the most severe cases, any members who disagree with the leader are portrayed as part of some vast conspiratorial network seeking to infiltrate and destroy the group. The leader weaves this struggle into the fabric of the cult's mythology, creating a 'light versus darkness' worldview. The leader's preaching concentrates on the coming end of the world. Lastly, the leadership often employ the technique of self-fulfilling prophecy to bolster their image as God's chosen among the flock."

"How many of these groups are there in the U.S.?" asked Neil. Brian was a little surprised at his friend's activity during this session. He had hardly spoken a word in the previous meeting.

"Hundreds," Melissa answered, "and that's not counting militia groups. The watchdog groups who monitor this sort of thing have noticed an increase in both the

number of apocalyptic cults and the membership in such cults in the last few years. And don't think that the passage of the millennium solved anything, either. These groups are just as passionate about the approaching future."

"Next," Melissa continued through her outline, "I want to give some contemporary examples of apocalyptic cults. The most interesting of these cults for our purposes are the ones that fall into one of two classifications: those that have definite links to the Judeo-Christian traditions, and those that specifically make space phenomena a part of the apocalyptic scenario. Some of the more interesting examples of the former are those authors and laypersons who espouse the existence of a secret code hidden in the Bible. Take for example the 1999 motion picture called *The Omega Code*, marketed as a distinctly Christian movie. The idea was taken from the book by Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code*. In that book Drosnin contends that an alleged code in the Torah predicts that World War III will start in either 2001 or 2006. He also says the code forecasts the annihilation of all life on earth as the result of a comet impact in 2012."

"2012? Now that's a significant date," mused Father Benedict.

"Yes, it is, Father," replied Melissa. "Why don't you elaborate for the rest of the team?"

"2012 is the date predicted in the ancient Mayan calendar for the end of the world."

"That's correct. I don't think it would be news to any of you that Drosnin's book achieved bestseller status. What some of you may not know is that several conservative Christian adaptations of Drosnin's book have also sold well. This idea of a code is very ancient within the Judeo-Christian fold, and has remained alive to this day."

"That's true," responded Brian, "but I'm pretty conservative in theology, and for the record, I think the idea is uninformed and ridiculous. I'm working on a book right now—or was, anyway—to try and demonstrate that these 'Bible Codes' have no substance. Show me someone who believes in a Bible code, and I'll show you someone who has little or no knowledge of how we got the Old Testament. The choice of Hebrew text underlying the research completely and deliberately circumvents the thousands of manuscript variants in the other existing manuscripts of the Torah, like the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls."

"We're aware of your book, Dr. Scott."

"I just wanted to be clear."

"Fine," she said dismissively.

Father Benedict interrupted. "Are there any astronomical touchpoints that interest these cults—like comets, for instance? Comets were certainly important signs for the future in the ancient world."

"Absolutely; that's the second kind I wanted to mention. There are dozens of groups that feel that certain upcoming alignments of the planets, for example, are harbingers of the end."

"Do you have any examples?" Brian asked quietly. The priest's question elicited the memory of his earlier conversation with Andrew about the Vatican observatory. He'd have to make a point of engaging his colleague later about it.

"I don't have a list with me," answered Melissa, "but I can give you some off the top of my head. Keep in mind that astronomy software is available commercially to check out the planetary and stellar validity of these claims. Some groups claim that the



planets will align in a straight line some time in the future, and that this signals the second coming of Christ—just as a star did the first time around, according to the New Testament. Others postulate that the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in front of Taurus, a condition mirrored in 7 B.C., marks the second coming."

"Fascinating," remarked Colonel Ferguson.

"Frightening is more like it," intoned Melissa solemnly. "What scares me about all this is that in a climate where millions of people are swept up by apocalyptic fervor and the paranoia Deidre described, some brilliant but unbalanced people could create their own Armageddon for their own purposes." She paused to take further questions before proceeding with the final two points of her presentation.

"Very impressive, Dr. Kelley. Fortunately," Colonel Ferguson observed, glancing at the undersecretary, "we know what we're dealing with. We're going to have to go public with the problem; it would be arrogant to assume that since we can't find a way to deal with our virus no one else can, either. I'm confident that once we do we'll find a solution, but the public needs to be prepared."

"Like hell!" Mark Chadwick bellowed, unable to contain him-self any longer. Both Neil and Colonel Ferguson jerked in their seats, completely taken off guard by the outburst.

"Both of you can cease with the masquerade!" he ranted, his face flushed with anger. "You've been lying to us from the beginning—and to me for years!" he shouted, rising from his seat, shaking with rage. "It's true I participated in your little deception, because it was in the public interest, but I'll not be privy to any fabrication such as this. How can we serve the public when we're the ones being deceived!"

"How dare you call me a liar!" the Colonel growled back, bolting from his chair. "Sit down or I'll have you removed!"

"If it disturbs you so much," Mark continued, his voice more controlled, but in a still-seething tone, "I'd suggest you start telling the truth more often." He didn't move. The two of them stared at each other for a few awkward seconds, the rest of the team riveted in their seats. Finally Father Benedict seized the opportunity in the standoff.

"Gentlemen," he said calmly from his chair, "may I suggest you both have a seat so that we can sort this accusation out? I'm sure I speak for us all when I say we're only interested in the truth and doing the best job we can, not in assessing blame."

"He's a liar," Mark growled, seating himself, "and the only way I'll be satisfied is to receive an acknowledgment of guilt."

"Perhaps the Colonel has lied," the priest said carefully, glancing at the officer, "but he may have had a good reason." The Colonel said nothing, and after another moment sat down.

"Forget it, Father," Mark said, still glaring at his adversary. "There are no good reasons to lie. You of all people should know that."

"We can discuss my views on ethics later," the cleric replied. "We'll never know what to think if we keep behaving in such churlish ways. Besides, we haven't seen your proof. All we have is your encrypted emails."

"What!" the Colonel exclaimed. "You mean to tell me that all of you came here this morning believing I was lying!" The participants nodded.

"Encrypted email ..." the Colonel said in disgust under his breath.

"So what proof do you have that the Colonel. . . that we lied?" asked Neil in a

despondent voice.

"So glad you asked, Mr. Undersecretary." Mark opened a leather satchel he'd brought to the meeting and pulled out a stack of papers. "During the past week I've been conducting research on our virus." The Colonel scowled in the direction of Dr. Marcus, who man-aged only a quizzical expression.

"My distrust was initially kindled by the Colonel's unconvincing explanation for cattle mutilations," Mark continued. "What threw me for a loop was the way the Colonel took credit for all the mutilations that couldn't be explained via predation. His description of how mutilations were performed is simply infeasible for a small but, in my mind, significant number of mutilation cases. It just baffled me that he could make such a statement when I know that he knows better."

"Just what's so implausible about his description?" Melissa probed. "I thought his explanation covered all the pertinent features."

"No offense, Doctor, really," Mark replied, "but you're not an expert on mutilations. I can see you're well acquainted with the secondary literature, scientific or otherwise, but I've personally inspected hundreds of corpses and performed dozens of necropsies on victims. There are distinctive features of mutilations that the Colonel's explanation does not—and cannot account for. Granted, these cases are few in number, and are the most bizarre, but they did nevertheless occur."

"I hardly gave an exhaustive survey of our techniques," the Colonel retorted irritably. "You'd better be able to do better than this."

"Perhaps the Colonel would like to explain these cases," Dr. Chadwick challenged, distributing a handout. "What I'm about to describe is for real," he continued. "All three of these cases are ones I personally investigated, and are, to date, the most inexplicable I know of. I've included photographs and pathology reports where appropriate."

"How on earth could this be!" Father Benedict moaned with dismay, looking up from his copy.

"Frankly, Father, I have no explanation. In case you're just getting there, the Father is no doubt referring to the pathology report of the first case. The victim in question bore the marks of non-predatory mutilation common to virtually all cases—those features which the Colonel's explanation covers—with one exception. In this case, when I opened the chest cavity during the necropsy, I discovered that the heifer's entire heart had been removed but there were no external incisions on the body."

"This is incredible," Melissa marveled, shaking her head. "More like spooky," Malcolm followed.

"That's not all," Father Benedict interrupted, "keep reading. Look two thirds of the way down, 'the victim's heart had been removed without any puncture of the pericardium.' That's just impossible!"

"I know," acknowledged Mark, "but it's true. I eventually removed the pericardium and filled it with water. It was tight as a drum; not even a pinprick. Care to explain how you did that, colonel?"

Colonel Ferguson sat grim-faced and silent. He had conspicuously not even opened Dr. Chadwick's handout. Dr. Bandstra held his peace.

"I didn't think so."

"Look at the next case," Kevin Garvey urged the team. "The one where the

heifer's eye had been turned powder blue. Look at the picture."

"What would do that?" asked Brian.

"Radiation," answered Kevin, "and a pretty high level at that."

"That's right," said Mark. "I've had nearly a dozen cases like this one, too. Colonel?"

"You can discontinue the mocking tone, Doctor. Go ahead and finish your little sideshow."

"Very well then," Mark took up the gauntlet. "The mystery of the third case is partly the eyewitness report that accompanies it."

"You had witnesses?" Malcolm inquired, astonished.

"Sort of," Mark explained. "The case is one that involved two ranchers in Colorado who were making their rounds through the herd. They were especially concerned with the heifer in question since she was several months pregnant. They examined her and moved on to a nearby cluster of the herd, about 150 yards from her. They told me they'd spent about fifteen minutes examining another heifer when one of them happened to look back at the pregnant one. He was alarmed to see that she was lying on her side, and he suspected she'd gone into premature labor. The two of them ran to her, but when they got to her they realized she was dead. Her rectum was cored and her uterus completely removed and there was no blood on the ground. Now tell me, Colonel sir, how you could swoop in with a helicopter, abduct a full-grown heifer, remove these organs, spray your freon, and then drop her down, all in fifteen minutes without two experienced ranchers hearing it or scaring any of the other cattle?"

"I can't," he replied with disarming nonchalance. "Go ahead," he motioned, "I want to hear the rest."

"Fine. Needless to say," he continued, turning his attention to the rest of the team seated around the table, "I knew from these cases and others that the Colonel was being dishonest. This lie in turn prompted me to re-examine the entire scenario we were being fed, and that I had initially embraced. My suspicions were next heightened by something Dr. Marcus said during our first meeting which struck me as odd."

"And what was that?" Dr. Marcus queried defensively, breaking his silence.

"It was when you mentioned that the existence of our virus lent weight to the idea of panspermia."

"What's that?" Deidre asked before anyone else could.

"Panspermia refers to the notion that life on earth originated as a result of 'seeding' from space. As the theory goes, bacteria and viruses may have been sealed within microscopic dust grains, which sailed between star systems, and eventually landed on a new planet—kind of what happens with dandelions, but on a cosmic scale."

"So what's the problem with that?" asked Dr. Marcus.

"The theory isn't a new idea; it's just never gained much of a following, primarily because of the problem of the mechanism needed to propel these 'seeds' through space. Allegedly, these dust grains are propelled from star systems by the pressure of the light of the star, what astrophysicists call 'solar wind.' One of the difficulties with this scenario is that, although bacteria and viruses may lie dormant for long periods of time, they almost certainly could not tolerate either the extreme cold of space or the ultraviolet light of a star like the sun. The microbe would have to have a pretty thick carbon casing to theoretically survive those forces, but if it were too thick, it would alternately be too

heavy to be accelerated by starlight alone."

"So it's a sort of stellar Catch-22," noted Brian.

"Exactlybut that isn't the problem with our virus. Our virus supposedly came from a meteor as a sort of microbial stow-away. Needless to say, the notion of a virus hitching a ride on a meteor is unusual. More likely, it's impossible."

"That's it?" asked Dr. Marcus incredulously. "That's your proof? You're basing all this on some imprecision in my wording? As you've reminded others here, you're not an expert on exobiology—I am. You must really be paranoid to refer to an argument that weak."

"My suspicions," Mark continued resolutely, "led me to go back and read Dr. Marcus's notes on the meteor itself, as well as to test the validity of the virus's extraterrestrial origin. I've conducted five separate experiments over the course of the week in this regard. What you have before you contains a summation of my results. In plain English, there is absolutely no trace of carbon on the meteorite, which, as I mentioned above, is necessary to protect the bacteria or, in this case, the virus attached to it from the temperature extremes. The unusual compounds that the Colonel told us about are there, however. This forces me to the conclusion that although the meteorite is extraterrestrial, the panspermia mechanism is illegitimate. The virus could not have hitched a ride on the meteor. It would never have survived entry into the earth's atmosphere; the temperatures are too extreme without a protective shell."

"What about the virus?" Melissa followed. "Your message said you still believed it was extraterrestrial."

"I do. I wondered if our `meteor' was just a normal rock, but gaseous compounds are certainly there and utterly unique. It's a true meteor. Additionally, as Dr. Bandstra noted, I couldn't rule out the virus still might be extraterrestrial. It was just that the scenario of it being on the meteor *prior* to entering earth's atmosphere was untenable."

"So how can the virus still be extraterrestrialwhat you're saying seems contradictory," Deidre protested.

"I think we can address that," Brian spoke up. "Father Benedict and I came to similar conclusions based on the information Mark provided. The only answer seems to be that an extraterrestrial virus that had already been brought to earth by natural or human agency was transferred to the meteorand to the cattle. We speculated perhaps astronauts who'd picked it up on a space walk brought it here without knowing it."

"As I recall," Dr. Garvey said, closing his eyes in concentration, "quarantine procedures were drawn up by NASA for just such an eventuality. The document was entitled 14 C.F.R. 1211."

"Holy Andromeda Strain, Batman!" Malcolm suddenly be-came his typically animated self. "That would mean the problem has a human cause."

"Potentially," cautioned Father Benedict. "We were stumped as to why, if the problem were human error or deliberate sabotage, did the Colonel and Neil tell us the virus was extraterrestrial. That detail seemed to be completely extraneous."

"But couldn't an extraterrestrial virus that had gotten here some other way years ago, and which had heretofore remained undetected, still have been consumed by cattle?" queried Melissa. "That would mean there was no human involvement at all."

"I hadn't been thinking exactly along your lines," Mark said thoughtfully, gazing at Brian, "but I did look into the possibility Dr. Kelley just raised. I can categorically say

that her scenario, while plausible, is impossible in this case."

"Why?" several voices echoed.

"Because the virus cannot survive either the saliva of a cow or its gastric juices. It dies after only a few seconds of contact. Believe me, I've checked."

"But how could it get to the intestinal tract, then?" demanded Dr. Garvey.

"How indeed," Mark repeated the question and turned once again to the Colonel. "Tell us, Colonel, was the virus introduced deliberately or was it an accident?"

"Yeah," Deidre chimed in before the soldier could respond, "and did you guys do it or somebody else—everybody get ready for the buck to be passed."

The Colonel gazed out across the table at the panel of faces, but offered no response. He scowled at Neil, whose preoccupied expression told everyone he would contribute nothing independently of the Colonel. The room fell silent, each participant unsure of what would happen next. The Colonel sat quietly, his hands clasped in front of his lips, elbows on the table. His face wore a troubled expression; his eyes betrayed his distance. Finally, as though reaching some conclusion, he stood, straightened his uniform, placed his hat on his head, and pushed in his chair.

"We're adjourned until further notice."

## CHAPTER 10

"In our obsession with antagonisms of the moment, we often forget how much unites all the members of humanity. Perhaps we need some outside, universal threat to make us recognize this common bond. I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world."

—*Ronald Reagan, September 1987  
address to the United Nations*

"IS THE PATIENT ready?" the grim-faced physician asked, inserting his scrubbed hands into the surgical gloves held by the nurse.

"Yes, Doctor."

"General anesthesia?"

"Yes."

"Catheter in place?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"How many weeks is this one?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Good," he noted, turning toward the operating room door. "Shouldn't take more than a few minutes. I like when the day ends with an easy one. You can go now."

"Sir?"

The doctor stared at her, annoyed. "What's the problem?"

"I'm assisting, sir."

"No, you aren't. Where's nurse Everett?"

"She's down the hall in O.R. 1."

"Go get her now."

"But she's—"

"Are you new here, nurse . . . what's your name?" he asked, unable to see her name tag, growing more perturbed.

"MacPhail. I started four days ago."

"Well that's a relief. I was beginning to think you were just stupid. There are strict rules around here that must be obeyed," he informed her angrily, scarcely taking note of her shell-shocked expression at his insult. "First, I perform all third trimester abortions here, as well as all partial birth procedures."

"You mean Dilation and Extraction."

"D and X, partial birth—I don't care what the hell you call it!" he exploded, losing his temper. "I'm not interested in your political correctness! All I care about is that the job gets done and done right, and that means that I do the procedure!"

"Yes, Dr. Hastings," the belittled nurse mumbled, tears forming in her eyes at the berating.

"Which brings me to my second point—I only do procedures with my team present, and that means Dr. Hauer is on anesthesia and nurse Everett assists. It's my clinic and that's the way we do things! If you can't follow instructions, don't report for work

tomorrow! Now get my nurse!"

The frightened woman turned at once and headed for the clinic's hallway. Still infuriated, Dr. Hastings burst into the operating room where the amused anesthetist was waiting.

"A little cranky today, Dieter?"

"You know I have a plane to catch," he grumbled, glancing at the clock.

"This should be a time of celebration," he said pleasantly, still grinning under his mask as he checked the monitor. "I wish I had the honor."

"Yes ... it will be a momentous event."

A surprised but eager nurse Everett pushed her way through the swinging doors. "I'm sorry, Dieter."

"It wasn't your fault. If MacPhail screws up again I want her terminated."

"Of course."

"Is everything ready in the back?"

"Absolutely. Here's your scalpel."

Dr. Hastings worked quickly, expertly cutting a horizontal incision into the woman's abdomen just below the pubic hairline. Moments later he was through the uterus and the fetus' protective amniotic sac. He carefully explored the fleshy chamber with his fingers.

"I have the feet," he said, nodding in the nurse's direction.

Anticipating his movements she stood ready. Dr. Hastings eyed the patient's face and then directed his attention to Dr. Hauer. "Just fine on this end."

The doctor gingerly pulled the fully formed male fetus from its mother's womb. Nurse Everett handed him the scissors and clamped the umbilical cord. The abortionist hastily severed the rubbery lifeline, cutting off the flow of oxygen.

"Please take care of this," he said impassively, handing the squirming fetus to the nurse.

"Of course," she said compliantly, disappearing through a different entryway that led into the back room, carrying the helpless cargo.

It took only a few minutes for Dr. Hastings to clear the womb's remaining contents and stitch up his patient. With a goodbye wave to his assistant he followed the path of nurse Everett's exit.

"How's our little one?" he inquired, making eye contact with the waiting nurse, now standing beside a small, portable incubator, the cleaned, extracted baby tucked safely inside, IVs and vital-sign monitors already in place.

"Everything appears normal . . . as usual. Another child for the master's glory."

"Wonderful," he smiled and pushed the button for the garage door opener on the wall next to where she stood. The two of them watched as the door slid open, revealing a waiting unmarked, window-less van, fully equipped with emergency medical gear and supplies.

"Have a safe trip," he said sincerely.

"And you. The southwest is beautiful . . . or so I hear." "You'll get to go along one of these trips. Make sure he gets into a proper home."

"Nothing will be overlooked, Dieter. He'll receive the best of programming. Goodbye, now—Helel be praised."

"Helel be praised."

The silent, grim-faced figure swiped his card through the reader at a knobless door and mechanically punched an extended access code into the keypad mounted on the wall. The door slid open and closed tightly behind him. He strode toward a flight of stairs and descended quickly. Another lengthy hallway greeted him at the bottom, and he continued with the deliberate gait of one who'd made this journey many times. The next door bore no card reader, only a small, dark, glass rectangle on the adjacent wall five and one-half feet from the ground. A large, bulletproof pane of glass provided two Marine MPs, one standing sentry on the other side of the door, the other seated behind a console, a clear view of his approach. Their eyes never diverted from the object of their scrutiny, who, upon reaching the door, stood motionless, his face positioned directly in front of the rectangular object. The retina scan took only a few seconds and, identity con-firmed, the door's electronic lock released with a loud click. The two MPs saluted Colonel Ferguson as he entered, signed in, opened yet another door, and then disappeared into a carpeted foyer. He advanced to the lone door on the wall opposite where he stood, inserted a key and turned the knob. He closed the door behind him, and looked care-fully into the room, squinting in the dim lighting. The veteran officer straightened his uniform, removed his hat, and stood before the twelve seated men.

"Good afternoon, Vernon," a tranquil, yet authoritative voice resonated from the chair situated at the middle of a long, rectangular table. "We've been expecting you," the rotund figure added.

"Of course."

"Your meeting this morning was of great interest."

"I imagine it was, General."

"Hopefully your confession this evening will go as well."

"Indeed." The Colonel sat down in a chair facing the Group.

"I can't tell you how pleased we all were with your performance."

"And just what did you expect?" the Colonel asked firmly, jaw fixed, yet uncontentiously.

"You needn't defend yourself with me. We've been through enough of these . . . incidents. I knew you would hold your tongue. Some among us didn't share my confidence that you would await instruction, however."

"And who might that include?" queried the Colonel.

"Me, for one," a voice emerged from the shadowed end of the table.

"Ah yes, Major. Why don't you share your concerns again now that the Colonel is present?"

"Dr. Chadwick discerned your deception much too quickly. You're getting careless."

"I agree," a balding man voiced his accord. "And Dr. Bandstra's young friend also dismantled your ruse quite readily. I'd like to say again I think admitting the undersecretary was a grave error."

"So you still don't trust him?" asked the Colonel.

"No, I don't. And this young Dr. Scott seems to be a very intuitive thinker. I think we certainly could have made a more cautious choice."

"As I recall," the Colonel jabbed, "you were overruled." "That doesn't mean I was



wrong! And the major agrees with me now."

"Absolutely," the major affirmed his support.

"Listen to yourselves," the General grumbled. "Perhaps you're getting too old for this business losing your nerve! We've lost nothing by the unraveling of Vernon's cover story. All it means is that the timetable is moved up."

"If anything," Colonel Ferguson reentered the argument, "they'll be even more prone to accept what we have in store for them next. Having caught us red-handed once, they'll be far less suspicious now that their efforts have `forced' us to come clean."

"You don't know that you're just trying to recoup your losses," the major rebounded.

"Tell me, Major, has being on the losing end of some decisions caused you to doubt Vernon's leadership? Or is it just that he's Air Force?" the corpulent leader wondered aloud.

"Now why would you put it that way?" the major sneered, leaning forward and gazing toward the center of the table. "Look—I thought the Colonel used poor judgment selecting Dr. Bandstra, and I think the same about allowing Brian Scott on the team none of that is going to change, no matter how much you try to make this an Army-Air Force turf war. Bandstra is an outsider. I question any activity on the part of anyone whose career has been detached from our purposes."

"You haven't been with us that long, Major. We might have considered *you* an outsider."

"My entire career has been linked to the Agenda," the major defended himself. "Apparently you need to be reminded that I was hand-picked by your predecessor and superior. Instead of objecting to an alternative opinion, you ought to remember that you took your own precautions regarding Scott as a total unknown."

"Vernon can handle Bandstra, and as far as my own addition to the team, that addition is more than up to the task of making sure Dr. Scott isn't a risk. The issue isn't whether to admit an outsider, it's whether the risks can be nullified so as to serve our purposes. You'll find our collective judgment uncannily accurate. When Vernon returns and confesses they'll never accuse him of lying again. They'll be compelled to believe."

"And if they don't?"

"If they need additional convincing, that can be arranged. Their belief—and especially Dr. Scott's—is absolutely essential to the success of the Agenda."

"Then we'll proceed as outlined?" Colonel Ferguson inquired.

"Absolutely. Gordon, I assume you're prepared?" the heavyset officer remarked, addressing a man seated several chairs to his left who had remained silent. The man nodded.

"Excellent. Remember Vernon, all means necessary toward accomplishing our goal must be utilized."

"Do I understand you correctly, sir?"

"Adam is at your disposal if necessary."

The Colonel nodded.

Dr. Bandstra and his colleague arrived at the conference room as the other members of the team were filing inside. The appearance of a new face drew some stares,

but the team members had no time to speculate among themselves about the new addition to the team. It had been almost five hours since the Colonel had dismissed them. Now he paced behind the podium, impatiently waiting for everyone to be seated.

"Interesting," Brian whispered to Father Benedict, as the pair took their customary seats beside each other.

"What is it?" the priest said in a hushed tone.

"With Dr. Marcus, the new guy makes elevenour completed number. Makes you wonder why they waited to bring him on board."

"That is curious. It seems we've provoked something they had anticipated, but not at this time. You do remember the disagreement between your friend and the Colonel, don't you?"

Brian nodded and motioned to Andrew to be quiet. The Colonel was waiting.

"Brian," he heard a whisper to his left and felt a tug on his anal as he took his seat. It was Deidre. "I have a bad feeling about this," she said in a low voice. "I think I recognize the new guy."

"From where?"

"The MIT conference."

Brian's eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"I'll dispense with the small talk," the Colonel began, "and address the questions raised earlier this morning." The room went completely silent.

"Dr. Chadwick's work, as always, is above reproach. The virus we are dealing with is indeed extraterrestrial, and the explanation we offered for its arrival on earth was contrived on our part. I bear full responsibility for the deception. If it means anything to any of you, Dr. Bandstra was opposed to the ruse, but followed orders. You may not accept my logic, but I think after what you're going to learn this after-noon, all of you—even you, Dr. Harper—will understand my motive."

Deidre offered no interruptive comment, only a smirk.

"It's very hard for someone in my position to trust anyone, even colleagues," he admitted. "It took months for me to gain confidence in Dr. Bandstra. I wasn't willing to extend the same to any of you after only a few days. I felt we could use your services to accomplish the goals of this project while disguising the true target of your work. I was wrong."

"Dr. Scott's intuition, however, was only partially accurate," he continued. "Neither NASA nor our government— nor any other of the world's governments, for that matter—are responsible for the virus's presence. The dilemma we now face is the result of fate, or, as our theologians might term it, providence. I might add," he said, gazing intently at Brian and Father Benedict, "that after today, I hope that word is still part of your vocabularies."

Father Benedict and Brian exchanged a mystified glance.

"I have with me Major Gordon Lindsay. Major Lindsay is a career military man, and is the Air Force's chief archivist and historian in the areas that you will be introduced to this afternoon. He's been brought on board since we anticipate that you will have trouble believing what I'm about to tell you. We've prepared supplemental notebooks for you," he said, motioning to a stack of thick folders on the table, "documenting the history of our involvement with the extraterrestrial basis for our dilemma. Gordon, would you

like to add anything?"

Major Lindsay was short, stocky, and crew cut, and appeared to be just entering middle age. His sunken eyes and complacent expression gave him the look of a stern, humorless man, of someone who had resigned himself to the burden of the secrets to which he'd been overexposed.

"You must all understand," the major jumped immediately into his subject, "that every document in these notebooks has been declassified for some time and available to the interested public through the Freedom of Information Act, which I will hereafter refer to as the FOIA. I know this will probably annoy you, but introducing you to only those documents that you could obtain on the outside is a deliberate security precaution. If some of this material were to find its way out of this facility, the reality of our involvement would not be compromised in any way, since what you have is already public but for the most part unknown. I'm merely here to demonstrate to you that these materials are authentic."

"You'll notice that there are marginal notations on the pages, referring you to material that is still presently and permanently classified. This material has been considered admissible for your security clearances on a need-to-know basis. You may view these materials, but my signature is required for their retrieval, and they may only be viewed under staff supervision in the Facility archive. These references are not exhaustive, as you might guess. In addition to this hard copy material, we've arranged a tour tomorrow morning of the places in the Facility relevant to answering your questions, and removing any lingering doubts you may have about the project to which your task force is assigned. This will be the first and only time you gain access to these areas. Be advised that any additional attempt to enter these areas will be viewed as a security breach. Your security clearances and access cards do not enable you to leave the areas with which you are already familiar, hence your presence after today outside your assigned areas will be addressed with deadly force. Is that clear?"

A few of the small audience nodded, while the others' alarmed expressions made it apparent they had still not become desensitized to the extreme security measures. The major indicated to the Colonel that he was finished, and immediately took his seat. Brian stole a glance at Deidre, who nodded in the affirmative. Colonel Ferguson motioned to Neil, whose unsettled countenance couldn't be missed.

"I was brought on this project at the Colonel's request and by approval of the Group," the undersecretary began, "because this matter concerns national security. However, as the Colonel informed you at our first meeting, the President has no knowledge of either the true threat we're facing or our true purpose here. To my knowledge, perhaps only one or two individuals at the NSA have the correct information as well. After our work is done, we will be implementing a plan to gradually introduce the information to official governmental channels when the Group deems it appropriate. There's no easy way to say this ..." Neil paused, searching for the words, "we didn't bring the virus to earth ... actually, it wasn't brought at all it was made. They've deliberately put us in this situation."

Dr. Bandstra paused, as he removed a handkerchief from his lapel pocket and wiped the beads of sweat away that had appeared on his brow.

Brian couldn't help taking note of his friend's visible agitation, and his mind began racing ahead. Without thinking his voice filled the temporary vacuum. "Just who are *they*? " he

asked urgently.

Neil turned and wiped his upper lip. "I think you know, Brian. They are the reason you were brought here ... the reason all of you are here. To put it simply, we're in deep trouble."

Brian felt a sudden, powerful grip on his arm. He turned, surprised that the hand belonged to the elderly priest, his face seized by an anxious expression. He returned his attention to Neil.

"Neil . . . do you mean to say—"

"Yes, Brian; I do. The virus is not only extraterrestrial, but it's the deliberate product of an alien intelligence. *They* are here . . . and they've been here for a long time."

## CHAPTER 11

"The phenomenon of UFOs does exist, and it must be treated seriously."

—*Mikhail Gorbacheti; Soviet Youth, May 4, 1990*—

"LITTLE GRAY ALIENS?" Melissa Kelley asked mockingly. "This is all about the little gray guys we see on TV? Let's just go back to the first lie."

"I understand your skepticism, Dr. Kelley," Neil responded calmly, "but I can assure you that this is no joke—and no lie. You wanted us to come clean; so we are." She just shook her head.

"The Colonel thought there was a possibility we might have to reveal this to all of you, but deemed it best to try to get what we needed from you without divulging this information. After all—and I speak from the perspective of the Defense Department—this is our country's most closely guarded secret. Nothing is classified any higher."

"Just what do you mean by 'get what you need from us?'" asked Melissa.

"All of you have certain areas of expertise that are relevant to a careful and successful handling of a public disclosure of this information. Surely you can see how your expertise in apocalyptic cults fits into this picture. Your presentation earlier this morning was the first in a series of informational installments we hoped—and still expect—to glean from you. We hoped we could draw everything we needed from your research and informed opinion without actually disclosing our knowledge of intelligent extraterrestrial life by substituting another extraterrestrial scenario. Likewise we wanted to tap Deidre, not only for her work in group psychology, but also abduction psychology."

"Abduction psychology?"

"Yes. Your colleague has very quietly established herself as an expert in the alien abduction psychology—specifically in terms of profiling and psychotherapy."

"Is he kidding?" Melissa turned her attention toward Dr. Harper.

"Nope," she answered abruptly, "that's my specialty. What he's saying makes sense to me."

"You believe this line?" Melissa asked incredulously.

"Yeah, I do. It just figures that our government would impersonate leeches before they would do the unthinkable and tell their own employees the truth. Entirely consistent to me," she droned sarcastically.

"Look at the rest of the team," Neil continued. "Brian and Father Benedict were chosen to help us break this news to main-stream western religious communities. Brian is one of the few conservative religious scholars in the world to address this in an academic paper, and the apologetic angle he took in that monograph will be quite useful toward persuading most conservative Christians that their paradigm will remain intact even if ET is here."

"Don't forget, Neil, it got me fired."

"I know, but most concerned Protestants wouldn't react so impulsively. In terms of Catholicism, someone of Father Benedict's stature is indispensable. In addition to being a top bovine biochemist, Mark is an authority on cattle mutilations. Malcolm and Kevin are here because of their command of the science involving the environmental effects that have been caused by the virus' effect on the cattle. We thought we could assemble all of you and learn what we needed to learn from you without dropping the bomb. Unfortunately," Neil added, looking in the direction of the scientist, "Dr. Marcus let his guard drop and spoke carelessly. Mark caught it, but I have to say that I think the truth would have come out anyway, eventually."

"And speaking of Dr. Marcus," added the Colonel, "He's the nation's expert on exobiology, which we publicly define as the search for evidence of extraterrestrial life—privately, he's the leading authority on intelligent extraterrestrial life, at least in terms of anatomy and physiology."

"Now, wait a minute," Kevin Garvey interrupted, far more vocal than before. "You mean to say that we actually possess alien bodies?"

"Yes, we have a few here in storage, and several at various other locations."

"Oh, come on!" Kevin groaned in disbelief "I agree with Melissa. This sounds more ridiculous the longer you guys go on. Let me just go on the record right now that I don't believe any of this, and am personally insulted by your assessment of my gullibility. For all we know, you guys'll wheel a bunch of muppets in here and pass them off as alien bodies."

"You can examine them yourself, if you like," the Colonel promised.

"Well ... I'm sure ... " Kevin stammered, taken aback by the challenge. " ... We still have no way of knowing, other than our own common sense, why you were trying to dupe us. Now you drop this big `secret' on us but still won't tell us where we even are? We could be locked up on some Hollywood stage, prepped for another one of your little ruses, for all we know."

"What did I tell you?" the Colonel said with a somewhat dismayed smile, looking at Neil, who offered no response.

"Just what is that supposed to mean?" demanded Malcolm, emboldened by Kevin's uncharacteristic candor.

"It means that it's a shame that the public so mistrusts its own government, that when it wants to come clean, no one believes it.

"A shame!" Deidre mocked. "Let's just say that history has shown that you guys have cried wolf in the name of justifying your own atrocious conduct and ideology at the expense of innocent lives so many times that all you deserve is skepticism."

"You're right, Doctor," the Colonel replied, "and I told Dr. Bandstra this would be the predominant reaction. But I also think that all of you--the scientific and scholarly communities—share some of the blame."

"Now how is that?" Mark inquired, irritated by the Colonel's accusation.

"If what we're telling you is true, you scientists would be the most adversely affected by the revelation, next to mainstream religion, that is. You have a great deal to lose by this truth, since you've spent decades convincing the public that you know everything, that you have all the answers. This may shock you, but the government has tried to prepare the public for the eventual public acknowledgment of intelligent extraterrestrial

life, but you still insist that it's next to impossible that we've been visited and if contact were ever made, your colleagues at SETI assume with smug assurance that the only way it will happen is radio signals. Seems like it never occurs to the scientific community that not every citizen who sees unexplainable things in the sky is a liar, or that if intelligent life exists, it may not let us know in the way you so arrogantly suppose. On the other hand, if this is true, what does the military lose? We tell people we acted in the interest of the nation's security. We'll be understood by many, but you scientists will be shown to be just plain wrong—and by comparison to their technological level, woefully inadequate, even stupid. You three have a vested interest in this not being the truth, because it means the upheaval of the whole paradigm of reality that your own egos have erected. You've contributed to this whole milieu of distrust perhaps not as much as we have, but it is certifiably true."

"If we've been arrogant it's because the military led the way!" Mark shot back. "You act as though you haven't exploited the scientific community for the purpose of your cloak-and-dagger games. Well, we have proof positive of that within this little group, don't we? That's the worst part of this whole scam."

"No," a calm, firm voice interrupted what was quickly escalating into a bitter dispute. Major Lindsay waited until he had the attention of everyone. "No," he repeated, "the worst part of this situation—and it is no scam—is that the scholars and professionals in this room will fail unless we're all on the same page. If you people can't straighten your act out soon—and I'm talking about a matter of days here—critical time will be lost, and `they' will win."

"Mother of God," Brian heard Father Benedict whisper under his breath.

"What do you mean `they'll win?'" asked Brian.

"If you can't accept what we're telling you now, you'll never believe what extends from that truth. You must believe what Dr. Bandstra has told you before you'll be able to digest anything else." "Oh, so now we're back to withholding information? Figures," retorted Melissa.

"No," Neil replied. "We're here to tell all of you everything that you need to know for this operation. It's just that if you don't believe us from the start, you'll never take your job seriously."

"Let's just assume that we're all convinced," offered Brian, "what's this talk about winning and losing?"

Neil shifted in his seat and cleared his voice. "I'll give it to you as briefly as possible, because there's a whole history of our involvement with UFOs and their occupants that you must be made aware of to put things into proper context."

"Fine, let's have it," Melissa asked impatiently.

"In a nutshell, these aliens we call them the visitors have been surveilling earth steadily since the Thirties. We know, of course, that reports of these beings go far back into antiquity, but it's only been since that decade that they appear to have initiated a concentrated effort to learn about our planet and about us. We believe their intent has been to discern how workable a compromise living arrangement would be. Confirmation of their existence came in the form of several crashes and subsequent retrievals."

"Retrievals?" Malcolm asked.

"Yes, that's right," Neil replied. "Major Lindsay will brief you on at least one, so I

don't want to get bogged down on it here."

"Okaaay," he said skeptically.

"Good enough," Neil continued. "Despite the material re-mains in our possession, we really didn't know what we had on our hands until the Fifties, when the visitors initiated contact and let us know their goal was coexistence."

"You say `initiated, remarked Father Benedict, "are you implying that we couldn't have done the same—or wouldn't have?"

"The former."

"Can we communicate with them now?"

"Yes," the Colonel volunteered. "They have no vocal cords, so they communicate telepathically. It's an odd sensation at first, but you get used to just thinking without talking."

"You've engaged in one of these `conversations'with an extraterrestrial?" the priest asked in amazement.

"A few times."

"Getting back to our introduction," Neil broke in, "our own civilization resisted any attempt at integration with the visitors be-cause we feared the social, religious, and psychological upheaval disclosure would bring. This was the Fifties, remember; we were confident people just couldn't process it, especially since the country was so conservative, religiously speaking. In essence, we followed the recommendations of the Brookings Report and stalled for time."

"What's the Brookings Report?" asked Kevin.

"It was a study that, in part, dealt with the presumed socioreligious impact upon Americans should the reality of intelligent extraterrestrial life become factually known. I believe that will be part of Brian's report correct?"

Brian nodded.

"And now that I think of it," Neil added, "have you read the 1999 Bigelow Report? It's patterned after Brookings."

"No, I haven't," answered Brian.

"You'll need to read it and incorporate it into your remarks. It's available on the Internet. I'll email you the address."

"Will do."

"To continue, the visitors weren't pleased with our recalcitrance toward mutual existence. Quite frankly, they didn't understand it. They grew more insistent with time. We suspect that the planet holds something they desperately need for survival, but aren't sure what it might be."

"I suppose they threatened us?" Deidre asked.

"It appeared that way to those in our government privy to the situation. As Major Lindsay will brief you, we became concerned in the early Fifties with the increased number of sightings and, more particularly, the places where their craft began to show up—military installations, especially those which housed nuclear weapons, government facilities, that kind of thing."

"If these `space aliens' are so technologically advanced," Dr. Garvey said smartly, "why don't they just get rid of us like so many household pests?"

"They certainly could if they wanted to," the Colonel interrupted. "The only thing



forestalling something like that is our nuclear capability—and today, our biological weapons."

"Our government made a tactical error in that regard as well," Neil resumed his discussion. "We made it very clear that if there was any attempt to circumvent our desire that public contact be postponed, or if they made any aggressive move, we'd use our nukes."

"Brilliant!" exclaimed Deidre.

"If you're incensed at that, Dr. Harper," Major Lindsay intervened, "wait until Dr. Bandstra explains. We didn't intend on using weapons against the visitors."

"Huh?"

"No—we'd never be able to touch them with our weapons," Neil resumed, "even our weapons of today. Their vehicles are too fast and the larger ones too remote to be touched. We informed them that we'd essentially nuke the planet. Of course now we could use biological warfare to keep them from getting any of earth's resources, but that's out of the question."

"So our policy was MAD?" asked Melissa incredulously.

"Correct—Mutually Assured Destruction—exactly what it was with the Soviets in the Fifties and sixties, except from a more aggressive posture. We had enough nuclear capability to destroy the earth and its resources, which is what they need."

"Are the boneheads who created this policy still around?" Malcolm asked.

"No, they've all since passed away."

"There are those in the Group, however," the Colonel interjected, "who still believe in the policy—or did until the visitors trumped us."

"What do you mean?" Father Benedict asked nervously.

"Our problem. The visitors took matters into their own hands and decided to force us into population integration. They engineered the virus—we think sometime during the sixties—to essentially blackmail us into full disclosure."

"I don't follow," the priest responded. "How does it serve their purpose to put the planet on a course of environmental collapse?"

"We aren't completely sure, but we believe they're hedging their bets. They must have a way of reversing the effects of global warming—but we're guessing."

"What Neil is trying to say," added the Colonel, "is that a global environmental catastrophe to humanity is preferable to them compared to nuclear winter, which would destroy all life on the planet for centuries. We believe that they are willing to put the planet at risk environmentally since they could somehow survive it while we could not. What they want in exchange to halt the methane increase before it gets too severe is population integration. They want unrestricted and unopposed access to all areas of the planet."

"Why can't they have that now? What could we do to stop it?" asked Deidre.

"We basically can only harass them," the Colonel explained, "and threaten to institute our MAD policy if we see them take any aggressive move."

"Fortunately for us," Neil took the floor again, "the visitors have been patient, but it seems they've now figured out a way to call our bluff. As Colonel Ferguson just noted, they have offered to retard the effects of our current environmental situation in exchange for our non-resistance to public disclosure, rather than just letting nature take its course, so to speak. We believe they've chosen this path to allow us to think about our actions as rational beings, as opposed to acting rashly in self defense."

"Which is why you've been assembled," the Colonel reminded them again. "Obviously, we can't counter-blackmail them, and actually going through with the old nuclear option would be suicide. We have no choice at this time but to comply, and that means preparing the public for the truth."

"Isn't it possible that they could have diseases that would kill us?" Mark asked, breaking a personal silence. "After all, they came up with this nifty virus. How do we know we'd survive cooperation?"

"Tell me you believe this crap!" Kevin Garvey snapped angrily. "You're a scientist!"

"So am I," retorted Dr. Marcus. "These beings are as real as you and I. Since you haven't seen our proof yet, why don't you just get down off your high horse and cut the 'scientist' bunk?"

Dr. Garvey flushed with anger, but regained his customary composure and leaned back in his chair.

"I'll answer your question now, Mark," answered Dr. Marcus. "The truth is, we don't have one hundred-percent assurance—and that's by their own admission and our combined research. We've studied the alien bodies we have thoroughly, and there have been ex-changes of humans and aliens."

"Exchanges?" Deidre eyed him with transparent repugnance. "Yes—of the sort depicted in the movie *Close Encounters*. However ..."

"What?"

"They haven't always followed the guidelines we agreed on."

"Meaning?"

"They take people . . . actually, a good number of them."

"Do you know how *many* lives you've screwed up?" she said angrily.

"The people involved in exchanges were all volunteers, Doctor. On the other hand, the visitors claimed that they needed more people than the exchanges could supply, that they needed to study individuals who'd been part of families that had been used for research for decades. We allowed this—or I should say surrendered to it. They informed us, but they didn't have to. There's no way to stop them anyway. They were at least courteous about it."

"I feel warm and fuzzy all over. I'll bet knowing the little guys who gave them an anal probe are polite will help my patients and thousands of others."

"Well what would you have done?" he shot back. She didn't answer. She couldn't.

"At any rate," Dr. Marcus redirected his attention back to Mark's question, "we've learned a great deal through the exchanges, as well as their own experiments."

"Tell me this isn't going where I think it's going?" Melissa rolled her eyes.

"Breeding, Dr. Kelley? Is that such a leap? They've been doing it for years to detect genetic incompatibilities or other harmful abnormalities. We've benefited as much as they have—and they made a sincere effort to keep the use of our females to a minimum."

"I for one am disgusted with what I'm hearing!" Father Benedict spewed in rage. "You speak as though human beings were nothing more than advanced lab rats. It matters not that we benefited—the Nazis learned a great deal through human experimentation, but do we speak of them in such protective terms?"

"I understand your anger, Father—" Dr. Marcus began.

"No you don't! You have no appreciation for man being in God's image. I believe you when you say you couldn't stop them, but don't make excuses for what they've done!"

"That's why they take the uterus, isn't it?" Mark inquired pensively. "The uterus of a cow is physiologically closer to that of humans than any other species."

"That would be my guess," Dr. Marcus answered.

"I'm with the Father here," Deidre piped up. "You sound like the alien PR guy. If I've listened to one hypnotic regression on some woman who claimed she'd been made pregnant during an abduction only to be abducted later and returned without the fetus, I've heard a hundred. I say we can't trust them, especially if they could have used cows. If they're so advanced, why couldn't they create artificial wombs? For God's sake, even we stupid humans can do that."

"I'm anything but the 'PR guy,' Doctor. I can't answer your question, but I can say that the visitors have never shown any sign of overt hostility or contempt for us."

"Other than introduce a virus that's gonna bake our buns in thirty years," quipped Malcolm.

"You misunderstand their urgency," Dr. Marcus countered. A collective sigh of exasperation reverberated through the room.

"Dr. Marcus is just being honest—that is what you people want, isn't it?" the Colonel said in a perturbed tone. "We don't know why, but they configured this thing to force us into a decision at this time. My guess is that they need access to the planet now but can't act unilaterally because of the threat we'll make that access point-less."

"They have to know we would never do such a thing. It doesn't make sense," Melissa criticized the Colonel's speculation. "Well, I think that they've witnessed human beings kill enough of their fellow humans, as well as willfully pollute our own life-giving resources, that they believe we'd do it. They may think we're that primitive that we'd kill each other off rather than throw away our power and our worldview paradigm."

"My estimation of their intelligence just went up a notch," Deidre deadpanned.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Garvey spoke up, "but I'm just not buying it. The whole idea is asinine. It's not that I don't want to believe, but I need proof—substantive, irrefutable proof, and in this case, an abundance of it."

"I'd have to say the same," Melissa admitted. "It's just too far out. What do the rest of you think?" The team members exchanged glances. The Colonel, Neil, and Dr. Marcus surveyed the expressions on each face, as well as the body language. It was apparent that only Mark Chadwick appeared to have been swayed.

"I guess we're back to square one then," said the Colonel. "Tomorrow morning we'll proceed with the same briefing that we gave Dr. Bandstra a little over a month ago. We suspected that you would need to be convinced. Major Lindsay will conduct your initiation into the history of our country's contact with intelligent extraterrestrial life."

## CHAPTER 12

"I am completely convinced that UFOs have an out-of-world basis."

—*Dr Walther Reidel*—  
*Research Director and Chief Designer*  
*at Nazi Germanys rocket center at Peenemunde,*  
*LIFE Magazine, April 7, 1952.*

KEVIN GARVEY WAS already awake when his alarm clock rudely informed him it was 7:30. He lay for a few moments in his bed, gazing at the ceiling, pondering anew, as he had done for the last half-hour, just what lay ahead for him and his colleagues after breakfast. His mind rehearsed the Colonel's startling confession of the previous evening and, as at that time, he began to systematically dismantle the man's claims. The overwhelming unlikelihood of the scenario played out before them was matched in magnitude only by the consequences that would abound were it the truth.

He climbed out of bed and, despite the fact that he was alone, donned his robe, tying it securely around his waist. Grabbing the towel and overnight bag he had laid out before going to bed, he exited his bedroom and was headed for the shower when something on the floor near the room's entrance caught his eye. He was sure nothing had been the least bit out of place the night before. He walked over to the door and picked up a small piece of paper that contained a short, typewritten message:

Your continued distrust of the nature of the project is well placed. I can provide you with evidence of more deception. The meeting this morning will adjourn at 12:30. Go directly to the sixth door in the corridor from the meeting room end after you are adjourned. This door is locked, but will be overridden for fifteen seconds at exactly 12:35, allowing you access outside the restricted zone. You must be there at the precise time. Memorize the directions below to the door indicated. It will be over-ridden for fifteen seconds as well at exactly 12:40. Only you have the wherewithal to understand what you will see in this room. The room will be empty until 12:55; the exit will be overridden at 12:50, at which time you must leave. If you want to get back to your area without detection, retrace your steps by the same time intervals. Destroy this note so that it cannot be recovered.

Kevin stared at the paper in his hand. The only explanation for its presence was that someone had placed it inside his door during the night who could remain undetected by security or who'd be considered to have rightful access to his room. His mind grappled with the possibilities. Who would have the motivation to undermine the team's leadership while having the ability to manipulate the electronic security devices?

"You may want to follow along in the notebooks you received last evening," Major Lindsay began, "by reading the various documents contained in your folders, but I would suggest you wait until you return to your rooms to read things in full. I'm going to present an abbreviated survey of the history of alien contact in this country and the involvement of our own military and civilian government in relation to that contact. Please feel free to ask anything you want. Again, this will be your primary opportunity to do so, since I don't anticipate any further role with this task force."

"Some of you may be aware," the major continued, "that what we think of as UFO sightings and alien `contact' have been witnessed for millennia. Ancient literature bears such accounts, in cultures as diverse as that of ancient India, Native Americans, medieval Europeans, Mesoamerican peoples, the Egyptians, and, some would say, the ancient Israelites. I would assume," he said looking in Brian's direction, "that Dr. Scott would contest the latter."

"I would," Brian agreed. "I know a lot of people would say that the first chapter of the book of Ezekiel describes a UFO, but that conclusion is totally without merit in my mind."

"Could you explain why?"

"The details of Ezekiel's vision can be traced to religious iconography in Babylon at the time of Ezekiel's writing while he was among the Israelite captives. I can show you drawings and photo-graphs of religious statuary with the wheels, eyes, creatures with four faces all of it. Ezekiel was either witnessing a manifestation of deity, complete with motifs he had seen before in Babylon, or God providentially appeared to him in such a way that his description would tell people in Babylon familiar with such symbols that God had visited him. He did *not* see a spaceship. I would contest the Egyptian material as well. The winged disk of Horus is perfectly consistent with Egyptian modes of expression. On the other hand, I've seen the medieval paintings with airships in them, the Pre-Columbian figurines of flying craft, and have read some of the accounts of such things in the ancient Hindu Vedic literature. Beats me what's going on there."

"I wouldn't argue with anything that you've said, Doctor," the major responded. "It merely goes to show that, when we're dealing with ancient material it's difficult to know just what they were seeing. Consequently, I try to steer away from such areas. I plan to stick to the twentieth century. A good place to begin the discussion of our own culture's odyssey with UFOs," the major said, shifting gears, "is the 1940s. In February of 1942, air raid sirens and anti-aircraft fire awakened a good number of the people of Los Angeles. The targets were 25 silver flying objects in V-formation near Long Beach. Over 1400 rounds and thousands of dollars of damage to homes and public buildings later, nothing was shot down. The unusual thing about the episode was that eyewitnesses reported seeing several of the objects stop motionless in midair while the anti-aircraft shells exploded all around them. Keep in mind—this was 1942. Neither we nor anyone else had aircraft even remotely matching the descriptions recorded during the event."

"Why the hell did they start shooting?" asked Deidre. "Again, this was February of 1942. It was just three months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Authorities thought they were under attack by some kind of wingless flying machine that the

Japanese had."

"No wings?" Melissa followed.

"No wingsan original copy of the *LA Evening Herald Examiner* account is available in our archives. Again, folks, everything I'll talk about this afternoon is documented for you, whether it's in the form of newspaper articles, documents obtainable via the Freedom of Information Act, or declassified military and government memos. Everything can be backed up in black and white. We've deliberately framed your introduction in this way to demonstrate that we aren't making this up. As I noted before, if you choose, you'll be free to view currently classified material that will supplement what we've given you, but only under the conditions mentioned earlier."

"Moving on then," he proceeded, "in 1944, reports by Allied military pilots began occurring that their fighter planes were being pursued by fiery balls which moved at terrific speed, and which could maneuver in all directions."

"The foo-fighters," Father Benedict commented.

"That's right, Father. You've obviously heard of them." "Yes, I met several pilots who'd flown combat missions in World War II who actually encountered them."

"For the rest of you," the major explained, "the French word for fire is *feu*, so our pilots anglicized the term into 'foo'—hence 'foo-fighters.'"

"So what were they?" asked Malcolm.

"The U.S. Army's 8th Air Force—remember, the service branches of today were not separated back then—conducted an extensive inquiry into them, but could come to no conclusion about what they were. Explanations like Saint Elmo's fire or ball lightning didn't fit the descriptions of the behavior, and so were ruled out. Generals Douglas MacArthur and George Marshal also initiated investigations into the phenomenon by establishing the Interplanetary Phenomenon Unit, which operated under the aegis of the Director of Counterintelligence."

"Interplanetary?" Melissa repeated in amazement.

"You heard correctly."

"Too bad they couldn't have just asked the Nazis," Brian quipped.

"So you're familiar with the Nazi *Feuerball*, Doctor?" asked the Major.

"Yes, I am," Brian answered. "Actually, this is the part of UFO studies in which I'm most interested. I think all the sightings that can't be ruled out by weather phenomena, visual inaccuracies, or hoaxes are explainable by our own R & D into Operation Paperclip technology. I've felt for a long time that, rather than visitors from space, UFOs were our own experimental aircraft derived from knowledge gained from Operation Paperclip."

"What in the world is 'Paperclip?' And what's this crap about Nazis?" asked Kevin bluntly.

"We're getting a little ahead of ourselves to talk about the Nazi angle and Paperclip," the major commented, "but I guess we can do that. It isn't an understatement to say that our own country's involvement with UFOs stems directly from the Second World War," he continued. "It's no secret that the Nazi war machine was quite advanced for its day, having produced a number of breakthrough military technologies during the course of the war. Most people know they perfected the V-1 buzz bomb and the V-2 rocket, and that one of their leading scientists, Werner von Braun, was an integral contributor to our rocketry and space programs. Less well known but equally effective

weapons that never quite got into the mass production stage included guns that could fire lethal `bullets' of air or beams of sound and a host of strange flying machines. One such model was the unmanned *Feuerball*—the `Fireball,' which was guided by remote control and designed to interfere with the ignition and radar systems of Allied bombers. It was flat, circular, armored, and jet-powered. In flight it gave off a good deal of flame."

"So that's what the foo-fighters were?" asked Father Benedict.

"Most likely. Our military didn't know anything about them until after the advent and successful implementation of Operation Paperclip. But even after we learned of their existence, there was no evidence of any connection between them and the event I just told you about in Los Angeles—or, I might add, other similar stateside events."

"Sounds to me like you aren't helping your case, Major," Melissa challenged. "To this point, I'd say that there were very human technological explanations to UFOs."

"We've barely started, Dr. Kelley," the major reminded her. "You must remember that, while it is true that many UFOs were or are experimental aircraft, the actual percentage is lower than Dr. Scott's wishful estimation. We know the secrets guarded so closely by the Nazis at the time, and, clever as they might have been, they don't answer all the cases—neither then nor now."

"And none of this addresses where the Nazis got the technology, either," offered Neil, glancing at Brian.

"Back to our subject," the major said, guiding the discussion. "*Feuerball* technology was eventually applied to another larger, circular aircraft, the *Kugelblitz*, or `ball lightning'—not to be confused with the meteorological phenomenon of the same name. The *Kugelblitz* eventually became the V-7. The British actually stumbled onto the plans for this craft, the prototype having been destroyed by the SS when it became apparent that the war was lost. This and other versions of flat, round craft were developed and tested by the Nazis during the 1940s. In case any of you are interested in the technical aspects, our library has a copy of an important work by a British military officer entitled, *German Secret Weapons of the Second World War*."

"Were any of the `foo-fighters' ever shot down?" Deidre asked. The major shook his head.

"Where do we get the name `flying saucer' anyway?" asked Malcolm. "Is that what the Germans called their machines?"

"No, Dr. Bradley. As far as the term goes, it's an invention of the American media. An American pilot named Kenneth Arnold reported seeing an object in June of 1947 that flew, in his words, `like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water.' The media picked up on the description, and the term stuck."

"If all this is true, why weren't the more famous German engineers in on these craft—I mean, we've never heard any of this from guys like von Braun," noted Kevin skeptically.

"They were all privy to these craft," countered the Major. "Just because they didn't publicly acknowledge their existence when UFO reports started increasing doesn't mean they were ignorant. Besides, these were highly guarded secrets, the divulgence of which would provide a catalyst for people to start digging into the pasts of many of the scientists here in the U.S. working in our military industrial complex whose identities had been changed as part of Paperclip."

"Again with this `Paperclip' thing. Could you tell us what this project was before

we go any further?" Kevin pressed him in an irritated voice.

"One question at a time, Dr. Garvey," the major replied, unmoved by his irritation. "I still need to address your other question more fully. I'm sure you and the other scientists have all heard of Viktor Schauberger—correct?"

The three men nodded.

"Schauberger, of course, was an Austrian scientist kidnapped by the Nazis for the purpose of tapping his technological expertise. During his 'employ' under the Nazis, Schauberger designed a number of flying disks powered by cutting-edge electromagnetic propulsion."

"Why weren't these disks destroyed during the war?" asked Father Benedict. "I'm the only one here old enough to remember when the British destroyed Germany's top-secret rocket facility, Peenemunde, in 1943."

"That's only partially correct, Father. It's true that Peenemunde was bombed, but most of it was underground, so it was relatively undamaged. Even so, Dr. Hans Kammler, the SS's *Obergruppenfuehrer* who was in charge of the Nazi weapons technology program, decided to distribute the various weapons projects at the facility to other locations throughout Germany after the attack. I should point out here that, eventually, the SS, under the direction of Heinrich Himmler, was given complete oversight of this technology and financial independence by Hitler. In effect, the secret weapons technology overseen by Kammler became what we would call in this country a 'Black-Op'—a project whose funding is secret and independent of governmental oversight."

"Sounds familiar," sneered Deidre.

"In case you forgot, Dr. Harper, you're being paid under such an arrangement now," Major Lindsay retorted. "If you care to return your salary after this project is over, please let me know."

"Whatever."

"Do you guys know what happened to Kammler?" asked Brian.

"No, we don't. I take it that by your question you are aware he disappeared without a trace after the war."

Brian nodded.

"He was one of the most noteworthy figures to escape. All we know is what von Braun was able to tell us. Kammler apparently wanted to use his knowledge to broker a deal with the Allies, and, with von Braun, was ready to do so. Then all of a sudden he told von Braun that he was 'about to disappear for a lengthy period of time.' Von Braun never heard from him again. It's too bad, really, we could have used him to help us develop the craft and technology we did recover after Germany surrendered."

"How can you say that!" said Melissa in disbelief. "He was a Nazi—one of Hitler's goose-stepping morons!"

"So were most of the other scientists who worked through-out our own military-industrial complex after the war—that was the purpose of Operation Paperclip."

"Come again?"

"Operation Paperclip was our government's postwar pro-gram for recruiting Nazi scientists for our own military-industrial complex."

"Is he serious?" Melissa asked incredulously, looking at Brian.

"Absolutely," Brian replied. "Just wait till you hear this."



"We'd been recruiting Nazi scientists prior to Paperclip, but the official program stepped up the operation. The program was officially disclosed to the public on October 1, 1945. What wasn't mentioned was the fact that most of the scientists brought over here were members of the Nazi party. Our military originally intended to de-brief these men, particularly since we had come into possession of thousands of documents from Peenemunde, and then send them back to Germany. We soon realized the extent and value of their knowledge, and what a waste it would be to just send them back. When we discovered their arsenal included flying disks, the War Department determined that we needed to control this technology. The only problem was that it was expressly illegal to offer Nazis immigration permission, and President Truman was not of the mind to change that."

"So how did the project get off the ground?" asked Kevin, intrigued.

"Truman eventually did approve Paperclip, but explicitly forbade including anyone who had been a member of the Nazi party or an active supporter of the Third Reich. The War Department's Joint Intelligence Objectives Agency soon figured out that most of the guys we really wanted couldn't pass this test. A deal was eventually brokered between a Nazi intelligence expert, Reinhard Gehlen, who had deeply infiltrated the KGB, and then CIA director, Allen Dulles. Dulles thought that he could gain two things by dealing with Gehlen: Paperclip scientists, and an ally albeit a known Nazi—for spying against the Russians. The result was that the dossiers of the scientists we wanted—were sanitized—cleared of references to party membership, Gestapo ties, and any evidence of human experimentation. Even Werner von Braun had been initially labeled as a threat to our national security. Who'd have ever thought that the guy who served as one of Walt Disney's experts on the 'World of Tomorrow' used to work for Hitler? Some of you may have seen him on TV."

"I'm devastated!" Malcolm cracked. "One of the Mouseketeers was a Nazi!" Brian and a few others couldn't help laughing.

"You have such an ... unusual way of putting things, Dr. Bradley," the major said stoically, glaring at him from his seat. "May I continue?"

"Be my guest," Malcolm said with a hint of self-amusement.

"At the apex of his career in this country, von Braun was named NASA's associate administrator. Essentially, the U.S. government gave Nazis new lives and, in some cases, new identities."

"How could Truman change his mind like that?" wondered Melissa.

"He didn't. He never knew how his orders had been circumvented. Paperclip is a classic—and now, because of the Freedom of Information Act, a very demonstrable—example of a secret government within a government. I'm actually quite proud of the program and what it achieved."

"Maybe they weren't so bad," offered Kevin soberly. "I mean, I'm an admirer of von Braun, and it seems to me that a lot of these guys were probably working under duress."

"That's true for some, and for von Braun, it is certainly arguable," the major commented. "Others, though, were certainly guilty of war crimes. Take Arthur Rudolph, for example. Rudolph was operations director of the Mittelwerk factory at the Dora-Nordhausen concentration camps, where 20,000 workers died from beatings, hangings, and starvation. One military file prior to Dulles' sanitation program suggested he be incarcerated should he ever set foot on U.S. soil. If you look at his Paperclip file, it reads

that nothing objectionable about him was detected. Rudolph became a U.S. citizen and designed the Saturn 5 rocket used in the Apollo moon landings. His true record, however, was discovered in 1984, and he fled to West Germany to escape prosecution. He wasn't the only blemish on the program, either; other Paperclip recruits were well beyond the pale of 'acceptability.' Another Nuremberg defendant, Hermann Becker-Freysing, had been sentenced to 20 years in prison for conducting experiments on Dachau inmates, such as feeding them seawater that had been chemically altered to make it drinkable. Then there's the aforementioned Gehlen, who was offered a job in exchange for his offer of intelligence on the Soviets. The list is really quite long."

"Good grief!" Melissa exclaimed. "Why haven't I heard of this before?"

Major Lindsay smirked. "Probably because there's no sex in the story. If you'll learn anything this afternoon it'll be that the American media, the great protectors of the people's right to know, have been our biggest asset in maintaining secrecy. To put it succinctly, the media is, by and large, incredibly gullible, even stupid. We've counted on their unbounded smugness and know-it-all attitude for years. It never ceases to amaze me how they can be so suspicious of the military when it comes to our relationship to banana republics like Grenada, and then so accepting when we tell them how silly it is to take claims of UFOs seriously. Almost without exception they uncritically buy every explanation we give them, no matter how implausible under scrutiny, and then help us by making anyone who questions us look like fools. Less cynically, it may be because Paperclip was supposedly terminated in 1957."

"What do you mean by that?" Melissa wondered.

"It's never actually been terminated. We just announced that it was, and the press accepted it. I can't tell you the number of times we've just announced something and had the trusting press treat it like the gospel truth. Time and again they've been willing stooges. Paperclip just simply morphed into projects with different names. Some real journalists who recently dug into the matter discovered as much, but their colleagues just treated them like conspirators. I guess that's preferable to being shown to be inept themselves. It's quite beautiful to see it work," he added with satisfaction.

"Yeah, what a thrill," cracked Deidre. "Sure does my heart good to see you so enthused about duping the public."

"You know by now we had our reasons. And, if I might add, you haven't heard anything yet."

"Oh, I'm quite sure you guys are skilled manipulators. You've had a good half-century of cover-up experience. You could have just been honest back then; we'd all be a lot better off now."

"You're so sure of that, are you?"

"Yes! You've blown fifty years' worth of opportunities like this one. You could have assembled a team like this and broken in the public long ago."

"People would never have been ready in the Fifties," Major Lindsay replied defensively. "I'm willing to bet Father Benedict and Dr. Scott would readily agree."

"I don't know about Catholicism," Brian said, tapping his pen on his notebook, "but from where I stand, evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity would have gone crazy. They'd have either seen a conspiracy on the part of the communist sympathizers within our own government—remember, this was the McCarthy era—or would have labeled the whole thing as demonic. In fact, I don't think things have changed much."

"I wouldn't be so pessimistic in regard to Catholicism," Father Benedict opined, "but it will still be a tough sell. People are fearful of the unknown by nature. Among the major 'book religions'—those that derive their doctrine from a holy book—Christianity and Judaism will have the toughest time. Islam will be less of a problem, since the subject of other worlds has been addressed in the Koran."

"You gentlemen have your work cut out for you," noted the Colonel.

"Okay," continued Deidre, "Perhaps disclosure wasn't a good idea on a wide, public scale, but you could have used more civilian scholars and scientists—especially those whose primary expertise wasn't in military transfer applications. You and I both know you were scrambling in the Forties to keep from wetting your collective pants."

"What exactly are you talking about now?" Kevin demanded in an annoyed voice.

"Only the military's textbook example of how to keep the truth from the public," Deidre said sarcastically.

"And just what was that?" Kevin demanded.

Major Lindsay sat back in his chair. The egotistical look on his face exuded the superiority complex of one whose entire career had revolved around seducing people to beg for information that only he, as one of the intelligence elite, could dispense, but who would in reality allow only crumbs of disinformation to fall from his table. Even now, as he divulged the secrets most guarded by himself and his peers, he enjoyed being in complete control. Even the truth could advance the purpose of manipulation. He strummed his fingers on the table lightly as the group awaited a response.

"Ever heard of Roswell, Dr. Garvey?"

## CHAPTER 13

"I believe that these extraterrestrial vehicles and their crews are visiting this planet from other planets, which obviously are a little more technically advanced than we are here on Earth ... For many years I have lived with a secret, in a secrecy imposed on all specialists and astronauts."

—Colonel L. Gordon Cooper—  
*Mercury and Gemini Astronaut,*  
*address to the United Nations, 1985*

"WHO'S ROSWELL?" ASKED Kevin and Malcolm in unison.

"God, you guys are ignorant!" Deidre exclaimed. "Not who, but what—Roswell is a place, a town in New Mexico. You guys ought to take a time-out from playing with your calipers and get acquainted with popular culture. Haven't any of you even seen *Independence Day*?"

"No," Kevin replied coolly, "we have better things to do than go to movies. Someone has to do real science while you practice your pseudo-scientific abduction bunk."

"So the less informed we are about what we don't agree with, the more our own work increases in validity? Huh? Say what?"

"How can you call yourself a scholar?" Kevin asked Deidre condescendingly.

"Look—I'm not saying I believe anything about Roswell—just that you ought to be informed before you start castigating any-one. You better watch your tone, Doctor, because if the Colonel and Neil are giving us the truth, you're gonna owe me one huge apology—and I *will* collect. I don't see Mark laughing, either."

Kevin and Malcolm turned to their colleague, who just shrugged. "Taking into consideration what the major is divulging and the weird stuff I've seen working for the government, I'm with-holding judgment," he said blandly. Kevin shook his head in disgust.

"Forgive my ignorance as well," Father Benedict said apologetically, "but I fear I'm not much better informed either. I've heard the name, mind you—I know it has something to do with UFOs—Major?"

"Of course, Father," Major Lindsay acknowledged. "As Dr. Harper noted, Roswell is a small town in New Mexico, most famous for what is certainly this country's most controversial UFO incident. Since it is essential for appreciating all the secrecy that has characterized U.S. UFO policy since then, all of you will need an introduction."

"On the night of July 2, 1947," the major continued, "Mr. and Mrs. Dan Wilmot reported an oval-shaped UFO moving northwest, toward what would become known as the crash site. About the same time, another man and his father, while driving northwest of Roswell, also observed a bright light in the sky that appeared to them to be some kind of meteor headed for earth. A local rancher, Mr. Mac Brazel, heard a loud explosion minutes later. The next morning, Brazel discovered a debris field approximately 300 yards wide and three-quarters of a mile long on an adjacent pasturage. Brazel decided to

collect some of the debris. He put a large, circular piece into a shed on his property, and showed the rest to his neighbors, the Proctors. Brazel celebrated the next day's holiday at home, and on July 5 took a trip to nearby Corona to tell some acquaintances about what he'd found. The morning after that, Brazel decided to take some of the smaller pieces into town for the local sheriff, George Wilcox, to see."

"What did he think he had?" asked Melissa.

"He wasn't a scientist, so he had no real idea. He just knew that something had crashed. Roswell was home to an Army Air Force base—the Army was part of the Air Force back then—so he suspected it was some kind of plane. Anyway, early that afternoon, Sheriff Wilcox and Brazel decided to contact the Roswell Army Air Force base and report the find. The base commander, Colonel William Blanchard, the base intelligence officer, Major Jesse Marcel, and a Captain Cavitt drove to the sheriff's office to have a look and talk to Brazel. Colonel Blanchard eventually took a piece back to the base and alerted Brigadier General Roger Ramey in Fort Worth, Texas. That evening, Marcel and Cavitt returned with Brazel to examine the piece in his shed; the piece Blanchard had was flown to Fort Worth at that time as well. They stayed the night and went out to the debris field the next morning." "Was there anything unusual about the pieces?" Father Benedict asked.

"Yes," the major answered. "According to what Marcel said afterward, the material was very lightweight and incredibly strong—they tried to bend it by pounding it with a sledgehammer, but couldn't do it. The smallest and thinnest pieces could be crumpled in the hand, but returned completely to their former state. The material was also impervious to scratching and heat, and several pieces had some unidentifiable imprinting. They spent the entire day at the site, and by nightfall Marcel and Cavitt had loaded the trunk of their vehicles with fragments, and went back to the base, although Marcel stopped at his home first at 2:00 a.m., and showed it to his wife and son."

"This guy isn't still alive, is he?" asked Malcolm.

"No, Major Marcel died of cancer in 1978—in fact, it was his terminal diagnosis that prompted him to break his oath of silence and tell his story. We worried about this breach at the time, but we knew we could count on the media to paint Marcel as a slightly deranged, pathetic figure. His son is still alive, though. Later that morning at 7:30, base officers met regarding the debris, and guards were assigned to the access roads leading to the field. A couple of hours later, troops arrived at the site to begin a cleanup. Then, at 11:00 a.m., Colonel Blanchard made a decision that earned Roswell a place in UFO lore."

"What did he do?" wondered Malcolm.

"He ordered the base public relations officer, Lieutenant Walter Haut, to issue a press release to the local radio station, KGFL, as well as to the town newspaper, that the 500th Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force, Roswell Army Air Field, had recovered a flying saucer. The story spread all over the world, and wound up in the nation's most prestigious newspaper, the *New York Times*."

"What was the reaction in the town?" asked Father Benedict.

"Chaotic. Phone lines at the base, at the sheriff's office, and at the newspaper and radio station were completely tied up. The sheriff tried to send some deputies to the site, but by then the MPs had their orders to block access to the site to anyone except military personnel. They didn't want anyone to see anything, especially the bodies."

"Bodies?" Melissa marveled.

"Yes," the major replied. "One of the craft occupants had apparently been thrown from the craft, but the others were inside. One was still alive, but the military didn't know it until all the bodies had been brought to the base. They were each about four feet in height, had light gray skin color, heads that seemed disproportionately large for their bodies, and large black eyes. You're all familiar with the description by now due to media saturation—again, one of our attempts at acclimating the public. That's a subject for later."

"At least that's how the lore has come down to us," interjected Deidre.

"Yes, that's right," he said with a defiant stare. "One of you has recently seen the proof— isn't that correct, Dr. Bandstra?" he asked, never moving his gaze from Deidre.

"Yes," Neil intoned somewhat reluctantly, as though disturbed by both the question and his own response.

"I'm a little surprised at your skepticism, Dr. Harper. I had thought you had accepted the facts by now."

"Hey, I don't doubt there were bodies. I'm just skeptical they were genuine aliens."

"Are you saying they were fake?"

"No," Deidre replied.

"So you don't accept the Air Force's 1997 report that the bodies were actually test dummies?"

"Geeze, no thinking person would," she smirked.

"I remember seeing that conference on CNN," Mark spoke up. "It sounded to me at the time like the Air Force explained what happened very well."

"No offense, Mark, but had you done any reading on the Roswell incident prior to seeing that conference?" she asked.

"No, I just heard about it on the news leading up to the televised conference."

"That explains why you bought it then. I have to admit, that before that conference, I doubted if anything weird happened at Roswell at all. As Major Lindsay will surely explain to us when he continues, the whole Roswell story depends on several events: whether Mac Brazel was forced to recant his original story; whether General Ramey allowed actual debris from the field to be photographed by news photographers; and if he had the debris switched prior to the publicity shots. I was ready to conclude that the switch never took place, and that Jesse Marcel didn't recognize the material because he wasn't privy to the crashed vehicle's design which was being test flown by the Air Force. But when I saw the conference, I was led to believe there was indeed a cover up."

"Why was that?" asked Malcolm.

"Because the Air Force's explanation was so . . . so ridiculously insipid. No one with even a basic familiarity with the Roswell events could have accepted what the Air Force's Colonel Haynes was saying. The high point—or low point, depending on your perspective—came when Colonel Haynes explained that the bodies were re-ally test dummies used by the Air Force as part of a secret weather balloon project called Project Mogul. Not only did he mistakenly connect the dummies to Mogul, but the dummies he displayed were very human in appearance and all over five feet tall. Even better, the dummies were blue, and none of the descriptions of the bodies match their appearance!"

"Maybe the witnesses remembered incorrectly," offered Kevin.

"That's the kicker," she responded. "One of the reporters actually knew that the

Air Force only used those dummies beginning in the early 1950s. That brave soul dared ask Colonel Haynes about this fact, documented in the Air Force's own archives, inquiring as to how these dummies could be associated with the Roswell incident. Colonel Haynes—and I'm not making this up, I promise—said with a straight face that all the witnesses to the Roswell event, which number in the hundreds, had apparently suffered from what he termed 'time compression'—that is, they all had, over the years and without exception, remembered an event that actually happened in the early fifties as having happened in 1947!"

"You've got to be kidding," said Melissa, holding back a laugh.

"He's not," Brian backed her up, chuckling. "I saw the same conference. It was truly unbelievable."

"But what about the headlines—all over the world, dated July 1947?" Melissa asked incredulously.

"Beats me," said Brian. "I don't think there was a person in the room that wasn't wondering if Colonel Haynes had misspoken badly. When he was questioned on his response, he stuck to it."

"Absolutely," Deidre agreed. "It was at that point I knew he'd been sent out like a lamb to the media slaughter."

"I know Colonel Haynes," Major Lindsay broke in. "He's a good, loyal officer. He was told what to say—to back up the Air Force's written report no matter what, and that report insists that the bodies were those dummies. But your intuition is correct—the conference was actually part of a planned conditioning program. The effect we were aiming for was what you described in regard to yourself—that something that sounded so awkward couldn't be completely true. Once we took steps to reveal what we know of the extraterrestrial presence, the premeditated buffoonery of that conference could easily be referenced, not only for its influence on hearers, but also as proof of our positive intentions. We were a little taken aback that the major media—recall that the conference was during the day, when most professionals are at work—did not report the snafu that evening. We knew they had not and would not do any serious investigation into the whole Roswell incident, and that they are predisposed to reject the very idea of extraterrestrials, but we thought they would at least get the word of the inconsistency out. Turns out we've manipulated them so effectively over the years, that their disbelief is pure reflex. They just re-reported the Air Force's explanation, and then chuckled through their newsbytes. Haynes' twisted logic never saw the light of day on the major networks. You'd only catch it if you listened to it live, or got a transcript off the Internet."

"I'd like to hear what Deidre thinks the bodies were if they weren't aliens or dummies," said Brian, his curiosity piqued.

"Yes," the major agreed, equally inquisitive, "what do you think, Dr. Harper? What were we 'actually' covering up if not alien remains?"

"Sure, I'll give you my little theory, but first I'd like to ask Neil something. Have you seen any live aliens?"

"No, just the bodies in cold storage."

"Do you have any training in anatomy or special effects?" "You know I don't."

"How do you know it was real then?"

"Well ... I'd heard we had such things prior to seeing them. I just supposed I was looking at the proof."

"So you were sort of expecting to see such a thing."

"I guess that's possible—but I still think it was real. It seemed very real."

"It is real, and it was alive and I have been trained in anatomy," Dr. Marcus said confidently, finally getting involved in the discussion. "I've autopsied every specimen in this base—analyzed the tissues, seen their DNA. They are certifiably real. Why are you so opposed to the notion?"

"Don't get the wrong impression," Deidre held up her hands. "It's not that I am opposed to the idea that there really could be aliens, or that the story Major Lindsay is unfolding is true. It's just that I don't connect Roswell with any of this, and, quite frankly, until I actually see a real-live alien being, I'm not going to be convinced. I don't know you, Dr. Marcus, and in view of the way we've been led around by the nose to this point, I'll openly ask if anyone can give me a reason to trust you. I think it's fair to say that neither I nor anyone else here can be completely sure that we aren't being used even now—your duplicity does make that a fair suspicion, whether you acknowledge it or not. In today's world, anything can be faked. Take that hokey Alien Autopsy film, for instance—surely you're not going to tell us that's genuine, are you?"

"Of course not," answered Major Lindsay, "it was a fake, but it served its purpose."

"You mean you guys knew all about it?"

"We funded it. I have to admit I was impressed by the ensuing analysis among ufologists. Some of them really have a lot of integrity and leave no stone unturned in their critique of the things we put out there to condition the public. Of course they don't know we're the ones either doing it or arranging for it to be done."

"Well, in my mind, that proves my point," noted Deidre, "I for one will reserve positive judgment until I see and touch for myself. For such an extraordinary claim I personally need extraordinary proof."

"Your position is reasonable," Colonel Ferguson added in a serious tone, "and understandable. I hope we can count on bipartisan objectivity, however. We have admitted deceiving you, and now we're asking you to believe us. We've made our reasons known, and you yourself said you understood our rationale. I hope you and the others can suspend your disbelief for a while. I'm very confident you'll get the proof you need. We really must be of like mind on this to do our jobs."

"We'll see."

"Now tell us what you think about Roswell. This ought to be interesting."

"I think the Roswell event is best understood in light of what Major Lindsay began with in terms of his history—Operation Paperclip. One of the questions that would have inevitably surfaced in regard to the recovered technology was the effect G-forces created by the incredible speeds and maneuvers at those speeds would have on human beings. In my view, the Paperclip recruits—known Nazis, mind you—argued successfully to their superiors that human beings should be placed in the crafts to see what would happen to the human body. It's no secret that the Nazis did this in Germany; human experimentation was a given there. I think that, as they did in the 'Father-land,' these scientists selected human undesirables—in this case, severely retarded or mongoloid children—for their experiments. Hence the size and appearance of the corpses. No one who saw them—and it would only have been for seconds—would ever expect that humans were in the craft, since we weren't supposed to have such a craft. What do you think would have been the fallout if the *Roswell Daily Record* had



discovered that this craft was developed by Nazis and was being perfected by Nazis on our own government's payroll—and that the ongoing research involved sacrificing the most unfortunate members of human society? I'd say the alien angle was more palatable, and the ensuing cover-up fixed the American attention on the extraterrestrial hypothesis in our psyche. No one would ever think there was anything the government would want to keep under more secrecy than a crashed alien ship. I'm suggesting there is. There you have it."

"That's awesome, girl," Malcolm said with admiration. "It makes sense—it really does."

"It's a fascinating alternative," Brian said thoughtfully. "Imaginative is how I'd describe it," Major Lindsay said dismissively.

"I guess we'll find out maybe," remarked Deidre. "I've had my say, now; I think we'd better move on."

"I agree," noted the major with disdain. "I guess we can pick it up with Major Marcel's trip to Fort Worth on July 8. Major Marcel was ordered to go to Fort Worth to meet with General Ramey. That afternoon Mac Brazel was permitted to go back into town, where-upon a Walt Whitmore, Sr., of radio station KGFL, who interviewed him about the incident, found him. Ironically, at about the same time Brazel was giving this interview, the debris originally flown to General Ramey in Fort Worth was being switched by military personnel with the remnants of a known weather balloon type in General Ramey's office."

"How do you know that?" asked Melissa.

"There's the now famous picture of Jesse Marcel kneeling next to the weather balloon parts. Marcel testified before his death that when he got to Fort Worth, he was taken to Ramey's office, shown the new, planted debris, and told that it was his duty to tell the reporters and photographers who would arrive in minutes that this was part of the wreckage he'd hauled from Brazel's field. If you look carefully at the photo, the 'wreckage' even has a radar detector attached, some-thing Marcel was quite familiar with. You must remember that the personnel at Roswell were top-notch. Roswell was where our nation kept its atomic weapons; it was the only base of this kind. Marcel was the base intelligence officer, and was quite capable in determining what a weather balloon was. In fact, the town of Roswell had had dozens of weather balloons come down in its vicinity. Some were retrieved, but others were allowed to be kept by civilians who found them. Trained officers like Marcel had to be familiar with what needed to be guarded or kept secret and what didn't. Besides, it took three fully loaded C-54s to get all the debris out of Roswell—which was way too much for a Mogul weather balloon. Marcel followed orders, but his deathbed account highlights that this was a lie. Ramey consequently told reporters at this arranged news conference that the officers at Roswell had been fooled."

"What about the headlines? How did they undo all that?" asked Malcolm.

"And Brazel what happened to him?" wondered Kevin.

"Officers from the base found Brazel the next day, July 9, and returned him to the base for interrogation. Brazel's son Billy later testified—accurately, I might add—that he didn't see his father for eight days. Brazel was being interrogated during that time, and was only released after swearing he would not discuss the incident with anyone after that day. He told his son that he wouldn't even talk to him about it, but did say that what he saw was not a weather balloon. Upon his release, military personnel took Brazel back to

radio station KGFL where he gave a revised account of what happened. His recantation didn't go entirely unrewarded, since he was later seen driving around town in a new truck, which everyone in town knew he couldn't have afforded. That same day the military sent their people to all the newspaper and radio offices to recover all copies of Walter Haut's original press re-lease. The *Roswell Daily Record* then printed a retraction of the original story. By nightfall Major Marcel had been flown back to Roswell, and to add to his humiliation, he was ordered to confiscate the pieces he'd left at his home with his son, and tell him and his wife that they couldn't talk about what had happened or he'd lose his military benefits. The military also retrieved the piece from Brazel's shed and one kept by sheriff Wilcox."

"That's pathetic," Malcolm said in disgust.

"No, it's typical," Deidre offered cynically. "Sheriff Wilcox's family was treated even worse," she added. "After they were both dead their granddaughter said that MPs told the sheriff that if he talked, he and his family would be killed."

"I think we'd better keep some perspective," the Colonel said, entering the conversation. "This was all new to us in 1947. We had just entered the Cold War with the Soviets, and the country was coming off four years of war with the Axis powers. It would have terrified U.S. citizens to think that we might have another enemy out there, one which was much more technologically advanced than either the Nazis or us."

"I don't understand something," Kevin said. "What's the connection with all the foo-fighter Nazi technology and what was re-covered at Roswell—assuming your version of events there is correct and Deidre's isn't?"

"The Nazis had alien contact before we did," Major Lindsay answered. "The documentation is sketchy, but they apparently recovered some crashed ships just as we did at Roswell, and were able to reverse-engineer the technology with some limited success. We've been trying to do it since Roswell, too. The German scientists and engineers we brought over here under Operation Paperclip were of great help, but we didn't get everyone we wanted. Some of the leaders of Nazi back-engineering apparently also died during the last months of the war as well."

"So you're saying that the Nazi technology was derived from alien craft?" queried Brian.

"That's right."

"It seems to me that human minds were capable of these technical achievements," Brian responded. "Forgive me, but this dependence on alien visitors reminds me of people who insist that the pyramids could only have been built with extraterrestrial assistance. I'm not a scientist, but I just don't feel compelled to agree."

"I feel like Dr. Scott does," Kevin said curtly. "Anything you show us could have originated purely from human endeavor, no matter how far advanced. I'm sorry; that's just the way it is."

"I understand, Doctor," the Colonel responded, "but part of the reason you feel that way is no doubt due to some of the technological achievements of the twentieth century—correct?"

"Sure."

"It's only fair to tell you then that some of those success stories were the result of our military seeding American businesses with bits of alien knowledge."

"Such as?" Kevin inquired skeptically. The Colonel deferred to Major Lindsay

with a nod.

"Well," the major said thoughtfully, "there's the transistor, for example."

"The transistor!" Kevin exclaimed, losing his characteristic cool. "Bullshit!"

"What exactly do you know about the history of the transistor, Dr. Garvey?" the major asked calmly.

"Not much, except to say it's ludicrous to suggest that we needed alien help to come up with it."

"So, in other words, you know nothing about it?"

Kevin dismissed the observation with a wave of his hand.

"You miss the point, Kevin," the Colonel interrupted. "We're not saying that humans could not have invented the transistor; we're saying they couldn't have done it at the time it appeared."

"What's your proof for all this?" Mark demanded, taking the heat off his friend.

"What about the claims of that general . . . maybe he was a colonel ..." Deidre stammered. "The one that came out with a book a few years ago on stuff like this."

"Corso," Colonel Ferguson completed her thought with transparent disdain. "The late Lieutenant Philip J. Corso. He died shortly after his book was published."

"That's him!" she recalled.

The Colonel and Major Lindsay looked at each other. The Colonel shrugged.

"Colonel Corso is viewed, shall we say," Major Lindsay explained, "by those in our alien contact program as something of a loose cannon."

"Why is that?" asked Father Benedict.

"Some of us feel he violated his oath of silence. At the very least he didn't wait for the Group's approval before he went public. He insisted that he had sworn silence to only one person, his superior, General Arthur Trudeau. When the General died, Corso thought he was free to talk. He had a lot to say, too. He was there at Roswell from the very beginning, and was eventually put in charge of our alien technology transfer program."

"Which did what?" Malcolm asked, intrigued.

"Just what we're talking about. It was Corso's job to come up with potential applications of the alien technology from Roswell and other retrievals for American industry. One such case was the transistor. He negotiated secretly with Bell Laboratories to get them the technology that would enable the creation of the transistor."

"Why haven't the rest of us ever heard of this guy?" asked Mark, the consternation etched on his face.

"I hate to keep repeating this mantra," the Colonel smirked, "but the media doesn't take it seriously. No matter, though; if you're really interested his son, Philip Jr., has been recently publishing his father's handwritten notes and memoirs on the Internet."

"This is all so fascinating," Kevin droned facetiously, "but again—where's the proof of all this technology transfer?"

"You can requisition the papertrail if you like after we're through here," Major Lindsay replied matter-of-factly. "For now I can tell you that prior to 1947, the year of the Roswell crash, there were no transistors in use, only raw germanium and selenium diodes composed of naturally occurring elements. After September of 1947, the entire artificially composed silicon transistor appeared out of no-where at Bell Labs. What was unique and unheard of at the time was that the silicon transistor contained arsenic in trace quantities, which produced unprecedented changes in the conductive properties of the

silicon."

"Any first year electronics student knows that silicon could conduct electricity before 1947," challenged Kevin.

"True," noted Colonel Ferguson, coming to the major's defense, "but before 1947 it had been used as a static collector of electricity. Something quite different than the transistor. Look it up. The patents for the transistor were awarded to Bell Labs in 1948 and 1949. Sure, some day we'd have gotten beyond vacuum tubes, but doesn't it strike you as odd that the greatest scientific minds of the prior two centuries people like Einstein, Marconi, Testa, Fermi, and Faraday never even suspected that ordinary sand could be converted into something of such incredible utility as silicon? It was a completely novel creation."

"What about other countries like the Soviet Union?" Brian asked. "Did they have anything like the transistor?"

"No," answered the major. "The Soviets were still using vacuum tubes well into the seventies."

"Fine," said Kevin curtly, unconvinced, "but I need more than this."

"Perhaps you'd like to see something bigger than a transistor," teased the Colonel.

Kevin's nonplused expression told everyone he was surprised at having his bluff called so readily. Before he could answer the Colonel, the senior officer withdrew a cellular phone from his briefcase and hit the speed-dial.

"Hello . . . yes, this is he . . . tell Dr. Yu we're on our way." The Colonel stood up, as did Major Lindsay and Dr. Bandstra. The rest of the team got the hint and did likewise, still unsure as to what was next.

"From this point on," the Colonel warned them sternly, "it is imperative that you stay close to the rest of the team, since we will be venturing well beyond those areas where you have unescorted access. As long as you're with me, the MPs won't be alarmed. Since your badges won't permit you entry or escape from this part of the Facility, if you try to move about independently your actions will be viewed with suspicion. Our security is trained to shoot to kill should there be any hint of an escape from this portion of the base. Is that clear?"

The members of the team acknowledged the warning.

The Colonel proceeded through the doorway to the conference room and out into the hall. They followed the Colonel about 50 yards down the now familiar corridor in the direction of their living quarters, and, aided by the Colonel's pass card, exited the main corridor through one of the windowless doors lining the passageway. There were two small trams on the other side, waiting for their transport, and the Colonel and Major Lindsay each got behind one of the wheels, the Colonel taking the lead vehicle.

The ride lasted longer than Brian expected it would. There were corridors, ramps, and tunnels that seemed to all look the same. He wondered to himself if they weren't being led in circles just for the sake of confusion.

Finally the trams came to a halt in front of a guardhouse no bigger than his quarters at the Facility, adjacent to which was a knobless door. The small hut was heavily armed, a row of assault rifles having been mounted on the wall inside. Two dark blue sheets of glass about eight inches square were positioned next to the door, the lower about three feet up the wall, the one above it about five and one half feet from the ground. They reminded Brian of a checkout scanner at the grocery store. The Colonel stepped

from his driver's seat and stood at the door, waiting until everyone was gathered around him. He nodded to one of the MPs inside, who looked down at something where he was seated. The Colonel pressed his right palm to the lower square, which lit up at his touch. He kept his palm fixed in position for a few seconds, until the light went off. Next he removed his hat and stood, slightly stooped, in front of the higher pane, touching his nose to the glass. A light quickly scanned his right eye, after which everyone heard a loud click. The door slid open slowly, and the team passed through into a short corridor, adjacent to which was the open guard-house. The MPs gazed at each of them earnestly, as though intent upon memorizing their faces for future reference. The Colonel traversed the corridor, at the end of which was a door identical to those in each member's room, a simple card reader fixed above the handle. The Colonel removed his identification card and paused.

"Remember, please stay with the group at all times," he repeated his earlier admonition. "You'll soon see that those things that make up our everyday preoccupation, the things whose safekeeping with which we've been entrusted for the sake of our nation's benefit, deserve all the security we give them. You may not understand every-thing you see here, but the major and I will do our best to satisfy your curiosity. Oh, and one more thing," he smirked arrogantly, "you'll also finally find out exactly where it is you've been staying."

He quickly swiped the card, and the familiar access light went off.

"Welcome, everyone," he announced as he held the door open, "to Dreamland—the United States Air Force's Groom Lake Facility or, as it's most commonly known, AREA 51."

## CHAPTER 14

"It's kind of fun to do the impossible."

—*Walt Disney*

"MY GOD ..." DEIDRE exclaimed in a whisper, as the team, led by Colonel Ferguson, descended an iron flight of stairs to the ground level of a cavernous hangar. There were no jets or other aircraft on the tarmac, but there was a great deal of bustle along the perimeter of the floorspace. White coated men and women were busy moving in and out of dozens of rooms built into the walls, detectable only by virtue of the clustered windows that allowed visual access to the facility. Coveralled technicians drove small flatbed trams laden with equipment and machinery back and forth between several large work areas whose contents were partially concealed by a translucent tarpaulin draped over the surrounding scaffolding. Brian also took note of several stern-faced MPs, equipped with sidearms and accompanied by large, thick-shouldered German shepherds.

"This place must take up at least a square mile," Melissa added, rendered nearly breathless by the shocking expanse. "I can't believe we've been next to this for all these weeks."

"Actually," Neil responded casually, "you've been on the floor above it. We're roughly a half-mile underground."

"You must be joking," Kevin Garvey muttered in disbelief as the team followed the Colonel.

"No joke Kevin."

"But it's obviously an airplane or jet hangar," he protested.

"A testing hangar to be more precise," Dr. Bandstra corrected him, motioning for Brian to join him at the rear of the procession.

"Whatever what good does a hangar do you when it's underground? How can you test anything? There's no runway or way out."

"We don't need them," the Colonel interrupted, turning momentarily to face the group with a cryptic smile. "This way," he directed them, turning to his right as they reached the floor. "I know they're narrow, but please observe the marked pathways at all times," he warned them, and proceeded with a deliberate gait toward one of three concealed work areas situated adjacent to each other just ahead.

"Please stay within the lines," Malcolm cracked under his breath as he let Mark and Father Benedict pass on in front of him. "Single file!"

"Must you, Malcolm," Deidre complained good-naturedly as he slipped into the line ahead of her.

"Watch it, girl, or you'll get it at recess."

"I still don't understand," Kevin fussed aloud just ahead of Brian and Neil. "Granted the ceiling is pretty high, but how can you test any jets in this environment?"

"Who said anything about testing jets?" Brian said, his voice quivering with excitement. "Does that look like any jet you've seen recently?" He pointed to the image

now emerging behind the tarpaulin.

Kevin's pace slowed, and finally stopped. He stared, mouth agape, at the perfectly round silver craft resting atop a small tapered platform at the heart of the restricted area.

"Kevin," Dr. Bandstra nudged him gently. "You need to keep going; we don't want to put too much distance between us and the rest of the team."

"Yeah . . . right," he murmured, remembering the Colonel's warning, and began to catch up.

"This is awesome, Neil," Brian said enthusiastically as they continued.

"I hope you feel that way in a few hours," his friend replied, somewhat grimly.

"This is just part of the show. What you'll see after this is why I asked for your presence on the team."

"What's that?"

He sighed and, head down with hands in his pockets, walked a few more paces before responding. "When I saw them, I was compelled to believe," he answered. "You will be too. Afterwards, my mind went back to your paper. I insisted you be brought on."

Brian's mind raced as the group arrived at the slit that allowed access through the tarpaulin. A middle-aged Asian man emerged through the opening, and handed the Colonel a clipboard, the contents of which he proceeded to inspect.

"Good afternoon, everyone," he said jovially, his round face beaming, as he placed his pen into the lapel pocket of his lab coat. "It's so nice to have some outsiders."

"You mean earthlings?" quipped Malcolm. Several of the members laughed, but the Colonel greeted his jest with only a scowl. "You'll have to get used to Dr. Bradley."

"Now, now, Colonel," the scientist interjected. "You must all excuse the Colonel," he added, turning toward the team. "He's under a great deal of pressure, much of which is unfortunately caused by my-self. We can be notoriously slow."

"He means meticulous," the Colonel offered, his countenance brightening slightly, "and we wouldn't have it any other way—in fact we can't allow it to be any other way."

"You look familiar, sir," Kevin remarked, peering through the small crowd. "I'm Kevin Garvey have we ever met before?"

"Not personally, Dr. Garvey. You may have seen me during your graduate work at Cal Tech. I taught there before coming here a few years ago." Kevin nodded pleasantly.

"This is Dr. Michael Yu," the Colonel began his introduction, "formerly employed, as you just heard, at Cal Tech. Dr. Yu's Ph.D. is from MIT "

"Awright!" Malcolm interrupted over the Colonel's voice. "—Where his specialty was particle physics. He's in charge of propulsion systems here."

"And back-engineering alien technology?" Mark asked seriously.

"Not much," Dr. Yu admitted. "Most of that was before my time. I'm standing on the shoulders of giants."

"Nazi giants," Deidre grumbled in Father Benedict's direction in a barely audible tone. His glance told her and the others nearby that he didn't consider that the worst possibility.

"You're far too modest, Mike," Neil contradicted him with the compliment.

"I know you're ready," the Colonel said to Dr. Yu, getting the business at hand rolling. "What about the other group?"

"All set to go," he smiled again. "We're ready to take it for a spin when you are."

"Good, give us a few minutes." The Colonel turned and headed for a door located about fifty yards from where they were standing. Neil motioned for everyone to follow him.

"Where are we going?" Father Benedict asked.

"To get a better view," Neil answered.

"This one seems quite good."

"After you, Father," he deflected the comment.

Once through the door, the team began ascending a flight of stairs, which was in turn followed by another, and then yet another, each of which turned to the left. The third set, however, was clearly makeshift, and not part of the permanent structure of the building they were in. It led to an undersized entryway, barely five feet in height. The words "observation deck" were stenciled above the opening. Brian ducked inside, and emerged inside a spacious room, which he estimated was roughly half a basketball court in size. Two rows of cushioned chairs faced a large open window from which the expanse of the hangar was plainly visible. There was no sign of the work area they had just visited.

"Take a seat, everyone," the Colonel directed. "There'll be enough since Dr. Bandstra and I will be standing." Brian moved toward the final seat on the first row, next to Melissa Kelley, but as he sat down, she abruptly stood and, with a glare, made her way past the others already seated and sat down in the back row. Father Benedict quickly filled her space and placed a hand on his shoulder.

From the seat next to Father Benedict, Deidre leaned forward and gave Brian a curious glance. "You two have a fight?"

"I think it has something to do with the fact that I have a pulse."

"Ignore her," Father Benedict whispered.

Brian sighed.

"Oooh yeah! Will ya take a look at that!" Malcolm exclaimed, sitting up in his seat. The words were barely out of his mouth when the shiny hull of a classic 'flying saucer' floated in front of the window, arresting the view of everyone. Brian wasn't sure, but it looked to him like the very bottom of the craft, which emitted a strange bluish hue, was spinning.

The Colonel picked up a phone hanging on the wall next to a panel of small lights and buttons. His only words were "we're ready," and hung up the phone. A few seconds later the craft in view went into a series of maneuvers. They began simply, with several brief horizontal and vertical trips to each side of the hangar and floor-to-ceiling, respectively.

"How does it do that?" wondered Kevin incredulously. "There's no evidence of exhaust, no engine even."

"There's no sound either," commented Mark. "Just that weird glow underneath."

Suddenly the craft stopped in a dead hover in its original position. Without warning it suddenly accelerated to the far end of the hangar at an incredible speed, covering the distance in under a second. It was as though it had been shot out of a gun, yet still visible to the naked eye.

"It's coming back—right for us!" Kevin bellowed before any-one could process what he or she'd just seen. "Everybody down!" Only Neil, Major Lindsay, and the



Colonel resisted the perfectly natural inclination to cry out in terror and take cover.

"Relax, people," the Colonel said with a grin. "What's the problem?"

Mark Chadwick picked himself off the floor and peered cautiously out the window. The saucer was hovering silently as before, although this time much closer to where they'd been seated.

"Hope you guys have fun scraping the pilots off their wind-shield after that stunt," Kevin griped, irritated and embarrassed.

"Completely unnecessary," the Colonel said cockily. "Take a look for yourself."

The craft slowly rotated 180 degrees before them, revealing two large, rectangular portals, one above the other. The upper panel slid open to the side slowly as they watched. Dr. Yu and two pilots waved to the team from where they were seated inside the craft.

"How is that possible?" Melissa wondered aloud. "He doesn't even have a hair out of place."

"They should have been atomized," Kevin argued. "I don't have a deathwish or anything, but I'm not going to believe this isn't some kind of slight-of-hand stunt until I fly in one of those myself."

"We thought you might say that," the Colonel smirked mischievously, and pressed one of the buttons on the panel next to the phone. A thick pane of glass appeared at the side of the open window and slid slowly across their line of sight.

"Wait a minute ..." Deidre said apprehensively, ". . . does this mean what I think it does?"

"Mother of God, we're inside one!" Father Benedict ex-claimed in an agitated voice, and rose hurriedly from his seat.

"Please sit down, Father," Neil requested in an understanding voice.

"But my heart—I'm much older than the rest of you," he said, his breathing becoming labored.

"There's nothing to fear," Major Lindsay assured him, coming to his side. "You'll feel nothing, believe me. The only precaution any of you need take is to keep looking straight ahead. Otherwise you may get nauseous. There's no risk of danger."

"No risk!" Andrew protested.

"Easy, Father," Deidre took his arm and led him back to his seat next to her. "You guys better let him calm down first," she demanded, staring at the Colonel.

"Of course."

Father Benedict sat back in his chair, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. He nodded for the Colonel to proceed after a couple minutes. The Colonel picked up the phone.

"You're clear for maneuvers, captain."

The team members braced themselves for acceleration, but felt nothing happen. "Look straight ahead, out the window," the Colonel directed. Suddenly the panorama of the hangar changed drastically—up, down, sideways each time the visual perspective changing in only a fraction of a second, like watching a television while channel surfing. The craft then went into a slow 360 degree circuit, whereupon the team was able to watch the entire perimeter of the hangar pass before their eyes.

As soon as the saucer completed its circumference, the far wall of the hangar appeared to rapidly come into view before their eyes and then disappear, like separate frames of a slide show, albeit one that kept reappearing in alternating sequence over and

over. Their craft was accelerating from end to end, as they had seen the first one do. The experience was disorienting at first, but no one became ill.

"He'll slow it down now," Colonel Ferguson prepped them, "so that you can see you're actually in motion and not being visually deceived. Some of you may find this frightening, but you're in no danger. If you start to feel sick, just close your eyes; there will be no sensation of motion, so you needn't worry about that."

The craft repeated its end-to-end pattern, each time decelerating. The visual effect this time was like going forward and back-ward on a roller coaster but at ten times the speed. There was no sense of gravitational force. Brian was among several who had to avoid looking. Colonel Ferguson picked up the phone again and paused.

"Set her down."

The saucer landed a few hundred yards from where the craft had been docked earlier. Those team members who could looked out the window and watched a tram tow a tall, portable stairway out to the craft. In a few minutes they were all outside, and the Colonel was escorting them to the perimeter zone. The team was abuzz with amazed curiosity. Dr. Garvey was especially talkative, and tailed the Colonel like an enamored schoolboy.

"How can G-forces be totally eliminated?" he inquired excitedly. "Where did we get antigravity?"

"I think we've already told you where we got it," the Colonel answered cockily, "and Dr. Yu admitted as much. We'd like to take credit for it, but—"

"Aliens?" he could hardly believe he was saying it without finding the idea as objectionable.

"Absolutely."

"Can we talk to Dr. Yu?"

"Two hours maximum up until the noon hour, unless Dr. Yu is in the middle of something more important."

"Why is that?" asked Mark, trying to read the Colonel's expression.

"No need for suspicion, Mark. We still have a lot of other information to cover with Major Lindsay's assistance, and besides, Dr. Yu has work to do. We can't afford to monopolize his time, and I won't dictate his schedule. If you need more time with him you can arrange an appointment. He'll be along in a minute; we'll wait in a conference room off to the side here." The Colonel proceeded to usher the group to the location he'd mentioned. The smiling Dr. Yu entered the room a few minutes later.

"Hello again everyone I hope you all feel okay."

"I think we're all fine," Kevin spoke up, uninterested in containing his enthusiasm and, for the moment, forgetting the note he'd received earlier that morning. "How the hell do those things work? It just seems impossible!"

"Well, I'll try to answer as many questions as I can but the Colonel has told me that most of you have very little physics training, some none at all. I'll try not to bore anyone and keep it simple. If you want more details we can talk later as well."

"Fine," Kevin replied impatiently, "now how do you guys do this?"

"How many of you remember the 1997 experiment where British and Dutch scientists levitated a frog? It was a pretty hot news story across the nation."

"I remember that," Malcolm acknowledged. Several others did as well.

"Good," Dr. Yu continued. "The way they accomplished this feat was to put the

frog inside a magnetic cylinder and then create a magnetic field at least a million times stronger than that of the Earth. The idea was to create a field strong enough to distort the orbits of electrons in the frog's atoms. The result was the magnetic field pushed the frog away from earth's magnetic field, which made the frog float."

"What does that have to do with UFOs?" asked Deidre.

"Pardon, me, Doctor," the scientist said pleasantly, "but this craft is not unidentified." His correction drew chuckles from around the room.

"Okay, you got me."

"The connection between the frog experiment and what you just experienced goes back to Einstein's theory of general relativity."

"I don't recall Einstein working on anti-gravity," Kevin said.

"According to Einstein," Dr. Yu explained, "spinning objects can distort gravity. Until 1989 it was thought the effect would be far too small to measure in the laboratory."

"What happened in 1989?" Father Benedict asked.

"I should say before we get into this much further that I don't like to use the term 'antigravity;' 'gravitational modification' is the more accurate term for what we do. The term 'antigravity' really only applies to natural forces in space that contradict gravitational forces. Anyway, in 1989, Dr. Ning Li of the University of Alabama in Huntsville formulated a theory. Dr. Li predicted that if a magnetic field were applied to a superconductor, lattice ions within the superconductor would begin to spin rapidly and create a miniscule gravitational field."

"You've lost me already," Brian lamented.

"Hold on keep listening. In 1992, two scientists, Podkletnov and Nieminen, tested some of Dr. Li's ideas. They discovered that spinning a superconducting ceramic disk at 5,000 rpm can produce a 2 percent reduction in the weight of non-magnetic objects placed over the spinning disk."

"Hmmm . . . fascinating," Deidre responded.

"And Einstein," Malcolm thought aloud, "realized gravity and acceleration were indistinguishable in certain experiments. That would mean modifying gravity could also modify the effects of acceleration. Hence, no G-forces."

"That's right," Dr. Yu confirmed his musing.

"So that spinning light-thing we saw under the saucer was a superconductor—that actually repelled the craft away from earth's gravity?" asked Melissa.

"Yes—pretty much," he answered, pleased at a novice's ability to see the connection. "There are technical problems with the way you've stated it, but that's basically it. The phenomenon is known as the Meissner Effect. Wonderful job!"

"I've read some of the work on Dr. Li's idea," interrupted Kevin. "Didn't NASA do some work on trying to prove her theory?"

"Yes, at the Marshal Space Flight Center, but the biggest disk they ever made was only twelve inches in diameter. We've obviously gone way beyond that. In effect the superconductivity we're talking about generates its own gravitational field to counteract and, to a limited extent, overcome, the earth's gravitational field. In deep space the effect works a little differently. The technology you've observed, when combined with the bismuth-magnesium layered hull of the craft, results in the creation of a gravitational shield."

"Why is it called a shield?" asked Father Benedict.

"Basically, the repelling effect serves to create a gravity-free area around the craft. Once the craft escapes the pull of earth's gravity, the gravitational shield around the craft actually functions to *pull* the craft through space at speeds close to the speed of light, rather than propelling it. The craft simply goes in the direction the shield is concentrated."

"This is bizarre," Mark commented.

"Just different."

"Something doesn't make sense to me," Kevin remarked.

"Yes?" Dr. Yu waited.

"The power source. If it took a magnetic field a million times greater than earth's to lift a frog—and the electricity needed for that would be quite a bit—how could we even begin to generate the kind of power necessary to propel a craft like the one we were in at such speeds while under the effect of earth's gravitational pull? I understand the theory, but it seems well beyond our grasp to put it into practice."

"And along with that," Brian added, "everything you've said to this point is clearly of human origin—unless you're going to tell us Einstein was an alien."

Dr. Yu nodded enthusiastically. "You've both made significant observations—except the part about Einstein, of course! Remember I was only using the frog experiment as an illustration; we have an altogether different method of generating the necessary electricity. Human scientists had been tinkering with the idea during the first half of the twentieth century; it's based in part on the work of Nicola Tesla. We extract the necessary electrical energy from the environment at the molecular level. Any source of molecular heat will work, actually. We prefer to use either the heat from the sun or from the radioactive decay of the earth. The electricity is removed from the mechanical vibrations of molecules on already-moving electrons by a special interface circuit called a parametric circuit. The energy is then funneled inside a conduit called a tuned cavity resonator, which in turn directs the energy through and over the superconductor, causing it to spin."

"*Human* scientists?" Deidre questioned uneasily, indifferent to everything the scientist had said beyond the unnerving reference.

"Yes," Dr. Yu replied curiously. "It was the visitors who helped us fill in the technological gaps. They'd already mastered the principles involved, and helped us perfect our own propulsion system."

"Yeah, in exchange for our looking the other way when they felt like treating our people like guinea pigs," sneered Deidre. "You might look at them as heroes or something; to me and the people I've seen exploited they're nothing but celestial proctologists. They disgust me, frankly."

"I understand your feelings—" Dr. Yu began.

"Do you? How could you, unless you've been a victim'?"

"Well, I haven't been a victim, as you put it, but I do think you're being unreasonable—and hypocritical," Dr. Yu countered, never losing his genuinely pleasant persona.

"And how's that?" Deidre shot back, her voice more intense.

"Honestly, Doctor," the scientist intoned with deliberation, "if you knew that the path to saving your race went through the door of human experimentation, would you cease your work? Would you really sacrifice the future of your people in order to avoid

the distasteful?"

"I'd look for other ways to—"

"That isn't the question," he stopped her. "Would you condemn the rest of us in this room and our children to extinction to keep your own moral sense intact? After all, that is the dilemma from the aliens' perspective. They need a place to stay is there room at the inn?"

Deidre squirmed in her chair as Dr. Yu and the others waited for a response. Brian glanced at Father Benedict, whose face bore an expression of deep reflection.

"Well?" Dr. Yu pressed.

"I guess not—but I'd trust my own motives, and the motives of fellow humans, before I'd trust some unknown entity."

"If they in fact exist," Brian added.

A hush fell over the room. Dr. Yu cast a confused glance at the Colonel. "Is there a problem?" he finally asked.

"We've told them about the visitors and about our problem the reason they're here," the Colonel responded, "but a good number of our members can't seem to accept that the visitors are real."

"Oh . . . I see," he said thoughtfully. "That's not surprising. Have they seen Dr. Marcus' laboratory?"

"We have a date with Ian later this afternoon, actually," the Colonel answered, looking at Dr. Marcus, who nodded politely.

"Very good."

"The Colonel said we could have some of your time this morning, Dr. Yu—may we? I for one have more questions," Kevin asked in anticipation.

"Certainly, and for those of you who may get bored with the technical jargon, I could have one of my assistants take you through more of the craft itself—with the Colonel's permission, of course."

"Absolutely," Colonel Ferguson assured them. "We need to meet back here at noon for a brief recess. Major Lindsay has a good deal to cover this afternoon before we breathe life into a few more myths," he remarked, looking at Brian.

## CHAPTER 15

"It is my thesis that flying saucers are real, and that they are space ships from another solar system."

—Dr Herman Oberth—  
*Father of modern rocketry*  
The American Weekly, October 24, 1954

KEVIN GLANCED AT his watch nervously as the tram in which he was riding made its way back toward the non-restricted zone of the Facility that they had come to call home. It was 12:27. He silently debated with himself whether following up on the note he'd received was worth the risk, or even necessary after what he'd just seen and heard. Dr. Yu had been most impressive, answering each question he or any of the others had offered with aplomb. The technology was exponentially beyond anything he'd ever heard of in graduate school or read in professional journals. It was truly otherworldly, from his perspective. *What could I possibly see now that would change my mind? What would make me doubt the project?*

The tram came to a halt and the MP driving the vehicle carded the door for the team, eyeing each of them unflinchingly until they'd passed to the other side of the barrier. The team headed for the cafeteria for the abbreviated mealtime they'd been given. Kevin had half an hour to be at his forbidden destination and back and only two minutes now to make a decision.

"Not hungry?" Mark Chadwick asked, breaking his concentration.

"Not really," he replied with a calm that surprised himself. "There's something I want to look up back in my room; I can grab a snack there."

"Suit yourself, but don't be late. I think this afternoon will be even more interesting."

"See you then," Kevin acknowledged, and turned away. He glanced again at his watch and quickened his step, counting each door he passed. He arrived at his checkpoint with twenty seconds to spare. He looked back at the cafeteria. He was alone in the hallway. He took a deep breath and tried the door handle. It released as though it had been expecting his touch, and he passed through. He hurriedly set the timer on his watch and followed the directions he'd committed to memory as instructed, glancing only at his watch to track his time and scan each turn for guards. He had no way of knowing, however, how close he was to his objective. He quickened his pace to a trot as he saw his remaining time drop under one minute. The illusory footrace ended with only a few more strides. His eyes widened as he read the phrase on the door: Auroral Research Observation. Winded initially by apprehension but now by anticipation, he impatiently watched the seconds tick past 12:40. He placed his hand on the latch, and again the door yielded.

Kevin found himself on the upper tier of an expansive, auditorium-style room that reminded him immediately of the old Mission Control center he'd seen on television as a

child during the NASA Apollo missions. He silently descended onto the main floor via a carpeted set of stairs to his left. True to his unknown informant's word, the room's four computer consoles were unoccupied. Once on the bottom, he gazed, mouth agape, at the massive view screen. All the earth's continents and oceans were displayed on adjacent panels, arranged in a panoramic display. Wind currents, color-coded according to altitude and atmospheric layer, were superimposed holographically on each continent, their pathways and directions being updated at one minute intervals. Ocean currents were also likewise indicated. Symbols and data readouts on each panel informed onlookers of current weather conditions, wind velocity, temperature, barometric pressure, as well as the time oriented to the southwestern United States.

A muffled expletive escaped his lips as he noted he had only six minutes left. He moved deliberately from console to console, trying to determine what it was that he was supposed to glean from this excursion. Suddenly a high-pitched beeping sounded. Kevin stepped away from the computers, fearful that he'd triggered an alarm. The beeping stopped after only a few seconds. He eyed the door nervously, but nothing happened. Four minutes left. He turned back to the view screen and his eye immediately took note of several blinking icons on the lower left quadrant of the map that displayed the United States. He stepped closer with the hope of interpreting the activity. *What the hell?* He stared at the icons, which he could now see had appeared over the southwestern corner of the state of New Mexico. He looked incredulously at the clock, which was accurately synchronized with his own watch. *No way—this is impossible; its July for God's sake.* As soon as the words formed in his mind the answer came. He understood why he'd been sent here, why he'd been singled out—and how the team was still being deceived. *I can't believe they can actually do this.*

*Oh, but we can,* a voice suddenly invaded his mind. Kevin whirled around, but his senses were suddenly overtaken by an invisible force, his mind commandeered by an unseen intruder. His fore-head began to throb violently, and his eyes rolled backward. The sensation of being levitated off his feet never registered in his brain. *I don't like being deceived ... who sent you here?*

Kevin's body dangled in midair for a few more seconds, then stiffened tightly for just a moment before his limbs began to flail wildly and involuntarily. His head jerked rapidly from side to side. Blood began to trickle from the corner of his mouth. Then, just as abruptly as the assault had begun, his limp body fell to the floor with a dull thud. The assailant turned silently toward a neighboring wall and passed through it effortlessly.

\*\*\*

"It's five past one where the hell is Dr. Garvey?" the Colonel demanded impatiently, surveying the team. "He knows better than this—*well?*"

"All I know," Mark replied uneasily, taken back by his friend's uncharacteristic tardiness, "is that he skipped lunch to read something in his room."

The Colonel scowled and took the phone from its resting place on the table. Malcolm glanced curiously over at Mark while the Colonel barked orders that Kevin's room be accessed on the double and that he be escorted immediately to the conference room. The team waited tensely in the awkward silence, anticipating their colleague's arrival and the ensuing tirade. Several minutes that seemed like eons passed as the

Colonel paced behind Major Lindsay's chair. Instead of the expected sound of the door's security latch, the phone rang. The Colonel stared at it for a moment, puzzled, and then picked it up.

"Well then where is he? Check the logs . . . What do you mean he's not on them?" the Colonel bellowed, his alarm turning into exasperation. "Oh . . . I see. Get your asses to those checkpoints, then, ... If he doesn't turn up, I want every inch of this base searched, dammit! "

The Colonel slammed the phone down on its base and spread his hands on the shining, mahogany table, head down in concentration.

"What is it, Vernon?" Neil ventured.

"It appears," the Colonel replied after a few seconds of hesitation, "that Dr. Garvey was a little too impressed this afternoon . . . or that he's become bored with our company."

"I'm afraid I don't"

"Garvey isn't in his quarters!" the Colonel shouted angrily, "and never was, according to the security logs."

"He didn't stay on the other side," Mark offered, "I talked with him right outside the cafeteria."

"I know . . . someone let him out into the base ... there were some doorways whose locking mechanisms were overridden from the inside."

"What?" Major Lindsay exclaimed in dismay.

"Who was it?"

"We don't know . . . it was a master pass key."

Brian cast a glance at Father Benedict, who appeared deep in thought, his chin on his chest. The rest of the team looked almost as shocked at the security lapse as at the unveiling of the technology earlier that morning.

"What does this mean?" Melissa asked. "How could it hap-pen in a place like this?"

"I don't suppose," the Colonel intoned grimly, lifting his head, "that any of you have been contacted by any other base personnel than those you know are connected to this project—have you?"

No one spoke, but watched each other carefully for any hint that an answer might be forthcoming.

"If you have been, and don't tell me right now, you run the risk of my considering such a future revelation as a violation of your signed security oath. I can and will make your life a living hell if this project is in any way compromised . . . go ahead and get us started, Major."

"Yes sir."

Kevin's eyes opened lazily, and his consciousness was immediately filled with intolerable pain. Every joint, every muscle, every fiber of his being ached mercilessly. He could feel the blood in his mouth, the nausea in his stomach, the erratic heartbeat in his chest. As his vision cleared he took note of the analog clock on one of the view screen's panels: 12:55. He had to leave a message, to warn the others.

Mustering all his strength, he began to roll toward one of the computer consoles,



each revolution producing crushing pain. Breath-less, he reached the stool and desperately pulled himself on top of it, gasping and wincing with each inch of elevation. He came to rest on his side, his torso clumsily strewn over the seat. He smiled to himself weakly as he recognized he could navigate his way to the facility's email program. Using his right index finger, he typed an address and then tabbed to the subject line. Without warning, his chest was suddenly seized with terrific pain. He clutched instinctively at his heart with his right hand, his body writhing in agony. He felt himself losing his balance and grabbed at the keyboard, bringing it crashing to the floor with him as he toppled from his makeshift perch. Panting, he pulled the keyboard toward him. In silent desperation he took note of the small green light that told him it still functioned. The room slowly began to spin, but he gritted his teeth where he lay, trying to clear his mind. His fingers stumbled through the alphabet eleven times, and then hit the required keystroke combination to send the message. With his last ounce of strength, he jerked the keyboard's cord from the computer. A satisfied smirk creased his mouth as the blackness claimed him.

## CHAPTER 16

"I know that neither Russia nor this country has anything even approaching such high speeds and maneuvers. Behind the scenes high ranking officers are soberly concerned about UFOs, but through official secrecy and ridicule many citizens are led to believe that the unknown flying objects are nonsense . . . To hide the facts, the Air Force has silenced its personnel."

*—Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter  
former Director of the CIA,  
1962 NICAP press conference in Washington D.C.*

"I'D LIKE YOU to turn to page fourteen in your notebooks," the major began. "My goal is to introduce you to how we've been able to cloud public judgment on UFOs, both in terms of debunking evidence when it did escape our protection, and by means of the creation of phony public inquiries into UFOs whose conclusions were quite predetermined. In short, we've historically made it our business to publicly 'address' the issue and so inform the masses that UFO's were explainable by a variety of means, and of no national security concern, while secretly and simultaneously maintaining UFOs and their occupants as our highest classified national security priority."

"That sounds contradictory," Father Benedict opined. "You've told us before how certain things have been put before the public as a sort of 'conditioning' process, and then, simultaneously, you claim to have resisted disclosures, even resorting to deliberate disinformation. It makes me question not only your words but your motives."

"Let me explain, Father," the major paused. "Initially, the military wanted no disclosure at all. As you'll see momentarily, most of what we've done in terms of 'conditioning' the public has been recent—since the late Seventies. It was at that time that certain events within and without our intelligence network, such as FOIA slipups, convinced the Group that disclosure would be inevitable—so we wanted to be in control of it."

"That's understandable."

"We also couldn't lose sight of the fact that we must not panic the public. We figured that by keeping up our public resistance to the notion of UFOs, we would appear to be consistent to the public, and by discreetly releasing leaks and enlisting popular cultural media, such as Hollywood, we could make disclosure gradual and to our liking. The public could be conditioned to the idea over time, in preparation for the inevitable—but we would string the process out indefinitely through continued denial. The issue was control."

"You mentioned Hollywood," noted Melissa. "What's that all about?"

"Surely you've noticed the spate of extraterrestrial movies since the late Seventies," the major responded. "We decided back then that the popular culture would be especially susceptible to being molded through this medium, so we had our own agents go under cover to befriend script writers and pass certain ideas onto them. In a few cases we even solicited studio executives directly, paying them for their services and their

secrecy."

"So did our government's program for all this start with the Roswell case?" asked Melissa.

"No," answered the major, "Kenneth Arnold's sighting of June 24, 1947 gets primacy of place for what we would think of as the American interest in UFOs. In the wake of the Arnold sighting and Roswell, the Chief of Staff of the Army Air Force, General Carl T. Spaatz, asked the Director of the Air Force Office of Intelligence, General George McDonald, to start seriously investigating the phenomenon. Eventually this job was assigned to Brigadier General George Schulgen, who directed the Air Force Office of Intelligence Requirements Collections Office. General Schulgen asked General Nathan Twining, Commander of the Air Materiel Command at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base—which, by the way, at the time was named simply 'Wright Field'—to prepare a preliminary study of the reports dealing with the so-called flying saucers. Anyone recognize the name Wright-Patterson from what we've discussed thus far?"

"That was where most of the Roswell stuff was taken, right?" asked Malcolm.

"Exactly. General Schulgen also asked the FBI for their help in providing background checks on individuals who reported sightings in order to weed out the hoaxes. These preliminary steps became known as Project SAUCER, which would eventually change names when it evolved into a more formal inquiry, Project SIGN. On September 23, 1947 General Twining sent a report to General Schulgen in which General Twining offered the opinion that the flying saucers were real, not imaginary. It was this conviction that led him to request further investigation into the phenomenon. On the next page facing the Twining letter you'll notice part of an FBI memorandum from the same year, by the way—that, at the top, references the earlier request from General Schulgen that the FBI get involved in investigating flying disks. General Schulgen, prompted by General Twining's belief that the phenomenon was genuine, was trying to take some action."

"Looks like the recipient of the memo wasn't real interested," remarked Malcolm.

"In reference to the first recipient, that does seem the case," the major replied, "because most of the reports turned out to be hoaxes. Nevertheless, at the bottom of the memo a second author, a Clyde Tolson, wrote, 'I think we should do this,' before passing it on to its ultimate destination which was whom? Look at the handwriting at the bottom."

"Hmmpf . . . none other than J. Edgar Hoover himself," Deidre said, shaking her head.

"Look at what the director said in response to the memo and Mr. Tolson's suggestion. It's a little hard to read—the handwriting is legible for the most part—but Hoover writes: 'I would do it but before agreeing to it we must insist upon full access to discs recovered. For instance in the Sw case the Army grabbed it and wouldn't let us have it for cursory examination.' Take special note of the reference to the 'Sw case'—does anyone know what 'Sw' might—and I can say with certainty that it does—stand for?" asked Major Lindsay.

"Southwest?" offered Melissa.

"Quite correct," the major replied, "as in Roswell. What we have here is an internal FBI memo testifying that something unusual was recovered at Roswell—part of the flying saucer."

"Ohhh boy," mused Malcolm quietly.

"Still doesn't prove they're extraterrestrial," Brian noted.

"And again, Doctor, you miss the point," Major Lindsay retorted.

"So what is the point then?"

"That the public never saw the Twining letter or the Hoover memo. What I'm trying to establish—and will, barring lengthy interruptions that *within* the government flying saucers were a serious matter."

"What about more public inquiries?" asked Father Benedict. "You alluded a moment ago that they weren't serious—isn't that an overstatement?"

"In terms of spending tax dollars and creating a diversion, yes. In terms of admitting any concern over the phenomenon or objectively studying it, no. Every public inquiry—and I mean every—was an orchestrated, deliberate debunking campaign, and reached conclusions that were totally at odds with internal concerns and opinions. We practiced absolute, premeditated duplicity. Flip to the next page and you'll see a memo to then CIA Director, Walter Bedell, from his Deputy Director, H. Marshal Chadwell—which plainly says at point 3 that 'flying saucers pose two elements of danger which have national security implications. The first involves mass psychological considerations and the second concerns the vulnerability of the United States by air attack.' You see, contrary to public statements, the U.S. government has always been concerned with UFOs, and has always known they are a potential threat to national security. Publicly, the government carried out a premeditated cover-up of the whole subject. We fed only the most obvious cases of fakery to our public studies for easy debunking; we intimidated witnesses; and we ridiculed the phenomenon in the major media. Projects SAUCER and SIGN were part of this effort."

"But I still don't understand the goal—why?" Melissa demanded.

"Fear . . . the overturning of social and religious order . . . People just couldn't handle it, especially during the Cold War era. You're too young to remember the Sixties and how that era rocked the country, with its overturning of traditional morals and values. Just imagine what the reaction would have been if we'd told people that man isn't the highest being in the universe—in fact, we're virtual technological morons; and we're being visited at will by superior beings who can dispense with us if they choose. People complain now about the loss of religion and spiritual direction in the country! What we see now would have been welcomed compared to the chaos such revelations would have engendered."

"I have to agree with you," said Brian. "And what you're saying is consistent with the Brookings Report—the government study of all this, which Neil mentioned earlier."

"I for one am intrigued as to what you'll say about Brookings when you present your research, Dr. Scott," the Colonel responded. "Its conclusions have been the guiding rationale for most of the cover-up activity in which we've engaged. When the Cold War 'ended' in 1989, those who had been advocating greater disclosure began arguing for even bolder efforts . . . but most of us, including myself and Major Lindsay, thought that would be a mistake."

"Why have you changed your mind?" asked Melissa.

"The present threat easily outweighs the fears of Brookings," the major explained, "as well as the need for secrecy. We're going through all this to convince you of that, and have Dr. Scott and Father Benedict specifically in mind. Your belief that the crisis merits disclosure is essential to the project's success."

"Good luck," sighed Deidre. "I'm still not ready to lend my name to this. Despite all the technological wonders we saw this morning, we have only your word that its origin is alien."

"Patience, Dr. Harper. More skeptical individuals than you have said the same and changed their mind. Take Dr. J. Allen Hynek, for instance."

"Yeah."

"Wasn't he an astrophysicist?" asked Malcolm. "I think he was connected with Ohio State, correct?"

"Correct. Dr. Hynek served as director of Ohio State's McMillan Observatory. He also joined Project SIGN in 1948 while director of the observatory. He, like all the others who served on this project and others, was a confirmed skeptic. He made it no secret that he thought the whole 'flying saucer craze,' as he put it, was nonsense. Over time he changed his mind. I met him toward the end of his life and got a firsthand perspective of his own transformation. Naturally, I didn't disclose to him what I really knew about what had become a quest for him, but I almost wished I could have, as a sort of reward for his scholarly integrity and willingness to question his own paradigm."

"So what made him switch sides?" asked Malcolm.

The major opened a briefcase laying on the table in front of him and retrieved a book. "You have to realize that Hynek was in the employ of the government ostensibly to study the phenomenon. By the time he wrote his memoirs of his experiences in the government's various official inquiries into UFOs, the so-called 'Hynek Report,' of 1972, he had seen the Air Force systematically assign these inquiry panels only those cases that were easily solved as hoaxes or simple misidentification of natural phenomena. Hynek could say with complete confidence that, and I quote him: 'the Air Force turned hand-springs to keep a good case from getting to the attention of the media. Any case they solved they had no trouble talking about. It was really sad.' As a member of the Air Force, I know he was right. I even helped frustrate him."

"So what did Project SIGN end up saying about UFOs?" queried Melissa.

"Well," the major gathered his thoughts, "Project SIGN only lasted 15 months before being replaced by still another inquiry, Project GRUDGE. During these few months Project SIGN team members came to a conclusion that was very unpopular with political and military mindsets. I have included the final paragraph of the 22 page Project SIGN 'Estimate of the Situation,' that simply states that flying saucers exceeded human technological capabilities within and without the United States, and must therefore be considered of extraterrestrial origin. When the 'Estimate of the Situation' reached General Hoyt Vandenberg, it was rejected out of hand. General Vandenberg ordered all copies of the 'Estimate' destroyed and Project SIGN to be replaced. It was behavior like that which Hynek intuitively sensed to be reflective of a disingenuous attitude toward UFOs."

"And I suppose you would still back General Vandenberg," presumed Deidre.

"I would have, at the time, since I believe that back then and, I might add, until very recently, the deception and cover-up was necessary. Our national security was at stake internally, and it would have been foolhardy for the Air Force, commissioned as it was to protect our nation's skies, to admit to a population that had scarcely emerged from World War II, that these things were a legitimate threat against which we had no discernible defense. The only reason we're planning for disclosure now is that the other side has forced us to do so."

"As we've heard," commented Father Benedict.

"Our initially cautious approach that some of you are so suspicious of was soon validated by events very early in the 1950s," the Colonel continued, ignoring the tone of the remark.

"By what?" asked Melissa.

"A direct violation of our planetary sovereignty."

## CHAPTER 17

"It's done routinely."

*—Comment of an unidentified NASA technician to Donna Hare, farmer subcontractor in the photo labs of the Johnson Space Center in Houston, in her April 9, 1997 testimony to the U.S. Congress that she watched the technician air brush a UFO out of a space satellite photo*

"WHAT? I DON'T seem to recall earth being invaded by aliens," Malcolm snickered.

"That isn't what he's talking about," Dr. Bandstra rebuffed, sitting forward.

"Thank you, Neil," said Major Lindsay.

"Then what was it that no one noticed that so challenged our `planetary sovereignty?'" Melissa demanded.

"We'll get to that momentarily. For now, I want to direct your attention to a few things that will provide a backdrop. And trust me, Doctor, a good many people noticed. The events I'll discuss were covered in *Time* magazine in 1953—it's just that we were able, once again, to manipulate a willingly gullible media to interpret events to our liking."

"This ought to be good," Malcolm quipped. "I can hardly wait."

"Do you know anything about satellites, Malcolm?'" Neil interrupted. Brian could tell he was annoyed with the scientist's attitude.

"Just that it's necessary in meteorological training; it's Kev's area really."

The room became quiet as the team's attention was drawn back to their colleague's absence.

"Perhaps when Dr. Garvey deems it important enough to at-tend these debriefings," Major Lindsay said condescendingly, "he'll be able to help those of you who doubt what we'll cover in a moment to digest the material. At any rate, Project GRUDGE lasted a little longer than did Project SIGN." he continued. "Basically it was the official Air Force investigation from 1949-1952, though it was shut down briefly during that time. In 1951 it underwent something of a reorientation in attitude, brought on by the elevation of Captain Edward Ruppelt—a name as important as Hynek's in the history of U.S. involvement with UFOs—to its leadership. In 1952 it was replaced by a project that most of you have probably heard of—Project BLUEBOOK."

"Yes ... what did BLUEBOOK accomplish?" asked Father Benedict.

"It was without question our best exercise in public relations," the major said proudly. "Remember, these public inquiries were designed to explain away the phenomenon to the public. On the inside, however, we were scrambling for strategic options in the face of an extraterrestrial threat."

"For which, as Deidre brought up, we still have only your word and your interpretation of several odd happenstances," Brian said, thumbing through his notebook. "Knowing that J. Edgar Hoover wanted a look at a downed craft doesn't disprove my own opinion that these craft were successive stages of Paperclip technology."

"If you're correct, Dr. Scott," the major reasoned, "then why would our nation's intelligence infrastructure at the time take the measures it did to find out what these craft were?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"For example, in the early Fifties the Air Force issued orders to its pilots and air traffic controllers on how to handle any encounters. Specifically, these orders, officially known as Communication Instructions for Reporting Vital Intelligence Sightings, or CIRVIS, directed these individuals to keep any reported sightings secret under penalty of being tried under military espionage laws. Eventually, commercial airline pilots were given the same instructions and warnings. If the military already knew these were secret experimental craft, why did they want the information when they were sighted in flight? Wouldn't they already know that?"

"Well--"

"This effort to extract information from pilots and then muzzle them against releasing the information to the public," the major continued before Brian could respond, "should make it apparent that the military was trying to get information on these craft. That would of course imply they didn't know what they were. And in the ensuing years these communication orders were being carried out, Project BLUEBOOK was insisting to the public that UFOs didn't exist. How do you account for this, Doctor?"

"I think it depends on what 'intelligence infrastructure' you're talking about."

"Now you have me unsure just what you're talking about."

"You're obviously referring to the intelligence community we're all familiar with," answered Brian, "you know, the public one, the one that today contains the CIA, FBI, etcetera. I think we all know now that there exists another intelligence infrastructure that we don't know about—for example the one we're working for now. Therefore when you ask me why our nation's intelligence infrastructure would be trying to find out what these craft were, my answer is that they—the publicly known infrastructure—didn't know what these were, but the secret intelligence community who was involved with Paperclip did know."

"That's stretching things a bit," the major replied.

"Is it? Do the Attorney General, the FBI Director, or the CIA Director know about the meeting we're having right now and would you permit me to phone them personally to verify an affirmative answer?"

"No, they don't know. You've already been told that."

"That's my point. Just because you had and have military people running around trying to determine what a UFO is doesn't mean they're extraterrestrial."

The major sighed and glanced over at the Colonel, who by now wore an amused expression on his face. "Let me ask you a few things, Dr. Scott," Major Lindsay returned his attention to Brian. "Does our existencethis inner intelligence cabal—prove your own view, that UFOs certainly *aren't* extraterrestrial?"

"No it doesn't; it just makes this little joust all the more interesting."

"I can see you've done some reading in this area, so I'll assume you know about one of the nation's most famous mass-sightings, the one that occurred on July 19, 1952 in Washington D.C."

"You're refering to the ones that appeared over the Capital building and the White House?"



"Yes."

"Wait a minute," Melissa broke in. "You mean to tell me that a bunch of UFOs flew over the White House in 1952?"

"Eight of them to be precise," the major clarified. "This isn't the threat to humanity's global sovereignty to which I just referred, mind you, but it was disturbing. These eight UFOs were seen by hundreds of people, and were tracked on radar for several hours by both Andrews Air Force Base and Washington National Airport. Several F-94s were scrambled to intercept them, since they were violating our most restricted airspace, but to no avail. The story even knocked the Democratic National Convention off the front page. It all happened again a week later, only that time there were twelve disks. My point for Dr. Scott is that it would be unusual, to say the least, for us to send highly secret aircraft out to buzz the White House. It would have been very hazardous to these supersecret craft to violate our nation's most restricted airspace. Sort of foolish, I'd say."

"That sounds reasonable," Melissa noted, avoiding Brian's glance.

"But if these things were so far advanced," Brian continued, "it would be a risk worth taking, since there would be little chance they'd get shot down. As far as a motive for doing it, I don't have any guess."

"Neither would we," the major retorted.

"What was the official explanation for those events?" Melissa asked.

"Temperature inversion, according to the Air Force," replied the major, noting some confused expressions around the table.

"It's a meteorological phenomenon," Malcolm volunteered. "If there's a variation in temperature from the surface through a lower atmospheric level, it can create optical illusion—kind of like the way vision is distorted when you look at something just above a heated object—say the hood of a car."

"Thank you, Dr. Bradley," said the major. "In this case, there really was a slight one-degree temperature inversion to about 1000 feet, but to say that produced a V-formation of 12 disks, tracked on radar—most military personnel didn't believe it at all. By the way, this incident isn't the only one that has a Washington connection. President Clinton also had Webster Hubbell look into UFOs and we obstructed that inquiry as well."

The team members looked dumbfounded at the revelation.

"Don't any of you people read any political stuff?" he chided. There was no answer. "It's in Hubbell's book on his experience with the Clintons," he noted, shaking his head.

"How do you know the Washington military people didn't believe that the temperature inversion argument was viable?" asked Malcolm, steering the discussion back to the main topic.

"Several reasons. An FBI memorandum written a few days later makes it clear that Commander Boyd of the Current Intelligence Branch of Air Force Intelligence thought that the objects may be extraterrestrial. Ralph Clark, the Acting Assistant Director of Scientific Intelligence made it clear that his office was assuming them to be actual aerial objects. The best response to the Air Force official explanation was Ruppelt's," continued the major. "He demolished it, as he would many other debunking efforts. Ruppelt discovered that as many as fifty objects had been sighted over

Washington on May 23 alone, and that each night there were sightings the temperature inversions were never strong enough to affect radar, and that many of the nights on which those inversions occurred there were no objects sighted at all. There was clearly no relationship."

"But didn't Ruppelt eventually agree that there was nothing to the phenomenon?" asked Brian.

"In 1956 Ruppelt left BLUEBOOK and published what many consider to be the authoritative work on UFOs from a military insider, entitled *The Report on Unidentified Flying Saucers*. It was an expose of the internal chess game and was supportive of the extraterrestrial hypothesis. Two years later he recanted in a letter to NICAP, and added three new chapters to his book repudiating his original conclusions. He died two years after that. Keyhoe was convinced Ruppelt had been pressured by CIA to change his position. He had been, too. One of my superiors during my tenure in this whole area of concern was one of those who assisted the Air Force in discrediting Ruppelt's work and threatening to cut off his retirement benefits, including his health insurance and pension."

"How thoughtful," cracked Deidre.

"It was necessary. Once Ruppelt was gone, there was no opposition from within to a complete CIA takeover of government UFO investigation. Which brings me to our first certifiable extraterrestrial threat."

"Let me guess—aliens infiltrated the CIA," deadpanned Malcolm.

"You know, Dr. Bradley," the major said calmly, "you're even more irritating than your reputation. Unless you want to suspend the laws of physics as you've been taught them, you'll want to agree that earth was indeed visited, or rather, surveiled, by an alien presence in 1953. You can follow along you have each of the articles I'll cite, so you know I'm not making this up."

"Let's hear it," droned the scientist.

"I do so anticipating the pleasure of ignoring your apology a few minutes from now," the officer said curtly. "In 1953 the Air Force became aware that there were two giant objects orbiting earth near the equator at a speed of roughly 18,000 miles per hour. Naturally, the idea was so preposterous that Air Force personnel made repeated checks of both their equipment and its data. As astounding as it sounds, everything checked out. There were indeed objects of tremendous size orbiting the earth 600 miles out. Although they were being tracked on radar, the Defense Department immediately began an emergency detection system to monitor the objects. The scientist in charge was Dr. Clyde Tombaugh. Do you recognize the name, Dr. Bradley?"

"Isn't that the astronomer who discovered Pluto?"

"One and the same," he confirmed. "The tracking project was put under the auspices of Army Ordnance Research. Army Ordnance officials at White Sands, New Mexico, issued a press release stating that the purpose of the project was a search for moonlets that had come from space and were orbiting the earth."

"Where are you getting this?" Malcolm asked skeptically. "Look in your notes," he said smugly. "You'll see the article from the March 15, 1954 edition of *Time* magazine. It says quite clearly that Dr. Tombaugh was looking for objects orbiting the earth besides our moon. It even gives readers tips on spotting them themselves at various times of the day. Tombaugh, however, steadfastly refused to be interviewed and answer any questions on the project, directing inquirers to his superiors. There was a thick veil of secrecy surrounding every aspect of the monitoring project. A year later in the May 1955

issue of *Popular Mechanics*, the existence of what the writers were now calling a "manmade moon" hadn't been officially confirmed or denied. That article also reported that there had been persistent re-ports that the objects could be some kind of satellite. Naturally every-one on the outside assumed they were either natural objects or some type of experiment on our part. No one ever hinted they might be artificial but not ours. Keep in mind that this was before Sputnik, so the U.S. hadn't even launched its first satellite into space. That came in 1955, and we didn't have the capability to make anything that large."

"How do you know they weren't just asteroids or other natural objects?" asked Brian.

"Two reasons," Major Lindsay replied. "They gave off radio signals and left orbit."

"Mother of God!" Father Benedict exclaimed.

"Did you say they left?" a wide-eyed Melissa asked in amazement.

"Radio signals?" an incredulous Malcolm repeated.

"Yes. The 1954 press release stated that the agency had picked up strange radio signals from the orbiting objects. NASA's detection was corroborated by a French astronomer who also made it known he had received indecipherable signals from the objects. I have a question now for Dr. Bradley."

"What is it?" he groaned, looking up from the page he was reading.

"How many natural objects roughly one-sixth the size of our moon do you know of that can approach a planet, enter its orbit, and then leave the pull of the gravity that captured them in that orbit?"

Malcolm looked down at his notebook and said nothing.

"Your silence is most eloquent, Doctor," the major stabbed.

"What happened to the objects?" asked Deidre.

"We lost track of them in 1955. The government enlisted Dr. Lincoln LaPaz of the University of New Mexico, an expert on extraterrestrial bodies, to tell the media that the objects were natural, which he did. He later retracted the statement out of concern for his professional standing."

"What do you mean?" asked Brian.

"To put it bluntly, he knew how stupid the explanation was it violated all the conventional laws of physics to just say the objects left orbit. He knew that there would be no conventional explanation for how the objects all of a sudden could achieve an escape velocity. Fortunately the media accepted the story anyway, even after his retraction. No one bothered to ask where the thrust would come from on a piece of rock that would enable it to break away from an 18,000 mile per hour orbit and the gravity of the earth. They bought it, as usual," he chuckled. "I guess critical thinking skills weren't part of their job descriptions."

"Didn't anyone else come forward with an explanation?"

"No, and it wasn't needed after LaPaz. His reputation was too powerful. The media was satisfied, and so went on to other things. By the way, Tombaugh never published any results of his project's tracking of the object. Predictably, no one cared."

Major Lindsay paused to survey the expressions of the team members. Several were hurriedly reading through the materials he had provided them. Some shook their heads in disbelief, the reality of what they were scanning just beginning to set in. Others,

especially Mark and Malcolm, appeared genuinely shocked. All their scientific training screamed that the escape of even one object of this size, much less two, violated everything anyone knew about physics. Yet it had happened; the evidence was staring them in the face. The major could scarcely conceal his satisfaction.

"So I take it business went on as usual, despite something this shocking," Deidre said.

"Of course. On October 7, 1966, the Air Force announced that the University of Colorado had accepted the responsibility, not to mention the half million dollars of government funding for it, to study the UFO phenomenon scientifically. One of the university's physics professors, Dr. Edward Condon, was selected to head the study. Dr. Condon had longstanding ties to the military industrial complex, having assisted in the development of the atomic bomb and radar. Colorado assistant dean Robert Low was also selected for the project. As usual, these men were already complete skeptics, ruling out any unbiased approach to the subject. Barely three months into the study, Condon went so far as to say he didn't believe there was anything to the phenomenon but that, quote, 'I'm not supposed to reach that conclusion for another year,' unquote. The only sincere inquiry by any major world government had to wait until 1999 when the French released what's become known as the COMETA Report. That report admitted the extraterrestrial explanation must not be dismissed."

"You know, major," Brian interjected, "despite this papertrail of government duplicity, I'm still not dissuaded from my earlier position. The technology behind UFOs, as intimidating as it was—and still is could still be human."

"I'm really starting to like you, Doctor," the major said casually. "And where do you suppose we got this technology if not from the visitors?"

"Like I said before, Paperclip scientists."

"Tell me, Doctor," the major queried pointedly, "why should the military personnel in the know the ones that really were pursuing UFOs from the inside, the men who wrote the top secret memos, who really knew that projects like SIGN and BLUEBOOK were only PR fronts why would they concoct their own extraterrestrial problem and then pretend to each other that there was a national security threat looming over their heads? Doesn't that seem insane? Why would they need to kill public attention toward something that, according to you, they knew was just antigravity engineering of human origin? Would you really have us believe that one of our own projects was a threat to our own national security? Were our military and intelligence people so bored that they had to view *themselves* as the enemy? Tell me, Doctor, is your view at all coherent?"

"No . . . it seems that it isn't ..." his voice trailed off.

"Perhaps we didn't want the country of Liechtenstein to find out," the major volleyed sarcastically, drawing laughter from the team.

"Sorry," Brian backpedaled, "but I just feel like there's some-thing missing in all this. Maybe I'll feel differently as we go on. Just because I can't explain the psychology of black-op intelligence doesn't mean I should feel compelled to accept your explanation."

"You just can't accept an extraterrestrial reality," interjected Melissa in a disdainful tone. "It treads too roughly over your religion."

"That just isn't true. I've already addressed that," Brian de-fended himself. "You'll know I mean it when it's my turn."

"Oh my," Father Benedict said in a barely audible voice. Brian glanced over at the

old priest, who was thumbing through the rest of the notes the major had passed out. His notebook lay open to a black and white photograph of a triangular object, its shape certified by balls of light at each corner. "I take it this is the rest of your proof," he inquired, looking up from his notebook.

"It is," confirmed the major. "We have an assortment of photos you'll all find interesting, and a few documents to go through together." The major sat up and stretched to get a look at the priest's notebook. "The photo you see there is a still shot from video taken on a space shuttle mission."

"A what?" asked Mark urgently. "Did you say what I thought you just said?"

"Another fuzzy picture," Melissa smirked, gazing at her own copy of the photograph.

"Would you like to see the footage?" the major retorted cockily, opening his briefcase. Melissa didn't respond. Brian's pulse quickened in nervous anticipation.

The major retrieved the videocassette, stood up, and strode confidently to the podium located near the head of the table. He pushed several unseen buttons on the console, and a large, curved screen slowly descended from the ceiling as the lights dimmed.

"What you're about to see is from a commercially available video," he informed the team as he waited for the screen to reach full position.

"You're kidding right?" Malcolm asked, taken back at the possibility.

"I can assure you, Dr. Bradley, I don't make things up. An amateur space enthusiast who was recording NASA Select T, a live downlink from the shuttle distributed on satellite and cable TV, accidentally obtained this video, termed STS-48 after the mission number. Needless to say, NASA is more careful these days. In addition to STS-48, which corresponds to your still photo, I've also included some shuttle video from another mission, namely STS-80. In expectation of your reticence," he noted as he inserted the video, "I've already cued this to the appropriate sequence of footage." All eyes were drawn to the screen as the familiar click and soft whir of the VCR beckoned their attention.

The room fell silent as the screen displayed an orbital panorama dominated by the curvature of the earth, the horizon of which was slightly obscured by the brilliance of the sun spilling out from behind. A small, fuzzy blob began to move toward the earth. Brian was unimpressed, but only momentarily. The unidentified camera operator locked onto the object and magnified it. The stupefied team members gazed in awe at the still imprecise, but absolutely discernible triangular object as it made its way into the sun's glare. It disappeared from detection only for a few seconds, however, for its negative image, that of a darkened triangle with black corners at each tip, soon merged against the gleaming background.

Brian and Father Benedict glanced at each other as the footage cut out, but quickly redirected their attention back to the screen when the next sequence began. Once again the team found itself looking at the earth from orbit. Flashes of light dotted the atmosphere of the planet.

"Thunderstorms," Major Lindsay spoke up, anticipating the question. The spectacle was elegantly surreal.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Malcolm. "What's that?"

The team's attention was immediately riveted by a globular ball of luminescence

floating across the screen, high above the storms that raged low in the earth's atmosphere below it. Visual comparison between the object and the storm flashes told everyone that, whatever the object was, it was huge.

"This one is from the same mission as the last," the major explained abruptly as the scene quickly changed again.

"Looks like he saved the best for last," Brian overheard Father Benedict whisper in his direction. Together they gazed, transfixed, at another obviously large, controlled object, this time flying in accord with earth's horizon. Two unambiguous pulsating lights could be detected on either side of the object. It was undeniably a spacecraft. Major Lindsay hopped out of his chair and raised the lights. He turned directly toward Melissa.

"In case you're wondering, NASA's official explanation for these objects is that they are ice trickles sliding across the camera lens that only create the impression of actual objects in orbit. Do you share that view, Dr. Kelley?"

Melissa said nothing, and leaned back into her chair, arms folded across her chest.

"Dr. Scott, perhaps you have an alternative explanation?" the major queried smugly.

"Don't get me wrong, major," Brian began, shifting nervously, "but as impressive as the footage is, it still doesn't mean that those craft are extraterrestrial. After all, we've witnessed firsthand that we have other spacecraft unknown to the public."

"Where do you suppose we'd build or hide something of the size of the object in the second segment?" Major Lindsay asked, unmoved by Brian's denial.

"I have no idea."

"Trust me, Doctor, we have nothing that comes close. It's true we've managed to make small scale replicas—again, because we've back-engineered alien technology--but we have nothing so massive."

"Then we're back to trust ... and, if you don't mind me saying so, mine will be hard to earn."

"Let's move on to the documents, Gordon," the Colonel said, a hint of annoyance surfacing in his voice. "Maybe Dr. Scott will accept those unless of course he wants to argue that fifty years ago someone deliberately manufactured them and then hid them in the National Archives just so that someone would find them today and think they were real."

"Are these supposed to detail the Roswell recovery?" asked Malcolm, who by now had turned to the pages. "I mean it's all here—crash site, disk recovery, alien bodies."

"Yes."

"What the hell is Operation Majestic 12?" Melissa spoke her mind aloud as she flipped through her pages.

"Somehow I knew we'd get here," moaned Deidre.

"What you're all reading have become known as the MJ-12 documents," explained Major Lindsay. "As you've no doubt already noted, they are dated November 18, 1952, and are ostensibly part of a briefing prepared for President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower concerning the Top Secret program Operation Majestic 12. They detail, as Dr. Bradley has noted, the retrieval operation begun on July 7, 1947 of a craft that crashed near the Roswell Army Air Base. Among the debris were four small humanoid corpses. Operation Majestic 12 was the original name of this country's most highly classified team of experts

assigned to deal with the extraterrestrial reality. You have the documents exactly as they were leaked to the public."

"These have been published?" asked Melissa in a startled voice.

"Yes. They were mailed to a UFO researcher and TV producer in the form of a single roll of black and white 35 millimeter film." "This is incredible," Melissa said almost instinctively.

"Are they genuine?" asked Father Benedict. "Your language leaves me uncertain."

"That's quite understandable, Father. The answer to your question is yes and no. The documents themselves have undergone rigorous analysis by civilians, and are still the subject of vociferous debate within the lay-UFO community. Their most notable defender is Stanton Friedman, who, although he has produced some remarkable work on the documents, has not proven their authenticity to the satisfaction of his colleagues. Not surprisingly to those familiar with the ufological community, their preeminent detractor has been Philip Klass."

"And ... ?" interrupted Mark impatiently.

"The documents are fakes of a sort that is, they were specially prepared for leaking as part of an ongoing desensitizing program concerning extraterrestrials. However, most of the information in them is accurate, except for small details of lesser importance—unless you've decided to go with Dr. Harper's version of events, that the Roswell bodies were mongoloid children or something like that. If you have, you'll soon come to your senses. We have one of the original bodies here in this facility, and you'll be allowed to examine it under Dr. Marcus's supervision."

"Damn!" Malcolm marveled.

"These twelve names of the original members on the first page contain some pretty heavy hitters," Mark observed. "I recognize several of them." Malcolm nodded in recognition as well.

"Indeed. You've already heard the names of Admiral Hillenkoetter and General Twining. I guess I should say something about the other members. Dr. Vannevar Bush was a distinguished American scientist who, among other things, organized the Office of Scientific Research and Development in 1943. The next name, James Forrestal, became the Secretary of Defense in July 1947, the exact time of the Roswell crash. He resigned in 1949 and soon thereafter committed suicide. General Hoyt Vandenberg, who is of course the namesake of the well-known Air Force base, was a former director of Central Intelligence. Dr. Detlev Bronk was a physiologist and biophysicist who chaired the National Research Council."

"You keep saying `was,'" said Melissa. "Are all these guys dead?"

"Yes," he answered. "Moving through the list, Dr. Jerome Hunsaker was an aircraft designer, and chaired the Department of Mechanical and Aeronautical Engineering at MIT at the time of the Roswell incident. Sidney Souers was a retired rear admiral. He served as the first director of Central Intelligence in 1946, and was executive secretary to the National Security Council in 1947. Mr. Gordon Gray was assistant secretary of the army in 1947, and in 1950 was appointed by President Truman as a special assistant on national security affairs. Dr. Donald Menzel is one of the two figures on the panel with any subsequent public attachment to UFOs. He was the director of Harvard's observatory and became infamous as a widely read debunker of UFOs."

"A debunker?" wondered Father Benedict. "Did he reject his post?"

"No, he was a loyal member of MJ-12, and a believer. He was just used as part of the public disinformation program against UFOs. General Robert Montague was the base commander at the Sandia Atomic Energy Commission facility in Albuquerque, New Mexico from July 1947 to 1951. Lastly, Dr. Lloyd Berkner worked under Dr. Vannevar Bush on occasion, and was a member of another 'official' investigation, the Robertson Panel, that concluded that UFOs should not be taken seriously. As I said a moment ago, the original members of MJ-12 have since passed on. They have been successively replaced as needed, and the panel has since been renamed."

"The Group ..." pondered Father Benedict, "the Group is the contemporary version of MJ-12."

"That's correct. MJ-12 still exists, but the name isn't used on any written correspondence."

"I hate to ask this," Brian said, fidgeting in his seat, "but since you've admitted they're fakes, and I was in agreement on that, as is the vast majority of the ufological community, how do we really know any of the material in them is genuine—other than by your word?"

"Have you looked ahead at the material after the MJ-12 report Dr. Scott?"

"No, I hadn't gotten that far," he answered, and began thumbing through the contents of his folder.

"The last seven pages of your notebook contain three genuine documents, or excerpts from such documents, that demonstrate that the significant contents of the doctored MJ-12 papers are indeed factual. The first document is two pages of a 1950 memorandum from the Canadian Department of Transport. On the second page there is a reference to, and I quote, 'a small group headed by Doctor Vannevar Bush' which was working on the flying saucer problem. The second document is a typed letter from Dr. Robert Sarbacher, President and Chairman of the Board of the Washington Institute of Technology at the time of the letter's 1983 composition, on that institute's letterhead. On its second page, Sarbacher confirms the retrieval of extraterrestrial craft, the existence of extraterrestrial remains, and the subsequent study of both. The relevant disclosures are in the third and fourth-to-last paragraphs. The third document is a U.S. Air Force Office of Special Investigations description of a film of a UFO taken near Kirtland air base in 1980. Near the bottom is a reference to 'MJ Twelve'.

The major watched the expressions of the team members for a few seconds as they perused the documents he'd described. His eyes darted to the Colonel. The elder officer nodded and Major Lindsay closed his briefcase.

"Well ladies and gentlemen," the Colonel rose, "despite Dr. Garvey's continued absence, it's time

The Colonel's announcement was once again cut short by the ring of the phone. With an indignant huff he picked it up. "Ferguson ..." The old soldier listened intently for nearly a minute, his only gesture being a nod of his head in response to the information relayed. "I'll inform the team ..." his voice trailed off, his mood having changed from one of consternation to resignation. He hung up and cast a doleful glance at Mark. He cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to relay such terrible news ..." he addressed them, "but Kevin is dead."



## CHAPTER 18

"This is just a hypothetical situation, but do you have any three-foot or four-foot long hermetically sealed caskets?"

"Yes, we have four feet."

"How many do you have?"

"One."

"How soon before you could get more?"

—July 8, 1947 conversation between an unidentified mortuary officer at Roswell Army Air Force Base and Glenn Dennis, local mortician in Roswell, New Mexico.

"THIS IS EXACTLY how we found him, sir," the MP informed the Colonel.

The Colonel looked down at Kevin's stiffened body, resting atop the computer keyboard.

"Dr. Hastings says there was massive internal bleeding, Vernon," Neil informed him as he walked over to where the Colonel stood. "He suspects an aneurysm, seeing as how Kevin was apparently in good physical condition."

"Any history of that in his files?"

"He thought he recalled reading it two or three generations removed, but he's going to check." The Colonel nodded.

"What do you suppose he was doing?" Neil asked.

"Looks to me like he sat down here to work on the computer when it happened," observed the Colonel. "He took the whole key-board with him when he seized . . . ripped it right out the back," he noted, inspecting the connecting prongs. "What a loss . . . how are we supposed to replace him on such short notice, Neil? He was absolutely key."

"I'll start going through the files; we have to move fast." "Who the hell let him in here? Did we recover the override badge?"

"No . . . in fact ..." Neil hesitated.

"What?"

"It may be that the doors were accessed remotely."

The Colonel shook his head. "Just what I didn't want to hear. Wait till I tell the Group."

Mark lay in his bed looking at the ceiling. It had been nearly an hour since the Colonel had dismissed them for the rest of the after-noon and moved their next session to that evening. Mark scanned the floor apathetically, now strewn with the papers, journals, and desk paraphernalia which still lay where he had thrown them in a fit of rage upon his return to his room. He'd tried to sleep, but couldn't; the Colonel's announcement still hadn't sunk in. It just didn't make sense. The Colonel would only tell them that Kevin had indeed been found outside their restricted area, and that the MP who had found the body

insisted there were no external wounds on the body. "Maybe he knows something by now," he grunted with disdain and abruptly got out of bed. He sat down at his computer and accessed his mail, recalling the Colonel's promise to email everyone with details after he'd inspected the scene.

True to his word, amid the familiar congestion of his discussion-group exchanges, there was a brief message waiting from the Colonel detailing the cause of death and a description of how the body was found, but revealed nothing about the location of the incident, 'due to said location's restricted status.'

"An aneurysm?" he said aloud in disbelief. He moved his mouse in disgust to close the program, but stopped, his eye falling on a nonsensical subject line.

"Can't even avoid SPAM at AREA 51," he muttered, and opened the transmission. There was no message. Confused, he looked back up at the subject line.

"What the ... ?"

The line contained eleven characters:

Harpsnowkev

Mark stared at the odd, cryptic notation. He knew instinctively that the last three letters stood for Kevin, but could make no sense of 'harpsnow.' Taken together, the letters were gibberish, but they could only be split into 'harps now' or 'harp snow,' neither of which was at all coherent. Mark closed the program and shut down his computer, figuring that what Kevin had intended as a message had been interrupted by his fatal heart failure.

"Sorry it's so cold in here," Ian Marcus apologized to the group huddled together in front of him. "Here in the morgue every-thing needs to be properly stored and temperature-controlled. There are extra lab coats in the locker if it will help." Several of the team members spied each other nervously in anticipation of seeing what lay concealed in the row of cadaver drawers that made up the wall behind the facility's exobiologist. Emotions of excitement and anxiety fought for control of Brian's mind. Were there really the remains of alien life forms behind those stainless steel doors? I low could he know for sure? Despite his theoretical handle on the situation, he knew that this truth, were it the truth, could potentially redefine every religious sentiment in the western world. He knew intellectually, of course, that such a thing could only happen were poor theology allowed to dictate the discussion. But, after all, that was why he was here—to defend his contention that serious, biblical theology could quite easily accommodate the existence of other worlds, the reality of other sentient beings. His mind wandered momentarily to the paper he'd written about the subject, the one that had cost him his teaching position. I le knew he was right, that his exegesis was sound, that those who'd passed judgment on him had never seriously thought about the subject. So *why was he at all apprehensive?* At least he was taking the prospect of the revelation better than Father Benedict, who appeared absolutely stricken.

"We'll start with a brief overview of the bodies," Dr. Marcus informed them. "If you want to see the actual forensic examinations, we have them on film. Two of the corpses were filmed on 16mm, due to the late Forties date, so the quality isn't that great. The third is on standard VHS and is about a year old."

"A year old!" Mark blurted out. "How did you get the body?"

"Things die, Dr. Chadwick. The aliens gave us the body for further study; it isn't like we have a whole bunch of these, and the ones we did recover on our own are usually mutilated or burned, since they invariably are retrieved from crash sites. We looked at it as a gesture of goodwill on their part, in view of the fact that disclosure of the alien presence had become imminent."

"Which *then* have forced, according to what we've been told," Deidre reminded everyone.

"True, but they didn't have to share this with us."

"What if it died due to some terrestrial toxin, or unknown disease they carry?" questioned Melissa. "They could have been letting a plague loose upon us."

"Then I wouldn't be standing here talking to you. I performed the autopsy myself, and I haven't had so much as the sniffles since. Really, people. you have to get over the *Independence* an mentality they aren't here to dispose of us like some pathogen. Like Major Lindsay and the Colonel have explained, we haven't always had the best relationship with them, but it has never been hostile. We both need a healthy planet, and in today's world of nuclear arsenals and the presence of the will to use them, that necessitates cooperation."

"At any rate," he changed the subject, unlocking the handle release on the middle drawer with a key, "behind you we have several microscopes and drawers of literally hundreds of slides if you feel inclined to check them—tissue samples, bodily fluids, toxicological analyses, that sort of thing. I've done a full genetic work-up with DNA sequencing, and the internal organs are also stored here. You may examine whatever you wish, and I'll answer your questions to the best of my ability. The only thing I'd ask is that you do not touch anything unless you're wearing the proper gloves and facial gear. I don't want anything contaminated. That being said ..." his voice trailed off as he popped the latch on the drawer.

"If any of you have especially weak stomachs, you may find this disturbing," Neil cautioned as Dr. Marcus drew the metallic slab out of its sheath in full view of the team. Audible gasps punctuated the silence. Gingerly, the team members approached the slab for a closer look. It was an impeccable specimen that bore all the familiar visual features that had led abductees to dub the aliens "Grays": the chalky-gray skin; the bulbous cranium, disproportionate to the underdeveloped torso, with the narrow, tapering jaw; the black, opaque, insectoid eyes; the spindly limbs—it was a form they had all seen many times on television. But this wasn't television. The lifeless figure peered up at them in an emotionless, unnerving gaze. The signs of autopsy were evident, the Y-incision on the torso having been neatly sewn up. The skullcap had also been carefully returned to its original position, and both eyes were accompanied by sporadic, delicate stitching on their perimeter. Deidre looked away momentarily, fighting the gag reflex brought on by the overpowering odor of formaldehyde. Brian's heart pounded in his chest. The anxiety of the moment had passed; he was entranced.

"You can compare this specimen to one from Roswell," Dr. Marcus said, unlatching the drawer to the left of the first corpse. The attention of the team was immediately drawn to the second drawer as it yielded its contents. "It was injured in the crash, and there's been some discoloration due to age, but it's still worth looking at." As Dr. Marcus had noted, one of the legs had been mutilated and badly burned. There were

various smaller lacerations on the corpse. The face was contorted in an expression of acute pain. It was evident that it had suffered greatly in the moments before it succumbed to its injuries. The autopsy had not been as careful, and the specimen had been left in varying stages of dissection.

"Height and weight ranges from three and one-half to four and one-half feet and 65 to 90 pounds," Dr. Marcus began his introduction. "The black 'eyes' are actually not eyes at all; they're protective coverings. Here," he said, retrieving what resembled a dental pick from a nearby drawer, "let me show you." Dr. Marcus carefully inserted the end of the instrument under the edge of the left eye of the more recent corpse. The black casing gave way with little effort, revealing a pale, pupil-less, milky ball. "We're not sure how their eyes work, to be honest."

"You mean without the covering," remarked Melissa.

"Right."

"There are lenses within, but without a pupil it would seem that light can be absorbed through the entire ball. If that's the case, they'd need the protective black layer to prevent overexposure to light rays."

"Why the stitching around the eye?" she asked.

"An entryway into the sinus cavity. The nasal openings and mouth are extremely undersized, so that's the best way to avoid disfigurement or splitting the head open."

"Oh."

"You'll also notice," Dr. Marcus continued, peeling back a loosened flap of skin on the creature's throat, as though conducting a hands-on forensics lecture, "that they don't have vocal cords."

"And no discernible outer ear," added Mark, intrigued, as Dr. Marcus gently turned the creature's head, "only those tiny apertures,"

"The Colonel said that they're alleged to—I mean, known to communicate telepathically," Deidre reminded him, peering skittishly over his shoulder. The Colonel and Dr. Bandstra, who glanced at each other, did not miss her rewording. She'd been convinced.

"Do you know how they do that?" Malcolm asked, gaining Dr. Marcus' attention.

"I'll show you what we think they use to do it," Dr. Marcus offered. Mark stepped away from the slab and Dr. Marcus opened the drawer adjacent to the one on which the body lay.

"These are the internal organs," he noted, pulling the slab a few feet into the room. "Of particular interest is the brain. What do you notice immediately?" he asked, holding a fluid-filled glass canister aloft, its spongy contents visible to the group.

"Wow," Mark whispered in amazement, "it's got a third lobe."

"Precisely," Dr. Marcus replied, pointing to the globular mass situated between what otherwise looked like the two halves of a human brain. "We know from the ongoing work on ESP at Duke's Rhine Center and the PEAR project at Princeton that the human brain is capable of projecting and receiving thought from an external source. We figure that's the use of the extra lobe, since the rest of the brain is remarkably similar to our own."

"Have you considered the possibility that these beings aren't true extraterrestrials?" Melissa inquired.

"What do you mean? What else could they be but extraterrestrials? The evidence

is staring you in the face," the Colonel asked with some exasperation.

"I'm thinking in terms of evolution," she explained, refraining from looking in Brian's direction.

"I still don't get it," Neil jumped in.

"I believe Dr. Kelley is wondering whether I've considered that these beings may have evolved from humans—correct?" She nodded.

"I have in fact explored that option," he said pensively, "but I've ruled it out. Granted, there are absolute genetic correlations between our DNA and theirs, but—"

"Doesn't that suggest evolution from a common source?" she interrupted.

"I'll admit it's suggestive of that possibility, but by that I mean there's only a reasonable mathematical probability. I'd feel better about that possibility if there were fewer anatomical features that are utterly unique."

"Such as . . . ?"

"Take the stomach for instance," he offered.

"Yes, I noticed it was extremely small, even for their body weight."

"Precisely. In all the specimens I've autopsied, I've never discovered stomach contents. Reports of earlier autopsies are the same. I know they can eat because I've seen them do it, but—"

"Hold on, man," Malcolm interjected, "are you telling me we have live ones here?"

"No, not here," the Colonel answered for him. "We have a sort of exchange program still in effect, although not for entirely the same purposes as the one put into effect years ago that I told you about earlier."

"So what's it for?" Deidre asked, her suspicions aroused.

"Basically, to keep us honest. They send us a representative of sorts every few months to make sure we are proceeding with disclosure plans. They used to serve as technical advisers, but their interest has shifted to compliance."

"Compliance?" Deidre shook her head. "And you guys still think you have this tiger by the tail. Sounds to me like they're running the show, and I don't like it." To her surprise,

"We still have the capability to ruin their plans," Neil defended his superior.

"Yeah, and kill us all along with it. We know the scenario."

"At any rate," Dr. Marcus continued in a resigned tone, "they seem to be able to eat, but it seems they don't have to. From their `blood work,' if you want to call what they have `blood,' their bodies do have the sufficient nutrient and mineral content to maintain their metabolism and general health. I suspect they have some kind of osmotic ability to draw what they need from their environment by absorption. In other words, their skin functions like a filter. It would have to be bi-directional, too, since they have no excretory system that I can discern."

"Aha," cracked Malcolm, "that's why they're so interested in proctology." The Colonel glared at him. "Just a thought," he said whimsically.

"So you see, Dr. Kelley," Dr. Marcus concluded, "I can't see how the process of evolution can account for the virtual absence of digestive and excretory systems. If the process moved in this direction, how could the organism survive it?"

"You know what else they don't have that sort of makes it hard to explain them as evolved humans?" Malcolm piped up again. "What?" asked Melissa, nonchalantly.

"No sex organs. How do these guys get it on?" he looked at Dr. Marcus.

"There's only one answer to that," Mirk Chadwick perceived. "They reproduce asexually."

"We don't think so."

"Dr. Marcus?"

"I believe they reproduce artificially. In fact, from what we know of their genetic expertise from the nasty virus they've produced to prompt worldwide contact, I wouldn't be surprised if they just cloned themselves. After all, they're pretty much exactly the same. Every specimen I've examined is basically a carbon-copy of the others."

The team spent the next half-hour questioning Dr. Marcus and examining the results of his work. The team's scientific personnel were particularly thorough. Working as a team, they made sure that between them they handled or viewed everything at their disposal. Brian followed the questioning as best he could, but it was difficult for someone without the necessary background. Thankfully, Neil was eager to talk, and soon made his way over to his friend.

"You look pretty calm, Brian," he began.

"Of course, why wouldn't I be? You know my thoughts on the issue."

"Of course. It's just that when it really hits you, it kind of rocks your world. I have to admit I went through a few days of doubt about all I'd believed about the Bible, creation, even God."

"Why?" The depth of Neil's struggle took Brian aback. "You read my paper. We'd even talked about this sort of thing before I ever put anything into writing."

"I just found it unnerving that the only thing keeping me grounded was your words on a piece of paper. I'm relieved you can take all this in and still be so confident."

"God doesn't lie; we just need to remember he doesn't owe us an exhaustive history of everything He's done since the beginning of time."

"Right," Neil smiled, "but that isn't your main argument."

"True. A correct understanding of the image of God is critical. I hope I won't be wasting my time tonight when I present. It seems most of our audience doesn't really care about religion anyway."

"I'm glad you mentioned your presentation. The Colonel has decided to wait until the morning."

"He wouldn't have to. I'm more or less going to lecture through my paper. I'm ready to go."

"He isn't concerned about your readiness," Neil confided to him, "he wants to give Andrew the evening."

"I didn't know he was presenting anything."

"He isn't. We want him to take what you say and help the team understand the impact on the larger religious world. He's quite expert in all the western religious traditions. The Colonel doesn't think he's taking things so well. The only thing he's done since seeing the bodies is pace around like an expectant father. There's something wrong."

"Would you like me to ask him?" Brian offered.

"It's worth a try. Uh-oh, here he comes." Brian watched the old priest approach. A distracted look creased his face.

"Have you seen enough, Father?" Neil asked sincerely. "It seems everyone is

convinced but you."

"Not everyone is convinced, Neil," Brian corrected him. "What are you saying?" his friend asked, startled at his statement, coming as it had on the heels of his previous words.

"I'm just being honest," Brian said, lowering his voice. "I can see why you were convinced, but—"

"Why I was convinced?" he asked incredulously, being careful to keep the conversation private. "What about you?"

"I was convinced until Melissa's question about evolution from humans." Father Benedict's distant gaze disappeared, his attention fixed on the conversation.

"Huh? You?" Neil marveled.

"Let me explain. It was her question—it was stupid."

"Now you've lost me."

"She knows how evolution is supposed to work," Brian re-plied. "There's no way she would have overlooked the fact that the stomach couldn't have sustained the creature. And if it drew nutrition in an `alien' way, pardon the pun, she would have known there could be no evolutionary link between them and us. Plus, it's perfectly obvious any trait supposedly evolving over millions of years couldn't have been transmitted generationally in these beings, because they have no sexual organs. She'd have to be blind not to have noticed that. She's just too smart not to make the connection."

"What about cloning?"

"You don't need both cloning and sexual reproduction; they're redundant. What's more, in this scenario, they're mutually exclusive. It makes no sense if we use evolutionary logic, as she would have."

"How is that?" Neil asked, intrigued.

"In evolutionary thinking, the loss of an organ is due to its disuse; an organ becomes vestigial and then eventually disappears. But to evolve you need transmission of genetic change through re-production. You can't have both; they work against one another. She'd never have overlooked that. There are only two other options. One, these beings have never reproduced sexually, but always `naturally' by another means, as asexual organisms on earth do. That in itself disqualifies them as being directly related to us. Your other choice is that some other being created them sexless and with the intelligence to perpetuate themselves through technology."

"I see . . . you never cease to amaze me, Brian."

"Brilliant!" Father Benedict exclaimed under his breath, ex-changing a wide-eyed glance with Brian before wandering away again.

"But, if you're correct," Neil questioned, "why would Melissa even ask the question?"

"I don't know, Neil," he shrugged. "She's after something, and if she's not convinced, neither am I. I don't know if you've noticed, but she's developed a preoccupation with Marcus's autopsied corpse. She's been standing there staring at it for the last ten minutes." Neil peered over Brian's shoulder discreetly. As he'd said, Melissa stood over the body, arms folded, chin on her chest, staring at its face.

"Have you asked her about her question?" Neil inquired, turning his attention back to Brian.

"I've been fighting the urge."

"Why?"

"She pretty much despises me, and I don't want to cause a fuss and draw attention to her."

"She's too smart to let that happen if she's really fishing for information. She wouldn't show her hand that easily."

"I hate it when you use my own logic against me."

"So?"

Brian sighed. "All right."

He took a deep breath and walked over to where Melissa stood transfixed in thought. If she'd noticed his approach she gave no impression of caring. He hesitated.

"What is it, Melissa?" he finally asked in a whisper. "What do you see?"

She maintained her silence.

"C'mon, Melissa," he persisted, "I know you're onto something; what is it?"

She looked up from the corpse and gave him an annoyed glance. The two of them looked at each other but said nothing. Suddenly the words of her mysterious assailant came back to her. *He's the only one here you can trust.* She flushed with anger, not only at the recollection of the incident, but at the very thought of trusting a man, especially this one. *Just you wait. I'll expose you like all the others. All in due time.*

"Stuff it," she snapped, and walked away.

Brian hung his head in frustration. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Father Benedict's friendly, but concerned face.

"You must keep your wits about you, son. Your time is now," he paused, as if overtaken by some dramatic realization, "and you must be singleminded."

"What do you mean?" Brian asked a little uneasily. He wondered where Andrew's prophet imitation had come from.

"You weren't brought here by those arrogant bastards. God sent you here. The final pieces of the puzzle are coming together for me. I've pursued them most of my life, but God has shown me that it will be given to you to expose them. I'll help you all I can, but after tomorrow morning, my days will most likely be numbered."

Brian didn't know what surprised him more, the priest's language or his ominous, cryptic declarations. "Andrew, what—"

"Your dissertation—I keep telling you! It holds the answers to our questions. Especially now."

Brian was confused.

"Look at its face," the seasoned scholar whispered, taking Brian's shoulders and turning him toward the alien corpse. "Look at it and think about what you just said to Neil! Look at it and remember:

and behold, one of the Watchers appeared fearsome—like a serpent."

A chill ran up Brian's spine as the priest repeated the text of the Dead Sea Scroll fragment so familiar to him. He looked down at the gray figure in startled disbelief.

"It can't be."

"It is."

"It makes no sense," he protested.

"It will. Look at its hands."



Brian's eyes moved haltingly from the creature's face, to the shoulder, and down the emaciated arm to its hands. He closed his eyes tightly, his mind racing to process what Andrew was driving at. He opened them and looked again. He swallowed hard. He hadn't noticed before. He looked up at the priest, frightened by the connection the old man had made.

The alien's hands each had six fingers.

## CHAPTER 19

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

—*Genesis 1:26,27 (NIV)*

THE ALARM CLOCK blared annoyingly from its perch on the nightstand next to the bed. Melissa reached lazily toward the sound, clumsily fingering the assortment of buttons on top of the electronic nuisance. She located the snooze button and pressed it firmly. Peaceful silence filled the room, and she pulled the covers up to her chin, rolled over, and began drifting back to sleep.

"Rise and shine," a voice unexpectedly intruded. Her eyes flickered open in alarm.

"Don't move. Dr. Kelley," the voice commanded. "The rules of engagement haven't changed."

She recognized the voice of her solitude's thief.

"What the hell are you doing in my bedroom?" she bristled angrily. "I have a mind to—"

"To what?" he cut her off in a sarcastic tone. "Do what you're told and you'll live to hate me another day. You really ought to change your attitude; I'm not here to hurt you, remember?"

"It must have slipped my mind. What is it now?"

"I'd like a few answers, then—"

"Then you'll throw me another information bone?"

"Really, Doctor, the analogy is most unfitting. I actually find you quite attractive. You'd expect that, of course."

"Shut up and get to the point!" she shot back, still immobile. "I'd like to know why it is that you weren't convinced by our little sideshow of the reality of extraterrestrial life."

"How would you know if I believed it or not?"

"The good undersecretary informed the Colonel, and the Colonel briefed the Group last night. We all believe heartily in the free flow of information, you know."

"I never said anything to Dr. Bandstra."

"Correct—technically. Dr. Scott suspects you aren't convinced," he added, and summarized Brian's suspicions for her.

"Since when does Dr. Scott speak for me!" she asked, her anger rising again.

"He doesn't, but your demeanor has convinced him that's the case."

"So what."

"So your own uncertainty has tainted him. His exact words to his friend the undersecretary were, I believe, 'If she's not convinced, I'm not convinced.'"

"Sounds like he's just trying to keep up," she said, drawing some satisfaction from the idea.

"If that's what you think, you couldn't be more incorrect. You don't know Dr. Scott as I do."

"Oh, that's right—you know everything; sorry, I forgot."

"You know, there are multitudes who would kill to see what you've seen. What makes you smarter than them?"

She didn't answer.

"Don't play games with me," he warned. Melissa smiled under the covers, taking pleasure at his irritation.

"Well?"

She maintained her silence.

"If you don't help me," he said in a more controlled tone, "I can't assure you of my help when you might need it. Now tell me why you think the bodies aren't real."

"I never said I didn't think they were real," she said coyly.

"I'm intrigued ... go on."

"Of course they're real," she continued, choosing her words carefully, "they're just real fakes. That's all I'll tell you."

"Clever girl ..." he said with an unseen smirk. "I can see my choice of you has been totally justified. You're wrong in what you think is the truth, but close. Closer than any of the others."

"What do you mean I'm wrong?" she said defensively. "I haven't told you what I think."

"You've told me enough, told me what I wanted to hear. You see, no one else would have understood your comments."

"Why is that, O omniscient one?" she oozed bitterly.

"Because," he continued confidently, unfazed by her sarcasm, "I know how you spent your time during what should have been your first semester of college. No one else here does, because it isn't part of your record."

Melissa's eyes widened in horror and disbelief. He really did know everything.

"Your self-training during that time has put you ahead of the others," he droned on in her silence. "Nevertheless, you're wrong. But take heart, you'll soon see something that will perhaps help you put the pieces together."

"If you know all these things," she blurted out vengefully, "why the mind games? If you know we're being taken for a ride again, why not just tell me and get it over with?"

"It's just more fun this way."

"Fun my ass! You're hiding something too."

"Yes . . . I am," the figure said with a thoughtful sigh. "But what I'm hiding will only help you. As I said before, I'm acting out of self-interest. That shouldn't be hard for you to swallow." An awkward silence ensued.

Melissa was taken back by his change of tone. His words made him seem less reprehensible somehow. "So when am I going to receive this epiphany?"

There was no answer. After a few seconds of indecision, she decided to sit up in her bed. As soon as she did she heard the familiar click of her door's locking mechanism.

He was gone. She breathed a sigh of relief and looked over at the clock. Brian's presentation would begin in just over an hour. She was actually looking forward to it. It was time to start laying the groundwork to bring him down.

\*\*\*

"What I'm passing out," Brian began, handing a small stack of papers to Neil, who was seated to the left of the podium, "is simply a printed list of verses I'll be mentioning throughout the course of the presentation." He felt strange giving such an instruction to the individuals seated before him, people who, for the most part, had little if any time for the Bible. The only faces not betraying either amusement or boredom at his handout belonged to Neil and Father Benedict. He felt quite out of place. He took a deep breath to ready himself. Regardless of the contempt some of the team may have for what he was going to say, he knew it was terribly important to the project. It might even be life-saving if Andrew proved correct. His mind drifted momentarily back to the priest's weird announcement of self-doom, but he shook it off. It was time to get started.

"So why would religions find the notion of extraterrestrial life inherently problematic?" Mark asked.

"There are really two reasons for that. First, to put it simplistically, some adherents of these religions have difficulty believing any-thing that isn't spelled out in the pages of their religious books. While it's true that both Catholicism and Judaism have ongoing tradition to refer to when it comes to doctrine, for many religious conservatives—even within those groups—if an idea isn't in their authoritative books in black and white, it can't be true, which in turn means it must be heresy and therefore a deception. Eastern religious writings don't dispense dogma so much as they relate history, ethics, or religious expressions of their followers. God isn't described as a person who has given specific revelation about himself that is to be believed and obeyed. Western religious texts are filled with that, and essentially define their respective faiths."

"So you'd argue that since there's nothing in the Bible that says ET can't be real, why worry about it?" asked Deidre.

"Yes, that's part of what I would say to religious conservatives to calm their fears."

"You've used the label `conservatives' now several times," noted Malcolm. "Want to let us know what you mean by that?"

"Sure. By `conservative' I am referring to those Jews, Catholics, and Protestants who pretty much take the Old Testament or the whole Bible at face value—it's God's word and it means what it says ... it prescribes our behavior and has no errors in it."

"As opposed, let's say," interjected Father Benedict, "to those people who, though religious, tend to view the Bible as merely descriptive of a bygone era and culture that has little or no authority over what we think and do today. The Bible for them is a loose collection of stories and lofty ethical ideas."

"Right," acknowledged Brian. "My own contribution to the immediate debate,

getting back to that, focuses on the second objection that a serious Jew, Christian, or Muslim would throw at the idea--that if ET were real then he'd have to be made *in* God's image just like humans. Since theologians of all these traditions have for centuries taught that the image of God is what makes man absolutely unique among created beings, and since—so it's said—the image must refer to things like intelligence, speech capability, moral sense, etc., then the reality of an extraterrestrial intelligence would demonstrate that the Bible has an error."

"But people have believed that for centuries," Melissa interjected.

"True again but such assertions and the debates they fostered have of necessity remained the province of either anti-supernatural bias or interpretational perspective. If ET showed up on the White House lawn, the problem created isn't one where the faithful could argue that the church's position has been misunderstood, or that a text has been taken out of context. It would be an event of a magnitude parallel to the Galileo incident. The church has staked out a position, and an admission of error would be very troublesome to the faith of millions."

"Comparing such an event to the Galileo fiasco is saying a lot," Mark noted. "Are you sure you aren't exaggerating? I know religious scientists that wouldn't have so much trouble with an extraterrestrial unveiling."

"I'm not denying that there are committed Christians or Jews who could handle disclosure," Brian responded, "but masses of the laity would have their world views demolished—and that isn't just my opinion, either. Congress came to the same conclusion in the Sixties."

"Congress?" Deidre asked in surprise.

"Brian is referring to the Brookings Report," Neil cut in. "It was mentioned in passing earlier. Do you have anything from Brookings with you, Brian?"

"Yes, I brought a few pertinent pages," he answered, opening his backpack and retrieving a manila folder. "The Brookings Report was issued on April 18, 1961 as House of Representatives report number 242. The original title," he continued, reading from one of the sheets, "was 'Proposed Studies on the Implications of Peaceful Space Activities for Human Affairs.' The study was conducted for NASA."

"What kind of things did they say?" Mark inquired.

"Page 215 reaches an interesting conclusion:

`Anthropological files contain many examples of societies, sure of their place in the universe, which have disintegrated when they had to associate with previously unfamiliar societies espousing different ideas and different life ways; others that survived such an experience usually did so by paying the price of changes in values and attitudes and behavior.'

"A footnote on page 225 adds this—and it targets fundamentalist Christians:

`Fundamentalist (and anti-science) sects are growing apace around the world . . . for them, the discovery of other life—rather than any other space product would be electrifying . . . If plant life or other subhuman intelligence were found on Mars or Venus, for example, there is, on the face of it, no good reason to suppose these discoveries, after the original

novelty had been exploited to the fullest and worn off, would result in substantial changes in perspectives or philosophy in large parts of the American public, at least any more than, let us say, the coelacanth or the panda . . . If super intelligence is discovered, the results become quite unpredictable."

"It isn't hard for me to imagine the chaos that would seize militant Christian groups," Melissa said, concurring with the report. "These people would think the devil himself had come to earth and the apocalypse was upon them."

"Do you really think," asked Malcolm, "that religious types would wet their pants like that? Seems a stretch."

"I'd have to agree," Mark sided with his colleague. "You're a Christian, Brian, and it seems like a pretty `conservative' one at that," Mark said, "and you said earlier you don't have a problem with the idea."

"Right on both counts. I believe that the answer to the apparent dilemma is to demonstrate that the problem is just that—only perceived and not real. I should add, too, that a more recent study into the same question is far more optimistic about the impact on religious people."

"Does that study have a name?" asked Father Benedict.

"The *Alexander UFO Religious Crisis Survey*. It's often referred to as the `Bigelow Report' after the foundation that funded it. Despite this study, I think we need to be as cautious as possible when it comes to assessing how religious people would react to an intelligent ET reality."

"So why aren't you fearful?" asked Deidre. "Why wouldn't this harm your religious views?"

"I believe," Brian began, "that the Christian church, and conservative Judaism for that matter, has fundamentally misunderstood the Old Testament concept of the image of God. Once that's corrected, there is no problem with intelligent extraterrestrial life. As it stands now, the way the image is defined only sets the church up for a fall. The idea that the image of God should be defined as intelligence or some mental or spiritual faculty is hopelessly flawed, yet that view has monopolized the discussion."

"But how is making this correction, whatever it is, different than the church backtracking and saying they just misunderstood what the Bible said?" Deidre queried.

"In one sense, nothing that is, if the correct interpretation were given enough air time, so to speak, before contact was made. That's the point of my involvement, as I see it."

Neil nodded.

"On the other hand, it would be a mistake to see this as a retreat. Rather, such an effort should be interpreted as a return to serious study of the relevant passages. Theology has never been static, even within what you all would think of as an entrenched orthodoxy. Those in the field recognize that theological change has often occurred commensurate with advances in linguistics and archaeological finds, that sort of thing. For our purposes here," Brian continued, "the church needs an academically defensible position on the image of God that's rooted in the biblical text, one that's the result of sound methodology, and one that can accommodate an intelligent nonhuman species. If that's done soon enough and persuasively enough, people who take the Old

and New Testaments seriously will be prepared. It's sort of preventive theological maintenance."

"So how would you defend the presence of the extraterrestrials we're working with to people so attached to the Bible?" the Colonel asked, his eyes narrowing in interest. "What do you think this image of God is?"

"Those are actually separate questions." Neil looked at him uneasily. He knew Brian's thoughts on the image of God, that it was the lynchpin of his contention that intelligent extraterrestrial life presented no theological problem. Despite Brian's comments of the previous evening, he'd not anticipated any departure from Brian's position during the meeting. He couldn't contain his curiosity.

"What do you mean, Brian?"

"Before last night, I really had only one way of answering the Colonel's questions. I now have another," he confessed in a reflective, almost tense voice, peering momentarily at Father Benedict.

"So give us both of them," the Colonel prodded.

"Oh, I will," Brian stiffened himself behind the lectern. "I'll start with the view that I had assumed I'd be giving since I received this assignment, the view that's tied up with the image of God. I don't imagine anyone here will object to that one, since it's pretty positive. But let me say up front that the other one isn't going to be very encouraging."

"I think we'll be able to handle it," Melissa noted impatiently, arms folded, rocking back in her chair. Brian looked again at Father Benedict, whose expression captured his silent doubt.

"Well, I guess we should start by interacting with the traditional view so everyone is clear on what specifically I object to in that understanding. The primary verses for the doctrine are Genesis 1:26 and 27, which read:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, overall the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

"I would agree," Brian explained, "that the image is certainly that which makes humankind unique from the rest of creation. I would also concur that both men and women are included in the text with no hint of gender superiority with respect to the image, that the image makes humans 'like' God in some way, and that the image is either present or not; it isn't given incrementally. Where I disagree with the traditional view is in its definition of just what is meant by the whole notion of the image of God. I don't think it's a thing God put *into* humans at all."

"That seems to be what the passage says," Melissa spoke up, her brow wrinkled with confusion. "It says humans were created not that I believe it mind *you*—*in* the image of God. It seems to point to something instilled in us. How do you get around that?"

"I don't get around it because there's nothing to avoid. The preposition you pointed out is actually the key—but I'll get to that in a minute. Let's think about the logic

of the traditional view first. You may not agree with some of the implications of my analysis, but I think you'll see the inconsistencies."

"The traditional view," he continued, "defines the image of God via a broad range of faculties: intelligence, sentience, rationality, emotional response, the ability to know God and commune with Him, the possession of a 'soul' and a free will, a sense of morality, or even the ability to communicate. Recalling the passage, if any of those things are by definition the image, it must also be true that all human beings possess them equally and, more importantly, only human beings possess them. Remember also that one either possesses the image or one doesn't. There is no hint in these verses or any others in the Bible that human beings 'received' the image unequally or incrementally."

"I think I know where you're going here ... interesting," Melissa said reflectively, gently biting her lower lip as she scribbled something down on his handout. Brian could scarcely believe she'd let something slip that even sounded remotely complimentary. He almost lost his train of thought.

"It's important to realize that none of the items in the above listing of how scholars have defined the image are uniformly distributed to humanity. What about those born severely retarded? Those mentally damaged through some other birth defect? Do they possess as much of the image as the rest of us? If the image is intelligence, do smarter people have more of the image than less intelligent people? Do Alzheimer's patients lose the image? How do we even measure intelligence, especially in light of current studies into emotional intelligence? And what about the human fetus? Does it possess any of these things at all? In my mind, Christians and Jews of a pro-life persuasion jeopardize their own position by adopting the traditional view of the image. If they want to attach personhood to the contents of the womb in the first trimester—and from the moment of fertilization at that—they have to either redefine the image or separate the image from personhood. For some reason they haven't thought about the first option, and the second choice is an absurdity."

Brian paused to survey his audience. He was pleased that everyone seemed to be following. He still expected some off-the-cuff remark from Melissa, but none came.

Mark shifted in his chair as he prepared to speak. "I get the point you're making about the fetus, Brian ..."

"But . . . ?"

"But someone on the other side—and I'm not saying I believe this could easily say that all these mental faculties are in the fetus from conception, but that they just haven't appeared yet. It seems the image could still be some 'thing' inside the product of conception. After all, the entire range of human behaviors and intelligence are resident in the fertilized egg."

"What you're speaking of is a philosophical fallacy," Brian answered.

"I don't follow."

"It's the difference between actuality versus potentiality. For instance, you're saying the DNA coding is all there for, say, the brain—which controls our intellect, our sense of right and wrong, and our emotional responses—but does the fertilized egg have a brain?"

"Of course not," Mark answered.

"So, if the image were part of the genetic code—our IQ, or our rationality, etc., we'd have to make a distinction between what is only *potentially* real versus what is



actually real—right?"

"Yes."

"So we'd logically have to conclude that humans at the initial cellular stages and even very early fetal development only potentially have the image—if in fact the image resides in some way in our intellectual faculties or our ability to exercise our wills freely."

"Makes sense to me."

"I'm sure it does, but I oppose that view—the image must be actualized from the very moment of fertilization for abortion to be wrong—else how would I or any other pro-life religious person oppose terminating the pregnancy before the brain developed?"

"You couldn't," Deidre broke in. "If brain activity is what distinguished humanity and it's only potentially there, the organism is only potentially human."

"Exactly."

"Another problem with the proposed definition," Brian resumed his critique, satisfied that Mark's objection had been addressed, "concerns free will. If the image of God is equated with free will, does the inability to exercise free will mean the image is not present? Again, the fetus and other human beings who lack even a modicum of mental or intellectual capability are by definition excluded. What about the ability to know and commune with God? Same problem. Some human beings are inherently incapable of seeking or responding to God due to mental handicaps."

"I just thought of something else," Malcolm remarked. "This whole idea of intelligence being what makes a person distinct doesn't account for artificial intelligence. I remember back at MIT running into some grad students in philosophy who objected to work being done in that area—they made it sound as though it was dangerous because in their minds it blurred the distinction between humans and machines. They didn't believe the Bible, of course, but they were really uptight about it."

"It also doesn't leave room for animal intelligence," Deidre added. "The whole sub-discipline of psychology known as animal cognition gets into that. There's no doubt animals possess intelligence and even self-awareness. I've read dozens of studies where animals do better than human infants on memory tests, for example. I doubt if a pro-lifer would want to keep what you're calling the traditional definition if he was as exposed to animal intelligence as I am, and I'm not even an expert."

"Both of those observations are right on target," Brian congratulated them. "I discussed them in my paper on this subject."

"And that got you fired?" Deidre asked, peeking above her glasses.

"Yeah."

"What a surprise."

Brian shrugged.

"So let's hear your spin on animal intelligence in this whole question," Melissa asked, steering the discussion back to Brian.

"Well, if humanity doesn't have a corner on intelligence and the ability to express feelings, the traditional definition falls. It's just impossible to define intelligence or the acquisition of intelligence, or the ability to be taught, in such a way that would *exclude* every member of the animal world while *including* the human infant. I'd go further and also say that the animal question also negates the free will definition. If by free will one means the ability to exercise self-control, resist compulsion, or the freedom to act contrary to some congenital behavioral instinct, animals have been shown to be capable

of all these things. All one would need would be to produce instances of just one animal refraining one time from instinctual activity, or refusing to do something it had been trained to do, or being trained to do something totally contrary to its instinct, to destroy the idea that the image of God is free will. Again, whatever the image is, it must be unique to mankind."

"So, are you opposed to artificial intelligence?" Malcolm asked, reintroducing the subject.

"I have no inherent problem with it as a theologian. If the image isn't intelligence, that settles it for me. I do have other concerns more along the lines of the moral use of artificial intelligence, but that's another subject."

"What about the whole idea of communication ability?" Mark inquired.

"I think it's as poor an option as the others. There are well known instances of animals communicating with humans. Koko the gorilla comes immediately to mind, for example. She knew over two hundred signs of standard sign language, including how to spell. More importantly, she could use them to convey abstract ideas and form independent combinations. She wasn't just mimicking or repeating the same old phrases for reward. She genuinely communicated. Nevertheless, Koko and other examples may be beside the whole question."

"How's that?" Melissa asked.

"Those who prop up communication ability as a viable definition of the image of God often assume that communication across species determines intelligence. For example, we have the image because we can command a dog but he can't reciprocate. It overlooks the whole notion of inter-species communicative ability. Even insects are well known for this ability. Who decided that didn't count?"

"What about the soul?" Neil asked, rubbing his chin. "Seems like a defensible position."

"Not really," Brian replied. "The word typically translated 'soul' in the Old Testament is *nephesh*, and Genesis is very clear that animals have one. For example, in Genesis 1:20 on your sheets the text reads: 'And God said, Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky.' The phrase 'living creatures' is actually *nephesh*, the same word translated 'soul' in Genesis 2:7, where the text says Adam became 'a living soul.' The word simply refers to conscious life, the quality of animation in a living thing. Some theologians try to argue that, even though both humans and animals have a *nephesh*, humans are different from animals because they have a 'spirit'—a *roach* in Hebrew. It's far from clear, however, whether humans are trichotomous beings—having three 'parts' as it were—body, soul, and spirit, or whether a human being only has two parts—body and an immaterial soul-spirit, depending on which term you prefer. In fact, *nephesh* and *roach* are sometimes used interchangeably in the text, so it's hard to argue that the *mach*—the spirit—is the image."

"So I gather from what you've said thus far," Mark summarized, "that the existence of an intelligent extraterrestrial life form is no problem for you because its existence doesn't lay claim to the image of God. It doesn't even matter if man were intellectually inferior, since intelligence is not the image. Correct?"

"Yes."

"So then what is the image, in your view? Your fellow creationists are surely going to want a viable substitute."

Brian nodded and took a sip of water before responding. "I believe the image of

God is not a thing put into us by God that makes us unique, but rather it's something we do. It's not a quality; it's a function. We don't possess God's image; we image God. One's a noun, whereas the other is a verb."

"How do you get that?" Melissa asked.

"My view is based on a point of Hebrew grammar. I know that no one else here reads biblical Hebrew, except for Father Benedict, but I think I can explain what's going on in the text in Genesis 1:26-27."

"Good luck," Malcolm said, shaking his head.

"Thanks," he grinned. "When Melissa made her observation earlier about the preposition `in,' I said that she had put her finger on the key to the issue. The preposition in English is actually a single letter in Hebrew, the letter *beth*, which is equivalent to our letter "b." The question for the translator, of course, is how to translate this letter, or preposition, in the context of the verse. Typically, this letter, when attached to a noun, as in this case, may be translated `in.' I hate to sound like President Clinton here, but have you ever thought about what the word `in' means? It's actually an important question."

Some of the team chuckled, but all of them had no trouble admitting they'd never bothered.

"Now I know what you linguist types do on weekends," Malcolm quipped.

"It beats watching cricket on ESPN."

"Watch it," said Deidre facetiously. "You spend a couple years over there and it kind of grows on you."

"Anyway," Brian continued, enjoying the banter, "the word could denote location, as in the sentence `put the dishes in the sink.' It could also refer to the means by which something is done, as with the phrase `written in pencil.' Other alternatives are inclusion in a group— `I want membership in the club;' or a result `he broke the statue in pieces.' The word has a variety of values."

"So how do you take it in Genesis?" Melissa wondered, starting to look a little bored.

"There's a special use of the preposition *beth* that many He-brew scholars believe is the point of the author in Genesis 1:26-27," he answered, "the meaning of, `functioning in the capacity of.' Hebrew grammarians call it the beth of predication. But rather than use all the words "in the capacity of," English usually uses the word `as' for this meaning. For example, the sentence `I served as the chairman' really means, `I served in the capacity of the chairman.' Now take that meaning of the *beth* preposition back to Genesis 1:26-27, and look what you get: `And God said, "let us make man *as*, or *in the capacity of* our image.'" Once you do this, the verse means—"

"That people were created to function in the capacity of God," Deidre interrupted him, making the connection.

"Exactly," Brian affirmed. "We're here in the place of God and that interpretation is backed up by what the same verses say humans were supposed to do once created: `and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' Human beings were created to be the rulers of God's creation; they were to be God's managers or substitutes. No other creature was given this privilege of rulership, not even the angelic beings, even though Psalm 8:5 says they are superior to us, presumably in powers and abilities. 'Imaging God' is really what is meant by the Old Testament idea of the image. We have the

rightful rule over the planet, no other entity does, and if you're human, you inherit this status. It matters not whether we speak of the fetus, a mentally incapacitated person, or an individual that is apparently whole—if you're human, you bear the status of God's stand-in on earth. Humanness and the image are by definition inseparable."

"So, in your view, ET may be smarter, but he wasn't given the same status?" Malcolm asked.

"Correct. There's no need to forfeit the image of God, and hence the doctrine of the uniqueness of humanity, in accepting the reality of sentient extraterrestrial life. The two are mutually exclusive concepts. The result is that Jews and Christians alike who take their faith seriously have no reason to be alarmed should intelligent extraterrestrial life ever become part of our worldview."

"This makes a lot of sense," commented Melissa. Brian could hardly believe his ears. "I have one question. There's something in Genesis 1:26-27 that I've always wondered about and often questioned, but I've never gotten a satisfying reply."

*Here it comes. She's been setting me up.* "And what's that?" he asked politely, his stomach knotting up.

"Why the plural pronouns in these verses? You know, 'let *us* make man in *our* image—'why isn't the singular used if there's only one God?"

Brian looked at Father Benedict, expecting to see his by now familiar sober expression. To his surprise, however, the priest appeared filled with eager anticipation, as though this was the moment he'd been waiting for. Something told him it was.

"That," Brian said ominously, "is the centerpiece of the other possibility. What I've outlined to this point is no doubt what the Colonel and Neil had in mind when I was recruited. It's the key to making disclosure palatable to the Jewish and Christian worlds."

They both nodded. Neil looked especially pleased.

"I sense a 'but' coming," the Colonel observed warily. "I'm satisfied with your work as it stands. Like you pointed out, it's exactly what we need. We can't have religious resistance."

"With all due respect, Colonel, you'll have more than resistance on your hands if my other view turns out to be the correct one," Brian warned soberly. His bold tone took everyone by surprise.

"Just what are you getting at?" the Colonel demanded, a hint of uncertainty in his voice. Brian hesitated, glancing again at Father Benedict.

"Is there a problem, Brian?" the priest asked. All eyes fell on the young scholar.

"I still have trouble believing it," he replied to the priest, as though the two of them were the only ones in the room.

"But ... ?"

"The idea has such explanatory power, but . . . it seems so fantastic."

"Go ahead, son," he encouraged him.

"Well ..." he began slowly, gathering his thoughts, "Melissa asked about why Genesis 1:26-27 reads 'let us create man in our image.' Most Christian interpreters have traditionally argued that the plural there is either a reference to the Trinity, the idea that God is three persons in one essence, or that it's written that way as a literary device known as the 'plural of majesty' as if to emphasize the one God's greatness by referencing him more than once."

"And you don't buy either of those options, I take it," the Colonel remarked.

"No. The first amounts to the hermeneutical crime of reading the New Testament back into the Old, a method that any introduction to the science of biblical interpretation will duly note as illegitimate. Genesis doesn't refer to a Trinity."

"I just can't see why your views would upset anyone," Deidre dead-panned sarcastically. Brian shook his head wistfully and smiled.

"The second view," he resumed, "has a scene like Isaiah 6 in mind, where God is described with the threefold 'holy, holy, holy.' The problem with the second idea is that not only do other Hebrew texts, such as the Dead Sea scrolls, have a different number of 'holies' here, but in Hebrew grammar the literary phenomenon known as the plural of majesty only occurs with nouns or adjectives—as in Isaiah 6. Genesis 1:26 uses a plural verb form, so it can't be the plural of majesty. A better explanation for the plurals is—"

"Angels?" Deidre anticipated.

"Sort of," Brian followed. "Actually, there are different classes of angelic beings who function in a hierarchy or bureaucracy. The Hebrew Bible actually lays it out quite nicely, but you'd never get it from English translations. I can lay it all out for you if you like. One of those classes is the *heney elohim*."

"The what?" Mark sputtered.

"Sorry for the Hebrew—the 'sons of God:'"

"Are you somehow linking Genesis 6 with the alien Grays?" Neil asked incredulously. A few of the team members looked at each other curiously, not familiar with the biblical chapter Neil had referenced.

"Well ..." Brian balked.

"Spit it out, dude!" Malcolm cajoled, playing with his pen.

"Yeah—In a nutshell," Brian shifted nervously behind the lectern.

"How is that even remotely plausible?" Neil demanded.

"What's this about Genesis 6?" Mark demanded. "I don't have any idea what you guys are talking about."

To Brian's relief Father Benedict interrupted. "None of you probably realize this," the priest began, "but there's a story preserved in the first four verses of Genesis 6 that echoes stories found in every major religion and culture around the world—Mesopotamians, Greeks, Egyptians, African tribes, Native Americans—they all have a story of beings from the sky or the heavens that came down and had sexual relations with human women."

"I don't see the problem," the Colonel objected. "In fact, I'd say these observations help our cause. So what if all the major religions have this story—all we need to do is educate them to the fact that what these ancient writers thought were angels were in fact aliens. Is there anything in the Genesis story that would give the impression that these beings were violent or intended to harm humans?"

"Not specifically—at least right there ..." Brian began slowly, "but that doesn't help, actually. There are a couple of problems with your attempted solution."

"Such as?"

"New Testament references to the event, for starters. What happened in Genesis 6 was viewed as evil. The event is interpreted by the New Testament book of Jude as literal sexual activity perpetrated by wicked, fallen angels, not good ones. To say the least, Jews and Christians who take the account seriously will link aliens to demonic activity if we put aliens in Genesis 6."

"So we go with your first view," the Colonel sparred. "Like I said before, I for one have never detected any hostility from the visitors."

"I'm not through, sir," Brian corrected politely, sensing the resistance building. "It isn't that simple. Many people will make the connection between aliens and Genesis 6 whether we conceal that possibility or not—which is why, as I said a minute ago, you'll have more than a backlash on your hands."

"Let's hear it," the officer grumbled.

"To put it simply, Jesus linked the events prior to the great flood and that would include Genesis 6:1-4—to his return. Matthew 24:37 pretty much says it all, where Jesus says point blank that, 'As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.'"

"I didn't hear anything about aliens in there," Mark objected sarcastically.

"It's true that most religious people would think Jesus was referring to a culture engaged in sinful living on an unprecedented scale in that passage, but sooner or later they'll notice—or be introduced to the idea by those who see it as I'm describing—that Jesus mentions 'marrying and intermarrying' in the same verse. The only ones doing that in the Genesis 6 description are the sons of God and the human women. What you want us to sell to people as a friendly living arrangement with ET could be viewed by many as the harbinger of the apocalypse."

"This just can't . . . be right," Neil said haltingly, aghast at what he was hearing.

"It isn't!" the Colonel erupted. "What proof do you have that any of this nonsense has anything to do with the visitors?"

"As Andrew just said," Brian replied, this time more confidently, "this story shows up in dozens of ancient cultures. In ancient Greek mythology, it's the story of the Titans—beings descended from the gods who had sexual intercourse with human women. Sound familiar?"

"So?" the Colonel snapped.

"So the Greek word for 'Titan' is *Titanos*. Significantly, *Titanos* is also a homonym—there's another word in the Greek language spelled exactly the same way. Care to guess what the other *Titanos* means?"

"What?" he snorted impatiently.

"Gray."

"Oh ... my . . . God," Deidre gasped and cupped her face in her hands.

"So you see, Colonel," Brian stared at him, "if the alternative is really what's going on here we'll have more than a religious panic induced by people who believe the apocalypse is upon us—it *will* be upon us."

## CHAPTER 20

"UFOs are the Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse."

—*DE: Lincoln LaPaz*

"I JUST KNEW it!" Melissa taunted. "You're one of those militant right-wing Christian wackos. You'd give them all the ammunition they'd need to justify religious opposition to the government. You Bible-thumpers portray yourselves as God-fearing, community-minded `servants,' when you're really nothing but fear-mongering, gun-toting survivalists. It's just pathetic."

"Hold on, Melissa," Neil responded to the diatribe, trying to keep his temper. "I'm among those `Bible-thumpers' and resent your characterization. It's a grossly unfair distortion."

"Whatever. I've studied too many of these groups to be intimidated by a difference of opinion."

"Then your research has relied on guilt-by-association propaganda, not scholarly methodology!" he jabbed emphatically. The level of his agitation surprised Brian.

"Fine, but we can all see that you're the one arguing from emotion here."

"Let's keep this civil, people," Deidre stepped in.

"I still say we go with Dr. Scott's first view and forget the other one—it's totally counterproductive," insisted the Colonel.

"Do you think that's wise, Colonel?" Father Benedict asked, and then hesitated, drawing everyone's attention. "This information is critical for all of us to evaluate what it is we're facing and who we're in league with."

"Fine, Father," the Colonel said, leaning back in his chair, observing the priest's demeanor with interest.

"I think the reason Andrew questioned you," Brian said, attempting to explain the priest's objection, "is because the second view is really his own. He's only recently introduced me to the idea, which he bases in part on my own dissertation."

"Just what the hell was your dissertation about?" the Colonel asked, leaning forward.

"Something called the divine council."

"Oh, that helps," smirked Melissa.

"I can give everyone the short version, if you're interested."

"I think it would be helpful," Neil approved, "especially as it relates to what you just hit us with." The team looked at the Colonel for his reaction. With a sigh he sat back into his chair.

Brian pulled his Hebrew Bible from his backpack. "Here goes," he said and took a deep breath, glancing at Father Benedict and then Neil. "A good bit of what I'll say is based on the Hebrew Bible and the languages and religions of Canaan, not the English Bible. My conclusions are therefore not based on what English readers are used to seeing in front of them when they read their Bible. I know you aren't Semitists, so if you have trouble following me, let me know. I'll do my best to communicate what the biblical text is saying and what the implications of it are."

"This ought to be good," Melissa muttered, just loud enough to be heard. Brian ignored her.

"My dissertation was entitled 'The Divine Council in the He-brew Bible and Intertestamental Jewish Literature.' I'm sure the term 'divine council' is new to you, so we'll start there. Andrew ..." Brian paused, sliding his Bible to the priest, "could you be ready with the passages we'll touch on? We'll start in Psalm 82." The priest nodded.

"The divine council is an ancient concept in the world of the near and middle east, much older than the biblical text. The major civilizations of remote antiquity—the Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians, Egyptians, and Hittites—all believed in the existence of a council of gods who ran the cosmos and the affairs of earth—hence the term 'divine council.' Other less well known peoples, such as the Phoenicians, the Moabites, and most notably the civilization at Ugarit—located in what is now Syria—also believed in such a council. The Ugaritic religion is especially important to the discussion, since elements of their worship—for instance, Baal worship—are not only referred to in the Hebrew Bible, but are adapted by biblical writers."

"Are you saying that the Old Testament Hebrews adopted Canaanite religion?" asked Neil, somewhat surprised. "I know that many Israelites were condemned for doing that, but it sounds to me like you're saying Hebrew religion borrowed some things from pagans."

"The word 'borrowed' isn't quite accurate," Brian explained. "I'm referring to the prophets themselves incorporating phrases from Canaanite and Ugaritic religious texts into their own writings—the Hebrew Bible."

"Oh," he mumbled, dumbfounded.

"So much for 'every word proceeding from the mouth of God,'" jeered Melissa.

"Quite the contrary," Brian corrected her with an annoyed stare. "No orthodox theologians have denied or do deny that the biblical writers used sources for their compositions. Most of the literary adaptation I'm talking about here had a specific, polemic purpose."

"Meaning what?" asked Mark.

"The biblical writers—the prophets and psalmists mostly—were fond of using texts that claimed something about a Canaanite god and then editing it so that what they produced would extol the virtues of Yahweh, the God of Israel. For example, in Deuteronomy 33:26 and Psalm 68:4 God is described as 'riding on the clouds'—a phrase taken word-for-word from Ugaritic religious texts that describe Baal. The biblical writers appropriate such texts that describe Baal as master of the heavens and reword them to 'correct' the theology—as if to say, 'no, you dunderheads, it's Yahweh who controls the heavens, not Baal.' It's actually quite clever."

"Now, you said most of the times this occurs the writers correct the theology. I take it that this isn't always the case," wondered Deidre.

"Right at times what you have instead of a theological polemic is actually a shared religious belief, and the classic example is the divine council. Andrew, why don't you read Psalm 82:1 and point out the relevant Hebrew terms."

The priest nodded and put on his reading glasses. "Okay . . . Verse One says 'God—and the word there *is elohim*, used for God's name—God stands in the divine council; he judges among the gods'—among the *elohim*—the same word as earlier in the verse."



"So what we have," Brian took over, "is a direct statement in the Hebrew Bible that *God—elohim*—presides over a sort of heavenly council composed of a group of other gods—the other plural *elohim*. It would make absolutely no sense to translate the verse as something like 'God stands in the divine council; he judges among God.' The second occurrence of *elohim* must be plural."

"Sounds like plain old polytheism to me," Melissa smirked.

"Only if you ignore what the rest of the Hebrew Bible says about God and these other 'divine beings'—which is how I think the second plural should be translated. We moderns recognize that there is a theological difference between *deity* and *divinity*. In western religious terms, 'deity' speaks of a being who is independent, self-existent, all-powerful, omniscient, and the source of everything that exists—including the other *elohim*. On the other hand, 'divinity' implies derived existence, power, and ability. Divine beings are not infinite and self-existent; they had to be created, and are subservient to the creator."

"This distinction for which Brian is arguing," interjected Father Benedict, "is not at all contrived. In fact, it was the very focus of the first ecumenical council in the history of the Christian Church, the Council of Nicea, held in 325 A.D."

Brian motioned for him to continue.

"At that council, the views of a man named Arias were put to the test to determine if they were heretical. Specifically, the controversy concerned Arias' view that Jesus was not God in the flesh, but was rather a being God the Father had created eons ago. Hence Arias taught that Jesus was divine, but not deity—contrary to John chapter one I might add. Arianism, as it came to be called, was condemned by the council as being contrary to the teachings of the New Testament."

"Didn't that council write the Nicene Creed?" Deidre asked.

"Yes, it did," Brian said, resuming the lead. "The distinction is important, and actually protects the Israelites from the charge of poly-theism. The problem is that most scholars in my field—or otherwise—usually don't give the Israelites enough credit for understanding the distinction. They're allegedly too 'primitive' or theologically unsophisticated. I say such criticisms are bunk. The Old Testament Israelite knew and believed that Yahweh was indisputably the true God Almighty, but the ancient Israelites also believed the gods of the other nations, the other *elohim*, actually did exist. They believed these divine beings had fallen from grace, but nonetheless possessed real power, but power that was not comparable to the true deity."

"Yeah, I can see where this would make you a popular guy with the Christian right," Deidre grinned. "Nothing like having your peers patiently hear you out."

"I guess you know how it feels," Brian said, looking her in the eye. He got the distinct impression that his willingness to think out-side the box had made points with her. She'd been down the same road with her work on the abduction phenomenon.

"So in reality, we aren't talking about polytheism, where deities compete with each other, rival each other, battle each other, etc. The picture in the Hebrew Bible is that Yahweh, the head of the heavenly council—the cosmic CEO as it were—is without peer and rival. He alone has ultimate power, and His authority cannot be successfully overturned. He is Deity and He alone. The other ancient Near Eastern societies weren't completely devoid of the idea that one god was on top, but the other gods could defy the leader not only to be annoying, but to actually compete for the lead god's rank. Only

Israel kept a clear distinction between a sole deity and the surrounding de-rived divinities. The only thing standing in the way of conservative Christianity's and Judaism's admission of the divine council as a legitimate Israelite belief is the fact that we've imposed our own philosophical conception of monotheism on the Semitic mind."

"Fascinating . . . I suppose this isn't the only place the divine council shows up in the Old Testament?" asked Neil.

"Far from it," scoffed Father Benedict, turning the pages in the Hebrew text. "There are a couple dozen references to either the council or its members. For example, I Kings 22:19-23 gives us a glimpse into an actual divine board meeting!"

*"Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the LORD and said, 'I will entice him. 'By what means?' the LORD asked." 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,' he said." You will succeed in enticing him, ' said the LORD. 'Go and do it. ' "So now the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The LORD has decreed disaster for you."*

"Psalm 89:5-7 is striking as well," noted Brian. Father Benedict turned there quickly:

*The heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones. For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD? Who is like the LORD among the heavenly beings? In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him.*

"Why can't these just be angels like Deidre answered a while back?" Malcolm asked.

"Good question," Brian acknowledged. "The problem with grasping that these are not mere angels is due mainly to the fact that our English Bibles seem to say just that. In reality, there are very precise terms used in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near Eastern world for various bureaucratic levels within the divine council. In fact, several of the terms used at Ugarit and Mesopotamia are exact, letter-for-letter equivalents to words used in biblical Hebrew. Unfortunately, English Bible translators, either out of ignorance of the ancient Near Eastern overlap in terminology, or perhaps to protect the reader from the presumed polytheism we talked about, don't translate the individual terms with the precise meanings they denote."

"The languages are that close?" asked Neil.

"Absolutely. For example, the Ugaritic language and He-brew share words like *kokebey el*— 'the stars of God' which refers to heavenly beings in verses like Job 38:7 and Isaiah 14:13. Then there are the plural *elim* and *elohim*, which mean 'gods' or 'divine beings,' and phrases like *beney elohim* or *beney elim*, 'the sons of God' or 'of the gods'— again, I prefer 'divine beings.' The very phrase 'assembly of God,' or 'divine council'— the *qahal el* or *adat el* respectively, are also precise equivalents. Even more interesting, according to Psalm 48:1-2 and Isaiah 14:13, the God of the Bible is said to live on the 'mount of assembly' in 'the heights of the north.' At Ugarit the head of the council also

lived on a mountain in the northern recesses where the council met. The parallels are absolutely undeniable and unmistakable."

"Maybe they're the same god," suggested Mark.

"I wouldn't go that far, because the data doesn't allow it."

"Neither does your theology," Melissa sniped.

"My theology is based on the Hebrew text, and nothing else," he replied. "I'm loyal only to the text, not a denomination or Brother Billy Bob's First Church of the Snakehandling Apostles," he quipped, staring her down. His response drew some laughter, but Melissa's expression was haughty and unflinching.

"Ugaritic religion says a number of things about El," Brian continued, "particularly his sexual exploits—that the Hebrew Bible rejects. The names are the same, but the conceptions are different at a number of points. That's the verdict of the written remains, not my preferences."

"So what were you saying about this heavenly bureaucracy thing?" Deidre inquired, steering the discussion back to the point of departure.

"Basically, the various terms for heavenly beings define each bureaucratic level of the council. El or Yahweh is at the top—both names are used in the Bible for Israel's God. The 'sons of El,' the lesser *elohim*, are the next descending level. Beneath these two tiers are the *malakim*—the 'messengers.' By the way, *malak* is the term that is properly translated 'angel'—our word 'angel' comes from the Greek *angelos*, whose base meaning is 'messenger.' They're sort of the heavenly errand boys who work for the divine beings who outrank them. The only exception is when a message is so important that one of the higher beings delivers it. For instance there is the mysterious 'angelmalak—of Yahweh.' We know he is a very high ranking council member, unlike the mere *malakim*, since he exhibits attributes of deity—he forgives sin, accepts sacrifices, etc. In some cases, as in the account of Samson's birth, he is specifically called *elohim*. Personally, I think he's the physical manifestation of Yahweh, the council head. That would also make him what Christian theology calls a preincarnate form of the second person of the Trinity—Christ himself—before he was born into a human body at Bethlehem. The last layer in the bureaucracy is comprised of the *cherubim* and the *seraphim*, both of which seem to be guardians of the throne room the boardroom, if you will—of God and his council."

"This Old Testament bureaucracy," Neil pondered aloud as he leaned back in his chair, "is it unique? I mean, I don't recall reading anything like this in the New Testament."

"That's because the Greek New Testament lacks the descriptive vocabulary for the hierarchical terms," Brian answered. "It's kind of like the so-called 'wine problem' in the Bible."

"You'd better explain that, Brian," Father Benedict suggested.

Brian thought for a moment. "I'm sure you all know that Christians and other groups who want to use the Bible as an authoritative religious book—like Mormons, for instance—say that drinking alcohol is forbidden by the Bible. The Old Testament Hebrew has nearly a half dozen words for a beverage made from the fruit of the vine, all but one of which refers to an alcoholic beverage. Godly Bible characters clearly consumed alcohol. New Testament Greek, on the other hand, has only one word for 'wine' *oinos*, a word that can mean fermented or unfermented beverages. This vocabulary deficiency has led to arguments among certain Christians over the consumption of alcohol. So it is with

angelic beings. The Hebrew text has a wide variety of terms for heavenly beings, but their distinctions get blurred in the New Testament—they all get translated with *angelos*. There are some fairly oblique indications of a heavenly bureaucracy that have slipped through to the New Testament."

"Of course—the references to 'principalities and powers!'" Neil exclaimed in recognition.

"So what does this have to do with our project?" the Colonel queried impatiently. "This is all very interesting, but I haven't heard anything yet that would lead any sane person to think the apocalypse was drawing near."

"For that, we need to go back to the Genesis connection," Brian noted. "Remember that I argued a moment ago that the image of God actually refers to a special status given to humankind—specifically rulership over the earth."

Several heads nodded.

"Now, of course, I've argued that the 'us' in Genesis 1:26 refers to the divine council—God together with the heavenly host, made up of divine beings and angels. Does anyone see a potential problem?"

"I know you wouldn't say this," Melissa interjected, "but you could argue that humans were created by the gods—and it isn't much of a leap then to say that these gods were extraterrestrials."

"Correct—some do say that," Brian replied.

"The idea that our solar system was 'seeded' by extraterrestrials is popular among some religious cults that incorporate belief in aliens into their mythology," Melissa added. "It would seem Genesis says the same thing."

"I'm sure it's no surprise that I believe it doesn't," Brian qualified, "but you've noticed what I hoped you would."

"But if there's a plural in those Genesis verses—let us make humans in our image—then doesn't that mean that these beings helped create humans, or, using your terminology, share the same status as humans?" she persisted.

"The answer to the first question is no," Brian collected his thoughts. "The verb 'created' found in Genesis 1:27 is singular in the Hebrew, and the text also adds the phrase, 'He'—again, a singular reference 'created them.' The council members do not participate in creating humankind. Only God did that."

"If they can't create anything, why ask them about it?" Malcolm joked.

"The point isn't that they possess no creative power. Apparently they do possess creative ability because they share the image of God. Remember, we have creative power, but on a scale far inferior to God. The text is unambiguous—the council members didn't participate in creating humanity. By the way, the idea of the image being shared by heavenly beings is my answer to Melissa's second question—but with a qualification. Humans were given unique rulership status on earth. We're top dog within the creation as it applies to earth. Genesis 1:26-27 makes no reference to our dominion over anything else. Angelic beings may share a special status as rulers, but human-kind was given rulership over the earth."

"But I remember in Sunday School ..." Mark interjected, then stopped. Everyone could read the embarrassment on his face. "Hey, my Dad was a minister, okay?" he added defensively. "Anyway, I remember being taught that the angels were superior to humans. Is that correct in your view of all this?"

"Yes, it is," Brian commented, "and I think it's one of the keys to explaining why things within the bureaucracy went awry. Andrew has the verse, I believe."

Father Benedict flipped through several pages until he found the reference in Psalm 8:5:

'You made him'—that is, mankind in context—'a little lower than the divine beings'—the *elohim*—'and crowned him with glory and honor.'

"What happened? Was there a labor dispute?" Malcolm queried with his characteristic candor.

"Of sorts. It was more of a discrimination case," Brian answered, borrowing the metaphor. "The sons of God were passed over for a terrific job, even though they were more qualified."

"Let me guess," Neil broke in, "they were angry that humans got to oversee the earth."

"Right again," Father Benedict congratulated the undersecretary. "They catch on quickly!" he noted, looking at Brian.

"I'm not saying I believe this stuff," added Malcolm, "but if I were one of those heavenly dudes, I'd be pissed—what right does humankind have in ruling this planet God just made, especially when we were here first and we're smarter!"

"My own view of what happened," Brian continued, sup-pressing a chuckle, "is that one of the *beney elohim*, whose name is given to us in Isaiah 14:12-15, rebelled against God's decision to put mankind over the earth and hence to allow humans to be imagers of God. He took a good portion of the rest of the sons of God with him—it was a mass defection from the council."

"Satan?" Melissa asked.

"Technically," Brian answered. "The word 'Satan' isn't actually used as a proper name in the Hebrew Bible. The term just means 'the adversary' and isn't actually used of Helel, although the New Testament makes that connection."

"Who's Helel?" Neil asked.

"That's the name of the heavenly being who rebelled against God's decision according to Isaiah 14, a certain Helel ben-Shakar. His name means 'Shining One, son of the dawn.'"

"Is his rebellion described in any detail?" asked Deidre, adjusting her posture. The look on her face told Brian she was following his train of thought.

"Yes, there are some details—this will blow your minds, believe me. After this piece of the puzzle you'll know why Andrew and I are so apprehensive. Have all of you at least heard of the story of the serpent in the garden of Eden with Adam and Eve?" Brian asked.

Everyone made some sign of affirmation.

"Haven't you ever wondered why Eve wasn't surprised when the serpent spoke to her?"

"Because it's a fairy tale?" Melissa mocked.

"Other than that—and it isn't," Brian retorted. The scientists in the room just shook their heads. "You all had better pray—if that's the right word—that what's laying in cold storage here validates your evolutionary views and not what I'm constructing

here," he countered, suddenly feeling bolder, "because if I'm right, you'll have more to worry about than apologizing for Darwin."

"I for one have always wondered about that," said Neil. Deidre acknowledged the same. The Colonel was silent.

"The answer is that she wasn't surprised because she didn't speak to a serpent—she was speaking to a *nachash*."

"What do you mean?" asked Neil, confused by the statement. "Are you denying the story?"

"Far from it. The word translated 'serpent' in Genesis 3 is *nachash*. It's a fairly common word, and can, of course, be translated 'snake.' It also has three other meanings in the Hebrew Bible. A *nachash* can be someone who practices divination, or can refer to shining brass. As a verb, however, the word often means 'to shine, gleam,' as you'd guess from the reference to brass. Daniel 10:13 describes the prophet being visited by a heavenly being whose body shone like brass."

"I think I know where this is going," Melissa murmured, although this time there was no hint of sarcasm in her voice. Brian could tell by her expression that she was interested in what he had to say. She quickly looked away.

"Anyway, *nachash* in Genesis 3 can just as well be understood as a substantive participle."

"A what?" Mark asked.

"Sorry for the grammar—let's just say the form there can be a verbal used as a noun."

"Oh. That's helpful."

"Sorry again," Brian picked up his thought. "What I mean to say is that the word *nachash* can be translated as"—

"The Shining One," Melissa finished his sentence, a disturbed look creasing her face.

## CHAPTER 21

"As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man"

*Jesus, in Matthew 24.37—*

"YOU GOT IT," Brian confirmed. "Eve wasn't surprised that the entity before her spoke, because she was in the presence of a celestial being, not a snake. She stood before Helel, the shining one of Isaiah 14. He aimed to plunge her and the human race into disobedience so he and those who agreed with his rejection of Yahweh's decree could be put in charge of the earth. Remember, of all created beings, humans were the only ones who did not have to answer to the council members or any of the heavenly hierarchy—they reported directly to Yahweh. Helel was incensed at this snubbing, especially with reference to a creature beneath him."

"This is wild," Deidre interjected. "How do you know your reconstruction is right? Isn't this all made up?"

"No—unfortunately. Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 confirm it. In the Isaiah passage describing Helel's rebellion and punishment, we are specifically told that his reason for betraying God was his desire to 'be like the Most High.' The phrase either means he wanted to be the imager of God in the garden and on earth in place of the inferior humans, or that he wanted to call the shots in Yahweh's own office and rectify Yahweh's 'stupid' decision. I'm not sure which meaning is best, but both options fit my reconstruction. I sort of prefer the latter because it not only encompasses the first, but it seems to fit the rest of Isaiah 14 better, where Helel says 'I will raise my throne above the stars of God'—remember, in Job 38:7 those were the sons of God 'I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain."

"That sounds like that divine council stuff," Malcolm noted, "you know, God lived on the mount of assembly."

"Nice catch, Malcolm. You're right. Helel wanted to rule in the dwelling place of God."

"I thought he wanted to rule over Eden and on the earth," Melissa chimed in. "He can't do both."

"Yes he could," Brian replied, "since Eden *was* the mount of assembly."

"Come again?"

"Eden was the place on earth where God met with the divine council."

"I thought Eden was a garden, not a mountain—and that only Adam and Eve lived there."

"That's only correct insofar as the story is related in Genesis 3. But Ezekiel 28 adds a few fascinating details."

"I'm translating verses 12-16," Father Benedict broke in enthusiastically. "The chapter is a diatribe against a human—the prince of ancient Tyre. The prophet Ezekiel warns him about his arrogance using the story of a shining, beautiful divine being in Eden who rebelled out of pride:

*The word of the LORD came to me. "Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: " `You were the model of perfection, All of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God ... You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings.'*

"Wow!" exclaimed Neil. "I never noticed that before—Eden, the garden of God, is specifically called the *mountain of God*."

"And a heavenly being—not a snake—was expelled from the garden, not just Adam and Eve," Brian pointed out.

"You said a few moments ago that this Helel took a lot of the *beney elohim* with him when he rebelled—where do you get that?" asked Deidre.

"Basically, from two references in the Old Testament, although there's a source outside of the Hebrew Bible that relates to the question as well. Deuteronomy 4:19 and 32:8 are the biblical sources. Do you have the verses, Andrew?"

"Ready . . . Deuteronomy 32:8-9 say, 'When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the nations according to the number of the sons of God.'—and you need to comment on this phrase, Brian."

He nodded and motioned for Father Benedict to read on.

"Deuteronomy 4:19 reads, 'And beware that when you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, that you be led astray to worship them and to serve them, these things which the LORD your God has allotted to all the nations under the whole heaven.'"

"You're going to have to explain all that, too," Neil interrupted, reminding Brian of his audience.

"Right. First, Andrew noted that the last phrase of Deuteronomy 32:8 needed a comment. What he translated reflected the Septuagint Old Testament, not the Hebrew Bible that, say, the Pharisees would have used."

He paused to survey his audience. Most of the team looked confused.

"The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It was put together in the first few centuries before Christ. That translation was based on a slightly different edition of the Hebrew Bible than the one the Pharisees of Jesus' day would have used—that one is called the Masoretic text. However, Jesus and the disciples primarily used the Septuagint."

"How do we know that?" Melissa inquired.

"When they quote the Old Testament, their quotations match the text underlying



the Septuagint roughly 80 percent of the time. For our purposes, the Masoretic Old Testament says that God set up the boundaries of the nations `according to the sons of Israel,' not `according to the sons of God.' The Septuagint text is better in this verse for a host of technical reasons. It's also backed up by the Dead Sea Scrolls."

"What do the verses mean?" asked Neil. "I've read Deuteronomy a number of times, but it's like I'm seeing these verses for the first time."

"They refer to something God did when he divided up the nations geographically."

"Which is described in Genesis 10 and 11," noted Neil.

"Right. Most people skip those chapters because they're just a list of the nations in the region of the Mediterranean—except for Israel, which isn't in the list."

"That's odd," Neil mused.

"And important," Brian replied. "What I want you to do is consider our Deuteronomy verses in light of God's partitioning of the earth in Genesis. They teach us that when God divided the earth, he put the nations of Genesis 10 and 11 under the authority of the sons of God, which in turn were deemed by the pagan Gentile nations as their gods."

"And so Israel isn't in the list," Neil deduced, "because according to Deuteronomy 32:9, Israel was Yahweh's property."

"Whoa!" Deidre exclaimed, "That sounds like God made the non-Jewish nations worship false gods."

"And I thought humans ruled the earth, not these divine beings," added Melissa.

"To answer Deidre first, you're right. This is the Old Testament equivalent of a passage like Romans 1 in the New Testament—that's where God is said to have given people up to their own persistent sinfulness."

"How nice of him," Melissa sneered.

"It was—and I think you'll agree." She managed only a mystified look.

"God gave mankind a free will," Brian explained, "a decision that, once made, could not be withdrawn. God had no interest in forcing sinful people to love him. When they persisted in rejecting him, rather than turn them into robots, he left them to their own vices—but the truth was still out there. Wouldn't you rather be free than an automaton?"

"Whatever," she retorted, "I don't believe any of this anyway." Brian continued.

"So God gave the nations up to their own willful rejection of him. By the time of Genesis 10, a lot of history had been covered, and humankind had consistently shown more interest in pursuing its own impulses than the will of God even after the Flood! As a result, God more or less decided to let them go—but He had a plan to get them back. And speaking of Genesis 10 and 11, if you count the number of nations listed in those chapters, there are exactly seventy."

"I take it that's significant," Neil guessed, glancing at Brian, his brow wrinkled in thought.

"Absolutely. Since the number of the sons of El at Ugarit—remember, Ugarit shared a belief in the divine council—is placed at exactly seventy. The match is perfect. Each Gentile nation was put under the authority of one of the seventy sons of God. Deuteronomy 4:19 gives us the added detail that other members of the heavenly host were also part of this arrangement. God was more or less saying, `if you won't follow me and would rather worship these lesser beings, go ahead.'"

"So each of these nations sort of had their own divine, but evil, hierarchy?" Deidre inquired.

"That's the picture I get."

"But if the serpent was actually some kind of angelic being, what about the curses that follow in the garden story?" she wondered.

"They're metaphorical. Helel wanted to be above all creation, so God put him beneath all creation—even the cattle were considered superior in status. Even they would trample him, figuratively speaking."

"Can we get onto the supposed connection with the project?" the Colonel suddenly blurted out in an even more irritated voice.

"Of course," Brian said apologetically. "With respect to the curses Deidre just brought up, the most important for our purposes is in Genesis 3:15. This curse addresses the relationship between Eve's offspring and the offspring of the Shining One. We are the progeny of Eve. Who do you suppose are the children of the Shining One?"

"He wouldn't be able to produce any," Deidre spoke up. "Genesis 3 has him all alone. He'd need a female."

"Good observation," Brian responded. "Now where do you suppose this being would get a female?"

"I don't . . . hold on now ..." she said as she pondered the question.

"The sons of God saw the daughters of men," Andrew read aloud from Genesis 6, "that they were beautiful, and took them wives of all they wanted."

"My God!" exclaimed Deidre in a half whisper, "can you say `alien abduction?'" She shook her head.

Brian paused to let this revelation sink in, then added, "Some people suggest the incident refers to the genetic engineering of humanity by extraterrestrials."

Father Benedict noted the distress on Neil's face, and responded, "But the supposed extraterrestrial connection is a weak conclusion. Rather, Brian and I have wondered whether the Grays are not truly extraterrestrials. We think it's possible they are either the sons of God, or are creations of the sons of God after their own likeness."

"I'm not following," complained Mark.

"For instance," Father Benedict explained, "when you say `alien,' you of course mean beings from another planet. What if the Grays are not truly extraterrestrial in the conventional understanding? What if they are actually evil entities—either servants of the original sons of God, or the culprits themselves? What if they are spiritual entities that could take on physical form at will, in order to reproduce a seed to infect the lineage that would lead to the Messiah? The whole point of the fallen sons of God cohabiting with human women was to render impossible the pure lineage required for the Messiah."

"I'm not sure I follow that last point either," Deidre admitted.

"I'm not sure I want to," remarked the Colonel.

"You've got the pieces in front of you, Dr. Harper, now look at the puzzle," Father Benedict prodded. "Use your own research into the abduction phenomenon."

Deidre thought for a moment before responding. "You know, you guys sound a little like Jacques Vallee, and even more importantly for my money, Dr. Mack."

"Yes!" exclaimed Father Benedict.

"Although neither would assent to any of this Bible stuff," she added.

"Who are Jacques Vallee and this `Dr. Mack?'" Mark asked.

"Vallee is a famous French ufologist—a Ph.D. in computer science by training—who did most of his writing during the Seven-ties," Deidre answered. "He's the guy that Steven Spielberg used for a model for the French ufologist in the movie `Close Encounters.'"

"No kidding," said Malcolm, "I loved that movie."

"Vallee is one of the few, at least for his time, to postulate that the ET's may not be true extraterrestrials but inter-dimensional beings pretty much like religious types would describe spiritual beings. I don't know why, but a lot of people into UFOs nowadays seem to have forgotten about that view; they just think on interplanetary terms without giving the older view the same consideration. Dr. Mack is a psychiatrist at Harvard University; he's recently come to the same position in his latest book, *Passport to the Cosmos*. Some-how, these inter-dimensional beings can take genuine physical form."

"Harvard?" Mark wondered. "How would Harvard allow a guy like that on their faculty?"

"Dr. Mack's beliefs—and, I might add, his intellectual honesty—have caused quite a stir. He was tenured before he got into this, so he isn't going to lose his job over it. The university has retaliated in some ways, though. Dr. Mack was going to be my graduate adviser at Harvard until the university saw to it that he would receive fewer graduate students to mentor. I was accepted at Harvard, but the university informed me I'd have to study under someone else. Dr. Mack gave me the scoop himself a bit later, and recommended I go to a friendlier environment. I chose Edinburgh because their psychology department allowed students to study parapsychology."

"Wait a minute," Neil objected, "isn't there some verse somewhere in the Bible that says angels can't have sex? Or maybe that there's no sex in heaven?"

"I think I'll convert to Islam," quipped Malcolm.

"You're thinking of Matthew 22:30, which does apparently teach that there's no sex in heaven—that we'll be like `the angels of God in heaven.'"

"So the sons of God in Genesis 6 can't be angelic beings then?" Neil wondered.

"No, it doesn't mean that at all," answered Brian. "First of all, the verse doesn't say that angelic beings *can't* have sex; it just says they don't."

"That's pretty weak," said Melissa.

"I agree, but it's still an interpretive option. I prefer to handle this objection by pointing out that the verse says the angels in heaven don't have sexual relations. This is pretty obvious since elsewhere the New Testament refers to the angelic beings as `ministering spirits.' You must recall that the sons of God in Genesis 6 were not in heaven. We know from elsewhere in Genesis that when these heavenly beings come to earth they take on real, unmistakable, corporeal form. For instance, in Genesis 18 and 19 the two angels accompanying the Lord when he visits Abraham were able to eat, and they also physically grabbed Lot and pulled him into the house when the men of Sodom threatened him. In Genesis 32 Jacob wrestled with an angel. I would say angels don't need to eat in heaven either—as we won't, as far as the Bible tells us—but on earth they could and did. There's no reason to suppose that the same isn't true for other physical abilities, such as sex. I'd say the reference to the Shining One's `seed' opposing the `seed' of the woman in Genesis 3:15 actually requires reproductive ability."

"Well said, Brian," Father Benedict commended him.

"That does make sense," said Neil. "Aren't there other views of Genesis 6? I can't recall ever having heard the passage laid out quite like this."

"There are basically three others," he answered. "If you look back at Genesis 6:1-4 on your handouts, you'll note that the hybrid offspring of these weird sexual unions were the 'giants.' The Hebrew word behind 'giants' is *nephilim*. Since many Jewish and Christian interpreters think that this sounds too mythological, or find the idea of angelic-human sexual union impossible or unthinkable, they have postulated other views that take the *nephilim* to be fully human. One view has the intermarriage of the passage as being between godly people and pagan, ungodly kings who were thought to be divine, so the union produces great warriors. The reason they were viewed negatively in the text was because they came from pagans. Another view says that the 'sons of God' are those from the godly line of Seth, another of Adam and Eve's sons, while the daughters of men were descendants from the ungodly line of their son Cain."

"The one that killed his brother Abel in Genesis chapter four," Father Benedict added.

"So, all the women in the story were ungodly?" asked Melissa.

"That's what you'd have to say if you held that view. Aside from not being in the text, I'd say it's pretty sexist."

"For once we agree."

"You'd also have to argue that being from the line of Seth made you godly. I don't know how that would figure in the rest of biblical theology. It would mean you're going to heaven because of the family into which you were born; it's ridiculous. The real reason these views are offered is because the idea of hybrid offspring is offensive to many. A third view postulates that the sons of God here were men possessed by demons who used human bodies. This view ignores the fact that you'd have a 'son of God' being demon possessed."

"So what's your defense against these views?" Neil asked.

"All of them are untenable because they read something into the text. They're also unworkable since they all ignore the spelling of the word *nephilim*."

"What do you mean?" asked Neil. "What does spelling have to do with it?"

"The notion that the *nephilim* are only human men is based on the assumption that the word comes from the Hebrew *naphal*. Allegedly, *nephilim* actually means 'those who fall upon', as in 'attack someone'—hence the view that they are only human warriors."

"So what's the problem with that?" Mark asked.

"The vowels are all wrong. Most people who try to argue this way never bother to write the form out in correct Hebrew. Their whole approach is flawed. If you take the term as being from the Hebrew word *naphal*, a translation of "those who fall upon" would require a spelling of '*nophelim*.' Notice that the first two vowels are wrong—and the middle one is especially important, as I'll try to explain."

"Isn't it true that Hebrew originally had no vowels?" asked Melissa.

"Yes, but prior to the language getting vowels, which began after the fifth century A.D., the ancient Hebrews used consonants to indicate vowels in some words. The letter *yodh*—our 'y' was used to mark the vowel letter 'i.' There are several places where *nephilim* is spelled with the *yodh* vowel marker in the middle. The spelling is very clear. The word *nephilim* actually comes from Aramaic. Sorry about the grammar again, but it's either a passive participle that means "fallen ones," which would fit my view since they

were viewed in the ancient texts as evil, or it's from the Aramaic *nephila*—'giant.' When it comes right down to it, the ancients didn't discriminate between the root words—they believed the *nephilim* were sired by fallen beings and they were gigantic."

Colonel Ferguson had been, for the most part, silent during the course of the discussion, but now decided to contribute to the conversation. "I have two questions," he said, glancing thoughtfully at Brian. "First, must there be this weird connection to Genesis 6 and alien abductions? That all happened—if it happened literally—a long time ago. I don't want to offend either of you, but it sounds pretty contrived to me. Second, how can these 'sons of God' have any connection to the alien life forms you've seen—I'm still waiting for some evidence that goes beyond speculation. Those frail little gray bodies don't strike me as being divine beings—or bodies that could produce giants."

"Well," Brian began, "you've certainly laid things out well. I guess we'll take them in order. As far as the abduction phenomenon, you're correct in part—the Genesis 6 incident happened a long time ago—"

"And everyone was supposedly killed by the Flood, too," noted Neil.

"Every human except for Noah and his family was killed by the Flood; the text says nothing about the sons of God being killed." "That also assumes the Flood was global," added Father Benedict.

"Right," Brian backed him. "I personally do believe in a global catastrophe, but some have argued for a localized flood precisely because of Genesis 6:1-4."

"How's that?" asked Neil.

"The verse says that the *nephilim* were 'on the earth in those days, and afterward.'"

"I never noticed that 'afterward' part before," Neil said, re-reading the passage on his handout.

"It seems few global flood proponents have," said Father Benedict. "Genesis 6-8 clearly says that Noah and his family were the only survivors of the flood, but it also has that phrase about the *nephilim* continuing on the earth. If the flood was only localized, say, covering Mesopotamia, then you'd still be able to have survivors and could interpret the statement about Noah and his family in the con-text of a less-than-global catastrophe."

"Where do these *nephilim* show up later in the Bible?" Deidre asked.

"The book of Joshua," Brian answered. "Though by then they were known by various clan names: the Anakim, the Emim, the Zamzummim, the Rephaim. Same description though—unusual physical stature. They were the original enemies of Israel when the conquest of Canaan began—remember, the Old Testament basically documents a continuing violent opposition to God and His own. The spies who doubted the Israelites could take the land specifically feared the Anakim. They claimed that they were 'like grasshoppers' compared to them. Goliath and his brothers were descendants of the Rephaim."

"It would seem," Mark thought aloud, "that if the story is true—and I'm a scientist, mind you, so don't anyone quote me here—that there are only two ways to reconcile a global biblical flood with the statement that these *nephilim* are known after the Flood: One, the account is wrong and has a mistake in it; two, Noah and his family carried the genetic material for these giant-sized people."

"Actually," Brian responded, "there's another option."

"Which is?"

"Deidre?" Brian said, looking in her direction to see if she was thinking along the same line.

She smiled slyly. "I'd say option number three is that the abductions—the 'cohabitation' as the Father put it so delicately, never stopped—these aliens, or divine beings, just kept doing it."

"Precisely," Brian said ominously. "And I'd agree."

Deidre elaborated, "The abduction stories of 'star men' coming down and having sex with human women have a continuous history over millennia in dozens of cultures worldwide. The comparative mythology suggests that it's never stopped. It takes little imagination to link the ongoing abduction circumstance with the sons of God in Genesis 6. What its purpose might be, I have no idea. I'm surprised, Colonel, that you didn't make the connection.

"I'm an expert on what we might call at this point 'alien relations,' not abductions; that's why you're here. I still don't see a connection," he resisted. "Again, look at that little gray body—does that look like it could produce one of those giants? After all, it isn't anatomically capable of reproduction there aren't any sexual organs!"

"Well, there is one immediately apparent anatomical congruence between the specimens we saw and the *nephilim*, and then, by extension, the sons of God," Brian offered.

"What is that?" inquired the Colonel.

"The hands and feet," Brian replied. "The corpses had six fingers and six toes. We know from the book of II Samuel 21, verse 20 that this was a distinctive feature of the Philistine giants of the clan of the Rephaim—Goliath and his brothers."

"Weird!" said Malcolm.

"Despite that anomaly, I think the Colonel makes a good point," Mark noted. "It seems impossible that these puny gray beings could have been in a genetic line related to these giant *nephilim*. It's unfortunate that we aren't told what these sons of God looked like in all these ancient texts."

"That's not true," Father Benedict rebutted.

"You're kidding!" exclaimed Melissa.

"No, I'm not," the old priest replied tersely. "And the description found in an ancient Dead Sea Scroll is an important link between the sons of God in Genesis 6 and the extremely tall *nephilim*. To appreciate the scroll source that contains the description, you must realize that the book of Enoch, a book heavily used by the Dead Sea sect, gives the rest of the story to the Genesis 6 incident. Enoch equates the sons of God with another term used in the Hebrew Bible for heavenly beings—the Watchers."

"Never heard of it," said Neil.

"The Old Testament book of Daniel mentions them several times in the fourth chapter," he explained, "but you wouldn't catch it in an English translation. It's another Aramaic word. That same chapter also gives us some insight into the heavenly hierarchy Brian has outlined, since it contains references to angelic beings as the 'prince of Persia' and 'the prince of Greece.'"

"Does Daniel describe what the Watchers look like then?" Malcolm asked.

"No," Father Benedict answered, "but a description has survived in the one Dead Sea Scroll fragment I mentioned." Father Benedict cleared his voice. "The text to which I've alluded is a small fragment of a work entitled 'The Testament of Amram.' Scrolls scholars also refer to it as 4QAmram, since it was discovered in Cave 4 of Qumran. The

fragment reads: *and behold, one of the Watchers appeared fearsome like a serpent.*"

"A serpent!" Melissa exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes it was no coincidence that those who put the vowels into the Hebrew text chose to vocalize *nachash* as 'serpent' they had Amram and Enoch and other sources, and knew that these beings were brilliant, shiny, bronze-colored beings of serpentine appearance. In fact, as Brian pointed out, the consonantal text could be translated either way: 'serpent' or 'shining one.' To the ancient Jew there was no difference."

"But all the ETs are gray, not shiny or bronze-colored," objected the Colonel, "and again—what about their sexual inability?"

"Not so fast, Colonel," Deidre spoke up. Brian could tell from the look on her face she was more than ready for the objection. "The abduction literature has a good deal of information in it where abductees mention humanoid brownish-colored aliens with serpentine features—you know, slanted eyes and tapering jaws—and those are the big ones, some of them over seven feet tall according to the experiencers' memories . . . Dear God . . . their height."

"You're right. The unusual height of the larger Grays is another physical or genetic link to the nephilim, but let's bring this all together and address the sexual issue," Brian ventured. "This second view regarding ETs and our major western religious texts that I'm trying to articulate could easily conclude that those tall creatures in the abduction literature match the description of the Watchers in the Arram scroll. That being said, it would also suggest that these gray beings people think are from another planet aren't—they're spiritual, interdimensional beings that take physical form. The Book of Enoch mentioned before by Father Benedict also tells us that the Watchers were technological masters. Enoch specifically has them being blamed for giving humanity the technology to build the Tower of Babel in Genesis 10. Remember our discussion about the plurals in Genesis 1:26—why ask the council members about creating? If, as I answered Malcolm's question back then, we can say that these beings do have creative ability, it could very easily be argued that the Watchers have the ability to produce biological entities—in this case, the little Grays—without the need for sexual organs. They could create them through genetic engineering or perhaps cloning."

"Oh my God . . . What you just said ..." Deidre continued, wide-eyed, struck by the possibility of the correlation. "It reminds me of something else in the abduction literature. Abductees regularly describe the little gray guys as passive, taking orders from the bigger ones. I've even read transcripts of therapy sessions where some experiencers speculate that the big ones may have made the little ones . . . you're starting to scare the shit out of me, Brian, and I've heard a lot of weird things."

The room fell silent for a few moments. Brian perused his audience once more, waiting for some reaction.

"Have you ever seen any other ETs than the Grays, Colonel?" Malcolm asked, seriously for a change.

"No—absolutely not!"

"Then how do you know they aren't just drones, maybe some sort of cosmic plebeian?"

The Colonel's face started to redden. "I just know! I've been at this for thirty years! If they had evil intentions, we'd have detected it by now. Besides, they would be

immortal or something like that—why wouldn't they take the planet by force whether we threatened counter-measures or not?"

"Good question," Brian said thoughtfully. "I don't know."

"What's more," the Colonel continued on the offensive, seizing Brian's failure to address his criticism, "why would these sons of God use spaceships? Tell me!" he demanded.

"I think I can address that one," Melissa took the opening. Brian did a double-take.

"Hey, you read enough of the apocalyptic crap that I have and you run into the Book of Enoch eventually. A lot of this is in Elizabeth Claire Prophet's drivel."

Brian and Father Benedict exchanged curious glances.

"If Enoch is taken seriously—again, not that I believe this," she continued, "and these creatures are masters of technology who have freely doled it out to humankind for their own purposes, then why couldn't the Watchers make these craft? Besides—and Deidre probably knows more about this than I do—I recall reading that there are stories from ancient India that describe strange flying craft."

Deidre nodded. "They're in their Vedic sagas."

"I'd say that's pretty remarkable flying machines in ancient literature," Melissa continued. "It's not that long of a leap to make the connection between the Watchers and the beings in this Sanskrit literature. Deidre?"

"You're readin' my mind, honey."

"I'd add," said Father Benedict, "that if Psalm 82 describes a punishment of the Watchers for the Genesis 6 episode, then they have lost their immortal status, and with it they may have lost other divine attributes, such as the ability to be anywhere instantaneously. We only discussed the first verse in relation to the divine council."

"Later in the psalm," Brian picked up the cue, "God judges the *elohim* for perverting judgment—I don't know if it's a link to Genesis 6 or not it may be if you take Enoch's version at face value. At any rate, when the text says 'you will die like men' the verb there is identical to the punishment upon humankind in Genesis 2 for Adam and Eve's disobedience to God's command: 'you shall surely die'. We know that Adam and Eve didn't just drop over dead when they sinned, but they did start to age, and were forever removed from the presence of the tree of life and the divine council's presence."

"In other words, they may be spatially limited when they take on physical form," Father Benedict explained. "They may actually need the craft, but I'm not totally convinced that's the only answer."

"This is preposterous!" the Colonel exploded.

"It gets worse," Brian said, trying to finish quickly, suspecting the Colonel was about to terminate the meeting. "I didn't get to your last question—what this has to do with the apocalypse."

"This meeting is over, as far as I'm concerned!" he bellowed.

"No!" Neil challenged him unexpectedly. The room grew quiet. The Colonel tried to disguise the surprise on his face at Dr. Bandstra's objection, but everyone had taken note. Brian decided hesitation would only allow the Colonel to shut things down.

"This is all related to the apocalypse," he said hurriedly, "because of what Jesus said in Matthew 24:37 during his discourse on what the signs of his second coming would be. That's the verse I quoted earlier:



*"As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man"*

"Holy sh—," Deidre caught herself. ". . . maybe I'd better start watching what I say."

## CHAPTER 22

"Character is much easier kept than recovered."

—*Thomas Paine*

BRIAN SNUGGLED COMFORTABLY under the covers, his sleep disturbed briefly by his body's internal rhythm. He smiled to himself at the realization that, for a change, he had nowhere to go and nothing to do. The Colonel had informed everyone after his presentation of the previous day that another meeting with an attache from the Group was being arranged, but the earliest opportunity for such an engagement would be in two days. Brian had been curious, but that was hours ago. He could care less right about now. All the day held for him was the bliss that only a warm pillow and a darkened room could offer.

He sighed with contentment, shifting his position, and instantly froze in terror. His foot, now consciously held motionless, had come to rest on the hairless, smooth, warm skin of another body. His heart pounded, the pace rising with his sense of bewilderment. His memory raced through the events of the previous evening, but he could recall only going to supper with Andrew and reading himself to sleep.

In the following seconds he gathered his wits. The figure next to him had not stirred. Grabbing the edge of the blanket atop him, he mustered his courage and bolted out of the bed, scurrying out the bedroom into his cramped living area. He stood there in shocked dismay. What had he done'? His mind groped helplessly for an explanation. Whoever was in his bed wasn't dead, and that left only one plausible alternative. Suddenly the possibility that he'd been dreaming came to him, but he dismissed it quickly. He was awake, and by anyone's interpretation of the scene, guilty as sin.

He surveyed the environs of his quarters. Everything appeared completely normal; nothing was amiss in any way, as far as he could tell. Why shouldn't it be? With a sigh of resignation, he walked noiselessly back into the bedroom, prompted by the morbid sense of curiosity he was sure the perpetrator felt when returning to the scene of the crime. He gazed briefly at the figure, her exquisite, naked body, partially covered by the bedsheet, lying peacefully on her stomach. Her face was turned toward the wall, but the tussled auburn hair told him all he needed to know. His heart sank.

Silently he opened several drawers and took the items he needed. His testimony was ruined. There could be no recovery from this. The two people he'd counted as friends, Andrew and Neil, would never look at him the same way. Thoughts of what they would say—and worse, what they would only think to themselves—coursed through his mind. The team members before whom he'd played the devoted Christian would see him only as a hypocrite. Tears welled up in his eyes. His life as he knew it was over.

Brian showered somberly. He typically used this time to pray and think through what he needed to accomplish for the day, but there was no sense of communion now, no eagerness to be productive. By the time he turned off the water he couldn't remember if

he'd even washed his hair. He was in an inescapable fog. Guilt came over him in waves, as did the maddening awareness that he remembered nothing about being with Melissa. He dressed in the living room and then re-entered the bedroom, only to discover that she was already gone. He turned to leave, but stopped. His senses told him there was something different about the room, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He turned around and stood in the doorway, unsure of what it was that had drawn his attention. After a few seconds of silence, it dawned on him. What was that smell? He took a few steps into the bedroom, sniffing at the air. Although faint, a queer, sweet-smelling aroma had circulated about the room. Brian walked over to Melissa's side of the bed. To his surprise he could clearly discern the distinct outline of her body. He bent down and touched the bed. It was warmer than Brian imagined it would be, but what took him back even more was the fact that the surface of the sheet was moist. He sat down on the edge of the bed and peered closely at the vague silhouette, baffled by the traces of her presence. What of it? he chided himself sarcastically, and lapsed into a daze.

An unexpected knock at the door stirred him from his gloom. He didn't move, hoping his caller would go away. He just couldn't face anyone. After a few seconds another series of knocks came, and then a third. Brian rose slowly and took his time getting to the door, opening it with a spirit of resignation.

"Hey, man, are you goin' to breakfast or what? It's almost ten o'clock, and I don't want to be the only lazy ass there," Malcolm greeted him jovially.

"Come on in," Brian said in a monotone, his mood immune to even Malcolm's infectious smile.

"Whoa," Malcolm said in a more subdued tone as the door closed behind him, "what's up? Your dog just die?"

Brian walked over to the room's lone chair and collapsed in it, not caring to respond. He stared at the wall behind his colleague.

Malcolm looked at him carefully. "Is it Melissa?"

Brian shot a startled glance at the lanky, bespectacled figure. "What do you mean?" he said, trying not to appear panicked.

"You know," Malcolm explained, "she's made a habit of trashing you whenever she can and in front of as many people as possible."

Brian shook his head.

"Naw, I didn't think so. No way you'd have seen her this early. Even she wouldn't come over just to insult you."

"Let's go," Brian said abruptly and stood up. It was the only thing he could think of to change the subject.

"Wait a minute," Malcolm stopped him as he approached the door. "What the hell is that weird smell?"

"I don't smell anything out here," Brian answered, "but I know what you mean. Your nose must be real sensitive."

Malcolm looked at him curiously.

"In the bedroom."

Malcolm strode deliberately into Brian's bedroom and emerged a few seconds later. "Man, that's funky. Are you burning incense or something?"

"Nope."

"So what is it?"

"Honestly, I don't know," he answered, thankful that Malcolm had not noticed anything else.

Malcolm and Brian put their trays down on the table next to Father Benedict, who was just finishing his meal.

"Well, it seems everyone slept in this morning," he said, his face bearing a cheerful expression that Brian hadn't seen on his face in days. "I trust both of you got a good night's rest."

"You bet, padre," Malcolm answered, pouring syrup on his pancakes. Brian stared at his plate.

"And you, Brian?" the priest persisted.

He shrugged.

Father Benedict wiped his mouth, eyeing his young friend carefully. "I'm surprised. You were in such a good mood last evening, what with the pressure of your presentation removed. I know the seriousness of this, but—"

"It isn't that," Brian cut him off, his gaze unaverted. "Then what is it?"

"I . . . I can't say . . . not now anyway."

"I doubt you have anything to say that I haven't already heard, Brian. I am a priest, you know."

"Yeah . . . I know."

Father Benedict looked across the table at Malcolm, who could only cast a quizzical expression in return, his mouth already stuffed.

"We need to talk, Andrew," Brian suddenly admitted. "It's just ... I've done something terrible."

"Not you, man," Malcolm said, swallowing. "What could you do that's so bad? I think God'll forgive you for oversleeping." "I'm serious . . . it'll just take me awhile bef—"

"Mind if I sit down?"

The three of them acknowledged Deidre's presence. None of them had noticed her approach.

"Go right ahead," Father Benedict gestured. "Good morning." ..

"I saw you guys jawing away over here. Looked pretty serious."

"It is," Malcolm offered. "Brian here seems to think he's offended the Almighty."

"Let's not get into it," Brian pleaded.

"Nobody's perfect, Brian," she said, a hint of sympathy in her voice.

"I'm well aware of that," he replied impatiently.

"Maybe we should let the man go for now," Malcolm suggested.

"What?" Deidre questioned. "That doesn't sound like you, Malcolm. I'd think you would be the one who'd want the scoop before anyone."

"I do—but just trust me, it's time to change the subject. Don't turn around, Dee, but I think you'll agree with me when you find out who's coming—unless you like hearing Brian trashed."

"Do you mean what I think you mean?" she asked. He nodded and proceeded to butter his toast.

"Do I want to be here for this?" she smirked, and pushed herself away from the table.

Brian looked up from his plate and over Deidre's shoulder. Melissa was making her way over to their table, a fierce scowl on her face.

"Thanks for the thought Malcolm, but it won't matter a few minutes from now," he intoned somberly.

Melissa sat down amid the group, not bothering to ask permission. "Good morning, everyone," she said in a saccharine voice. "I trust everyone had an enjoyable evening—especially you, Brian."

All eyes at the table were upon him, a few with eyebrows raised in curiosity, but still he refused to speak. Brian stiffened for the inevitable.

"It seems I've finally left you speechless," she continued cattily. "I would think you would at least have given me a thank you after last night." Brian could feel the blush coming over his face. He eyed the stunned expressions of the small audience sheepishly.

"No way!" Malcolm gasped.

"You mean . . . you two . . .," Deidre gawked.

Brian looked down at his plate again. Deidre remained where she stood. Andrew held his peace.

"Look," Brian said in a halting voice, "I apologize."

"That's a first," Melissa retorted. "I've had a lot of different morning-after reactions, but never an apology. Are you trying to insult me?"

"I don't know what to say," he struggled. "I just don't remember a thing. One minute I was with you," he added, finally looking at Andrew, whose face was drawn, "and the next I was in my room reading, and then this morning I woke up with you in my bed. I guess we must have—"

"You just don't know when to quit, do you?" Melissa fumed. "You've got to be the most arrogant man I've ever known. I don't know what you're trying to pull here, changing the story, but—"

"I'm not changing anything—I woke up and you were in my bed, okay? Let's let everyone know!" Brian challenged her, raising his voice in agitation, his tone more out of anxiety than anger.

"I wasn't in your bed, you dumb ass, you were in mine!"

"What?"

"Is there something wrong with your hearing?"

"No, and nothing's wrong with my eyesight, either. You were in my bed this morning. I don't know how you got there, but you were definitely there. Believe me, I noticed!"

"I'm not letting you weasel your way out of this," she came right back, her voice trembling with rage. "You had me last night in my bed!" she punctuated her statement emphatically. "And as for not remembering, cut the crap. Nobody sleeps with me and forgets it! For my part, I can certainly justify not recalling your performance. Now that I think about it, I don't feel like eating anymore!"

The two of them stared each other down, oblivious to the nonplused expressions of their listeners.

"I think I'll stay a bit longer," Deidre said to no one in particular, and pulled in her chair.

"God knows I don't want to get into any of the prurient de-tails," Father Benedict

intervened, "but I'd like to hear your version of what happened, Melissa."

"I know you're a priest, but you can't be that ignorant."

"Indulge me."

"Well," she began, "I left supper about the same time as everyone else, and then I went back to my room for a glass of wine."

"With Brian?"

"No, he wasn't with me then."

"Quite right. He was with me. When did Brian come to your room?"

"Andrew, I didn't go

The priest waved him off. "Let's hear it, Melissa. When did Brian come to your room?"

She hesitated. The others at the table eyed her suspiciously.

"I don't know," she answered, ". . . I can't explain how the wonderful Dr. Scott got in my room, but I do know he was there this morning!" she added defiantly.

"I see," the priest mused. "Can you remember any details of the, err, encounter?"

Melissa sat back in her chair with a sigh, again hesitant to respond.

"It's important, Dr. Kelley," he pressed her.

"No . . . I can't," she confessed. "He was just there."

"Did you speak to him this morning when you awoke?"

"No, I just screamed at him and threw a pillow at him, but he never moved."

"Did he awake at all?"

She shook her head.

"Brian," he continued, diverting his attention momentarily, "did you speak to Melissa this morning?"

"No," he replied, his curiosity aroused. "It's pretty much what Melissa just said. I woke up and felt her in the bed next to me, and got out of there as fast as I could. She never stirred or said anything."

"You make it sound like an escape," Melissa snarled.

"I didn't mean anything negative. It's just that . . . that I would never do a thing like this . . . at least I never thought I would. I can't remember a thing about it. I just assumed the worst."

"The worst?"

"Just an expression, Melissa."

"What's with you? You make it sound like being with me was something detestable. You should consider yourself lucky."

"Here, here," quipped Malcolm. Deidre glared at him.

"What Brian is trying to say," Deidre explained, "is that it's part of his beliefs that sex is for marriage only. It's a standard he's lived by am I right?" she questioned him.

"Yes."

"You mean you're a virgin?" Melissa asked incredulously.

"Yes," he answered softly, knowing he'd given her another occasion to mock him. "At least I was . . . or hope to still be."

"Oh, my God!" she howled, laughing at his disclosure. "No, there are no alien life forms around here!"

"If you could suspend the hilarity," Father Benedict said seriously. "What we have here in point of fact are two people who insist that each woke up in the other's bed,

neither of whom can remember any sexual contact with the other. Is that about right?"

Brian and Melissa looked at each other. Melissa didn't try to hide her amusement.

"One of you has to be wrong," Deidre concluded.

"You mean lying," Brian clarified.

"Actually ..." Malcolm interjected, this time with a thoughtful expression on his face, "they could both be telling the truth." "How is that?" Deidre asked.

"Melissa, do you remember anything unusual about your room this morning?" Malcolm asked.

"No," she answered in a more earnest tone.

"You answered too quickly. Take a minute and think about it."

"I know where you're going with this, Malcolm," Brian said. "I doubt whether that has anything to do with this."

"Whether what has anything to do with this?" asked Deidre. Malcolm held up his hand for silence, taking note of Melissa's now perplexed countenance.

"Come to think of it," she began, "there was something strange. I noticed this peculiar smell in my room. I emailed the service provider about it just before I came here."

Malcolm and Brian looked at each other. "Let's go, Melissa," Malcolm said, standing up hurriedly.

"What?"

"We need to get into your room—now."

"What's the meaning of all this?" Father Benedict queried.

"I don't know, but I noticed the same thing in Brian's room when I stopped by this morning. I want to see if it's the same smell."

"It was just an odd smell—what could it mean?" Melissa demanded, still seated.

"Like I said, I don't know, but it might be important. Come on!"

The five of them left their trays at the table and hastened down the hallway to Melissa's room. She carded the door and punched in her access code. Malcolm was the first to enter.

"I'll be damned," he said, shaking his head.

"You smell that?" he looked at Brian.

He nodded, a pleased but bewildered look etched on his face. "Is it perfume?" asked Father Benedict.

"Please!" replied Melissa.

Brian walked into the bedroom and tore back the covers.

"You can make that up when you're done doing whatever it is you're doing," Melissa informed curtly. "Bring back any memories?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Brian answered, "but not the ones you're insinuating."

"What's up?" asked Malcolm, entering Melissa's bedroom.

"I didn't want to say anything when you came over this morning," Brian explained, "since I felt so ashamed, but I noticed that there was some kind of imprint of Melissa's body on my sheet, and it was also warm to the touch, and moist over the entire impression—even close to an hour after I got up."

"An imprint of her body, huh?" Malcolm noted, his eyes darting in Melissa's direction. "If it's still there can I keep the sheet?"

Malcolm rolled her eyes. "Can't you stay serious for more than five minutes?"

Deidre chastised him.

"What's this on the sheet?" Brian asked, peering more closely at several small spots.

"Blood," Melissa answered.

"Blood?" Deidre queried, her attention arrested.

"Yes I've been having some bleeding lately."

"Forgive me for my ignorance," Brian interrupted, "but if it's your time of the month, wouldn't that interfere with your version of events?"

"It isn't my time of the month," Melissa retorted.

"Then why are you bleeding?" Deidre wanted to know.

"I've had it happen before, usually at times when I'm under stress—prelims, dissertation defense—that sort of thing. I guess my body counts having my life disrupted and career threatened as sufficient reasons to do it again."

"Get it checked, girl."

"Which side did you think I was on?" Brian asked, changing the subject.

"You were on that side," she retorted, pointing to the spot nearest the wall.

"There does seem to be some discoloration," Father Benedict perceived, "but it's hard to tell if there's really a shape there." The others agreed. "At any rate, Malcolm says the scents are the same."

"Maybe you're just trying to save a fellow guy's ass," Melissa accused.

"Listen, sweetheart," Malcolm rebutted, "Brian can take care of himself. As far as I'm concerned, if he did nail you, more power to him. The only thing I'd want is the details, comprende?" Melissa crossed her arms and left the bedroom.

"Thanks—I think," Brian said, unable to suppress a grin.

"No problem. For the record, I'd say nothing happened between you two."

"I would concur, under the circumstances," Father Benedict added, feeling the mattress.

"What a surprise," Melissa cracked, re-entering her bedroom, having overheard the conversation.

"We could have Dr. Bandstra check the door logs—we'd know when anyone went in or out," Deidre suggested.

"We would only know if the door opened," Father Benedict reminded her. "Only your own card can open your door from either the outside or inside. We'd have no way of knowing if the person who opened the door would have let someone in."

"Wait a minute," Brian suddenly remembered, "when I got out of the shower this morning Melissa—or whoever it was—was gone. She couldn't have gotten out without my card."

"I didn't get out, because I wasn't there!"

"Well then how did I supposedly get out of your room?"

"You could have used my card."

"I don't know the code."

"So you say."

Brian gasped in exasperation. "I could just as easily say you know mine and are hiding it. Your stubbornness is pointless."

"Maybe it was someone else—in both cases," Malcolm thought aloud, "and these other individuals had cards that overrode all others."



"Why would anyone go through the trouble to pull a stunt like this?" Father Benedict asked, his confusion building.

Melissa remained silent as the others pondered his question. Her mind drifted back to her last conversation with her unknown "benefactor:" he'd hinted that she would be exposed to some clue that was important to the real truth of the project. But she couldn't fathom any connection to this strange incident. His advice that Brian could be trusted came rushing back to her as well. Should she tell the others? If she exposed her source now, would she be in danger? But if she did, it would probably convince the others that Brian was telling the truth and that would make her insistence on his guilt look deliberate. *Dammit!*

"But if there was another woman," Brian protested, "that still means I may have . . . you know."

"But you said you remember nothing," Deidre said.

"I don't."

"Judging by the bizarre twists of this whole affair—pardon the pun—I'd still side with Malcolm and Andrew. Besides, you're innocent until proven guilty. We really need to check the logs—to see if any card was used or if the doors were activated at all."

"What if there were other individuals involved?" Father Benedict asked. "I still don't see a motive."

"And what if the logs indicate nothing?" asked Malcolm. "What do we have then, ghosts?"

"Who knows," Deidre threw up her hands. "I just think we need all the information we can get."

"Agreed," Father Benedict sided with her.

"How do we get the information? You know how paranoid this bunch is. Anyone asks any questions, especially about room access, and they're bound to get suspicious."

"Dr. Bandstra should be able to get us that information. I'm sure he'll be eager to clear his friend of any indiscretion."

"I have a confession to make," Melissa suddenly spoke up. The others waited, unsure of what was coming. She proceeded to tell the rest of them about her unknown assailant and his visitations, re-counting as best she could remember what he'd told her, omitting only the detail that she had a second access card.

"Damn! I can't believe it," an incensed Deidre exclaimed. "Somebody from the Group tells you that someone on the team is dirty and you don't think of telling us'? We could all be in danger we had a right to know!"

"Like I told you, I wasn't sure how he'd react . . . and I'm still not. I don't know what he'll do, and I never know when he's going to show up."

"How is he going to find out?" asked Brian. "No one here will breathe a word."

"You swear you don't know this guy?" Deidre demanded, still visibly upset.

"I have no idea who he might be. Nothing about it makes any sense."

"What about the others?" Malcolm solicited a response.

"We could tell Mark, but I'd keep my mouth shut around the Colonel and Dr. Marcus—and Neil for that matter," Deidre opined. "Sorry, Brian, but he's too close to the inside."

Brian hesitated to respond. He didn't like the idea of any collusion against his friend.

"I'm afraid I have to agree with Dr. Harper," Father Benedict sighed.

"Fine," Brian acquiesced. "I won't spill the beans if the rest of you are opposed to it."

"So what about this bedroom fiasco?" Deidre wondered.

"I'd say that there must be some connection to what Melissa's visitor leaked," Father Benedict reasoned, "even though we haven't got the foggiest idea what that might be. Unless something else happens that Melissa feels is a more likely fulfillment of his words, I don't think we have any other choice than to make that assumption."

"For what it's worth," Melissa said, turning her attention to Brian, "I'm willing to believe Brian—if he's willing to believe me."

"Of course."

"Consider yourself undefiled then," she smirked.

"Gladly."

## CHAPTER 23

"The simplest questions are the hardest to answer."

—Northrop Fry—

BRIAN SAT BACK in his chair and stretched, yawning loudly. The "day off" had turned out to be emotionally and mentally exhausting. After the strange goings on of the morning, he'd concerned him-self with going through his dissertation in an effort toward seeing it through Andrew's eyes, trying to discern the connections between the heavenly host and the contemporary mythology of UFOs and alien beings. The notion made his head spin. Nevertheless, here he was, sitting at a desk in a place whose location wouldn't be pinpointed on any maps, and part of a team confronting a problem caused by beings that weren't supposed to exist. *I guess anything's possible.*

He looked at the clock, which read ten o'clock. He was hungry, despite the fact that he'd eaten heartily at lunch and dinner, the day's only occasions for respite. Lunch had proven most interesting, for Father Benedict had made it a point at that time to inform each team member that the security logs revealed no door activity after Melissa and Brian had entered their own rooms the evening before. Andrew had approached the steward with what he called a `security concern' that Melissa's and Brian's cards were not operating correctly, saying that he'd overheard the two at breakfast discussing their cards. The steward had cooperated with his request to check the logs for malfunctions. Andrew could only tell them that the steward did not contact Neil and the Colonel in his presence, and he hoped they weren't told after he'd left.

While it had cleared Brian personally, the new information only deepened the mystery. If no one had entered the rooms or been granted admission, what was the explanation for what he and Melissa had experienced? Regardless of the bizarre turn of events, he was relieved that the episode was over and his reputation was still intact. When everything was said and done, it was really all he had in life. With no teaching position, no vocational ministry opportunity, no woman in his life, and no realistic prospect of filling any of these voids, all he could do was pursue the task that had presented itself and maintain his integrity. In fact, without his integrity, everything else was ultimately meaningless.

This realization and the commitment behind it was vital, for at times during the day he'd given in to the temptation of imagining himself with Melissa. Each time his thoughts would start off innocuously enough, with the simple pleasures offered by a feminine presence that he'd never experienced: the soft feel of a small, smooth hand sliding into his, an affectionate embrace, a lingering kiss, a smile meant just for him. The daydreams would inevitably become more intense, moving naturally toward more sensual fantasies. He knew the day-dreaming was useless, particularly for him, and that they were spiritually incompatible, but he longed for companionship. The familiar heaviness of terrible loneliness descended upon him, but this would pass. It always did. The fact that she hated him so much was almost comforting, since she was as beautiful as she was miserable.

A firm knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. Brian got up and opened the door. It was Neil and Father Benedict, both of whom wore serious expressions.

"I see we didn't wake you, Brian," Neil said as he entered, followed by the priest. Brian wondered immediately if Neil had learned of this morning's events and glanced at Father Benedict as he passed. As if anticipating the unspoken question, the older man quickly shook his head.

"We need to talk," the undersecretary got right to the point. "I dropped by Andrew's room and he suggested the three of us spend some time together before we meet with the Group's representative."

"About?"

"About your presentation."

"I noticed you looked kind of disturbed toward the end," Brian admitted to Neil.

"Of course! You can't sit through something like that and come away unfazed—especially if you're me."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I have no idea what to do. I wanted you here to help me reconcile the existence of these beings with my faith, and your first offering was everything I'd hoped for. Your second was like my worst nightmare. The Colonel was pretty angry. Afterward between the two of us he went on and on about how what you said would undermine the project. 'How are we supposed to behave around the visitors if we think they're these demonic fiends out there screwing our women?' he blustered—I've never seen him so apoplectic."

"Am I in trouble?" Brian asked. "Lord knows it wouldn't be the first time I ruffled somebody's feathers."

"Who knows?" his friend shrugged.

"Well, if he wants to send me home, I'll of course honor the security oath."

"You're not going anywhere," Neil insisted. "There's no way you're expendable now, especially to me. The three of us need to re-strategize this whole project." Brian looked at him curiously.

"What Neil means," Andrew broke in, "is that he fears we could literally be in league with the devil."

"Maybe we are." Neil just shook his head.

"You already know what I think," the priest added.

"The question I'm more concerned with here," Neil said in a tired, frustrated voice, looking up at Brian, "is what do *you* really think is going on here?"

"I've been trying to answer that question myself all day," the young scholar said wistfully. "I've read and re-read parts of my dissertation, some of the more important passages from the Hebrew Bible, some Dead Sea Scroll stuff, and a couple of Ugaritic texts. I also borrowed some books on alien abduction from Deidre and read through a lot of witness testimony. I've even tried looking online to see if anyone's postulated anything like this. That was sure a waste of time. There are lots of people out there who talk about the Nephilim more than I'd imagined."

"What do they say?"

"A lot of nothing. People mostly confuse the Grays with the *Nephilim*, which misses the whole point, not to mention all the textual data we have in the Bible and outside of it. They have no clue as to what the divine council is either. It's maddening,

actually. People nowadays think that they're Bible scholars if they have their King James and a concordance. The really dangerous ones think a computerized Bible program makes them the gatekeepers to ancient knowledge. Then there's this Sitchen junk ..."

"I take it you're referring to a person," Neil concluded.

"Yeah, Zecharia Sitchen. His stuff's all over the Web. He takes the ancient Mesopotamian texts literally and has them detailing alien visitations and creating humans in some genetic experiment. The guy has no interest in the ufologists like Vallee who build a powerful case with the same data that these 'aliens' are inter-dimensional, spiritual beings. He also just plain rapes the languages at some points, but who's going to notice? There aren't many people who learn Akkadian and Sumerian anyway, and those that have think the whole subject is a waste of time. No one's in the field who can check his work, so he says what he wants. Some of it's so bad I wonder if he even knows the languages."

"So have you come to any conclusions?" Neil pressed him impatiently.

"I would call them possibilities, maybe even suspicions—but I still can't be sure."

"Then let's go get some coffee and put our heads together," Neil replied, moving toward the door.

"We can talk here," Father Benedict suggested. "It's more private."

"I know, but I need some caffeine."

"I have some tea," Brian offered, pulling open a drawer of his filing cabinet.

"Still have it there, huh?" Neil smiled, remembering the stash.

"Of course."

"Sorry, but tea just doesn't cut it for me. Come on."

"Have it your way," Brian surrendered. "I'm kind of hungry anyway." Neil turned toward the door and slid his card through the reader. Brian took the opportunity to quickly squeeze Father Benedict's arm. The priest eyed him curiously, but Brian only motioned with his eyes toward Neil. Andrew could sense something was amiss.

The three men strolled down the hallway toward the cafeteria. They passed the door to Melissa's room, engaged in conversation. None of them noticed when, a few seconds later, Melissa slowly cracked her door and watched their figures turn the corner. She looked the other direction, and then back again. Satisfied no one was watching, she silently made her way the short distance to Brian's room. She took out the card her assailant had given her and stared at it momentarily, calculating the risk one more time. *it'll be worth it.* She passed the card through and held her breath. The door opened promptly without the need for a code. She quickly went inside and closed the door behind her carefully, as though the empty room had ears. She looked at her watch and then began strolling around the small quarters, gazing at his library. She bent over his desk and took note of the large book that lay open. Guessing correctly that it was his dissertation, she dispassionately read a page or two, but then carefully returned to the page at which she'd begun, leaving everything exactly as she'd found it. She checked her watch again. Ten minutes ought to be enough time. She extracted the card from the pocket of her jeans and strode to the door, passing the card through the reader as before. At the familiar click she opened the door slightly and held it for a few seconds before she let it close on its own weight. *That should keep you, from getting too much attention, whoever you are.* "At last," she whispered to herself, her lips curled in a deceitful smile.

"For starters," Brian began, removing the plastic wrapper from his sandwich, "I don't see any insurmountable difficulties with the notion that these beings are the fallen sons of God, or Watchers. The only real problem I have is that they exist, period."

"But you've seen the proof for yourself," Neil protested.

"I've seen a couple of corpses," replied Brian. "Whether or not they're true aliens or beings created by the bigger Grays—"

"The Watchers?"

"Yeah—either way, what's stored away in Dr. Marcus' lab doesn't answer the question about their true origin. I'm not even sure either of those options are viable," he added with a dubious note.

"What do you mean, Brian?" Father Benedict asked, some-what surprised at the doubt in Brian's voice.

"Melissa's suspicions. There's no way she'd be thinking of Watchers, but the way she acted convinces me she suspects some-thing else . . . maybe that they're fakes."

"They aren't fakes," Neil protested. "I guess Melissa just thought Dr. Marcus and the rest of us were lying, but the DNA doesn't lie—and that brings me to the main stumblingblock for all this in my mind: How can heavenly beings have DNA? If the Watchers created the Grays in their own likeness, they'd have to use DNA, but that's physical material."

"I don't see a problem, Neil," Brian answered readily. "Genesis 6 tells us, the Watchers could take physical form and that their hybrid children were physical, actual flesh. That which is physical and is a living being has DNA—it seems to be part of the fabric of God's creation."

"But since they are still intellectually superior to humankind," Father Benedict postulated, "they may be physically different as well. I'd say the Nephilim offspring require that assessment."

"Different?" Neil asked. "Other than the physical traits we already know about, how else might they be unlike us?"

"They may have bodies akin to the one theologians postulate Jesus had—not in the sense of unending immortality and perfection, but in the sense that the physicality of that body was also truly inter-dimensional. In other words, they have real physical form, but are still not bound by physical limitations."

"I don't get it," Neil admitted.

"I think I follow," said Brian. "We read in the gospels, of course, that Jesus had a body after he arose. We also know that he taught the disciples that, where two or three were gathered, he would be in their midst. How could he do the latter if he was in a body? His body would have to be one that he either 'used' when he wanted to, or one whose physical essence is not bound by time or space—as though he lives in another dimension, but can invade our space, so to speak, whenever he desires."

"Exactly," said Andrew. "Recall that Jesus appeared in the upper room before the disciples in very physical form, but no one saw him enter he was just there."

"I like it," said Brian, "especially the inter-dimensional aspect—it dovetails with Vallee's ideas and many experiencers testimonies."

"I see what you mean, Father," Neil reflected. "Your explanation of this part of the problem is much more coherent than your speculation about the flying craft, if you don't mind my saying."

"I don't. I have to concede that if the Watchers have bodies of the post-resurrection-type, the need for such craft makes no sense. On the other hand, if they're trapped in ordinary physicality, the craft would be needed."

"I don't think the flying craft thing should sidetrack us," Brian declared.

"Why not?" asked Neil.

"It may be irrelevant."

"It seems very relevant to the issue," his friend disagreed.

"Maybe not. What if that technology just came from Watchers to humanity without the Watchers themselves ever having needed it? Maybe they used it just to do it and it doesn't denote necessity."

"Like other building technologies in the ancient world?" queried Andrew.

"Sure Enoch tells us the Watchers gave mankind that technology, but the Watchers would not have needed to build cities and monuments for themselves. They just gave it to humans to seduce them with the promise that humanity could become like them with that technology—like gods, as Genesis notes in the tower of Babel incident."

"What about those ancient Hindu texts that mention flying craft?" Neil wondered aloud.

"That's something I did find some information on," Brian noted, "but it won't make you feel any better. It's wild stuff—you have texts from before the time of Jesus talking about mechanical people, missiles, and even aerial cities!"

"Let's hear it," Neil requested uneasily.

"Well, there were a wide variety of flying craft detailed in the literature of ancient India. Some were made by humans and looked like airplanes—they had wings, in other words. Others didn't have wings and flew by means of rotary engines, burning fuels, or otherwise unknown propulsion systems."

"Terrific."

"It gets worse—or more interesting, depending on your perspective. The ones in the second category are called *vimanas*, and are discussed in dozens of stories in works like—boy, some of these are real tongue-twisters—the *Rig Veda*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Samardrigana-sutradra*, the *Puranas*, and some other texts I won't even take a stab at. The dates for these sources range from the 400's B.C. to the 1300's A.D."

"Any mention of the pilots?" Andrew asked apprehensively.

"Yeah ... Neil?"

"Go ahead," he said pensively.

"Sometimes the pilots are human, other times they're different races of, quote, 'humanlike beings' called *Devas*, *Upadevas*, or *Vidvadhara*s. At least one of the latter is said to have inhabited the body of a serpentine creature that boasted, 'I am very opulent and beautiful, and wander freely in all directions in my airplane.' In case you're wondering, some of these beings did father children with human women. There you have it."

"Something else just occurred to me," Neil said, putting down his coffee, looking a little pale. "If what was happening in the days of Noah is happening today, why would it still be happening—and even more so, why would it have never stopped, as you and Deidre theorized yesterday?"

"That's one of the things I can't figure out to any satisfaction," Brian confessed. "I guess I would say it still has to be part of opposing God's plan and His people here on

earth, but as far as being any more specific than that, I'm not sure. If the Watchers of the Old Testament are these beings, there must still be an agenda that involves some type of genetic blending—but who knows?"

"I suppose this isn't the best time to bring this up," Father Benedict interrupted, a distant look on his wrinkled face, "but I didn't mention another Dead Sea text at the meeting that possibly relates to all this."

"You're kidding," Brian asked, eyebrows raised in curiosity.

"Well . . . it's thought to be a Qumran text . . . that hasn't been determined yet with any accuracy. No one on the scrolls team has actually seen the original, only a transcription, part of which I've seen. It dates to the first century A.D."

"Does it have a name?" Brian asked.

"It's called the `Apocalypse Scroll.'"

"Terrific," Neil lamented.

"It's named that because it contains details of a man's vision of the apocalypse, a vision shown to him by an angel."

"So what's in it?" Brian urged.

"One line of it describes Jerusalem under attack by, quote, `thousands of sun disks.'"

Brian's eyes widened in disbelief. "That sounds like " "Signs in the skies . . . A UFO assault," Neil droned, staring into space.

"Could that be right?" Brian prodded. "Do you think the text is genuine?"

Father Benedict shrugged, the blank expression on his face signifying that he was mystified by both questions.

"Neil?" Brian looked over once again to gauge his friend's response, but when he did so, an involuntary spasm of alarm coursed through him. Neil's face was buried in his hands, his panicked eyes peering out through his fingers.

"Are you all right . . . Neil?"

At first Brian's question met with no response. After a few uncomfortable seconds the undersecretary's facial expression relaxed and returned to a normal, albeit, grave disposition. ". . . the Agenda . . .," he whispered, "I . . . I just don't want to believe it. My God, what are we up against? . . . How can we stop them?"

Brian and Father Benedict looked at each other, startled by his prattling.

"Neil," Brian said calmly, as he reached across the table and placed his hand on his friend's arm. Neil diverted his gaze to Brian's face. "This is all just a theory, you know. The first version I offered is just as workable. Besides, if this is a harbinger of the end, the Lord's coming is part of it. I peeked at the end of the book of Revelation," he added with a mischievous grin, "and we win."

Neil exhaled hard and closed his eyes for a moment. A modest smile creased his lips. "I'm sorry. It's just . . ." he tried to continue, searching for the words.

"Dr. Bandstra," Father Benedict asked softly, "have you seen one of these larger creatures?"

"No—thank God. If I had, I'd be hustling all of you out of here now. Like I said before, I've never even seen one of the little ones alive. The Colonel has," he added, observing their dubious expressions.

"I know what you're thinking. I've known him almost ten years, and even though most of the time we haven't seen eye to eye, I've never known him to lie—to me anyway. I can't think of a reason he'd want to. I've been privy to everything you all only learned



incrementally."

"How about the Group?"

"I've never met any of them—except, again, for the Colonel, but he's more of a liaison than anything."

"Maybe we'll get some answers the day after tomorrow," Brian suggested. "This other Group representative—do you know who it is?"

"No. All I can tell you," he said, lowering his voice, glancing about the cafeteria, "is that our destination is on the east coast."

"Where?" the priest queried.

"A place called Mount Weather—but that's all I'll say for now. We'll leave the morning after tomorrow, and will meet our contact the same evening, though I'll be behind you a couple of hours since I have to take a different flight. Which reminds me," he paused and looked at his watch. "I still have a lot to do in preparation for the trip. I'd better put in an hour or so yet tonight so I don't leave myself scrambling tomorrow. How about you two?"

"I'm sure I'll put a lot more thought into all this, but I'm not pressed. Can I help you with anything?"

"I wish you could," his friend said, rising and pushing in his chair. Brian and Father Benedict decided to do the same. "If I think of anything, I'll let you know."

The three of them headed out the cafeteria and stopped in front of a door to which only Neil had access. "I'll probably only see you when we get to Mount Weather."

"Assuming nothing else funny happens," Brian quipped. Andrew looked at him in a panic. He knew instantly he'd slipped. "What do you mean?" Neil asked.

"Oh ..." he stalled, trying to cover his gaffe, "you know . . . maybe if Melissa has her problem again."

"What's that? I didn't know she had one."

"I overheard her telling Deidre this morning that she was having a bleeding problem."

"Bleeding? You mean menstrual bleeding?"

"Sort of," Brian continued, relieved that he'd thought of something convincing. "It wasn't the regular female thing. She said she'd had the problem before in graduate school when she was under a lot of stress. She didn't seem worried about it. More annoyed than anything, which suits her."

"Has she had it checked?"

"I think so; Deidre insisted on it."

"Good. Well, I'll see the two of you when possible. Good night."

"Good night," Brian and Andrew echoed as Neil left the cafeteria. Father Benedict breathed a sigh of relief. "That was close. You must be more careful."

"I know do you think he suspected anything?"

"No."

\* \* \*

Neil strolled quietly down the hallway, his mind still reeling from Brian's presentation and the conversation that had just transpired. He wanted to believe there was no cause for alarm; that his questions would be answered. He found it ironic he had reached a point where he was praying the visitors were genuine ETs, whereas a few

weeks ago the idea had rocked his faith. He felt uneasy now about continuing to keep his friend in the dark . . . but if Brian was right, then the things Neil knew about the project, that the team members still did not know, needed to be kept from all of them. Brian hadn't changed. He was still his unfailingly analytical self Even in the face of Melissa's constant harassing . . . he froze at the thought of Melissa, riveted in the middle of the silent hallway. He paced back and forth several times, hands on his hips, rehearsing Brian's words during their conversation. *They wouldn't!*

He stood still, deep in thought; a few moments passed, and his face flushed with anger. *Why would she be singled out? . . . Whatever the reason, I can't allow it!* He whirled about and headed for the security monitoring station.

Brian carded himself into his room and turned on the light switch. His late-night snack and the heavy conversation had combined to induce drowsiness, but he sat down at his desk to finish reading the dissertation chapter left uncompleted due to the earlier interruption. He sleepily turned the page, but was jolted into full consciousness when the light in his bedroom behind him suddenly came on. A surge of adrenaline brought him to his feet. He crept cautiously toward the bedroom and peered inside.

"Not again," he groaned, staring in disbelief at the redheaded form lying motionless in his bed, face toward the wall as before.

"No ... this is the real thing," the familiar voice answered seductively, as Melissa gracefully turned on her side and came to her knees on the bed, wearing nothing but a mischievous smile.

## CHAPTER 24

"Compassion is the antitoxin of the soul: where there is compassion even the most poisonous impulses remain relatively harm-less."

—Eric Hoffer—

CAUGHT COMPLETELY OFF guard, Brian stood in the door-way, mesmerized by the sight of her loveliness. A voice inside hint beckoned him to turn away, but the vision of her fleshly perfection muted the inner pleas. She was everything a man could desire, every-thing he'd ever fantasized ... everything he'd never had.

"Are you just going to stare or are you coming to bed?" Melissa purred, stroking the surface of the bed next to her. The sound of her voice awakened him from his stupor.

"Wh... what are you ... doing here?" he finally asked, the words expelled from his dry throat by brief, unnoticed gasps. He swallowed hard, his eyes running the course of every curve of her shapely form.

"I'm here for you."

Brian didn't respond, transfixed in the moment.

"You know, Brian," she said softly, tilting her head to one side, "I've been so very nasty to you ... I want to make it up to you ... this is the best way I know how."

"How did you get in here?" he mumbled weakly.

"I asked a guard to let me in," she lied. "I told him it was your birthday and I wanted to surprise you. He got the hint," she added playfully, her perfect mouth breaking into a sly grin as she slid her feet onto the floor.

Brian watched her approach him, her body moving rhythmically across the short span that separated them. She gently draped her arms around his neck and looked into his eyes, the intoxicating scent of her perfume numbing his senses. "Let me make your first time some-thing you'll always remember," she whispered, and kissed him lightly.

They locked eyes once more. "Now how do you want me?"

Brian didn't move. He could feel himself careening to the point of no return, his desire building. Melissa pressed herself against him and backed him against the wall adjacent to the doorway to the bedroom. She could feel his heart pumping furiously, her cheek resting on his chest. She warmed herself by the heat of his body. *You're mine.*

"I know you're a little nervous," she whispered again, running her hands down the length of his arms, caressing his muscles. "There's nothing to be afraid of," she soothed, and put his arms around her bare waist. "Touch me ... please," she moaned.

Brian began to slide his hands around her hips, but hesitated. The fight within him had resumed, but the unfamiliar, exciting sensation of her warm skin under his palms summoned him further.

Suddenly she took hold of his face and kissed him hungrily. Instinctively he reciprocated, his lips seeking her warm, sweet mouth. His conscience screamed at him to stop, and he reluctantly pulled his head back.

"Don't think about it," she gasped, locking her arms around his neck. "Just let it happen." She kissed his neck softly, and then his chin. "Haven't you been wondering

what it would be like?" His silence gave her the answer. Brian closed his eyes, trying to get his bearings.

"Take me, and find out, Brian," she coaxed him, stroking his hair. "I don't know about you, but I've been thinking about having you all day long. Let's make a whole night of it."

Brian struggled to focus. He had thought about her that day, dozens of times, and he wanted her—right now. There was no denying it. *I've been thinking about having you all day long.* Her words burned in his mind as he remembered how he had made love to her in his thoughts. But no sooner had the deed entered his mind than his other meditations from earlier that day blazed into his consciousness—the relief he had felt at retaining his reputation and the respect of the others, the wonderful release of the guilt. He felt Melissa slowly unbuttoning his shirt. *This makes absolutely no sense why would she ever want someone like me?*

His senses were jolted back to the present by the glide of Melissa's hand over his hairy chest. She looked at him longingly with her deep, green bedroom eyes. "I'm going to undress you," she informed him lustily, "don't move."

"No—" Brian said hoarsely.

"Trust me," she replied, pulling his shirt from the top of his pants, "you'll enjoy what I have in mind."

"No . . . I mean ..." he stammered. "Lie down on the bed."

She pulled his shirt apart and pressed her naked torso against his chest. Brian could feel his will numbing again, but she quickly broke the embrace. "Whatever you want," she said compliantly with a toss of her head. She turned and stretched herself out on the bed. She rolled over to meet him, and gasped. He was gone.

Immediately she jumped out of the bed and, grabbing the bedsheet, hurried into the living room, where Brian was fumbling with his card, trying hurriedly to pass it through the locking device. She quickly subdued her anger. She lunged for him as she saw him begin to punch in his code.

"Don't leave, Brian," she pleaded, and snatched his hand away from the keypad. She quickly put her arms around him again. "What's wrong?" she asked innocently. "I know I came on pretty strong, but it's just that I want you in bed—tonight."

"Give me a break," he replied, out from under her spell. "This is me you're talking to."

"I know," she hung her head. "I'm sorry ... I know it's against your principles, but—"

"Yeah, right. Get dressed."

"You know," she said, biting her lower lip for a moment, "we wouldn't have to go all the way. There are other ways I can please you," she added, a sultry grin returning to her face.

"It'd be just as wrong."

She reached for his belt, ignoring his refusal. He grabbed her arm and squeezed it tightly.

"What is it with you?" he demanded indignantly. "Ever since that first meeting you've treated me like a fool, belittling me in front of anyone who was within earshot, making fun of my looks, my standards—and now I turn you on?"

"I just want to make all that up to you," she insisted.

"No you don't. For some reason, you want to ruin me, to bring me to shame. What kind of a twisted slut are you?"

"Twisted!" Melissa exploded, "I'll tell you what twisted is, you bastard! Twisted is you peddling your religion in front of real scholars! Twisted is quoting your asinine Bible verses to people whether they want to hear it or not! Twisted is portraying yourself as more pure than anyone else! Well I know better I know you want me. You're not what you make yourself out to be. Your kind are all the same: con-trolled, thoughtful, and kind on the outside, but on the inside you're just as corrupt, ready to drop your pants and your precious standards—but in this case you'd get caught, so you hide behind your sickening self-righteousness!"

Brian felt the anger welling up in him, a fury like he'd never known. "Let me tell you something, Miss Kelley," he seethed. "If you ever do anything like this to me again, what I'll feel won't be arousal, it'll be pity you're so weak that the only way you can cope with whatever's made you so angry is to try to make other people as miserable as yourself."

"Why you let me go!" she snarled, and tried unsuccessfully to jerk her arm from his grasp.

"I'm not finished!" Brian shouted. "I have something else—" he stopped in mid-sentence, his gaze having fallen on the tears welling up in her enraged eyes. The paradox jolted him for a moment, but his surprise was soon replaced by a wave of realization.

"Go ahead!" she blustered, but held her bearing.

"If you ever do anything like this to me again," he said calmly, looking squarely into her moistened eyes, "I'll listen."

"What?"

"I'll listen," he repeated himself. "I don't know what you've been through, but I'm going to find out."

"Is that so?" she sneered.

"Yes . . . it is," he replied, still holding her arm. "I may not ever be of any good to you," he continued in a gentle but firm tone, "but you're not going to leave this base without knowing God placed someone in your life who at least wanted to help you deal with what-ever was done to you. I've only been treated with this kind of con-tempt once before, and at the root of it was pain. If you're ever ready to talk, I'll listen." He released her.

Melissa appeared ready to engage him again, but her expression changed, as though his words had hit their mark. The silence was broken by the clamor of shouting and bootsteps in the hallway.

"Get dressed," Brian said, and proceeded to button his shirt. Melissa disappeared into the bedroom just as an MP carded his way into the room, his pistol drawn.

"Hands in the air!" the gunman shouted at Brian, who by this time had taken a seat on the couch. He complied. Another MP entered the room and headed for the bedroom. The Colonel followed as a third Marine held the door open, just in time to see Melissa emerge from Brian's bedroom, jeans and bra in place, but no blouse, hands behind her head, escorted by the security detail.

"What the hell is going on here?" the Colonel demanded.

"What does it look like?" Melissa asked sarcastically.

"Melissa was just leaving."

"You mean I was just undressing for you."

"No, you were just leaving."

The Colonel eyed both of them suspiciously. "I don't know what the two of you are up to, but you'd better quit bullshitting me right now. The security system didn't make up the alarm it just relayed. What's going on here!" he bellowed.

"Let me in soldier!" a voice demanded from behind Brian's cocked door. Neil pushed his way inside, a panicked expression on his face.

"You!" he shouted when he saw Melissa. "What do you think you're doing breaking into—" he stopped when he saw her state of undress. "Never mind; I think I can guess."

"I was invited!" she shot back.

"Shut up!" Neil shouted, startling Brian. He'd never seen his friend angry before. "You can stuff your story right now! I know Brian better than that."

"Maybe you don't."

"If he was so willing, why the override card?"

"Maybe it was the Colonel," she said snippily.

"Yeah, and you brought the MPs."

"What's this about an override of security?" the Colonel inquired with a panicked expression.

"The security logs will explain everything. She has an over-ride card."

Melissa said nothing and refused to make eye contact.

"Let's go, Dr. Kelley," the Colonel said in an ominous tone.

"Can I put my shirt back on?"

"Do you want it back on?" Neil jabbed bitterly.

"Hurry it up," Colonel Ferguson ordered, and Melissa finished dressing.

The three of them left the room, leaving Brian alone, but not for long. A knock came only seconds after his door had closed behind the Colonel. It was Father Benedict. Over his shoulder Brian could see the rest of the team members huddled together trying to peek into his room.

"Come on in everybody," he sighed. One by one they filed inside. Brian shut the door and collapsed into his chair.

"Are you all right, Brian?" Father Benedict asked.

"I've had more uneventful evenings."

"Man, we all get roused out of bed and the next thing we know, Melissa's getting her lovely ass hauled off to detention, away from your room," Malcolm observed in his unique way. "So what happened?"

Brian briefly relayed the episode to the dumbfounded audience.

"That woman has real issues," Deidre said, shaking her head.

"Her behavior is just . . . irrational," Mark remarked, mystified.

"What have you got that I haven't got?" Malcolm wondered aloud.

"Malcolm !" Deidre started in on him.

"Sorry."

"This is very upsetting," Father Benedict reflected. "How did she get the card?"

"Most likely from her mystery visitor," Malcolm deduced. "Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"What?" asked Mark.

"If anyone else has one."

"I hope what you have to say is worth getting me out of bed, Vernon," the General yawned, sitting on the edge of his bed.

"It is, sir."

"So what was the disturbance you mentioned on the phone?"

"We've had a breach of security, sir. It appears Dr. Kelley was able to gain unauthorized access to another room."

"Where did she go?"

"Dr. Scott's room."

"What would she want there?"

"Apparently it wasn't what, but whom."

"Scott? You must be kidding."

"No, I'm not," the Colonel replied.

The General looked at the ceiling in exasperation. "How did she get the card?"

"All she'll say is that someone from the Group gave her the card, but that she never saw the person's face. I'm inclined to believe her, sir."

"Yes . . . so am I, unfortunately. The day we hoped would never happen just did, Vernon. We have a traitor in our midst." "That would seem accurate, sir."

"Was this the only time Kelley used the card?"

"Yes."

"I assume you've checked the other members—that they are in possession of their cards and that there was no conflict in their usage."

"Affirmative on both counts. We've confiscated the card. She won't be any more trouble. You should know one other thing."

"What's that?"

"Dr. Bandstra was in the monitoring station when the alarm went off."

"Did he see the log records?"

"Yes. He just happened to be there when the incident occurred, and saw the override on Scott's room."

"Damn! ... How will he react knowing that the Group has internal problems?"

"I'm quite sure he knows rivalries exist in every organization."

"This is different and you know it ... he knows it."

"I think I can fix the situation, sir," the Colonel offered.

"How?"

"I'll tell him that I suspected the Group was divided, which was another reason to assemble the team so hastily."

"So you're betting that if he believes you've anticipated this, he won't get jittery."

"Exactly."

"Very plausible; do it."

"Yes sir."

"We can't afford screw-ups, Vernon."

"I know, sir, but it could have been far worse."

"You're positive nothing happened between them?"

"Absolutely."

\* \* \*

"Are you sure you don't mind waiting, ma'am?" the MP asked Melissa politely.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I'm in no hurry. Just get my bag there in one piece."

"Move it out!" the Marine ordered the driver, and the tram rolled out onto the tarmac toward the transport jet a few hundred yards away.

She wasn't looking forward to the flight, but at least she'd gotten away from the catacombs of the Facility. It had been almost a month since any of them had seen the surface, and the simple pleasure of seeing the sunrise was well worth the 5:00 a.m. rising time. The warmth of the sun felt exhilarating.

Melissa watched the drab green vehicle get smaller and smaller as it headed east in the direction of the early morning sun. It zipped past the stalled jeep that, along with the tram, had been intended to carry all of them to the plane for boarding. The tram couldn't hold all of them, and the MP had asked her to wait for his return. She'd actually chosen to stay behind for another reason. Brian hadn't shown up with the others for some reason, and the Colonel had radioed for someone to check his room. She was determined to show him that she hadn't been taken in by his feigned concern. *He's just All of himself.* She would show him who was weak.

She scanned the buildings situated at various locations about the airfield. It was amazing how innocuous the base appeared. The hangars were large but unimpressive. Who could imagine the secrets that lay far below the surface? It seemed odd that the only sign of life was a solitary plane slowly creeping toward the beginning of a runway, and another MP with two German shepherds. Though he was about a hundred yards away, she could tell he was watching her closely as he guarded the door through which she and the team had come only a few minutes ago. Whatever. Unexpectedly she saw the Marine open the door and Brian emerge, carrying his familiar backpack, in a typically unfashionable pair of plain shorts and a T-shirt. She smirked as she saw him start out in her direction, the guard having ordered him to the waiting area, only to halt his gait once he recognized her. She enjoyed knowing she made him uncomfortable.

Brian walked up to where she was standing but passed her without uttering a word. He set his bag down against the side of the building and looked out over the tarmac, which seemed to stretch for miles. The sight was beautiful; it was so good to be outside. *If only the company was better*, he thought to himself, but instantly felt a pang of conviction at his unspoken sarcasm. He allowed himself another brief glance at her lovely form. Had the events of last evening not transpired he knew he'd have wanted to gaze more. She looked as unflawed as ever in her white shorts and powder blue tanktop, but what he knew lurked inside her quickly took the luster off her outward loveliness. Whatever lay behind Melissa's crass behavior, she was its prisoner, and he had the answer. He looked over at her briefly. He knew he couldn't let her hostility toward him dictate how he treated her.

"Guess I shut my alarm off by accident," he said, turning in her direction.

"I think you've mistaken me for someone who cares," she replied, holding her hand above her eyes, searching for the tram. It was nowhere to be seen.

"I meant what I said last night," he reminded her.



"I'll bet."

"I want to help; you can trust me."

Melissa cast him a fed up expression and said nothing, choosing to communicate her feelings for him with her middle finger. Brian didn't push.

Melissa resumed scanning the horizon for the missing vehicle. The plane was still there, but their means of getting across the expanse was mysteriously gone. She also noticed that the other plane was by now nearly out of discernible visual range, and that the surface had become eerily quiet. It was as though they were completely alone.

"Melissa." She refused to look at Brian.

"Melissa," she heard him again, although this time there was a sense of urgency in his voice. She looked to her left where he was standing, but he did not return her glance. Instead he was peering over her shoulder. She could tell he was alarmed at something. She turned in the direction of his gaze and her eyes fell on the two German shepherds she'd seen a few minutes ago. The guard was gone. The dogs were unrestrained. As soon as they made eye contact with Brian and Melissa they bolted toward them.

"Run!" he commanded her.

"Wha—?"

"Just do it—run!"

## CHAPTER 25

"The mark of a good action is that it appears inevitable in retrospect."

—Robert Louis Stevenson—

BRIAN GRABBED MELISSA'S arm and pushed her into motion.

"Head for the jeep! Get under it!" He started running as well, and almost immediately outpaced her. After a few more strides he looked back over his shoulder. The dogs were dismayingly fast for their size, and were rapidly gaining on them. He thought he could make it, but there was no way Melissa would.

Brian suddenly whirled about and sprinted toward Melissa. "Keep going!" he yelled as he flew past her. Bewildered, she paused and looked behind her at Brian, now heading straight for the dogs as fast as his legs could carry him. In amazed horror she watched as he slowed his pace, timing the leap of the first animal, and caught the shepherd in midair. The impact nearly toppled him, but he managed to keep his balance. Then, in a remarkably swift, deliberate motion, he altered the path of his momentum, the first dog still in his arms, and dove into the second animal. She turned and ran for the jeep, too afraid to witness what would surely follow.

Brian immediately began pummeling the head of the dog pinned on its side underneath him. The shepherd went into a frenzy. He outweighed the dog by a good seventy pounds, but it was all he could do to keep the animal in a prone position. The second animal lunged and hit its mark. Brian cried out as the fangs penetrated deeply into his exposed calf, but he held the dog beneath fast. He had no choice but to hold on; there was no way he could protect himself against both animals simultaneously. Desperately he dug into the pinned animal's eye socket with his thumb, trying to ignore the pain shooting through his leg. The dog beneath him yelped in agony and jerked violently, managing to loosen its hind legs, which he immediately set to fending off the man on top of him. Suddenly Brian felt the shepherd's sharp teeth release his leg. Without warning a second at-tack came from the side and inflicted a vicious bite on his shoulder. The animal did not lock on, though, choosing instead to go for its victim's throat. Brian caught a glimpse of the charging animal out of the corner of his eye, and had no choice but to release his grip and surrender his arm to the second dog's gaping maw.

Melissa made it to the jeep and scrambled underneath the stalled vehicle. She laid prostrate, panting heavily more from panic than exertion. She'd heard Brian's scream as she'd reached safety. A piercing yelp next punctuated the air, and she maneuvered her body into position where she could see what was happening. The battle was raging about fifty yards away. She flinched as one of the dogs latched onto Brian's left arm and shook it violently. Brian shrieked in pain again, but managed to get to his feet, the dog firmly attached and standing on its hind legs. The other dog seemed momentarily disoriented, walking in circles, shuddering, blood streaming from one of its eyes, but it soon got its bearings and circled behind its quarry for a counterattack. Brian frantically jammed his thumb into the eye of the yet unwounded dog, which instantaneously released his arm as it whined in distress and retreated. *Run for it!* she screamed in her mind, but, to her

astonishment, Brian made no move toward the jeep. Instead, incredibly, he went on the offensive, diving on the shepherd he had first injured, pinning it to its stomach. Sitting atop the dog and straddling it, he quickly grabbed a forelimb, placed his knee upon the joint, and jerked the paw upward with all his might. The second dog charged at him as its partner howled bitterly, knocking Brian from his position, but not before he'd succeeded in maiming the first animal.

The shepherd scratched furiously at Brian, now on his back, who tried to deflect the buzzsaw of claws and teeth with his arms. As if by design, the dog found Brian's bleeding arm and seized it in its jaws again. Brian gasped in anguish. The dog twisted his head repeatedly, gradually reducing the muscle of Brian's forearm to raw meat. For a brief moment Brian caught sight of its bloodied muzzle, its eyes rolled back into its head, maddened by the taste of his blood. Brian felt his knees buckle, but stayed on his feet. He knew if he hit the ground again, it would be for the last time. He tried punching the shepherd in the face, but his strength was weakening. The dog refused to relinquish his grip. Finally, as if by impulse alone, he grabbed the dog's ear and yanked it hard; but rather than releasing his arm, the dog became more enraged, tightening its toothy hold on its fading prey.

Suddenly, in a flash of insight, Brian let go of the ear and kicked the canine viciously between the legs where it stood. Still he could not free himself. He kicked again, and then a third time. The dog gasped for air, and Brian's arm fell free from its jaws. Summoning his strength, he fell upon the panting animal and, as with the other, broke its foreleg. He rolled off the fallen beast and watched it writhe in agony, its body contorted by the pain. Brian looked down at his arm, a bloody, shredded mass with fingers. He could only raise the limb half-way, and clenching his fist filled his senses with excruciating pain. His stomach heaved at the gruesome sight, and dizziness swept over him.

Melissa's scream jolted him into alertness. He turned toward the sound. The first wounded dog had hobbled to the jeep and was trying to get at Melissa. Brian tried to run, but stumbled and fell in disorientation. He toiled clumsily to get to his feet, and finally succeeded. He trudged toward the unsuspecting shepherd, now preoccupied with snapping at Melissa's kicking feet. Gritting his teeth to fend off the pain, he abruptly seized the animal's hind legs and pulled him from beneath the side-panel of the jeep. In a swift, calculated motion, and with a loud, tormented gasp, he spun the animal around airborne, smacking its head into the fender. Brian slumped onto the tarmac on one knee. The maneuver spent him, but it also accomplished its purpose of stunning the dog. He crawled to the stricken animal, but not before it had recovered. Brian's feeble offensive was met with two rows of teeth. He cried out as the dog's mouth found his mangled arm. Blood spurted as the canine's teeth ground to the bone, and Brian gasped and began to cry. Suddenly adrenaline surged through his body as he saw his own blood spurt through the teeth of the enraged animal. He realized in a panic that an artery had been severed. He quickly grabbed an ear as before and, pulling the animal upright, tried to disable it as he had done the other, by kicking it between the legs. After half a dozen well-placed blows, the dazed shepherd still clung tenaciously to his victim. Brian tried to pull his arm away, but the pain nearly caused him to black out. Finally, out of desperation, he placed his other arm firmly around the back of the exhausted dog's head and, mustering the last of his strength, jerked the animal's head back. The sickening crack of the beast's neck was

muffled by Brian's own anguished scream. The two combatants collapsed to the tarmac, Brian's twisted limb still in the mouth of the dead, twitching animal.

"Brian!" Melissa frantically called to him, "Get up! You can make it—it's only a few yards!"

Brian could hear her plainly, but couldn't move. His breathing slowed as his body began to lapse into shock. A peculiar dark circle began to appear at the periphery of his vision. Melissa's voice faded, but not before being replaced by a low, threatening growl. Brian knew immediately he was about to die, but felt strangely calm. He turned his head to face the other crippled, partially blinded assassin. The dog was badly injured, but had fared better than he had. The wounded shepherd limped awkwardly but purposefully toward him, teeth bared, his lone good eye seething with rage. Brian prayed for a merciful end. He closed his eyes as the dog closed in for the kill. But instead of the feel of unforgiving jaws closing about his neck, he heard a dull thud, followed by a whimper. He slowly opened his eyes and watched Melissa, crowbar in hand, barely three feet from where he lay, rain down blow after blow on the dog's skull until it gave way.

Melissa dropped her weapon and rushed over to Brian. She pried his arm from the dog's mouth and then gingerly turned him over onto his back. She tore frantically at his belt and, upon removing it, quickly applied a tourniquet around his upper arm. She cradled his face in her hands and looked into his eyes, now drenched with tears of agonizing pain. She quickly glanced upward and then back down to him. "Can you hear me?" He couldn't speak. "Help's on the way," she said, her lip quivering. ". . . just hang on."

\*\*\*

"I want to know what the hell happened out there this morning, and I want to know now!" Colonel Ferguson exploded. The twelve men in front of him remained silent.

"Cowards!" he challenged. "I don't know what's a more gutless deed, arranging a murder like this or refusing to take responsibility for it!"

"Colonel—"

"Don't interrupt me!" the Colonel bellowed.

"Vernon," the large man at the center of the table intervened, "I think it would be wise to exercise some restraint here. I understand your concern and anger, but—"

"But what? `The Group isn't used to being spoken to in such a way?' Who gives a rat's ass!"

"You will," a thin, nattily dressed man informed him calmly, "once you're removed."

"Then you might as well kill me," he retorted unflinchingly. "The Agenda is more important than you or me, than all of us collectively. I will not allow decades of planning and research to be washed away because one of you doesn't like outsiders on the team."

"That can be arranged," another voice said from the shadows.

"Do you think you can intimidate me?" the Colonel asked defiantly. "How dumb do you think I am? I haven't lasted thirty years in this game without knowing how to protect myself. I know your identities, where you live, who your children and grandchildren are. I've been gathering information on all of you for years. If I so much as come down with a cold I'll expose all of you. Try and take me down—you'll get only one

chance."

"So this is your trusted friend, eh General?" a third voice resonated in the silence of the Colonel's tirade.

"Yes," he answered coolly, "he is. And knowing Vernon as I do, he'll do exactly what he's said."

"Then he's the traitor here," a voice accused.

"No," the Colonel objected, "anyone who'd allow our work to be threatened and not be outraged is the one guilty of treachery—or spinelessness. Now who wanted Dr. Scott and Dr. Kelley dead?"

"This is preposterous!" the thin man exclaimed. "I'll not be bullied in this manner! We've all committed our lives to the success of this plan; none of us would jeopardize it for any reason."

"Bullshit! No one but those of us in this room could have arranged this. Who else could get to the surface to try this?"

"Or be armed," the General added. "Do we know yet when the MP Dr. Kelley reported on the tarmac was killed?"

"Judging by the body, probably inside of an hour of the incident," Colonel Ferguson replied, still visibly agitated.

"That would mean he was the one who released the dogs," the General reasoned thoughtfully.

"Are we sure about that?" asked the major. "Maybe someone shot him so that the dogs would get loose, and then moved the body later. Would anyone on the team itself want these two dead?"

"No one," a voice emanated from off to the side of the large table.

"Hmmpff," the thin man sniffed. "I suppose you think we're guilty as well."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"What a shock," he scoffed.

"I may be a newcomer here," the speaker retorted from the shadows, the anger rising in his voice, "but I am far from being a mere follower. The Colonel may be in the minority, but I side with him in the matter. One or more of you is trying to scuttle the plan, and I have no qualms over personally dealing with whoever it is. Don't let my appearance dissuade you."

"Yes," the thin man droned, "we're all well aware of your reputation. Some of us question your allegiance. Perhaps your loyalty has become divided."

"My allegiance has not, and never will, waver. You simply will not face the reality that everyone on the team was accounted for. Each member was already on the plane, except, of course, for Dr. Scott and Dr. Kelley."

"And Dr. Bandstra," the General reminded the speaker.

"Correct—Dr. Scott's best friend, I'll remind everyone. The boy is like a son to him. There's no way he would ever put Dr. Scott at risk. He'd die first."

"Are you positive?"

"Of course," the speaker leaned forward. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life. I suppose one of you is in a more advantageous position to know otherwise?"

"No, Father," the General answered, "we're not."

Melissa exited her room and walked hurriedly down the hall-way toward the cafeteria. After a few steps, she paused and hastily unzipped her purse and peered inside. Satisfied that its contents were secure, she continued on her solitary journey. About halfway she stopped at one of the doors leading beyond the restricted confines and, peeking through the small glass window, tapped gently on the door. The MP on the other side visually confirmed her identity, and carded the door from the other side. She acknowledged the guard with a glance, and continued on her way, a second MP at her side.

It had been two full days since the attack. Save for Father Benedict and herself, the team had already been transported as planned to its new destination. It was perfectly understandable that he stay behind until Brian could travel. After all, he was a priest and friend. On the other hand, she'd had to beg for the privilege. Neil and Father Benedict had been dead set against it, but to her relief, the Colonel relented after repeated requests.

Melissa and her military escort turned what by now was the familiar last corner of the walk to the Facility's infirmary. She'd come every few hours since Brian had emerged from surgery, but he'd been deliberately kept under heavy sedation. She could only sit beside the bed in the silence, stricken with guilt, running the events of the past month, and especially the past few days, through her mind. Why had she done it? Why had she so doggedly pursued the ruin of a man she barely knew, a man who had returned her unrelenting hostility by saving her life nearly at the expense of his own? She of course knew the answer, but now the remembrance of her own pain did not steel her determination to strike back. She felt only an abiding sense of shame as she approached the door to Brian's hospital room.

"Thanks," she said to the MP quietly, who turned and walked a few yards away to his designated post. She paused briefly, looking at the door. The moment she'd both yearned for and dreaded had arrived. She took the knob. To her surprise, it turned in her hand. The door swung outward, propelled by Father Benedict. The priest put his finger to his lips and closed the door behind him.

"I was told he was awake," Melissa said in a hushed tone.

"Oh, he's awake," the priest answered quietly, taking her arm and guiding her a few feet from the door. "I just don't want him to hear this conversation." She looked at him curiously.

"Don't act so surprised, Melissa," he said curtly.

"I wasn't 'acting:'"

"Of course," he said condescendingly. "So the huntress now looks for compassion from her prey," he observed with a cold stare. "For some reason he's asked about nothing other than how you were since he awoke. I'd say it was delirium if I didn't know him as I do."

"Listen, Father," she said, bowing her head, "I don't want to argue with you again. I—"

"You'd just like to forget this whole thing ever happened, wouldn't you?" he interrupted with mock sympathy.

She held her tongue.

"Well it did happen, and now you—and Brian—must live with the

consequences!" he said angrily through clenched teeth.

She looked up at him, his eyes now aflame with contempt. She made no attempt to engage him.

"Haven't you anything to say?" he growled.

"There's nothing to say."

"There's plenty to say!"

"I know how you feel about him, Father, but—"

"How could you know how I feel about anyone," he interrupted her again, "especially him?"

"I'm sorry. I misspoke."

"You're responsible for a great deal more than a poor choice of words," he accused. "I've never met such an uncaring soul in all my years. You've done nothing but ridicule him since you've been here, and now we're supposed to accept your remorse as genuine and not self-serving? Are we really supposed to sense grief after what you did the other evening? Tell me, how are you planning to use this latest incident against him?"

The old priest's words pierced her through the heart. No anger welled up inside her, only shame. She stood before him spirit-less, and made no effort to defend herself. Andrew beheld her, an implacable expression on his wizened face.

"I know you must have suffered in some way to become so spiteful," he continued, "but you aren't the only person who has experienced great hurt. You have no idea, not that you would actually care, what this man has endured in his short life. Yet through it all, he's clung to his faith, consciously refusing the path you've trodden for years. God forgive me for saying it, but it seems far more just for you to be suffering than him."

"I'd like to see him now," she said quietly, and turned to-ward the door.

"I'm not through," Father Benedict warned, grabbing her arm tightly. She stopped, refusing to look him in the eye.

"Listen very closely to me, Dr. Kelley, because what I have to say won't be repeated. Do I have your undivided attention?" he asked, yanking her in his direction. She fixed her gaze on him and shook her arm free of his grasp.

"Good," he said contemptibly. "If I so much as hear a single unkind word directed at him from your mouth, I swear by my calling I'll make you pay for it dearly. You may take me lightly, young lady, but you do so at your own peril," he threatened, drawing closer to her. "There is much more to me than meets the eye. You would do well to remember that."

"I will," she said edgily, taken back by his demeanor.

"Don't be so surprised, Doctor," he said, noting her startled gaze. "It isn't that I enjoy wasting my time on revenge; I'm simply devoted to his welfare. I suspect you'll never comprehend how important he is to the future. Brian Scott is worth a little extra time in purgatory. You, on the other hand, are not."

Father Benedict abruptly turned and walked away, leaving Melissa alone outside Brian's door. She sighed, a feeling of disgrace filling her as she watched the priest disappear around a corner. Her shame was momentarily pushed aside by the realization that Andrew had left the area unescorted. She looked at the MP, whose gaze was riveted on her, and shrugged it off. There was no question who was under more suspicion of late.

## CHAPTER 26

"Whatever is begun in anger, ends in shame."

—*Benjamin Franklin*—

"*HI*," MELISSA VENTURED cautiously as she entered the room.

"Hi," Brian reciprocated with a weak but sincere smile.

Melissa pulled up the chair that had become hers over the last two days and sat down at the bedside where Brian was propped upright.

"You look well," he sighed. "I'm so relieved. I couldn't get any specific information about you out of anyone this morning. I don't know what the big secret was."

"Brian . . . thank you ... ," she began, biting her lip.

"You don't need to say anything," he stopped her. "I'm okay."

"You're alive, thank God, but you're hardly okay," she disagreed, her eyes scanning the half dozen or so scratches on his face and neck, and then proceeding finally to his left arm, which lay in front of her, the lower portion of which was heavily bandaged and in a protective cast. "You lost a lot of blood, Brian. I'm amazed you made it."

"I thought it was over, too. I guess God still wants me around for some reason. I have you to thank, too."

"But you're crippled!" she groaned in dismay, then cupped her hand over her mouth and turned her head away.

"Well . . . yeah, right now anyway."

"Didn't they tell you?" she asked in a somber voice.

"Sure. The doctor showed up right after I woke up. He gave me the whole description of the surgery and the reconstruction. Kind of neat the way they fixed the artery, but he lost me about half way through it, to be honest."

"But you have nerve damage ..." she said, clearing her voice. "He had to tell you ... that you'd probably never use your hand again."

"He did . . . we'll see," he sighed.

"He was serious, Brian."

"So am I."

She marveled at his stubbornness, but her attention was quickly drawn to his still-swollen thumb protruding from the cast, now twitching haphazardly. Brian felt nothing, but followed her glance.

"It does that from time to time . . . at least I'm guessing it does. I've seen it a couple of times."

Melissa burst into tears, overcome by the guilt inside her. Brian watched her for a few moments, her body trembling with grief. "Melissa ..." he said softly.

"It's my fault!" she wailed, her face contorted with sorrow. "How would it be your fault? You didn't do this to me, and you certainly didn't make me do anything."

She shook her head.



"It's not your fault," he said, trying to comfort her. "You aren't to be blamed."

"Then why did you do it?" she sobbed.

Brian thought f o r a moment. "It was just ... the right thing to do. I knew you weren't going to make it to the jeep."

"It makes no sense," she said through her tears. "I've treated you horribly—deliberately, too. You were right the other night, you know. I wanted to ruin you, to make you a hypocrite in front of every-one. I've thought about it every day since the first meeting. And then you take everything I've dished out and do this. You should have let me die."

"That's ridiculous," he replied. "I made the right choice, and would do it again."

"Didn't you hear me?" she said, exasperated. "I said I wanted you to fall."

"I heard you," he said gently.

"You must be high," she sniffed. "Nothing you're saying makes sense."

"I hate to sound preachy, but I'd like to think I did what Godmwould have expected me to do. You're not to blame since there's no blame to go around. As far as the other things you've done since we've been here ... well . . . look at me," he requested firmly.

Melissa hesitated, but lifted her head and looked into his eyes. There was no anger in them, only compassion and understanding.

"Are you listening?"

She nodded.

"I forgive you," he smiled. She closed her eyes and dropped her head.

"Look at me," he insisted again. She complied, reluctantly. "Did you hear me?"

She nodded again.

"Just so we're clear, and can leave all this behind," Brian added, "I want you to know I'm not holding onto any of it; it's forgotten. When we see each other, you needn't feel any shame. If you've learned anything about me at all, you know I'm not a liar. You can believe me when I tell you that I forgive you—completely."

Melissa closed her eyes once more, squeezing the tears from them. She rose from her chair and threw her arms around his shoulders and embraced him tightly. She sobbed openly, her head pressed to his chest. Brian hadn't expected the display of emotion, and was uncertain how to respond. Cautiously, he placed his good hand on her head, and stroked her thick, auburn hair softly, waiting for her to regain her composure.

After a few moments her anguish subsided, and she lifted her head and looked into his eyes. "I'm so sorry . . . thank you," she whispered, touching his face.

"You're welcome," he acknowledged quietly, his skin flushing at the unfamiliar sensation.

"I've never met anyone quite like you," she continued, in the same position. "You're not like ..." she abruptly stopped. A distant gaze appeared on her face, followed quickly by a painful frown, and she pulled away from him.

"I'm listening . . . you can trust me."

"I know . . . I guess I owe you an explanation."

"You owe me nothing. You better remember that or be prepared to put up with my reminding you all the time."

"Okay," she forced a smile, and sat back in her chair, looking at the wall to the side of the bed.

"You really don't have to tell me anything; I just thought it might help."

"I was eighteen," she began, not even hearing his last comment, "and it was a few weeks into my freshman year at Penn State."

"I thought you went to Notre Dame," he noted, puzzled. "I did; I just didn't start there."

"Neil didn't mention it in your introduction."

"That's because he doesn't know about it. I left after three weeks, and I had no permanent record."

"Go on," he encouraged.

"My parents were totally against my choice. They wanted me to go to the fundamentalist Christian college they had gone to. They were missionaries."

"You're kidding," Brian's eyes widened with interest.

"I know it's hard to believe, considering what you've experienced of me. I was born in Ireland during the first year of their mission assignment, and lived there until I was fourteen, when we moved back to the States."

"Why did your family leave Ireland?"

"They decided to live in the U.S. while I attended high school. I was an only child, so they planned on returning once I entered college. I went to high school in this country, and was a National Merit Scholar. I got the best scholarship offer from Penn State, so I went."

"Was that the only reason you made the choice?"

"No ..." she paused. "I have to admit I was a little rebellious, although not in an overt sort of way. There was a guy from my high school whom I'd been dating—his name was Greg—that was going there as well on an ROTC scholarship. He was a Christian—or at least that's what he claimed—but that didn't matter to my parents. We were members of a very strict church, and one of the unspoken litmus tests in the church for parental success was to have your child in a fundamentalist college. Turned out my success only shamed them. It was just . . . bizarre."

Brian sighed and shook his head. She glanced at him curiously. He motioned again for her to continue.

"Two weeks into the fall semester, my boyfriend told me we'd been invited to a party," she said, now looking down at the floor, clasping her hands. Her voice slowed, as though confessing to some crime. "He had a few friends on the football team, and they'd invited him to their frat house for what turned out to be a drunken orgy. I'd never been in that kind of environment before ... although, looking back on it, I should have felt at home ..." her voice trailed off. Brian remained silent.

"I went to the party with him, but when I saw what it was, I insisted on leaving. He told me we didn't have to drink, that he wouldn't if I wouldn't—that we could have fun anyway. I bought it, but that was my second mistake. The first was believing anything this guy said about his faith. At the time I thought he seemed to be everything a girl could want—a cute guy with a good heart, smart, disciplined. It was all a sham."

"I take it he got you drunk."

"Drugged, actually. Ever heard of rohypnol?"

Brian shook his head.

"The so-called 'date rape' drug. It's odorless and colorless. I had no reason to ever suspect him of any harmful intent. I was hopelessly naive, at least at the start of the festivities," she said cynically, the bitterness creeping back into her voice.

"I think I know where this is going," Brian interrupted. "You really don't have to

go any further."

"Oh, but I do—you can't imagine where this all ended."

"Okay," he said uneasily.

"To make a long story short, my date and his friends took turns having their way with me. I have no way of knowing how many there were. Maybe half a dozen. I woke up on the floor inside the lobby of my dorm. At least they put my clothes back on."

"Please tell me they're serving time somewhere," Brian flushed with anger.

"Of course not. I left school a few days afterward and went back home. I lied and told my parents I'd made a mistake and didn't want to go there to college. It was easy to sell them on the notion that I'd go to their college next fall."

"Why didn't you tell them the truth?"

"Are you serious? They'd have been ashamed of me."

"Ashamed of you? You were raped!"

"It didn't matter."

"What do you mean?"

"A few weeks later I began feeling ill. My mother took me to a doctor, and he discovered I was pregnant. My parents were beside themselves, to say the least. I told them what had happened, but they didn't believe a word of it. My father insisted that I'd gone to Penn State just to sleep around with my boyfriend and anyone else that caught my eye."

"That's ridiculous! I'm sorry for saying this, but what kind of father would treat his daughter like such trash?"

"The kind who depended on financial support from our church and `those of like faith and practice,'" she recited the trite cliché. "The kind who would take the word of a rapist over his daughter's, especially when the rapist's dad was the pastor of the largest `sister church' in the state, and a firm fixture in the good of boy network affectionately referred to as our Mission Association," she seethed, reliving the injustice. Brian was stunned.

"The pastoral staff at my boyfriend's church," she continued, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "suddenly saw the light that abortion was permissible in cases of rape. Greg's dad told me that if I didn't have the abortion, my father—which meant my family—would lose financial support, but that he'd also lobby to have dad's ministerial credentials yanked. Not only that, should I ever bring charges against his son, he promised he would counter sue for false arrest or defamation of character. My dad told me it was the best thing to do for everyone concerned, and that God wouldn't hold me accountable—at least not for that sin. My own pastor backed them up as well. I knew it was evil, but I was eighteen and scared for my parents, especially my Mom. I went along with it and had the abortion." A hush came over the room; only the beeping of one of the monitors to which Brian was hooked up could be heard.

"What did your Mom say when it was all over?" Brian broke the silence. "At least you had her for support."

"Not quite," Melissa scoffed. "That's the best part. One day soon after the abortion I overheard my parents arguing about the whole episode. My father blurted out something to the effect that it served my mother right to have this happen after what she had done. I confronted the two of them on the spot about the comment, and we had a huge blowup. It was worth it, though. I learned that day that my mother had cheated on my father several

times while we were in Ireland, the first time shortly after they'd arrived. I've often wondered if they ever got along. I remember my Dad telling me as a kid that before they got married she wanted to go to Argentina in the worst way—but then locked onto Ireland as soon as she got married. She told him God wanted her there and that she was going—with or without him. Come to think of it," she added, reliving the confrontation, "although I never got a confession, from the sound of things I got the distinct impression that my father wasn't sure if I was even his daughter. Eventually the whole combination of events drove my mother over the edge and destroyed our family."

"What do you mean?"

"Mom wound up in a mental hospital. She never left, either. She died there a little over a year after her admission. My father committed suicide a few months after that. I didn't have any firsthand knowledge of all this, mind you; I left home for good the fall semester after my assault and never told my parents where I was going. I found out years after the fact from archives in my hometown paper when curiosity got the best of me. So there you have it; God's surely been good to me. Thank you Jesus for screwing up my life."

"Melissa—"

"Don't lecture me about God, Brian, or even blasphemy for that matter."

"I had no intention."

"What is it then?"

" . . . Come here . . . please," he motioned with his right hand after a moment of hesitation.

Melissa stood up and moved to the other side of the bed. Brian took her hand, and looked up at her. "I know you know this, but I think you need to hear it from someone else."

"What's that?"

"None of it was your fault. God would never hold you ac-countable for any of this."

"I know," she acknowledged, somewhat irritably, and pulled her hand back, but Brian did not let go.

"That's not all," he said nervously, mustering the courage to say what was on his heart. "I'm sorry for what was done to you. If I had been there, I'd have been on your side, no matter what. You've overcome so much to make a success of yourself. I admire you."

"Oh, Brian," she said wistfully, stroking his hand, "if you only knew ..." she paused. "If you only knew what I've done. You would certainly take that back."

"So educate me."

"I guess it doesn't matter," she sighed. "I'll at least leave the room today unhated, if not respected."

"I meant what I just said."

Melissa mustered a polite smile. "Like I said, I stuck it out at my parents' house the rest of that school year. Not that we were a family anymore, mind you. I decided I wanted to go into medicine, so I spent the year studying, both to prepare for the pre-med programs to which I'd applied and to take my mind off of what had happened, which didn't work. I became angrier every day. I quit going to church and basically told my parents what they could do with their phony religion. When I left I told them in a letter

that I would never be back, and that I wasn't going to tell them where I'd decided to go to school. I even went through the trouble of getting my own PO box so they wouldn't see any of my mail while I was applying to other schools. As you now know, I wound up at Notre Dame. I changed my major during my first semester there."

"Why was that?"

"I discovered the joy of exposing Christians as the frauds they were."

Brian didn't know what to make of the statement, and waited for her to continue.

"You look confused," she said, still clasping his hand. "I am," he confessed.

"During orientation week I ran into one of those Campus Crusade people trying to convince me I needed Jesus. He invited me to an ice cream social, and I told him I'd go if he took me. I don't know where I got the idea, but I wanted to see if he had the same thing on his mind as my rapist boyfriend and god-fearing mother. We weren't alone twenty minutes before we were doing it in the back seat of his car. That wasn't the enjoyable part; that came when I saw him at a literature table and announced to his friends there what we'd done. He was crushed. I'd found my coping mechanism at last revenge. Since then, every guy who has tried to pass himself off to me as some sort of spiritual giant has failed the 'Melissa test.' It didn't matter if they were married, either."

"I can hardly believe no one ever resisted."

"Some did, but never for very long. Gradually these small-scale humiliations weren't enough. I decided to major in religion, and dedicated myself to demonstrating that these people were just as screwed up as anyone else. They were empty headed simpletons who had no answers, only pious platitudes they used to manipulate every-one else."

"So you would have tried to seduce me again?" he asked, a saddened expression on his face.

"No . . . you were different," she said, the shame returning to her voice. "Like I said, you weren't the first to say no, but you were the first to see through why I was doing it. I knew there would be no point to coming after you again; it made me furious, actually. It was only after you'd nearly gotten yourself killed that I thought about what you'd said. So how about it? You can't think of me as anything other than despicable," she uncovered his hand, inviting him to release hers. He did, but Melissa stayed at the bedside.

"You're right," he said thoughtfully. "What you've done is terrible. You should be ashamed of yourself—are you?"

Melissa opened her mouth to answer, but halted. She'd been taken back by the question. Brian waited for her answer.

"Yes," she said dejectedly, and looked down at the floor, avoiding his gaze.

"Do you plan to do it again?"

"No," she said solemnly, looking at him once again.

"Why not?"

"What do you mean, why not?" she asked, again surprised.

"You tell me—why wouldn't you keep doing it? I'm sure you'd find more men who'd fall for you—so why not do it?"

"Because it's wrong!"

"So how did you justify it in the first place?"

"How do you think? It felt great to expose those hypocrites..."

"But ... ?" Brian asked, sensing her hesitation.

"But I'm still just as angry; it hasn't helped."

"Do you want to know what will?"

"I feel a sermon coming on."

"Nope—and you have my permission to leave if I ever slip into one. I won't deny that I want to see you deal with this for good. Jesus did address this issue while he was here. There's only one way to prevent this from controlling your life."

"You're going to tell me to forgive them, aren't you?"

"Yes. Believe me, I know from experience it's the only thing that will give you release."

"I don't know if I can."

"But you want to."

"I don't know that either."

"Sure you do. You just told me that your hate for the people who did this to you hasn't helped at all. As I see it, not wanting to forgive them is like saying you're content to stay as you are. You can't have it both ways."

"Okay, Socrates. I guess my problem is that I don't believe I can really do it."

"You must decide to do it. Will you promise me you'll consider it and give it time?"

"... Okay," she sighed after a moment, her countenance lightening a bit, "but don't hold your breath."

"Good enough ... I'll pray for you," he promised, but sensed there was still something troubling her.

"You know," she continued, as though he had read her mind, "you still haven't answered my earlier question. You've told me what you thought of what I've done, but you haven't told me what you think of me. I need to know," she finished, softly.

Brian saw the sincerity in her eyes, and thought about how to answer her. "Given your background, you should remember the story of the Prodigal son, right?"

"Sure. Everybody knows this story. The guy doesn't want anything to do with his dad's religion or lifestyle—just his part of the inheritance. He takes it and squanders it, making his life a wreck in the process. Are you trying to make me feel guiltier than I already do?"

"What do you think?"

"Sorry . . . so what's your point?"

"A lot of people know the story, but almost as many misunderstand it including you, judging by your reaction."

Melissa eyed his face, uncertain of where he was going with the exercise.

"You probably don't know what stories are grouped around it off the top of your head, but that's the key to understanding it."

"Keep going," she said, her curiosity aroused a bit.

"Jesus is using a series of stories—parables to address the same point. For instance, one of the stories he tells in conjunction with the parable of the Prodigal is the parable of the lost sheep. Remember that story? The shepherd leaves his ninety-nine sheep at home to go look for the one that's lost."

She nodded.

"Who's the main character—the sheep?"

"Of course not; it's the shepherd," she answered. "Right—now the parable of the lost coin—is the story about the coin?"

"No," she answered, "it's about the woman who's looking for it."

"And so what's the point of our parable?"

Melissa thought through the story where she stood, this time in silence. Brian watched her face closely and hoped that she might make the connection. Her expression changed, the truth toward which he was steering her finally manifesting itself.

"The focus of the parable ..." she whispered, reflecting on the words, "is the father. The father keeps going out to the road to see if the son is coming home. He's actually the main character ..."

"How do you know?"

"He's like the othershe's the one looking for something."

"Exactly," he smiled.

She looked down at him, tears again forming in her eyes.

"You've made some terrible choices, Melissa, and have ruined some lives, but God hasn't learned anything from our conversation. He is the father. I look at you the way He does. It's time for you to realize that he's been looking for you for quite a while. Forgive as you're forgiven, and go back to where you left God. He's waiting."

Melissa tried to stop herself from crying again, but couldn't. She sat down in her chair and wept. She wanted to believe what Brian had said, but she felt only despair.

"It's too late for me," she said in resignation, wiping her eyes.

"It's never too late."

"You only know a few of the things I've done."

"What don't I know? How many people have you murdered?"

"Come on, Brian. Intellectually, I know you're right—you'd win the debate," she answered, "but it doesn't help the way I feel."

"I think it will . . . eventually."

"Besides," she continued, looking at him in earnest, "what good does it do? If there's really a loving God, why does he turn around and make us suffer? I hate to say it like this, but look at you. You've been faithful to your beliefs, and kind to me—but look what it's gotten you."

Brian closed his eyes, her brutally honest words echoing in his mind. He'd thought the same thoughts himself, of course. His mind traversed through the memories of his own conversations with God in the hope of finding something that would comfort her.

"Sorry if I offended you," Melissa's apology broke his concentration.

"You didn't," he assured her.

"What is it then?" she asked.

"I used to think," he sighed, "that with the talents God had given me, I was going to be something special. I wanted more than anything to make a contribution to my field, to do something noteworthy for the right causes. I've had to learn that these things aren't what God intends for me, and, even more than that, they shouldn't be what drives me."

"That isn't very encouraging, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I think the real answer to your question," he continued, "is that you aren't and I wasn't—asking the right question. The question isn't what will make us happy, but what

does God intend. Once we come to that place, we need to believe that following that path will be the most fulfilling thing we can do."

"Are you fulfilled, then?"

"No, not yet, but I believe that I will be. Right now I have to confess I don't know what's going on in my life, probably because I have no life to speak of, at least from my very human perspective."

"You've mentioned losing a teaching position a couple of times. What was that all about?"

"It's a long and fairly convoluted story . . . small potatoes compared to what you've been through."

"Didn't any of your colleagues defend you?"

"No, I wasn't trusted from the get-go. I was an outsider most of these small religious colleges hire people who are known by someone already connected to the school. What's more, I was the only person in my department with a university degree and no semi-nary training. I believed in the school's theological positions, but I often defended them on different grounds—and was pretty open about disagreeing with interpretations of Scripture that I knew just weren't correct. I was a prime candidate for pariah status even before my infamous paper."

"I'm sure your friends and parents were supportive."

Brian didn't respond. Melissa realized she'd inadvertently touched a nerve. Her curiosity was piqued. Brian had certainly earned her respect, and his character had already shown itself in some unforgettable ways, but she knew next to nothing about him. She studied his face, now turned toward the wall. He took a deep breath, collecting himself. She could tell by his expression that he was calculating how to extract himself from this position of vulnerability. She intuitively sensed that the pain to which Andrew had alluded had somehow surfaced inside him; his guard was up. She wanted to know what made him tick—for the right reasons this time but hesitated, not knowing how to proceed.

"Neil was upset," Brian finally offered, turning his attention from the wall to his lap. "He hasn't always been available when I needed someone to talk to, what with his job and everything, but I know he's in my corner."

"He seems very devoted to you," she stepped carefully, "but I can't help wondering why you answered the way you did. You singled him out and didn't mention your parents. Do you mind if I ask why? If you do, I'll understand."

"I don't know how to say this without sounding like a charity case," he replied, "but I don't have any other friends. It's my own fault, for the most part."

"Oh, come on."

"Seriously. I've had a good number of acquaintances, but no one other than Neil who I really consider a friend, a confidante. You know, the kind of person who would call you for no other reason than to see how you were doing, or who'd invite you over to eat or watch Monday Night Football. I'm an only child, and all through high school I more or less kept to myself. I was quite overweight, but I wasn't too bad at sports, so I was at least tolerated by the guys. After games everyone else went out partying or had dates. I went home and read or watched TV. I didn't fit in, and really didn't care to, either. By the time I hit college, I knew what I wanted to do and what it would take to get into a prestigious grad school, and I gave myself totally to my studies. I never had anything



you'd call a social life. Neil got on my case about that at college. He was a professor at Hopkins, you know."

"I remember from the introductions."

"He tried to get me to participate more, but I pretty much wore him down. I had better things to do, or so I thought." "You sound as though you regret not listening."

"I do—a little anyway. Once you adjust to being by yourself you basically begin to work best that way."

"You mean it became a comfort zone."

"Yeah ... something like that."

"Are you sure you aren't exaggerating a little? I mean, you make it sound like you were a hermit."

"I'd say that's the exaggeration," he replied somewhat defensively. "It isn't like I avoided people altogether. They left me alone, so I left them alone."

"You never went out?"

"I've been to a mall, if that's what you mean," he joked nervously.

"You know what I mean—like to a concert with friends, or better yet, your prom—everybody goes to their prom."

"Skipped it."

"You're kidding why?"

"It's customary to go with someone, which was beyond the realm of the possible for me. Trust me, you haven't lived until you've overheard your Mom and Dad asking themselves if you're gay since you can't get a date."

Melissa couldn't help let out a chuckle at the comment, but quickly suppressed it when she noticed the memory had darkened Brian's mood considerably. "I'm sorry I prodded; are you okay?"

"Yeah ... I shouldn't let things like that bother me; they usually don't, but then again, I don't really think about them either. It's just that event was one of several turning points in my relationship with my parents. I should have just lied and told them I was meeting someone there and gone. It would have made them happy."

"I'm sure they got over it."

"I'd like to think they did."

"What do you mean? Don't you know?"

He shrugged.

"You never asked them?"

"I didn't get the chance," he lamented. A tear rolled down his cheek, and he looked away, embarrassed.

Melissa quietly rose from her chair and moved to the bedside and sat down on the edge. She gently touched his face as before and turned his head back toward her. She carefully wiped the small droplets away with her thumb. "I'd like to hear your story," she said softly, and waited.

Brian nodded faintly, and, after several minutes' delay, took Melissa through the events of his upbringing, his gradual estrangement from his parents, and their eventual turnaround before their deaths. Melissa was captivated by the details of his retelling.

"I can surely understand the part about them thinking you'd made bad choices. It's terribly severe, though, for them to just emotionally write you off. It had to be devastating for you," she said sympathetically.

"It was . . . theirs were the only opinions I ever really cared about. It was like they divorced me."

"But it sounds like they eventually came back."

"I think they did; I'd have just liked to have heard it. However ..."

"What?"

"I wasn't mentioned in their will . . . everything in their accounts and after the sale of the business went to the church and some local charities . . . even the house. I don't know if I was ever in it, or if they disowned me ..."

"Maybe they intended to change it but never got the chance," she tried to comfort him.

"Yeah . . . I like to think that was the case, too."

"You haven't said yet how they died . . . do you mind?"

Brian shook his head. "They were murdered ... gunned down at a gas station a few blocks from campus. I had to identify the bodies myself."

"Oh my God!" Melissa gasped. "How horrible! It must have been awful . . . I just can't imagine it."

"It was ... but having to watch the store videotape was worse. The guy just came barging in while they were at the counter and shot them both in the head like they were—" he stopped, unable to continue. Melissa took his hand.

"He killed the clerk too," Brian continued haltingly after a few minutes, "right after he opened the cash drawer ..."

Melissa closed her eyes, a wave of shame sweeping over her. The memory of her cruelty toward him came rushing back. Andrew's earlier accusations swirled about in her mind.

"Melissa ..." Brian looked up at her, sensing her thoughts. "I meant what I said."

"I know," she whispered. "It's just so terrible. I hope he rots in jail."

"The police never caught him. Incredible."

"How could that be?" she wondered in exasperation.

"Because God allowed it," he answered with conviction. "I know it's not the most soothing answer," he continued, "but it's the right one. You asked me before what I got out of saving you, whether I was fulfilled."

"Yes ..."

"Now that you know a little more about me, maybe my answer will be clearer," Brian hoped. "I believe that even though I can't make sense out of what's happened to me yet, someday God will make that clear and when he does, I'll be satisfied, even vindicated. I know my life as I envisioned it will most likely never materialize, but only because God's 'no' means something better. My point is that there's no way we can know how the tragedies of our lives are interwoven with God's blessing for others, not to mention us in the long run. Who knows what great thing God has decreed that's contingent on some prior tragic event? If my suffering is part of God's plan for some-one else, then by submitting to it I fulfill His will for my life. What more is there? I can't pretend to know why God allowed those things to happen to you, either. Maybe it was to bring you to this place at this time for some greater purpose. I do know that someday things will be set right. Maybe this conversation will be part of that; at least I hope it will. You should also know," he added, albeit more timidly, "that I'd do what I did for you again in a heartbeat, even if I knew the cost would be greater. It's easily the most

meaningful thing I've ever done."

Melissa leaned forward and embraced him again. Brian could feel her warm body shiver. She was weeping, and the realization moved him to tears again as well. He put his arm around her, and the two of them held each other without exchange, overcome by emotion. Finally, Melissa silently released him and pulled back just far enough to behold his face. They looked into each other's reddened, tear-soaked eyes.

"We're a pair, aren't we?" Brian smiled sheepishly.

Suddenly the door, located behind Melissa, creaked open. "Time to feed the inmates," a nurse announced jovially as she awkwardly pushed a cart into the room. "I . . . uh . . . hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No," Melissa sniffed and wiped her eyes with a tissue. She looked at the wall clock. "I guess I'd better go for lunch, too—oh, I almost forgot!" she said, sliding off the bed. She picked her purse up off the floor next to the chair, but waited to open it until the nurse had set everything up for Brian and gone on her way.

"I brought you something and don't laugh."

"Okay," Brian agreed, growing curious.

"There's no place in this God-forsaken 'Facility' to get any flowers, but I managed to scrounge this up," she said proudly, extracting a single white carnation, the stem bent in two places, from her purse.

"Thank you," Brian grinned, "I've never gotten a flower before."

"Maybe you still haven't; it's pretty hammered. I sort of ... borrowed it from the arrangement in the cafeteria one of the cooks brought in."

"It's great," he said appreciatively.

"I need to get going."

"Are you planning on coming back?" he asked, hoping.

"Of course. Do you want me to bring anything from your room? Maybe a book? The Colonel has given the MPs permission to let Andrew and me do that under their supervision."

"No . . . we can just talk."

"About what?"

"Anything."

## CHAPTER 27

"Half the work that is done in the world is to make things appear what they are not."

—E.R. Beadle—

BRIAN SHUT OFF the water, patted his toothbrush dry with a towel, and placed it into his travel bag. He looked self-consciously into the mirror, his only attire the ragged athletic shorts he habitually wore to bed. He toweled his hair once more, and tried in vain to sculpt the tussled mass into a form he deemed presentable, but soon gave up. He carefully raised his cast-encased left arm and, with his right hand, slid the bottom of the sling hanging from his neck around the cast. Glancing once more at his image, he self-consciously decided to drape a towel over his shoulders before leaving the room.

"Needless to say," he said to Melissa as he emerged, "I was surprised to see you this morning."

"I thought you might need some help," she answered, too cheerily for the ungodly hour, leaning atop his desk. "You know what happened the last time you overslept," she added, beholding him with transparent amusement.

"Hope you can make yourself useful, then," returning her glance with a smirk as he passed her on the way to his bedroom. "Give me a minute."

"How does the arm feel, anyway?" she asked loudly enough to be heard in the next room after a short interval of silence.

"A little achy," he answered, "but I only woke up once or twice during the night."

"Did they give you any pain medication?"

Melissa waited for an answer, but none was forthcoming. After a minute she walked to the doorway of the room and peered inside. Her heart sank as she silently watched him struggling with the polo shirt he'd selected for the day. Brian gave no clue he knew he was being watched, but was instead fully absorbed by his predicament. The sight would have been funny had she not still felt responsible for his plight.

"This is why I came over this morning," she reminded him as she stopped him, took his arm, and gently guided it through the shortened sleeve.

"Thanks ..." he said, a little embarrassed, "but I'm going to need to learn how to do this by myself."

"You will," she replied, "and when there's no pain I'm sure it'll take only seconds—but if you want to eat breakfast, we need to keep things moving."

"Right."

"What were you thinking, anyway?" she asked, "There's no way you could get yourself and your things in order in time this morning. You should be glad I'm here."

"I am, but I had already asked Andrew to come over this morning."

"Why didn't you ask me?"

"Come on," he grinned. "Having a woman help me get dressed? It's kind of awkward."

"You seem to be managing," she smiled. "But, if you prefer his company ..."

"You can tie my sneakers if you feel slighted," he quipped. A knock on the door reverberated through the room. "That would be Andrew."

"Great," Melissa rolled her eyes.

"What's the problem?"

"Let's just say I'm not his favorite person."

"He'll get over all this," Brian assured her.

"I didn't see as much of him yesterday. Are you avoiding each other?"

"Hardly."

"My card's in the top drawer," he nodded in the direction of his bureau. "Would you let him in?"

"If I knew your passcode," she said, retrieving the card.

"2929."

"You aren't supposed to tell me that; you'll have to get it changed now."

"I don't think so," he said, slipping his sneakers on. "You'd better let him in before he thinks something else has happened to me."

"He'll most likely call security the moment he sees me," she muttered, disappearing into the living room.

Melissa opened the door and, as Brian had guessed, it was Father Benedict. The priest appeared startled, but then his expression settled into transparent disdain. He entered the room without a word.

"He's in the bedroom," Melissa informed him.

"Is he decent?" the priest said coldly.

Melissa turned and went into the bedroom without acknowledging the barb. Seated on the bed, Brian looked up at her; her expression told him the priest had arrived. Without a word Melissa knelt in front of Brian and tied his shoes for him.

"How are you going to do this on your own?" she asked, as though nothing had happened.

"Velcro ... I'm way ahead of you. Good morning, Andrew," he called. The old priest stood in the doorway.

"Good morning," he reciprocated. "It seems my presence isn't required as you expected."

"Melissa's been here since 3:00 a.m. She knew I'd need some help."

"How thoughtful."

"It was," he smiled, catching her glancing at his face to see his reaction. "What's with the 4:00 a.m. departure anyway? I know they want us out east as fast as possible, but this is crazy."

"The major told me a few minutes ago that our shuttle wasn't used during the daylight hours."

"Shuttle?" Brian asked curiously. Father Benedict shrugged with ignorance.

"What's the major doing up this early?" Melissa wondered aloud, indifferent to revealing her suspicion.

"He and the MPs will be escorting us to the hangar."

"Makes sense," Brian noted, grabbing his backpack.

"Shall we go to breakfast then?" the priest asked.

"Absolutely."

\* \* \*

Malcolm made his way noiselessly down the strange, unfamiliar hallway, hugging the wall as he moved. There were no guards that he could see, a fact that brought no comfort, only suspicion that he'd been set up. He wasn't even sure who or what had beckoned him to venture out of his quarters this night. *What the hell am I doing here?* His breathing suddenly became uneven, and he felt the first of dozens of small beads of sweat on his forehead trickle down the side of his face. He'd never done anything like this, especially when the stakes were so high. Suddenly a light shone from behind him, its flickering beam moving from side to side as it progressively crept toward him. He panicked.

Resigned to the fact that he'd be detected no matter what he did, Malcolm broke into a reckless run down the hallway, and made an abrupt turn to the right, a decision that placed him in the midst of a maze of intersecting corridors. An alarm shattered the stillness, and the beleaguered scientist was suddenly seized with the realization that he had lost his sense of direction; he had no idea where he was or where he was going. Disoriented and winded, he stopped, trying to get his bearings. The echo of distant footsteps rapidly dispersing through the hallways reduced him to near hysteria. He curled up on the cold floor, trembling, awaiting discovery and the fate that came with it.

Unexpectedly, his eye caught the emission of a soft glow from underneath the door across the corridor from where he lay. It seemed warm and hospitable, even inviting. For reasons he could not grasp, he felt drawn to its source. He stood erect, suddenly energized, and crossed over to the door. He turned the knob, sure the door would be locked. Amazingly, it swung open. The light blinded him at first, and he quickly closed the door behind him to keep the glow from escaping into the hallway. Turning once more, he beheld a surprisingly vast room. He quickly put his hand to his mouth to muffle a frightened cry at the even more shocking contents. Before him were positioned dozens, perhaps hundreds, of sterile, glimmering, stainless steel gurneys. Atop each one, to his horrified fascination, was a perfectly intact alien corpse.

Compelled by some unseen force, Malcolm made his way to the closest body. Compared to those he had seen in the Facility, the specimen was flawless. The feel of its skin was disarmingly soft and fleshy, not the rough, grainy texture he'd expected, as with the aged, desiccated epidermis of the autopsied bodies in Dr. Marcus' lab. Despite its macabre appearance, to Malcolm it seemed a work of art.

Without warning, a familiar but anomalous sensation intruded upon Malcolm's transfixed awe. It was the queer aroma he'd detected in both Brian's and Melissa's rooms. He took a deep breath, filling his nostrils with the odd bouquet. Yes, he was sure of it. He hadn't noticed it at all when he'd entered the room. He looked around the cavernous chamber, hoping to detect the source of the emission, but could find nothing that suggested a source. He looked back down at where the corpse before him lay, and to his horror, it had vanished. Anxiously, he surveyed the gurneys in the room, and then stumbled backward in terror. Half of them were empty. He wanted to get out of the room, but couldn't move.

Suddenly the remaining bodies became animated and sat up-right, as though somehow brought to life by his fear. They quietly and robotically shuffled toward him. In utter dread he finally managed to move his feet, each of which seemed to weigh as much

as his entire body. He fell and was instantly immobilized, as though the floor itself held him in a fingerless grip. The aliens closed in, unmoved by his frantic screams. A voice broke into his mind, its source unknown. *Malcolm! ... Malcolm!*

"Malcolm!" Mark shouted in earnest, shaking his bunkmate. Malcolm shot upright in his bed, his T-shirt drenched with sweat, his heart pounding in his chest.

"You okay, guy?" Mark asked, crouched at the side of his bed.

"Yeah ..." he said, checking his surroundings.

"Some dream."

"Yeah . . . right. It seemed so real."

"Tell me about it. You woke me up out of a sound sleep, and that's doing something. What were you dreaming about?"

"Aw . . . just weird stuff... it was freaky."

\* \* \*

"I hope the food's as good where we're going as it is here," Brian commented, having eaten his fill. "I think the infirmary gets the trainees. That's the best meal I've had in, what is it, five days?"

Andrew nodded.

"The major should be here in about fifteen minutes," Melissa reminded them. "I forgot something back in my room that I'll need—don't leave here without me, okay?"

"We'll be here," Brian answered her.

"I'll take your tray back, Brian . . . and yours as well Father ... do you mind?"

"No," the priest answered casually, "thank you very much."

The two men watched as Melissa cleaned up their area and disposed of everything. She smiled briefly at Brian as she quickly departed for her room.

"Are you sure you're up to traveling, Brian?" Andrew asked once she was out of earshot.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really, I guess. We do need to get the show on the road, as they say. I'm sure the rest of the team is going stir crazy by now, what with this delay."

"Anyway, to answer your question, I do feel pretty good. I still need the painkillers from time to time."

"Are you aware your physician will be accompanying us?" the priest asked.

"He mentioned the possibility yesterday."

"I received a copy of the email the Colonel sent to the Facility concierge yesterday confirming it. The Colonel is anxious to have the team back together, and I must say so am I. We have much to do, and too little time in which to do it. Hopefully the change of venue will be an adequate protective measure."

"Accidents do happen, Andrew."

"Accidents? Do you seriously think this whole incident was an accident?"

"Well, Melissa and I have talked about it, and we just figured it was due to negligence—the dogs did what they were trained to do, and had no supervision for some reason."

"The reason was because someone wanted you dead."

"But why? We couldn't come up with a reason at all. No one on the team would be responsible, and supposedly everyone here at the Facility knows how important the team is. No one has any reason to try and kill me, or Melissa for that matter."

"Accidents don't happen in places like this, Brian. It was premeditated and arranged. I'm sure of it."

"You may be right, but obviously I hope not. Like I said, we couldn't come up with a rational basis for that conclusion."

"You're using 'we' a great deal, Brian . . . how exactly would you assess your relationship with Melissa? The two of you have been basically inseparable since you awoke. One of the reasons I haven't been in your company is I can't seem to get any time with you without her being present."

"Why is that so important?"

"Because I don't trust her—and if you're wise, you won't either."

"I think you're misjudging her, Andrew, at least now. You were right about her. She's been through some tragic circumstances and had a lot of anger to resolve. A week ago I'd have said you were right on target."

"Had a lot of anger? She evidently told you something that's convinced you she's dealt with it."

"More like she's promised to try, and I believe her. Ultimately I hope it will restore her faith."

"Her faith?"

"It's a long story, and one I'll need her permission to share. You'll just have to trust me for now."

"Very well," he replied. "Are you certain Melissa isn't thinking in terms of a different kind of relationship? It wouldn't be the first time—"

"Actually, it would," Brian interrupted. Andrew shrugged.

"I've seen romances derive from similar situations before," Father Benedict continued, "especially during a hospital chaplaincy I once held. The doctor saves a woman's life, and she becomes emotionally and romantically attached to him. Most of the time it doesn't last."

"And at no time did it involve me—and as long as Melissa's eyesight is functioning properly, there's no danger of that happening in this case. I'm still me, Andrew, and in case you hadn't noticed, my appearance wasn't exactly improved by the incident."

"Your cynicism aside, I just don't want to see you sidetracked. You must remain focused."

"Yes, Obi-Wan."

"I'm quite serious."

"I won't get sidetracked."

"I think you already have."

"How is that?" Brian asked defensively.

"Melissa's misgivings about the alien corpse—have you taken the opportunity to ask her about it now that you're on speaking terms?"

"Well ... no. I hadn't thought of it."

Father Benedict cast a knowing glance in his direction. "What have you talked about then?"



"Oh . . . just stuff... you know."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Just getting to know each other a little better. We've talked about our families, each other's areas of expertise, gotten into some theological subjects . . . that kind of thing."

Father Benedict said nothing, but his dubious expression spoke for him.

"Really, Andrew, you needn't worry," he sighed. "I'll confess ... I do enjoy the company . . . her company . . . but futility is an effective teacher. I won't avoid her, and won't try to spend less time with her. Somehow, I think I can help her deal with her past, and I don't want to do anything to drive her away."

"And I won't allow anything to deter you from your task. These `beings' are the evil divine ones, and we must prepare the Church. You may doubt it, but you know far more about this than I do. I've just shown you the foundation; it falls to you to erect the edifice. You're the only one who can see the forest for the trees, and there can be no delay."

"So you don't put any credence in the Colonel's explanation that we're being blackmailed by the Grays with the goal of coexistence?"

"None. Biblical history is repeating itself, as our Lord said it would. If you don't get the truth out, even the faithful will be deceived into believing."

"I just noticed something odd," Father Benedict whispered to Brian as the small contingent zipped through the tunnel on its way to their flight. Brian glanced at Major Lindsay, who didn't appear to be listening.

"What is it?" he asked quietly as the tram turned a corner and stopped at an inordinately large closed doorway.

"Wonder what they keep in here," Melissa whispered unnecessarily, drawn into the conversation at Brian's question.

"The email I received from the concierge mentions that we'll be rendezvousing with the team less than two hours after our flight is scheduled to leave." He showed Brian the page as the door rose vertically before them. "There's no way we'll be there that soon."

"Must be a typo," Brian offered as the tram drove through the gateway.

"No ..." Melissa disagreed loud enough for everyone to hear. Brian peeked at her curiously, but soon followed her wide-eyed gaze to the center of the cavernous hangar.

"It's not a typo," she finished her sentence in a mesmerized tone.

Brian stared at the mammoth triangular vehicle toward which the tram was headed. As tall as a three-story building, each of its sides were easily the length of two 757s set end-to-end. Brian could scarcely believe anything so large could fly. He watched dumbfounded as several flatbed trailers were being cleared of the last of their pay-loads, without so much as a conventional forklift or pallet jack. He gazed hypnotically as the work-crews affixed some type of disk under each pallet and simply pushed the cargo off the trucks and floated it inside the immense craft.

"You can pick your jaw up off the floor now, Dr. Scott," Major Lindsay taunted as their tram came to a halt. "It's the same technology that powers your transport, just a different application. See the bluish lights on the underside of each tip?"

Brian could see the faint hue reflecting off the floor of the hangar directly underneath the end of one of the triangle's tips. He nodded with recognition, recalling the anti-gravity propulsion unit of the craft they'd been in earlier.

"How fast will we be going?" Father Benedict asked nervously, still apprehensive of the technology.

"You'll be in Maryland in about twenty minutes. By the way, Dr. Scott, if you think this one is large, you should see the ones *they* have," he said cockily, enjoying the stupefied expression of his young adversary. "We're putting you on a cargo flight," he added, turning to Father Benedict and Melissa. "We don't like to make unnecessary trips—our way of trimming the federal deficit," he droned facetiously. "Hope you don't mind."

None of them answered, absorbed by the immensity of the sight.

"Good . . . some people prefer the sportier model," he smirked. "Dr. Hastings is already aboard; have a nice flight."

"We need to talk," Melissa informed Brian in a hushed tone, her eyes darting about the cabin so as to judge her volume. Both Father Benedict and Dr. Hastings were seated a short distance from them and were already engaged in conversation. "We only have a few minutes before we arrive," she reminded him.

"I think I know what's on your mind," he whispered. "The bodies?"

She nodded.

"Hold on. Andrew should hear this."

"Don't bother him; you can always tell him what I said." "He wouldn't feel bothered."

"No," she persisted, then hesitated as she appeared ready to explain.

"Why not?"

"I'm just not comfortable around him," she admitted. "He doesn't like me; that's for sure."

"It's true—he doesn't trust you. Can you blame him?"

"No, but that isn't it altogether."

Brian looked at her curiously.

"There's something else about him . . . I can't put my finger on it."

"Women's intuition?"

"That and his own words. You know, he threatened me out-side your hospital door just before I came in to see you."

"You're joking."

"Hardly. I never told you about that until now, so how did you know he doesn't trust me?"

"We talked while you went back to your room."

"Do you trust me?" she looked at him earnestly.

"Yes," he reassured her. "Now tell me what's on your mind. What was it about the corpses that left you unconvinced?"

"The fact that they may have been human, for starters."

"What!" he gasped. She motioned for him to keep his voice down.

"How can you say that?"

"You figured out part of it on your own at least that's what

my mystery visitor told me after the alleged 'unveiling.' You noticed the problematic link between a possible evolutionary development of the 'creature' and the tiny stomach and absence of sexual organs."

"How did you know what I thought about that? I only told Neil and Father Benedict."

"My mystery visitor told me."

"You didn't mention that conversation to the others."

"I didn't want anyone to know. You know that means Neil reported it to either the Group or to the Colonel, don't you?" she asked.

"Yes, but he told me he would have to tell them. There's no secret there."

"Interesting . . . I hadn't realized that."

"What about the idea we threw around that these beings are real and just reproduce themselves asexually by cloning?"

"We don't have that kind of technology, Brian."

"If they exist, maybe they do."

"Well ... all right. I'll concede that's a possibility but a slim one. Anyway, those two observations made me guess that somehow the corpse was possibly faked."

"And how was that done?"

"The corpse may actually be a human fetus whose growth in certain anatomical points has been selectively allowed to continue, or which was actively stimulated. You know, to keep the head disproportioned to the body, but let the anus and legs grow; that sort of genetic manipulation or inhibition."

"Can we do that today?"

"Sure. If I'm right, then the eyes have also been surgically altered to make them appear slanted—not just for curiosity's sake, ala Dr. Marcus. I've seen pictures of this sort of thing, albeit on a far less dramatic scale, in human embryology textbooks. The result is a human that looks non-human."

"What about the sex organs, or lack thereof?"

"They were simply removed and cosmetically obscured."

"Boy, Andrew is gonna hit the roof when he hears this."

"Why?"

"He believes they're real—and that my sons of God scenario is the truth."

"Do you believe you're correct?"

"Nothing I've seen makes me believe there are really aliens here. The technology can be very advanced, but still manmade, and if the corpses are a fraud, that speaks for itself. Then again, if there really are Watchers here, it's a good bet they've mastered this sort of technology and given it to humans."

"So what are you going to do as far as the project is concerned?"

"I'm willing to write up my first view, but I also at least want the second to be part of the record. On the other hand, it would really trouble me if the corpses were fakes. What would be gained by deceiving us again—and in a far more elaborate way? What could the point be?"

"I have a question of my own, too," noted Melissa.

"What's that?"

"Why wouldn't Mark have caught any of this?"

"Good question; that does seem odd."

"I'd like to think he may never have had a course on human embryology. It isn't a class you'd normally take in his field. I picked up all of this studying on my own during what should have been my freshman year. On the other hand, maybe he did notice and said nothing, which would be very unlikely, given his reaction to the previous ruse."

"Right. Or maybe ...

"Maybe he wasn't supposed to say anything that time."

## CHAPTER 28

"Every dogma has its day."

—*Abraham Rotstein*—

"OUCH!" BRIAN COMPLAINED.

"You asked for it," Dr. Hastings replied with an amused expression, removing the needle from Brian's stricken arm. "You want the painkiller, you get the painkiller."

"Yeah, but you usually give it to me in the rear."

"I think this is more appropriate for being in a car with Dr. Kelley present," he replied, putting the syringe back in his bag.

"What a wimp," Melissa teased him.

"Are we ready, sir?" the MP behind the wheel asked, peering into his rearview mirror.

"Drive on, soldier."

"Yes sir."

The car pulled away from the place where the huge triangular craft had noiselessly touched down in pitch blackness in what Brian judged to be an open field. He couldn't make out any lights on the horizon in any direction. Despite the company of those in the small entourage, he felt very alone as he gazed into the starlit expanse above him.

"I can hardly believe I'm saying it," he whispered to Melissa, "but I miss the Facility."

"I know what you mean," she acknowledged apprehensively. "This is the middle of nowhere."

"The middle of nowhere in Northern Virginia, to be more precise," Father Benedict offered uneasily.

No sooner were the words out of the priest's mouth than the three of them were startled by the flash of three sets of headlights, roughly a hundred yards from their location, lined up in a row, activated in unison by some unseen and unheard cue. Brian whirled around as the vehicles began to advance slowly in their direction. His attention was drawn away from the unnerving approach by an even more eerie spectacle. Melissa had grabbed his good arm and was now pointing upward. Brian gazed in wonder as their immense tri-cornered trans-port floated silently upward as if filled with helium. He watched the lights on the ends glow briefly and then it was gone in the blink of an eye. He and Melissa exchanged awestruck stares. Their mesmerized stupor was abruptly terminated by the hum of the jeep and truck engines that now quickened their acceleration.

"Don't worry," Dr. Hastings said with a yawn, "just our escort. The payload's going somewhere else."

"How do you know we're in Virginia?" Melissa turned to Father Benedict, regaining her focus.

"Dr. Bandstra told Brian and me we'd be moved to Mount Weather; do you recall that, Brian?"

"Yeah, but the name wasn't at all familiar."

"But you know about it, Father?" Melissa observed suspiciously. "That's very interesting."

"I remembered the name from a *Time* magazine expose on underground government bases ... must have been almost ten years ago. I don't know much about it, aside from its location, and that it's arguably the nation's most secret facility."

"I thought we were just there," said Melissa.

"AREA 51? No, everyone knows about that."

"But look what's there! This place can't compare to that ... can it?"

"Everyone has heard about Groom Lake, but no one gets in. Mount Weather is different—it hasn't reached the level of popular culture that AREA 51 has because no one knows it's there. Until the *Time* report, only a half dozen *Congressmen* even knew it existed."

"Another underground base?" Brian wondered. The priest nodded.

"We're actually about an hour away," Dr. Hastings answered as the vehicles pulled up beside them. "And please—no conversation about the project until we're there and inside."

The four of them exited their car and then entered the center vehicle in the three-car motorcade, a black sedan with no license plates.

"Wake me up when we get there," Brian yawned, leaning against the door, getting situated.

"You don't drool, do you?" Melissa asked jokingly.

Brian opened one eye and smiled mischievously. "Too late to change seats now."

\* \* \*

"Are you sure everything will go as planned this time?" the thin man seated at the long, oak table inquired accusingly. "We can't have any more miscalculations, Colonel."

"I think I'm aware of that."

"Don't get testy with me, Colonel. It's your flawed over-sight of this project that has nearly cost us our lives' work—and it may still, if Scott cannot be convinced."

"After today there will be no doubts. Dr. Scott will have no choice but to believe."

"Is Adam ready?" the thin man turned his attention toward the General, seated as always at the head of the table.

"Absolutely. Scott has also been prepared."

"This had better work," the gaunt figure complained nervously, looking at his watch. "It's not like we've done this before. If you screw up, everyone will know and eventually comprehend. And you'll be a dead man," he threatened, reaching for a glass of water.

"Careful, Dietrich," the Colonel smiled wryly. "You don't know who prepared that." The thin man looked into the glass, back at the Colonel, then drained the glass defiantly.

"Vernon ..."

The Colonel glanced at his corpulent superior, a satisfied smirk creasing his face.

"What about Dr. Kelley? She isn't convinced either," another voice reminded the small assembly.

"She will believe, and the team will be ready to work with a vengeance. The deadline is still attainable."

"Unless the Colonel's security detail fails to protect our investment," the thin man whined.

"The project will succeed, and you'll have your precious legacy," the Colonel intoned confidently.

"Man, it is so good to see you again!" Malcolm beamed, entering the room, shaking Brian's hand, and slapping him on the back. "I can't tell you how good!"

"Thanks, Malcolm," Brian said appreciatively.

"Ditto that," Brian heard a familiar voice behind him. A grinning Deidre was peeking inside the door to his new quarters. "If Mark hadn't looked out the window at just the right time . . . I don't want to think about it."

"What do you mean?"

"I saw the dogs attack you," Mark explained, entering behind her. "Everybody else was jabberin' away or trying to go back to sleep while the plane did a turn toward the runway. I looked out just before the plane rotated my line of vision away from where you and Melissa were waiting."

"Yeah," Malcolm laughed, "he started hollering like a banshee, and the Colonel got the pilot to stop. From what we heard after-ward, you'd have bled to death."

"Thank you," he reached for Mark's hand and shook it firmly.

"Craziest damn thing I ever saw anyone do," Mark said, shaking his head, hands on his hips, "especially considering whom you were trying to save. Just plain nuts, if you ask me."

"Really!" exclaimed Malcolm. "For sure you'd risk your ass for me, and maybe even Dee, but not her!"

"I'm thrilled to see all of you, too," Brian said, trying to steer the discussion in another direction. "I have no regrets about what I did, or who I did it for."

The four of them had their attention diverted by a gentle tapping on the still-open door. An awkward silence filled the room. A grim-faced Melissa let herself inside.

"I just dropped my things off at my room, and . . . I wanted to see if you needed any help," she said to Brian quietly, trying not to look at the others. "I can see you don't," she observed, and turned to leave.

"Wait," Brian called to her. She hesitated, then turned back to him. "There is something I need. Come over here, please," he requested, patting the space on his bunk next to where he was sitting. Melissa reluctantly complied.

"I'm also alive because of Melissa's quick thinking," he praised her, "and I'm very grateful. I know it's been pretty apparent we haven't gotten along that well—"

"We?" interrupted Malcolm, "I'd say it was her problem."

Melissa started to rise, but Brian took hold of her arm.

"He's right," Melissa acknowledged uncomfortably. Malcolm and Deidre exchanged surprised glances.

"We need to get something out in the open," Brian said, taking charge of the conversation, "I hold nothing against Melissa, and I won't be happy if I have to listen to anyone cut her down. She said what she said to me because of some of her own issues that needed to be dealt with, and we've been through them. We've had little else to do in the last few days but talk, and things between us have changed a lot--all for the better. What's done is done; I forgive her, and if I can do it, I expect all of you to do the same."

The room again fell silent. Brian surveyed their faces expectantly. No one seemed ready to take the initiative to respond.

"Nice try," Melissa said sincerely, patting Brian's hand, still clasped to her arm. "I'd like to go now." He released her.

"Hold on," Malcolm finally spoke to her. "I know Brian wouldn't lie to us, and if that's the way he feels, it's cool. I'm sorry for my attitude a moment ago. I have a habit of just saying whatever pops into my head."

"What a revelation," Deidre rolled her eyes.

"Thanks, Malcolm," Melissa managed a smile.

"No problem."

Mark looked at her a little dubiously, but finally nodded his approval.

"Good to have you back," Deidre gave her a hug.

"I missed you, too," Melissa replied, feeling relieved.

"I hate to interrupt this Hallmark moment," Malcolm cracked, "but we need to get both of you up to speed before the big meeting."

"What meeting is that?"

"The one that starts in about twenty minutes," Mark replied. "I take it you haven't seen Dr. Bandstra or the Colonel yet." He shook his head.

"The Colonel told us when we got here that the purpose of this little excursion was to show us irrefutable proof that he was telling us the truth—finally—that we really have been visited by extra-terrestrials, and that they're calling our bluff on disclosure."

"So what was the proof?" Brian asked.

"We still haven't seen it," Malcolm whined. "Five days later."

"You haven't been exactly bored, Malcolm." He shrugged.

"What does that mean?" Melissa asked.

"Malcolm's managed to see just about everything in reasonable walking distance."

"The security here isn't as tight as at the Facility," Malcolm explained with a wink. "You'd be amazed how far our badges get us around here."

"It isn't like there's much to see," Mark complained, "unless you're fascinated by food stockpiles and forklifts."

"What is this place, anyway?" Brian inquired.

"Mount Weather is about 46 miles west of D.C. It's the nerve center for FEMA's underground empire," Deidre replied in her familiar sarcastic tone.

"FEMA—that stands for 'Federal Emergency Management Agency,' right?" Brian asked.

"Right. Jimmy Carter created FEMA by writing an Executive Order remember those from my talk? FEMA runs nearly one hundred underground command posts, or if you prefer the political double-speak used at our briefing, 'relocation centers.' This one's the biggest, most well-supplied, and the most secret."

"Relocation centers'? Who are they planning on 'relocating'?" Melissa wondered



suspiciously.

"Good question, isn't it?" Deidre smirked.

"Most of these places were built in the event of nuclear war," Mark explained.

"The government wanted a place where top officials could park their asses," Deidre continued, "while the mere mortals on the outside fended for themselves. I know it sounds incredible, but they have a complete alternate government-in-waiting down here. Every-one from the President down through cabinet level secretaries has a counterpart. A complete parallel federal apparatus."

"Is she serious?" Melissa queried incredulously, looking at Malcolm.

"You bet," he confirmed. "If all our top government officials were killed in some catastrophe, their stand-ins would all be alive and ready to go right here."

"All duly unelected, of course, and they have no term limitations, either. The mirror government also has representatives of five federal agencies—the FCC, the Federal Power Commission, Selective Service, and the VA—a complete good of boy network," Deidre chimed in. "This base isn't even in FEMA's published budget."

"Girl, how did you know that?" Malcolm quizzed her. "That wasn't part of the briefing."

"This isn't the first time I've been exposed to this place."

"That's right," Brian recalled, "Father Benedict said he'd read an article on Mount Weather."

"Me too. Another thing they didn't bother telling us about the place was that FEMA is under no congressional oversight; it answers only to the National Security Agency known by its fans as the 'Puzzle Palace.'"

"What do they do here?" asked Brian.

"Several things I'm sure you would find interesting," Deidre quipped. "According to their own PR, FEMA exists to manage national crises. So one of the things they do here at Mount Weather is play 'war games,' studying various crisis models. But according to that *Time* article Father Benedict alluded to, they primarily collect and process data on U.S. citizens. That article cited a Senate subcommittee report that concluded files on over 100,000 Americans are maintained here, and the place is networked to all the other national 'relocation centers.' Mount Weather is basically one big database for those who survive."

"Survive?" There was alarm in Melissa's voice.

"Yeah," Malcolm picked up the discussion. "They monitor something called the 'survivor's list' here. The government actually has a list of around 6,000 people deemed 'vital' to the survival of the nation in the event of a catastrophe. Names, addresses, the works."

"Do I know anybody on it?" joked Brian.

"Look in the mirror," Deidre answered.

"You're kidding."

"Nope," Malcolm said cheerily. "The Colonel told us we're all on it. I feel more secure already. Anything happens to good old mother earth—that is, if ET all of a sudden wants to play nuclear chicken we're on the dole. It almost makes me want to plug my ears when I hear that sucking sound of our tax dollars getting vacuumed down the black hole we call the federal budget."

"Typical," Deidre said cynically. "Even if we fail in helping society transition to a peaceful existence with the Grays the government will still pay us. What a system."

"It may be a money pit, but it's impressive," Mark admitted. "The accommodations may not be as modern or plush, but it's a virtually self-contained facility carved right out of solid granite. There's an on-site sewage-treatment plant, a 250,000 gallon water supply, and a purification system for processing the underground ponds. The place has dozens of private apartments and dormitories, cafeterias, hospitals, mass transit system, communications network, and even it's own power plant."

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen," Malcolm dutifully noted, "among the government's underground facilities, this is the Hilton."

"That's probably why we were only supposed to be here a day; we can't be too comfortable," Deidre sighed.

"Only a day?" Brian wondered.

"Initially," Deidre elaborated, "we were all supposed to make the trip, stay a day, and then go back to the friendly confines of the Facility. Then you had your . . . accident—was it an accident?" She looked first at Brian, then at Melissa.

"We're not sure," Brian answered, "but Andrew doesn't think so."

"Where'd he get to anyway?" Mark asked.

"Probably in his room," Melissa offered. "I saw the MP let him in and give him the key."

"No," Malcolm answered, glancing at his watch. "He's probably on his way to this meeting to end all meetings, and we should be too."

"Where is it?"

"Bottom floor of this building. Go down the stairs and head toward the main lobby, but keep going past it to the end of the hall. It's the last room on the left before you reach the end. They've configured the door with a card reader. Your old one from the Facility will get you inside."

"Why don't you all go on ahead," Brian noted. "I need to use the restroom."

"Er ... uh, Brian ... ?" Malcolm began his question awkwardly, but with his trademark grin.

"Yeah?"

"Can you manage ... what with the arm and everything?"

"Yes ... !" Brian laughed along with the others.

Brian hurried to relieve himself while the others filed out of his room. Exiting the bathroom, he was surprised to see Melissa still present.

"Malcolm's quite a character, isn't he? It's good to be around him again."

"I'm sure he's glad to see you," she said quietly.

"Meaning . . . ?"

"Nothing," she sighed. "Thanks for what you said to them. It was very kind."

"You think he didn't mean what he said?"

"They all said what they did for your sake. It would be a different story if you weren't here. It's okay; I know I deserve it."

"It's not okay, and you don't deserve it. They have no con-text for understanding you."

"Neither did you, but you were still good to me."

"You need to give them the benefit of the doubt ... and some time. I'm sure you're up to the challenge . . . aren't you?" Melissa let out a little laugh and shook her head.

"How can I say no to that? You sure know how to corner me with my own stub-

borness."

"I just have confidence in you. You aren't the type to be so easily beaten."

"Do you always know the right thing to say?" she smiled.

"Actually, no," he said, returning the expression, grabbing his backpack. "Most of the time I'm fairly clueless when it comes to situations like that. I've usually ended up saying nothing, but I've tried to be better since my parents died. Coming?" he headed for the door.

Melissa followed him to the door but stopped him before he opened it. He looked down at her in curiosity.

"Well said," she congratulated him, her voice lowering. "Thank you again for defending me; it certainly would have been easier not to."

"I don't want you to be uncomfortable around the others," he said good-naturedly.

"You're a wonderful man," she smiled back, and then, without warning, reached for him and kissed him softly on the cheek. Brian froze.

"Come on," she coaxed, and reached for the handle. Brian didn't move. She scanned his face closely, trying to judge his hesitation. To her surprise his countenance had changed to one of anxiety; he looked positively distraught.

"What's wrong?" she asked, concerned by the transformation.

"I don't ..." he caught himself and took a deep breath. "I think it would be best not to do that again."

"Why not? I want you to know you're appreciated. To quote my favorite theologian, `it was the right thing to do.'"

"I just . . . I just don't want things to change."

"What do you mean?"

He paused, gathering his thoughts. "It's been wonderful to have regular company over the last few weeks, especially these last few days," he said, struggling to maintain eye contact. "To tell you the truth, I didn't realize how much I missed it all these years . . . I don't want that to change . . . especially with you."

"Why would it change? I didn't exactly slap you. You're not making sense, Brian."

"I can't explain . . . just so that you know I want to see you and be around you ... When we go back to the Facility and get down to work, I was hoping you'd still sit with me at lunch or something from time to time. I know you'll be busy; we'll all be busy. I just don't want anything to happen between us that would make you want to write me off. . . okay?"

"Well . . . sure . . . I had no intention, but—"

"Thanks," he said, visibly relieved, and opened the door. "We need to go; we can't be late for this."

"Right," she said, still puzzling over both his response and their brief conversation.

The two of them scurried down the stairs, entered the conference room, and sat down next to each other at the far end in the two remaining seats, positioned adjacent to Neil and Father Benedict. Brian expected to get a warm reaction from his friend, but Neil could only manage a respectful nod, his face etched with apprehension. Brian thought it curious that both Dr. Marcus and the Colonel were absent, but no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than the latter appeared at the doorway.

"Good afternoon, everyone. Good to see you, Dr. Scott." Brian nodded.

"I'm quite sure you're wondering just what it is we'll be doing this morning, particularly in light of my earlier comments. Our assembly is physically whole once more, but there is still the matter of the intellectual unity we'll need to carry out our mission. After today, that too will be a reality."

Brian and Melissa exchanged skeptical glances. The Colonel checked the time on the wall clock. As if on cue, someone knocked at the door behind the Colonel where he stood.

"Right on time, Ian," the Colonel welcomed Dr. Marcus, who peered into the room. "How is Adam?"

"Still a little shaky sir," the scientist answered without entering.

"We have a special guest with us today," the Colonel turned his attention back to the team. "He's traveled a great distance to be here. He's been advising us on the project for several years, but only occasionally in person. You'll have to excuse his condition at the present; it takes him a while to adjust when he does make the trip."

"Nasty case of jet lag?" Malcolm guessed.

"An ironic choice of words, Dr. Bradley," the Colonel smirked. "Gravity happens, you know ... and, for our theologians present, please forgive the name . . . Ian?"

Dr. Marcus ducked out of view for a few seconds, and then the door swung open wide.

Startled gasps and scattered expletives punctuated the air. Some of the team members stood at their chairs to get a better look. The gaunt, dwarfish object of their awe shuffled slowly into the room, bobbing clumsily on spindly, atrophied legs and bare feet that protruded from what were obviously a child's pair of sweat pants, supported by the arm by Dr. Marcus. The gray color of his skin contrasted starkly with the white NASA T-shirt that hung over his lean torso. The scene would have been hysterically comical if the figure had not been so emotionally and intellectually compelling.

"Mother of God ..." Father Benedict mumbled in a stupefied voice.

Adam stopped a few feet short of the near end of the table, gazing at the team through his oversized, opaque black eyes.

## CHAPTER 29

"Seeing is not always believing."

—*Rod Serling*

THE DIMINUTIVE GRAY being turned its head slowly to-ward where Colonel Ferguson stood. The military man, whose concentration was temporarily focused on gauging the initial responses of those in the room, suddenly behaved as though he'd been tapped politely on the shoulder. He turned to Adam with his full attention. The two of them gazed at one another for a few seconds without the slightest hint of expression on the part of either. The Colonel nodded, and then turned to the wide-eyed audience.

"A few words of introduction are in order before Adam gets to know all of you," he began, visibly pleased by the astonished reactions of the team. "Adam is, as you can see, one of the 'mythical' creatures to which I've been referring for some time now. He's part of the ongoing exchange program to which I've also alluded. He and a few other 'Grays,' as they've been categorized, visit us rotationally on a regular schedule. Their duties include technical assistance and, now that we've agreed to their insistence on disclosure, compliance to that agreement. We send our own counterparts to them as well."

"Where?" a flabbergasted Dr. Chadwick blurted out.

"Their base of operations is on the other side of the moon right now. As far as exchange programs, we use the underground base in Dulce, New Mexico; AREA 51 and its sister location S-4; and our base in Pine Gap, Australia. This is the first time Adam has been to Mount Weather."

"How does it communicate?" Malcolm asked eagerly.

"Please don't use the word 'it' around Adam. The military's sexist predilection being what it is," he intoned, eyeing Deidre, "we've assigned male names to all the visitors. As you know, they are sexless, but they are sentient, have a range of emotions, and can be offended. They normally don't wear anything, either; the clothes were our idea."

"Sorry. The T-shirt's a nice touch."

"Why does he walk so strangely?" Melissa asked.

"Gravity. It takes him time to get used to earth's gravity, particularly in the context of his frail anatomy. Which reminds me," the Colonel continued, "Adam does not speak as you and I do. He communicates telepathically. He can receive messages from you mentally—you can think in words, since he has the English vocabulary of, roughly, a teenager. It should go without saying, however, that he's considerably more intelligent. It's far better to conceive concepts or visualize, but that takes a lot of practice on our part. He can also receive conversation verbally, again with the same vocabulary limitations. When he 'speaks' to you, he will use both words and images. One last—"

The Colonel suddenly stopped and abruptly turned toward Adam, whose gaze was riveted on Deidre. The small creature turned again toward the Colonel, who then glared at

the psychologist in consternation.

Deidre looked at the Colonel smugly, and then glanced around the table. "Yep, he can read minds all right. He got my message loud and clear."

"Need I remind you to whom you're talking?" the Colonel asked, flushing with anger.

"Nope. He just needs to know there are some of us here who are less than thrilled with him."

"What the hell did you say to him?" Mark asked uneasily.

"It's just between him and me," she answered with a determined expression. "I don't know what you have planned here, Colonel, but I don't want the sucker touchin' me."

"That goes for me as well," a pale Father Benedict echoed.

"You needn't worry, either of you," the Colonel said in a calmer tone. "As I was about to say, you should all be aware that Adam may periodically scan your mind, rather than conversing; at least that's what we call it. Don't be alarmed; there are no ill effects."

"Other than him knowing everything you've done behind closed doors, you mean." Malcolm said apprehensively.

"True, but there's nothing we can do about it. They don't use it aggressively; it seems to be just something that's done when they meet a new person, or when they deem it necessary; sort of their version of a handshake. As far as what I have planned, I have nothing in mind. The time is Adam's, to do with as he sees fit. Feel free to ask him questions, but he may or may not choose to answer. We may be here an hour or five minutes; I don't know what he'll do. I'd only ask that you make your questions relevant. Adam knows nothing of trivial cultural items, such as sports or television shows. He's a scientist and, in the most dramatic sense of the word, an anthropologist." With that the Colonel stepped back toward the wall and motioned to the strange entity that he was through. The team scrutinized Adam intently, unsure of what to expect. Ian Marcus released his arm, whereupon the alien began to gingerly navigate toward the left side of the table where Malcolm was seated. The bespectacled black scientist closed his eyes, and the two figures remained motionless for nearly a minute. Finally a wide grin creased Malcolm's face.

"That's it!" he said excitedly, eyes still closed. "Just awe-some, dude." He opened his eyes, and Adam began to move again.

"He just gave me the answer to a question I missed on my prelims it was great!" Malcolm exclaimed, answering the question on everyone's mind. Not everyone was touched by Malcolm's usually infectious enthusiasm, though. Brian, Melissa, Father Benedict, and, most notably Deidre, in front of whom Adam now stood, could not disguise their apprehension.

Deidre eyed the creature coldly, as though trying to discern its motives, its own hidden thoughts. Her distrust of the entity was solidified by years of interviewing hundreds of traumatized abductees. She was determined to keep her wits about her, to keep the upper hand. Her effort was short-lived. A few seconds after facing off, Deidre's body stiffened violently, then began trembling. Her eyes rolled back in her head. She had been rendered completely helpless.

"Tell him to stop it now!" Father Benedict shouted. No one moved.

"Colonel, get that thing away from her or I will!" he bellowed, and rose from his

chair.

"Easy, Andrew!" Neil beckoned, and restrained him. "She isn't being hurt; it only looks bad because she tried to resist."

"Listen to yourself!" the priest scolded him angrily. The commotion did not appear to faze Adam in the least.

"Look!" Melissa tried to get Andrew's attention. He turned just in time to see Deidre's body relax, a sorrowful but calm look on her face. A tear trickled down her cheek. She nodded in agreement to an unheard question.

"Thank you," Deidre said unconsciously in a subdued voice. A few of the room's occupants exchanged bewildered glances. The confusion was not missed by the creature, which suddenly turned his attention to the opposite side of the table, briefly scanning Mark and Neil, both of whom made every attempt to submit to the process. It wasn't clear whether there was any intercourse between either of them and Adam, for the latter quickly moved on to Father Benedict, who was an altogether different kind of subject.

"Where do you come from?" the priest asked aloud for all to hear. Adam gazed at the elderly face for a few seconds. Father Benedict's face took on a troubled appearance, creases of anxiety stretching across his brow. "How old are you? What is love? How did you get here? Who is your God?" the priest unhesitatingly peppered him. Brian was struck by Father Benedict's seemingly fragmented line of questioning. He watched the old man's face carefully for some hint of emotion, some disclosure of what was going through either his mind or Adam's, but there was nothing. The encounter ended with Adam simply turning aside, as though he'd lost interest.

Brian watched with a weird mixture of horror and exhilaration as Adam diverted his gaze to himself and Melissa. For several seconds the gray being glanced from one to the other, then inexplicably looked back over his shoulder at the Colonel, who offered no visible response.

Melissa abruptly let out a startled gasp and grabbed the arms of her chair. Adam was reading her, though his vision was still directed at the Colonel. Melissa gradually relaxed, a serene expression forming on her face. She seemed at peace, almost enjoying the experience. Again, there was no hint of conversation.

Brian suddenly felt Adam's mind probing his own, filling his consciousness with flashes of his past, things long forgotten as well as things unforgettable. He had the sensation of falling, but could still feel his physical surroundings. He closed his eyes; somehow doing so helped ease the sensation. The presence in his skull was benign, not threatening; inquisitive, but not invasive; intense, but not sinister. Then a voice penetrated the inner silence.

*Do not be afraid.*

*I'm not, Brian thought back.*

*Your arm—are you in pain?*

*Sometimes . . . not now.*

*How was it injured?*

Rather than use words, Brian tried to recreate the events of the attack in his mind as best he could, following the Colonel's advice. Adam remained completely passive, apparently unmoved by the gruesome, violent event. Then, as quickly as his mind had been seized, it was released. Brian slowly opened his eyes and found himself face to face with Adam, his eerie countenance only inches from his own, having advanced to where

he was sitting. Somehow he had known what he would see, and was not alarmed in any way. He watched in trans-fixed fascination as the being moved back a step, and then extended his gnarly palm toward him, the six delicate fingers, each no wider than a string bean, coming to rest on his own exposed hand. Adam bent slightly to inspect the crippled limb, and remained in this position for nearly a minute.

Brian moved his eyes rapidly across the room. The others on the team stared at the spectacle, like unblinking, albeit mystified, sentinels.

All at once Brian detected a warm, prickly stimulation just below his elbow. It quickly dispersed throughout his lower arm down to the fingertips. The sensation felt like his arm was asleep, but he could feel a steady rise in temperature. He felt a twinge of pain, but before he could voice any alarm, the discomfort dissipated. The warmth, however, was constant.

"What's happening?" Melissa rose from her chair in concern to get a better look at the arm.

"I . . . I don't know," he struggled for an answer. "It just feels all warm and sort of bubbly. It almost tickles."

Without warning Adam reached for Melissa as he had Brian moments before. She pulled back, startled, but the voice inside her head reassured her. Still uncertain, she allowed the creature to take her hand and place it in Brian's. He raised his head and stared at Brian.

*Take the females hand.*

"I can't," he protested audibly. He had tried to command movement from the now useless appendage for days, and knew it was pointless.

*Squeeze the female's hand.*

Brian complied. The hand obeyed his mental command effortlessly. Melissa covered her mouth in shock. Brian repeated the simple yet unthinkable task half a dozen times, breathlessly watching the formerly unresponsive fingers caress Melissa's.

"I can't believe it!" he exclaimed and found eye contact with Father Benedict's astonished face. He looked back at Adam, whose blank, passionless, insectoid features hadn't changed.

"Thank you!" Brian offered effusively, but Adam turned away unceremoniously, this time heading for the door and the waiting Dr. Marcus. He paused for a few seconds and looked at the Colonel, and in another moment, he'd departed, like a mere apparition, leaving his small audience dumbfounded.

"I've seen them do some pretty wild things," the Colonel said, advancing toward Brian, "but never this," he finished the thought, shaking his head. The other members of the team quickly gathered around the elated Brian, tears in his eyes, to share his joy firsthand. Only Father Benedict remained detached, slumped in his chair, overwhelmed by what had just transpired.

"It's a miracle!" he overheard Deidre rejoice.

*That's exactly what people will say,* the priest thought, his head cupped in his hand.

"Over here, girl," Deidre waved. Melissa maneuvered her way through the crowded cafeteria toward the undersized table at which she and Neil were seated.



"I don't know about you two," Melissa said lightheartedly, "but I can hardly wait to get back to my cell at the dreaded Facility and get to work on my research. It's just so exciting being part of something like this! I mean, I know this project will change human belief systems forever, and may cause terrible upheaval, but—"

"You don't have to explain," Deidre said, cutting her sandwich in half. "I feel the same way. What about you, Neil?"

"I'd have to say that my own conflicts have been resolved," he answered in a reflective, almost somber tone.

"You've undergone a bit of a change on your own then," Deidre reminded him. "You didn't look so upbeat after Brian's second idea about these beings."

"Things are much clearer now," he replied, sipping his coffee. "I'm curious . . . Do either of you care to share your own experience with Adam?"

"He didn't really say anything to me," Melissa jumped in. "I hate to sound drippy, but I just felt this overflowing sense of love . . . like there was some sort of fondness for me . . . I can't really describe it any other way. What about you Deidre?"

"Well . . . it was pretty personal," she confided. "This is going to sound crazy, but take it in the context of my research . . . I've always had this fear that I'd been abducted myself, and that someday it would happen again, and that my daughter would be taken. I've coped with it by telling myself that my subconscious has absorbed too much of my subjects' testimonies."

"Why didn't that take care of it?" asked Neil. "Sounds plausible to me."

"My Mom once told me it had happened to her—and abductions tend to run in family groups. Her testimony was another factor that compelled me to go into the subject. I knew my Mom—she was an avid churchgoer, almost a saint in my eyes. She was no one to lie or make up something like that."

"Wow," Melissa voiced her surprise.

"Anyway, Adam caught all that."

"And . . . ?"

"He admitted that he knew of my mother—that was the hard part, but at least he told me the truth. He promised me that neither my daughter nor I would ever be touched. His words, if the term applies, were, 'does this help you?'" Deidre paused to gain her composure, the emotion of the moment still vivid in her heart. "That's when I started to cry," she sniffed. "I've just had this overwhelming sense of dread, that I'd stepped into something in my research that would someday cost me dearly. It was just what I needed to hear."

"Remarkable," Neil said reflectively. "That was just as special to you as Brian's healing was to him."

"Where is Brian, anyway?" Deidre asked, looking at Melissa.

"What makes you think I'd know?"

"Just a guess," she said slyly.

"He went right to the hospital and had the cast removed. He was so excited, he and Malcolm went to lift weights to try out the hand. I'm so thrilled for him!"

"I'm even happier to hear that," Neil commented. "I'm sure you're quite relieved."

Melissa looked down at her tray, trying to contain herself, but to no avail. "Why must everyone keep saying things like that!" she burst forth. "It seems Brian's the only one around here willing to really forgive me!" She stood up to leave, but Deidre stopped

her. Neil continued his meal.

"Well?" Deidre demanded, looking at the undersecretary.

"It was just an observation, not an attack," he said calmly. "I will admit," he continued, "that I'll be watching your attitude toward him with some healthy skepticism."

"Thanks \_for nothing," she shot back.

"Don't misunderstand me, Melissa. I can see you've changed, and I trust Brian's judgment. It's just that you can't undo your unrelenting bitchiness, if I must use the word, in a few days. You have to earn my respect. I can only promise you that I won't withhold it if you do. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes," she said, stung by his remarks, the blush receding from her face. "Seems fair to me," she grudgingly conceded. "Still, Brian's shown me a no-strings-attached kindness."

"He would," Neil noted thoughtfully. "He's an exceptional man. He has a profound capacity for forgiveness. I've learned some valuable lessons from him, and I'd like to think I've helped him along as well. Still, I wish he'd have allowed me to help him more with his own weaknesses. He's very hard-headed at times."

"When you say weaknesses," Melissa inquired, intrigued, "what do you mean?"

Neil eyed her dubiously, silently questioning her motives.

"I know you have a right to be suspicious, but I'm asking for the right reasons, if that's what you're wondering," Melissa intuitively responded to his delay in answering. "We've spent a lot of time together over the last five days, and I've learned more each time we talk, but there are areas I just can't seem to penetrate. It's very frustrating."

"He's a man, honey," Deidre joked.

"I'll have to ask you what you mean," Neil challenged.

"For instance," Melissa elaborated, "every time I steer the conversation beyond the tragedy of his parents or how he was fired you know, trying to get at what makes him tick—his feelings, his fears, that sort of thing—he changes the subject. Sometimes he doesn't even bother trying to be very deft about it, either. He just won't talk about himself in ways that reveal anything deeply personal."

"Don't expect it to change," Neil cautioned, "and don't take it personally. I know him better than anyone, and there are parts of him that are impenetrable. I think it goes hand in hand with his low self-image. He's really only confident when it comes to his areas of expertise, but hardly in relationships. I think he's improved from what I can see. I'm no psychologist, but I'm sure it has something to do with being emotionally disowned by his parents. I remember the battle he had with it; he was depressed for months. He was a loner to begin with, and that whole situation made him withdraw socially even more. He basically overcompensated by drowning himself in his studies."

"He has hinted about the social thing," Melissa commented, "but I still sort of thought he was exaggerating."

"It's not that he's socially inept, although he is rough around the edges. It's just that he never did anything in terms of a social life that anyone would consider having fun. For sure there are worse habits to pick up in college than studying, but he seemed to me very imbalanced. I tried to get him to open up, but it was pretty much an exercise in futility. I'd get after him about going out with the college group at church, and he'd invariably say he had to study. If you asked him if he ever had fun, he'd say whenever he opened a book."

"Did he ever accuse you of pestering?" Deidre asked.

"No. He only got annoyed when the subject of dating came up. My wife and I tried to pair him up once without his knowledge at a Valentine's Day dinner. It went horribly. The girl was someone familiar from church, and he just excused himself and left the restaurant. It was unbelievably crass."

"I can see that in him," Melissa agreed whimsically.

"You wouldn't have thought this so funny," Neil continued. "There was nothing good-natured about it. He suggested next time we try St. Mary's School for the Blind. It was just over the top."

"Sorry, Neil," Deidre said chuckling. Melissa was visibly amused as well. "Sorry, but that is funny, and I don't think it's all that consequential. Sure, someone with healthy self-esteem isn't going to act that way, but it's not like he's let that area of his life turn him into an underachiever. He knows what he's good at, and has the drive and passion to set high goals and meet them. He may still come around."

"I disagree," he countered. "You weren't there; he was dead serious. There was real anger in his voice. Fortunately we didn't have a falling out, and after a while we got him to come over to our place for meals. We came to see that he was grateful, but he never would have initiated anything. Come to think of it, in all the years I've known him, and as far as I know his past and upbringing, I don't recall him ever being involved in or mentioning a close relationship with anyone."

"What about his friendship with you?" Melissa asked.

"I imagine he's about as close to me as he's capable of getting, but I still wouldn't call it intimate. I know there are things he simply will not talk about, to me or anyone else."

"It's pretty obvious to me that the issue is vulnerability—he doesn't like it," concluded Deidre.

Dr. Bandstra reflected for a moment. "That's interesting ... Throughout all our contact during his undergrad years, whenever we'd pray together I'd feel like a stranger. There was never any deeply personal matter brought up, no specific struggle, or hope, or wish, or fear. It was very surface level. I knew he was deeper than that, but he never conveyed what was really on his heart. I asked him about it once, and he just bluntly told me there are things he has to say to God only—period. I've wondered whether he might genuinely enjoy being alone, and doesn't need the kind of closeness most people do."

"No ..." Melissa dissented thoughtfully, "that isn't true."

"How would you know?" he inquired.

"He told me so," she notified them, "earlier today, just before the meeting." Neil appeared surprised.

"Yeah ..." Deidre recalled, "you lagged behind with him after we left his room; you guys were almost late."

"We talked for a few moments and then caught up."

"What did you talk about?" he asked.

"I wanted to thank him for something he said . . . to the rest of the team."

"Yeah," Deidre jumped in, "it was good he said what he did. He pretty much brought up the whole issue of Melissa's attitude before the attack," she informed Neil. "It was appropriate," she acknowledged.

"So what did he say that got your attention?" he asked. Melissa balked at the

question, not wanting to relate any specifics.

"Well?" Neil persisted.

"He deflected a compliment I gave him. He made it sound like I was going to get upset at him if I did it again. No offense, but it was . . . odd."

"Now that's something I haven't seen," Neil replied. "What do you think, Deidre?"

"It is kind of strange," she said, pondering the episode, "but nothing pathological, I'm sure," she winked.

"Regardless," Neil declared, a change in his demeanor apparent. "I'd like you to keep your distance."

"I can't say I like your tone," Melissa took offense.

"Get used to being disappointed, then. You've got a long way to go with me, Melissa, and when it comes to Brian, I won't let anything slide. The guy has been through enough. I love him like the son I never had. I'll say it once more keep your distance."

"You can't keep me from talking to him."

"Actually, I can, but I won't ... but if you pull anything even remotely like your little exploit of recent memory, I'll make sure you regret it."

"You and Father Benedict," she retorted.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It seems you two fine, upstanding Christian gentlemen have a thing about threatening women. You're both hypocrites," she said angrily, having had enough at last. "Or maybe Brian's the only real one in the bunch."

Neil flushed with anger as well as embarrassment, but wasn't about to apologize. "I think it's time for me to leave," he said, rising from his chair, picking up his tray.

"Oh, Neil," Deidre asked politely, in an awkward attempt at cutting the tension, "you haven't touched your French fries—do you mind? I'll take your tray back."

"Sure," he replied, scowling at Melissa, who glared back in return. He set the tray back on the table and left without another word.

"That could have ended better," Deidre said, unperturbed, reaching for a fry.

"I hope you're not talking to me," Melissa fumed. "He has no right ..." she stopped, caught short by Deidre's knowing stare.

"Okay, he's got a right," she admitted, "but he ought to just keep it to himself."

"I can agree with that," Deidre allowed. "Let's face it, he doesn't like you because of the way you were to Brian. It's personal."

"Oh well," Melissa dismissed the observation.

"Hey," Deidre changed the subject, "it appears the good undersecretary didn't touch his pie—chocolate cream, honey."

"So what," she answered, still stewing.

"So the pie doesn't care who its owner's been. No woman I know can withstand chocolate; go ahead, you'll feel better."

"I'm trying to watch my figure."

"Oh yeah, you really need to keep an eye on that."

"What is this, food therapy?"

"I did learn something in grad school. Speaking as a professional, there are clinical studies that suggest—"

"Stuff the infomercial," she smiled distractedly, "you talked me into it."

"I guess the Colonel's a happy camper, now, what with all of us on the same

page," Deidre mused while Melissa took a forkful. "Good, huh`?"

"Very," she said, taking another bite.

"I know we'll only be here tonight, Melissa, but you and Brian should spend some time getting acquainted with this place. Malcolm said he was going to suggest it to you once you guys got here. There's some really weird stuff here. That building over there," she said, pointing, as she looked through the glass of the cafeteria, "it's full of—"

Her explanation was cut short by the sound of Melissa's fork hitting the floor, rapidly followed by agitated gagging.

"My God, Melissa, what is it!"

Melissa cast a panicked expression at her colleague, but was unable to speak. Deidre could see through the fingers clutching at her neck that Melissa's throat had swelled violently with alarming swiftness. The woman gasped ineffectually for air. She lunged for her purse, toppling their drinking glasses and scattering their utensils. No sooner had she unzipped the top than she collapsed to the floor, suffocating, her complexion already evincing a bluish hue.

Deidre rushed to her colleague, dodging Melissa's arms, now flailing hysterically. She tried in vain to clear her airway. "Get a doctor, quick!" she shouted at the small crowd that had gathered. She hurriedly tried to clear an airway, but Melissa's throat had swelled dramatically. Unsure of what to do, her eyes fell upon Melissa's purse. She quickly grabbed it and dumped the contents onto the floor. Her eyes immediately recognized what her colleague had attempted to find. With-out hesitation she pulled the top off the injection device and jammed it into Melissa's thigh through her slacks.

"The arm looks great," Malcolm beamed, "hardly a scratch left. I'd swear you could see the scarring disappear if you watched close enough."

"It feels great, too," Brian grunted through his last bicep curl, before releasing the bar. "Just incredible!" he said jubilantly, squeezing his once-crippled hand, rotating the wrist back and forth. "I can't remember the last time I honestly enjoyed working out. I wish I could start all over again!"

"Try and remember the feeling a month from now."

"Really. How do you think he did it?"

"Man, I have no idea," Malcolm shook his head. "It's light years beyond anything we can do today."

"No pun intended, I'm sure," Brian grinned and laid down on the bench press.

"Of course," Malcolm chuckled, spotting him.

Brian took the bar from its stand and began pumping the weight rapidly, ecstatic at the completeness of the restoration. He was sure it was his imagination, or maybe the sense of exhilaration, but he seemed stronger than before the injury.

"Save some of that for the Olympics," Malcolm said with a broad smile as he took the bar after Brian's last rep, and carefully replaced it on its stand. "Makes you wonder what else the little dude can do, doesn't it?" Malcolm asked.

"Yeah, it does."

"Hard to believe. A few days ago I'd never have wanted to see one of those metallic midgets."

"Why is that?" Brian asked, laughing.

"I had the weirdest dream," he began.

"What was in it?"

"Lots of Grays. They were dead at first, or asleep or some-thing, and then they all came after me like one of those zombie flicks."

"Tell me about it."

Malcolm proceeded to relate the details of his dream to Brian, who couldn't contain his amusement until Malcolm mentioned one specific detail.

"You mean you were in this room with all these gray aliens, and the smell was there too?"

"Yeah, but not at first. It was only after I'd turned around and some of them were missing."

"Are you sure it was the same smell?"

"Absolutely, man. Why do you ask?"

"It's just odd. Remember that Father Benedict seemed to suspect that the smell and what Melissa's unidentified visitor said were somehow connected. It still doesn't make sense."

"Dreams aren't supposed to make sense."

"Well . . . I guess I can agree, for the most part anyway."

"What are you getting at?"

"Haven't you ever had a dream that comes true?" Brian asked. "No . . . but I could pick some that I wish had."

"I've had it happen once or twice. For instance, I've had dreams that something was going to happen to me or someone I knew, and then it did."

"So . . . like you think there's some kind of collective consciousness or something . . . that we can somehow tap into the future?"

"No, I can't say I believe that, although a lot of people do."

"Isn't there something in the Bible about it being wicked to tell the future?" Malcolm asked.

"Well, there are rules in Deuteronomy 18 for telling whether someone is a true prophet of God or not—if someone in ancient Israel predicted the future and was at all incorrect, he was deemed a false prophet and put to death."

"Sounds like the Israelites had a good solution to those psychic hotlines."

"Yeah," Brian laughed again, enjoying Malcolm's wit.

"So you believe that kind of thing is impossible today?"

"I'm really careful not to use the words 'God' and 'impossible' in the same sentence," Brian answered. "Personally, I believe that Scripture doesn't really address dreams in the passage I mentioned. Deuteronomy 18 and other texts are opposed to people claiming to be receiving direct revelation from God that is binding on the spiritual community. It really doesn't say anything about whether God did or could reveal personal things to people. I sort of compare it to instances in my life where I felt certain compulsions to do something immediately . . . I can honestly say I felt convinced the Spirit was prompting me to do something, so I did it."

"Like what?"

"Like not to go somewhere, or to share a specific verse of Scripture with someone, or to share the gospel with a perfect stranger."

"How about this conversation?" Malcolm bantered.

"No . . . this one is unprompted, at least as far as I can tell. Anyway, if God can do that sort of thing while you're awake, why can't he do it when you're asleep? Maybe God was trying to tell you something."

"Seems logical enough, if that's the right word. However," Malcolm said stiffly, pushing up his glasses, "I would think that an Almighty being could make things less opaque."

"You know, Malcolm, there isn't much discernible difference to me between scientists and theologians. Have you ever thought about that?"

"I don't know about all this religion stuff. All this talk about spirits and impressions—I need facts, hard data; something I can look at under a microscope or through a telescope."

"Like a superstring? A positron?"

"Aw, now that's a low blow," he said, leaning on the bench press.

"Actually, it isn't. Theoretical physicists believe in lots of things they can't see or actually detect—that's why it's theoretical, yet everyone takes what they say like it's the gospel truth—pun in-tended as well."

"Well, they detect energy that's real. Even though we can't see it, we can see its effect."

"So when the effect is religious, or non-physical, the invisible cause by definition can't be real?"

Malcolm shook his head, a friendly smirk creasing his mouth.

"And by the way," Brian added, "energy has to come from a reaction within matter. It's your side that believes in the spontaneous, unintelligent generation of matter, not mine. Scientists can talk all you want about disassembled quarks or pre-matter material or God-particles—interesting term, by the way it all comes down to having matter before there was matter in a Godless view of origins. So what if matter took some other form prior to the Big Bang; you still have something before there was nothing. I call the something someone—God; scientists just give matter another name and then pretend it wasn't matter, or ignore the question altogether."

"Very interesting," Malcolm mused, thoughtfully. "My field isn't physics, it's biology, and I see all sorts of evidence for evolution. I have to admit that people in my field tend to leave all the Big Bang stuff to somebody else. We just look at what's been here since the beginning. We'll have to talk more about it later. Right now there are things you need to see here at Mount Weather that I'm sure you'll find interesting, and we have only this evening to do it."

"What kind of stuff?"

"This place looks like a survivalist's outlet, man. You wouldn't believe the stockpiles of food, water, medical supplies, fuel, batteries, seeds, baggies to crap in—you name it, they've got it, and lots of it."

"Well, it's FEMA's nerve center, like Deidre told us. They're supposed to have all that stuff, for the survival of the government."

"Brian, according to Mount Weather's published PR, they're supposed to have enough supplies for 200 people for several months. I'm no logistics expert, but I can show you now that they've got stockpiles in here that will last for years, and for thousands, maybe tens of thousands of people—and that's just what I've seen so far."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, and that's not all," he motioned to Brian to draw near enough to hear him whisper, "they've got bio-weapons here too—anthrax and some lethal pollutants."

"How do you know?"

"It's my expertise, man. I've handled the stuff in grad school; believe me, I know what it looks like and how to read the labels. The freaky thing is, our clearances allow us to get to it. Now you tell me how that stuff is used in disaster relief other than to just clear the casualties."

"I would think if it had some sinister purpose then they wouldn't have let you just go snooping around for it."

"Well," he checked his voice, "they didn't exactly give me directions to where it was. Once I saw we had some weight around here, I just hitched a ride on a few trucks and rode around all day. You'd be surprised what you can do with one of our badges and a clipboard not to mention an expression that convinces people you know where you are and what you're doing. While everybody else has been sitting around playing cards or picking their noses, old Malcolm's been up and about town. I've been to some of the storage areas that are way back inside the mountain; that's where they have the real interesting stuff."

"So what's your theory?"

"I haven't got one, but I can say two things with confidence."

"Yes?"

"One, they know something's gonna happen that we don't, and it'll be real nasty when it goes down; two, I'm glad we're on the survivor's list. Maybe they'll make me the new EPA head if I behave."

"Only you could put things quite that way."

"C'mon," Malcolm grinned, "we need to get our butts in gear. We can pick up Melissa afterwards. She'll want to see some of this too."

The two of them showered and dressed quickly, then exited the exercise area. They covered only a few yards of the short distance to their accommodations before the sight of flashing red lights ahead distracted them.

"What's over there?" asked Brian.

"The cafeteria, one of them anyway."

"Look's like something's going on."

"Can't be anybody getting their stomach pumped," cracked Malcolm, "the food's too good here."

"Want to take a look?"

"Yeah, but just for a minute."

As they neared the cafeteria, they suddenly saw the familiar form of Deidre breaking through. She didn't see them, but they could plainly make out her expression. "Not to be unscientific or anything," Malcolm said seriously, "but I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Dee!" Malcolm called. She turned and, upon recognizing them, trotted out to them.

"Now, Brian," she warned, putting her hand on his chest, "this is going to look much worse than it is."

"What is it?" he asked, a feeling of dread building inside him.



"It's Melissa."

"What happened?" he demanded fearfully.

"She's going to be all right. It was a close call, but she'll be fine."

"What—" he stopped in mid-question as the crowd parted for the stretcher carrying Melissa. Brian ran over to the side of the stretcher before Deidre could stop him. The attendants paused long enough for him to see her pale, slightly bloated face, partially obscured by an oxygen mask. She looked at him briefly through heavy eyelids, but was only semi-conscious.

"What happened here!" he insisted again as Deidre and Malcolm approached from behind. "Why is her face so swollen?"

"I'd say it was some type of allergic reaction," Deidre guessed, and related the details of the incident to the two of them.

"What do you think she reacted to?" asked Malcolm. "I've seen people look like that after bee stings, but it was never life-threatening."

"I'm not sure, but I'm going to find out. The only thing that saved her was that I found her epinephrine injector and knew how to use it. I had a patient during my psych practicum who carried one for a food allergy. We had our sessions right after the lunch hour, so he showed me how to use it in case he ever had a reaction and went into anaphylactic shock during a session. Melissa's reaction was incredibly fast; she must have a severe allergic condition to something."

"Where did they take her?" Brian asked.

"The main hospital facility is a few blocks from here. That'd be my guess."

"Then let's go."

"Brian, let them do their job and treat her."

"But there isn't much time."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about leaving tonight," she remarked. "Once the Colonel hears about this, he'll want an investigation."

"For an allergy?" Malcolm said incredulously. "The man's paranoid, but not that much."

"Well, even if he does want us to leave, you can join me in some civil disobedience. I'm not going anywhere until I get some answers."

"What is it, Deidre?" Brian inquired, sensing she was troubled.

"She had a reaction all right, but I don't think it was an accident."

"What?" the two men echoed in unison.

"I'm going to find a few people I want to ask questions. I'll meet you guys at the hospital in an hour or so."

"Wait a minute," Malcolm grabbed her arm. "Just what are you thinking?"

"That someone tried to kill Melissa," she announced gravely. "And if I'm right," she looked at Brian, "this wasn't the first time."

## CHAPTER 30

"What is now proved was once only imagined."

*William Blake*

"HOW'RE YOU DOING?" Brian asked with a smile as he leaned over the freshly awakened Melissa. She blinked a few times, clearing her mind, and looked about at the familiar faces surrounding her bed: Brian, Deidre, Mark, Malcolm, and to her surprise, Neil and Father Benedict.

"Okay," she sighed, and winced. "I've got a winner of a headache, though."

"You've been asleep for a couple of hours. Do you remember anything?"

"Before or after I hit the floor?" she muttered, moving her head from side to side, trying to relieve the tension. Brian looked askance at Deidre, who shrugged unknowingly.

"What do you mean?"

"Let me sit up," she requested, and activated the mechanized berth.

"Are you sure you want to talk?" Deidre questioned.

"Yes ... certainly. I'm so glad you're all here . . . I have something to tell you . . . it's pretty strange, actually."

"I think we're getting used to that," Mark mused.

"Well," she began, "I remember taking some of Dr. Bandstra's pie, and then all of a sudden I couldn't breathe. It's my fault, really; it was so careless."

"Could you explain, Melissa?" Asked Father Benedict.

"I have a nut allergy."

"You never broke out in hives around Malcolm," Brian quipped. The others laughed.

"You're learning from the master, grasshopper," he retorted.

"Ow," Melissa flinched again, "don't make me laugh; it hurts."

"Go on," encouraged Neil.

"Like I said, I'm allergic to any kind of nut, peanuts especially. I have a severe allergy to anything made with peanuts or peanut oil, or any peanut product."

"Which explains the epinephrine," Deidre noted. "The pie crust was made with peanut oil. I checked."

"Death by chocolate cream pie ... hmnnun," Malcolm remarked.

"Why didn't you tell anyone about your allergy?" Brian wanted to know.

"I didn't think I had to," she answered. "The food preparers at the Facility were given the specifics as to my dietary requirements. I never thought about tasting the pie—baked products can be really bad for me since I assumed everything was kosher here as well, so to speak. It was terribly careless."

A few of the team members exchanged worried glances.

"What's wrong?" Melissa wondered, observing their demeanor.

"All that information was forwarded to the cooks here, Melissa," Neil informed her. "They knew all about your allergy."

"But how ... ?"

"Deidre thinks that someone tried to kill you," Brian in-formed her soberly. "She

also thinks the attack by the dogs wasn't an accident at all, but we weren't the target you were."

"What!"

"I guessed that food was probably the reason for your reaction," Deidre began unraveling her theory, "so after they loaded you onto the medical cart—"

"Oh, Deidre," Melissa broke in, "thank you so much . . . I would surely have died. I saw you keep me breathing after you stuck me. It seems like I'm a calamity waiting to happen," she glanced at Brian.

"If only you knew how prophetic that sounds," Neil said in a worried voice.

"Hey," Deidre exclaimed, hit by a sudden realization, "how did you know I gave you CPR? You were unconscious by then."

"That's the weird part ... I saw you working on me from above ... It looked to me like I was floating above my body. I saw you two guys, too," she said to Malcolm and Brian, "walking toward the cafeteria."

"Oh boy," Mark said, shaking his head.

"What else did you see?" Deidre asked, her interest and focus sharpened.

"I'll tell you in a second," she said with renewed vigor. "Right now I want to hear what makes you think someone is trying to get rid of me—and even more importantly, why."

"Deal . . . After you were on the cart, I told Malcolm and Brian what I suspected, and went to talk to the Colonel. He assembled the food prep staff for this section of the base, and we questioned them. That's when we discovered that the information on your allergy had been forwarded—it was sent by email the day after Brian got out of surgery, well ahead of your arrival."

"Where is the Colonel, anyway?" she asked.

"He's launched a full-scale investigation. Man, I thought I'd seen him at his worst, but he went positively berserk when he found out what had happened. Whoever did this better pray the MPs get to him first."

"I'm flattered," Melissa joked, "but I'd honestly trade the emotion for the knowledge that somebody wants me dead." "Wait till you hear the rest," Brian told her.

"Once we found out that they knew better than to make a pie with peanut oil, we wanted to find out who made it."

"Should the staff really have been expected to be that careful?" asked Father Benedict. "There are hundreds of people who eat at that cafeteria."

"People with peanut allergies can't be around nuts at all," answered Melissa. "Whole schools have been forced by legislation to stop serving nut items or recipes prepared with peanut-based materials. Even major airlines will refuse to serve those little peanut snacks when they know someone with a nut allergy is on the flight. If they had the information, they knew better."

"We learned from the staff on duty for today," Deidre continued, "that the pie was just sitting out with the rest of the items to be placed in the dessert case, but no one would admit to making it."

"What a surprise," noted Melissa cynically.

"We also found out from the menus on the kitchen's computer that chocolate cream pie has never been served here before."

"But it is listed in my dietary information file among the desserts that can be

prepared at no risk along with a lot of other chocolate desserts. Maybe someone had access to my file and figured I'd be partial to one of those desserts."

"He was right then," Deidre noted. "Unfortunately, anybody on staff could have seen that sheet, and they're not going to admit making the thing."

"I'm no cook," said Neil, "but I've never seen my wife make pie dough with peanut oil."

"Ordinarily you wouldn't put anything like that in dough," Melissa answered him.

"Which tells us," Father Benedict broke in, "that such preparation was deliberate. The pie was intended for you."

"But it seems like such a random act," Brian commented. "One pie isn't going to go very far; anyone could have taken a piece and Melissa would never have had the opportunity."

"Actually, it may not have been so random, Brian," Neil offered, recalling something. "I saw the pie put out while I was in line. I took a piece, since it's one of my favorites as well. Melissa was only four or five people behind me and she didn't even take a piece. She was certainly in a position to get one, but didn't. She had the reaction to my piece."

"How did she get yours?" Father Benedict wondered aloud.

"I left in a huff ... we had an argument."

"I drove him away with an insult," Melissa volunteered apologetically.

"Hopefully the Colonel will turn up something else," Brian said optimistically. "I'd like to hear about your experience, Melissa."

"Brother . . . it was really weird," she said in a disbelieving tone. "I've heard about NDEs and OBEs, but I never put any credence into them."

"NDEs? OBEs? Translation please," Mark inquired.

"Near Death Experiences and Out-of-Body Experiences," Deidre responded. "Melissa didn't have a pulse for two or three minutes ... Tell us about it."

"Well, like I said, I had this floating sensation, and I could see you trying to revive me. After a few seconds I decided, I guess, to go look around. I went outside the building and was just looking around at all the activity ..." she stopped.

"When what?" asked Father Benedict.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," she said, flustered. "After I floated—or whatever I did—outside, I was met by some sort of being—and no, it wasn't Adam or anything like him. It—or he—told me in my head to follow him."

"What did he look like?" asked Brian, glancing at Father Benedict, who immediately returned eye contact.

"There was no face or even form, actually. I could just tell there was someone—or something—there. Anyway, I followed it. On the way we passed Malcolm and Brian, like I said . . . I just realized something," she paused. "We could fly around, but instead of going above the buildings, my guide led me by way of the streets here inside the cavern. We'd follow one, then turn right; then another, and turn left. It was almost like—"

"Like it wanted you to remember where you were going," Brian perceived.

". . . Right. Maybe it was a dream," she speculated.

"Maybe," offered Deidre. "Was there anything else?"

She nodded. "We got to a certain building and went in through the door and I mean right through the door. Once we were inside the building, we passed through a few

carded checkpoints, and then came to a place where two hallways intersected and turned right. A few feet away there was a solid door. The door opened as if commanded to, and I saw a room with lots of shiny tables in it, all like the ones we saw in Marcus' lab. After that I sensed my guide directing my attention down the opposite end of the hall, but it wouldn't go in that direction. I didn't know what to do, so I hesitated. Then I woke up in my body . . . if that's the right way to put it."

Brian immediately shot a startled glance at Malcolm, who, unlike a moment ago, appeared anything but jovial.

"Did you say shiny tables?" Malcolm asked weakly.

"Yes."

"Would you say there were hundreds of them?"

"Yes, that would seem right, but I didn't count them or anything."

"Was there anything on them?" he asked, swallowing hard.

"No."

Malcolm breathed a sigh of relief.

"There was one other thing about the room," Melissa added. Malcolm stiffened to attention.

"It seemed permeated with that strange aroma that was in my room and Brian's."

"I need a drink," Malcolm said woozily.

"What's the problem, Malcolm?" Neil asked.

"Better let him sit down in one of the chairs," Brian cautioned, and then went on to relate Malcolm's nightmare and its obvious overlap with Melissa's experience to those present.

"That," Melissa said emphatically after Brian had finished, "is just bizarre. Do you think it means anything?"

"Yes, but I have no idea what. Father?"

"I agree—and from the look on your face, Deidre, I'd say you concur."

"I've been exposed to too much of this to say I didn't think it had some meaning."

"Now what could that be?" Mark scoffed.

"Don't start in on me again with the pseudo-science crap," Deidre warned. "You still owe me an apology from the last time. Be-sides, I think we've all had our paradigms stretched today, thank you."

"I don't know about Brian," Father Benedict continued, "but I believe these experiences could be God's way of giving us information—but that they could also be deceptions. Each experience as it unfolds must be evaluated against what we know for sure is trustworthy revelation."

"I think it's possible, too," Brian remarked. "We could be blessed by Providence or in danger of being led astray. At the very least it deserves investigation. If we detect any falsehood in it, then we'll disregard it as anything meaningful. If nothing comes from it, there's no harm done."

"Agreed. It seems on the surface that Malcolm's dream and Melissa's experience, whatever it may have been, are connected and that those are in turn connected with what happened at the Facility. If we find that room, if it indeed exists, then we may find an answer."

"Melissa," Brian said inquisitively, "you seemed to imply that you could find this building from the way you were guided to it—how sure are you about that?"

"Pretty sure. It was quite vivid."

"You game? The Colonel has already told us we'll have an extra day here because of this."

"Absolutely, but they're going to hold me for observation until morning."

"We'll do it then."

\*\*\*

"Why do I have an overwhelming sense of déjà vu?" the thin, well-dressed man sniped sarcastically. "We were eager to congratulate you, Colonel, but it appears you're trying to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory once again."

"Shut up, you senile old ass!" a smartly uniformed and much younger army major exploded. "You've known for weeks we have a saboteur among us. For all we know, it could be you why else would you be so consumed with making the Colonel look incompetent?"

"How dare you," the older man seethed. "We know where your sympathies lie."

"We? I don't see anyone leaping to their feet to join you. It seems everyone else can keep their heads, especially when we've in fact achieved our goal."

"We've achieved nothing until their research has been disseminated and the disinformation believed, you twit!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," the General drew their attention. "I share both your beliefs and concerns, and I suspect that Colonel Ferguson will yet prove to be more than a match for our adversary. Vernon?"

"Yesterday's occurrence was indeed a scare, but we believe we know who's been trying to terminate the project," he said, not caring to conceal his satisfaction.

"So what are you doing about it!" the thin man demanded. "Eliminate the problem!"

"Oh, I will ... personally, I might add. We just need one-hundred percent confirmation, and that will come in a few hours."

"What about the team members? Have they been confined to their quarters?"

"Certainly not," Colonel Ferguson disclosed. "None of our researchers are involved. Let them wander around; this will be their home in the near future anyway. Whatever they find they'll thank us for later."

\*\*\*

"Take your time, Melissa," Brian said patiently.

Melissa stood at an intersection under the artificial light illuminating the huge expanse of granite far above their heads. It was an incredible sight, this bustling, underground town. Save for the absence of the sun, the scene before them could have been played out in any small town or outdoor military base in the U.S. Vehicles, from bicycles to pickup trucks, were moving in every direction, their progress impeded or authorized by stoplights. Pedestrians, alternately attired in military dress, occupational uniform, or civilian clothing, were busy about the day's demands. There were no

buildings more than two stories high, and most of them were coated with the same dull beige paint. Down one direction they could see a barber shop; down another a PX station. Guards were a rare sight, but did serve as reminders to the team that they weren't in Mayberry. There was no sense that those who were in employ at Mount Weather were in the business of hiding anything. If you were here, you were supposed to be here, and you were an active part of a massive preparation campaign—but preparation for what?

"I'm sure this is the way," Melissa assured the group of seven following her. "It isn't far."

Melissa led the team across the intersection and two more blocks, pausing only occasionally to pick out a landmark for guidance. At the next intersection she turned right, and then left at the next street. The group made its way on foot straight toward what would have been the edge of town had the installation been in the open air. As it was, they finally reached their destination at the foot of a large, factory-like building situated across from the town proper, and adjacent to the mouth of the next gaping cavern. The well-worn road leading into the expanse attested that the cavern was regularly used. Nonetheless, there was nothing visible from where they found themselves.

"I've been in there, and in one other," Malcolm informed Brian as he looked into the grotto.

"Anything about the building look familiar?" Brian asked him.

"Nope."

"Well, let's see if that holds true for what's inside."

The team made its way to what they guessed was the main entrance, a double-glass door equipped with the familiar electronic admission control.

"Allow me," Father Benedict said politely, and swiped his card. The door clicked open without incident. They entered and were greeted by an MP seated at a desk.

"Please sign in sir," the guard instructed the priest, "and the rest of you as well." The formality acknowledged, Brian motioned for Melissa to take the lead. She had no trouble discerning her surroundings, and led them confidently through a series of hallways until she reached the crossroads she had mentioned from her bed the evening before.

"This is it," she said.

"It sure is," acknowledged Malcolm, somewhat apprehensively. "The playroom is right over there," he pointed to the right.

The team turned right into the ensuing corridor, and Malcolm and Melissa strode without deliberation to the third door on the left. Melissa tried the door. It was securely locked.

"Damn!" Deidre reacted in frustration. "This was a wasted trip."

"Not so fast," Neil chided her, and withdrew a small set of keys from his rear pants pocket. After several tries, the door yielded. "How do you rate?" asked Malcolm.

"I'm the assistant project leader, remember? They gave me these keys when we got here, but I've only ever tried the one that's the master to our little dormitory."

Neil slowly opened the door and stepped inside the room, followed by the others. True to their colleague's recollections, an enormous room filled with hundreds of shiny metal tables, each about five feet in length immediately confronted them. All of them were empty. Brian couldn't help but hear Malcolm breathe a sigh of relief.

"Anybody notice the smell?" Mark asked.

"What smell?" asked Deidre, sniffing the air.

"That's the point; smells like the only person who's been in here has been Mr. Clean."

"He's right," Brian agreed. "There's nothing unusual here."

"I don't get it," Melissa griped disappointedly. "I was sure we'd find some clue here; I know what I experienced."

"I don't think anyone doubts you," Brian said, inspecting one of the tables. "You did get us here without much effort."

"But what could it mean?" Father Benedict wondered aloud. "Why would Malcolm's dream and Melissa's experience be so similar?"

"Melissa," Deidre spoke up, "didn't you say that your guide sort of wanted you to go down the hallway in the other direction?"

"Yes ... I felt that it did, but it wouldn't move."

"You make it sound like old Casper didn't want to go with you, Missy" Malcolm cracked.

"You know . . . I did get that impression. It was almost as if . . . it was frightened—and don't ever call me Missy again."

"You're such a help, Malcolm," Deidre replied in an annoyed tone.

"Well?" asked Mark impatiently.

"Well what?" insisted Melissa.

"Well, are we going the other direction or not?" The team looked at each other apprehensively.

"I doubt very much if we're going to see anything creepier than Adam down there," Mark opined.

"Oh, I can think of a few things that might do the trick," Deidre retorted anxiously.

"We must go," Father Benedict insisted. "We can't pass up any chance to learn from Melissa's experience. I'm going." With that the aged cleric headed down the hallway.

"He is an exorcist, you know," Brian eyed Melissa with a nervous smirk, and turned to follow Andrew.

"Let's hope we don't need him," Neil said darkly, right behind him. The others accompanied the threesome.

The team cautiously made their way down the opposing corridor. They carefully observed any signs on the rooms that lined the hallway. None of them held any promise of insight, and were all locked anyway, with the exception of the last room. To everyone's surprise, the door was ajar.

Neil slowly pushed open the door and peered into the room. The others filed inside following his lead. The windowless room contained nothing of apparent value or secrecy, only a large, rectangular, polished oak table surrounded by thickly cushioned low-back swivel chairs. The deep, plush carpeting that greeted their feet was the sole hint of luxury. The lone adornment was a beautiful but unspectacular bronze sun disk, its metallic rays pointing in all directions, fixed on the wall behind one of the long sides of the table.

"Oooh . . ." Melissa suddenly swooned. "I feel dizzy ... Brian..."



Brian darted past Father Benedict just in time to break Melissa's fall. He gently laid her on the floor and felt her cheeks for warmth. The alarmed team crowded around her body. Father Benedict anxiously eyed the door behind them. After a few moments Melissa's eyes fluttered open, alert as ever.

"What happened?" Brian asked, worry etched on his face. "I'm not sure . . . one minute everything was fine, the next I had this irresistible vertigo. I think I'd like to leave no—"

Brian looked into Melissa's eyes. Her rapt attention was focused toward the floor, underneath one of the air-conditioning vents that lined the room's paneled walls.

"What the . . . ?" she whispered to herself. She quickly turned onto her hands and knees and reached underneath the vent. Pulling her tiny quarry from the darkened niche, she blew the dust from the minute artifact she held between her fingers.

"Am I looking at what I think I'm looking at?" Deidre asked, unnerved by the revelation.

"You sure are," Mark confirmed with a glance.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Malcolm noted in a conspicuously somber tone.

"Me too," Brian added.

"Don't throw it away," Father Benedict charged.

"I'm not keeping it," Melissa refused. "You want it, you keep it."

"Fine," the priest bent over and took the object. As he straightened, the solar disk mounted on the wall arrested his attention. He stared at it momentarily as Brian helped Melissa to her feet.

"We'd best be leaving," he warned, still gazing at the object.

"What is it Andrew?" Brian asked as the others exited the room.

"I've seen this . . . symbol . . . before."

"Where?"

"I can't place it . . . I just know it means something."

"You're giving me the creeps, Andrew."

"I would think Melissa's little discovery would be sufficient for that," the priest sighed, inspecting the tiny article once more before pushing the bloodstained human tooth deep into his pocket.

## CHAPTER 31

"As a rule, we disbelieve all the facts and theories for which we have no use."

—*William James*—

"HOW IN THE world can you say you don't believe Adam was an alien?" Melissa clamored, astonished at Father Benedict's pronouncement.

"I merely said," he began slightly above a whisper, eyeing the three passengers seated across from him, "that I didn't believe he was extraterrestrial," the old priest countered, "and what we've recently found makes me even more suspicious of another deception."

"Then what do you think ... oh, you must be saying that you still agree with Brian's second view—that Adam was real, but that he was some sort of inter-dimensional entity."

"That can take on a physical, fleshly form," he answered, still hushed. "Please, let's keep this discussion among ourselves."

"Who's going to hear us?" Malcolm asked. "The Colonel's riding shotgun, and Neil took one of the cabins."

"There are several people I don't know near the head of the plane," Father Benedict said, motioning behind the three occupants whose seats faced his own. Melissa turned around briefly, noting four or five uniformed officers in the mostly empty plane.

"Okay, we'll keep it down—now you mean you think Adam is a demon or something? Sure didn't look that way to me."

"No, no. I wouldn't use that term, although I do believe he is an evil manifestation," he said seriously, "and should not be trusted or tolerated."

"I just don't believe this," she rolled her eyes. "Of all the superstitious nonsense. Why do this and nepotism have to be the only constants in church history?"

"I wouldn't call it nonsense," Deidre entered the conversation, momentarily distracted by her view of the clouds. "Like I said before, there are people with no particular religious commitments that believe the same thing. They use words like 'inter-dimensional' when theologians would refer to the same realm as the spiritual plane, the place where angels and demons are supposed to do their thing. What do you think, Brian? After all, you're the test case here after your healing."

Brian waved her off, eyes closed and head laid back against the headrest in his seat.

"What's wrong with him?" Deidre asked Melissa.

"I hate flying," Brian answered for her, "it hurts my ears. I guess we can't expect the anti-gravity express every time."

"I don't expect Brian to agree with me," Father Benedict refocused the conversation, anticipating the younger scholar's opposition. "I know I'm in the minority here."

"You mean you're the only one who doesn't believe what we saw," retorted Melissa. "That's not the same as being the minority."

"Nothing that we've seen won't fit into Brian's second view that we're seeing the return of the fallen *beney elohim*, the sons of God, rather than beings who are truly from another planet. Remember, according to the Old Testament and other sacred Jewish writings, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, the *beney elohim* were physical, of superior intelligence, and possessed high technology that they passed on to mankind—against God's wishes, I might add."

"Two problems," noted Mark. "Not that I believe any of that stuff but you're here to convince the masses, not me."

"Which are?" Father Benedict asked, deflecting the scientist's skepticism.

"The Colonel's objections—which I think weren't satisfactorily addressed earlier. First, the Bible story you guys went through during Brian's talk said pretty clearly that these sons of God had sexual relations with women. All the specimens we've seen point incontestably to the fact that these beings cannot reproduce sexually. Second, these sexual unions allegedly produced gigantic offspring. Adam's appearance gave me no reason to believe that he possesses the genetic material to produce gigantism or any sort of physically robust traits. I'd say your view is completely unworkable."

"I have a third problem to add as well, Andrew," Brian finally spoke up. "This," he announced, stretching out the arm Adam had healed. "If these creatures are evil, why do this? On the other hand, if they are just another life form, it isn't beyond belief that Adam could just have done me a favor—unspectacular to him, but astounding to us. Why must we view Adam as divine at all, good or bad?"

All eyes fixed upon the priest. The issues had been clearly laid out, and they waited for his response.

"I think Brian touched on an answer to your first objection, Mark, during a conversation we had after his presentation," Andrew noted, ready for the exchange. "Brian would allow that the small Grays could be genetic creations of the *beney elohim*. After all, the ancient texts are clear that the Watchers were technological masters. I actually think that the activity of Genesis 6 could also have a technological explanation. It's possible that the biblical story allows for reproduction via some technological method, like *in vitro* fertilization, or a method that doesn't actually involve sexual mingling, like cloning."

"Then what about the sex in Genesis 6?" Deidre enjoined.

"It could be the biblical writer's way of explaining *the results* of activity between the fallen *beney elohim* and humans."

"I don't follow."

"Well, whoever recorded the primeval history—Moses, if you take the statements in the Torah seriously—saw the giants produced as offspring to the human women, and naturally, due to their pre-scientific worldview, interpreted the cause as being sexual intercourse. In their mind, what else could it have been? In reality, the sexual language could be masking a technological tampering with those women."

"Reality?" Mark cracked from his seat next to the priest, "you must be kidding if you think that really happened."

"Is it that much different than your own apparent belief that Adam is a true extraterrestrial? If you accept that, then you can no longer reject the abduction lore in either its ancient or modern recounting. Tell me, what's the difference between saying an alien being is real and a divine being is real?"

"Well—"

"I'll tell you what the difference is!" the priest snapped, obviously agitated. "It's because the latter choice forces you to conclude there is a divine realm, which means there's a supreme Being, the Head of the divine council—Almighty God— and if that's true, you're accountable to Him! You can't stomach that thought!"

"Listen, Father," Mark bristled. "I could just as easily say you can't stomach the alternative."

"Actually," Brian came to Father Benedict's defense, "Both Andrew and myself have said several times we are completely willing to believe that there are true ETs. That issue need not affect our theology at all. We could embrace either position; you couldn't."

"Ugh!" Mark grunted and threw up his hands. He turned to the window and began fingering one of his curls, done with the conversation. He glanced over at his scientific colleague, but Malcolm only shrugged.

"As I was saying," Andrew continued, "in reality the *beney elohim* could have been plying their technological knowledge on human women, which, as Deidre noted before, sounds a lot like the alien abduction syndrome. However, I won't rule out direct sexual intercourse. But that all only relates to the Genesis 6 incident. In terms of how these little gray humanoids were produced, I don't think you'd need to argue the same scenario. I think the notion that these small gray aliens were genetically made via cloning from the ground up by the larger Grays the way they are sexless, mute, feeble, drone-like—is the best option. Hence these feeble entities are not the *beney elohim*; they just serve them."

"They're created in the Watchers' image, then," Melissa finished his thought.

"Right, since the *beney elohim*—or, the Watchers—may have creative ability due to the plurals in Genesis 1. We've been down that road before, and I don't want to belabor the point."

"So you rebut Mark's two objections," Malcolm summarized, "by saying that Adam—and all the other specimens we've seen to this point, are real—as in created, intelligent beings—but that his arguments that they don't match the biblical bad guys because they're small and sexless are irrelevant, since Adam and his little gray friends aren't these sons of God anyway—they just work for them?"

"Precisely," answered Father Benedict in a low, foreboding voice. "And if that argument is viable, and I believe it is, then nothing we've seen to this point excludes the possibility that we may be interacting with something more evil than we can possibly imagine. This is my fear."

"Except for Brian's objection you haven't dealt with that. Why would he heal Brian? I thought God was the only one who could do that, anyway," remarked Deidre.

"As far as the latter," Brian volunteered, "there are indications in Scripture where false prophets had the powers of true prophets, to a point anyway. The book of Revelation also tells us that false prophets will have such abilities as well. Just because there is power manifested doesn't mean something is good."

"Yes, Lucifer himself is described as an angel of light. Just consider his name, Helel—the shining one, and other such descriptions that Brian pointed out."

"But why would he heal me just to deceive me?" Brian asked.

Father Benedict looked at the floorspace between his row of seats and that of his

comrades, rubbing his hands together. "Yes—that could very well be the case."

"That's more of a retreat than an answer," observed Melissa, expecting some retaliation.

"And that's true as well," the old man conceded, "but I've seen too much of such deception during my service to the Church to dismiss it. There is another possibility, albeit it would still serve that same purpose."

"What's that?" asked Brian, intrigued.

"That your healing was not what it seemed to be not that it wasn't real, mind you. We can all testify to that."

"Then what do you mean?"

"That it was designed to make you think the power came from Adam when it didn't."

"Now I really have heard everything," Melissa derided him. "We all saw it. Brian felt it, for God's sake just own up to it!"

"You're all overlooking some very important information information that allows you to dismiss my view too easily, facts that you just don't care to incorporate into your position," he challenged them.

"Okay, Sherlock, let's hear it," Deidre said brusquely.

"Fine, and then I won't trouble you any longer. What about the attempt on Melissa's life, Deidre? You of all people should be asking yourself why such an incident would occur. Have you fit it into your view of the goings on here?"

"I guess someone just doesn't like her," she shrugged. Father Benedict scowled at her.

"Okay, okay, it's weak, I know," she conceded quickly. "I guess the answer's no, I haven't thought about how what happened might be connected. And now that I am, no correlation comes to mind."

"Are you now willing to surrender your interpretation of the Roswell event?" Andrew fired another question.

"No . . . no, I'm not, but I don't think the Roswell incident and what we're dealing with here are necessarily related."

"You mean you assume that they aren't related. Why are you so willing to believe that at Roswell the military used the ET angle as a prop to cover up heinous dealings with Nazis, and yet so willing to believe there's a real ET presence here?"

"Because I saw a real-live alien! The thing scanned my mind, for God's sake."

"Which brings up some other questions for you, Father," Melissa re-entered the discussion. "How do you account for the mind scans, and what happened between you and Adam?"

"The mind scans are irrelevant," he defended himself. "If these beings are the divine beings I suspect they are, such an activity is well within their abilities. The fact that they can do this sort of thing doesn't negate my view, or your own, I might add. Adam told me nothing and did nothing inside my head. In fact, his silence was disturbing. He couldn't answer any of my questions—questions that were basic to where he came from, to personhood, and to the universe's ultimate origin."

"Maybe he wasn't interested," Deidre suggested. "He's a scientist, not a philosopher."

"Aren't you, as a scientist, interested in those things?"

"Well . . . sure."

"Then his evasion of the questions is telling, in my mind. Why avoid the questions or appear bored with them when they interest us?"

"Maybe he isn't Catholic," Malcolm jested.

"You'll get no argument there," the priest scoffed. "Let's go back to the Roswell thing," Deidre requested. "Certainly."

"One of the problems I have with the application of the *beney elohim* to this whole area are the UFOs themselves. Why would these beings need spaceships?"

"Andrew and I have actually thought about that question as well," Brian informed her. "We've postulated that perhaps they don't need such craft and don't use them."

"Say what?" Deidre disputed. "That's where this whole alien thing began."

"I agree—if you believe they are truly from elsewhere in space."

"But?"

"But what if they're just technologically capable of such things for the sole purpose of passing them on to mankind, while not needing such vehicles themselves? The technology would be real and we know it is yet the product of the minds of the Watchers, who have no need of it. Tell me, Deidre—and you'd know better than anyone here—is there any evidence, other than hypnotic regressions or hearsay, for such craft being truly from another world?"

"What about the demonstration?"

"What about the question? I think we would all admit that while the ET explanation seems a very good fit for what we saw, humans could have come up with gravity modification. So then, is there any actual hard evidence, other than what we've been told, that this technology is in fact otherworldly?"

"I guess not," she granted after a few moments.

"And even more importantly," Father Benedict followed, "is there any evidence that would require me to abandon my notion that divine beings could create such craft and give that knowledge to man-kind as opposed to beings from space?"

"No, but that's a little like asking us to prove a negative," Malcolm criticized.

"I'll accept that," Father Benedict said, "but I have the ancient texts on my side."

"Which are open to interpretation."

"True enough."

"Why would the Watchers do that just hand out the secrets of the universe?" Malcolm wondered.

"For the same reason humans make so much of the question of extraterrestrial life now—to divert our attention from the true Deity to the pseudo-deities, from the uncreated, self-existent, omnipotent, and omniscient One to the created, contingent, and limited beings whose powers are derived and inferior. They want to be viewed as being like the Most High. The reason has always been the same."

"What about the virus—it's certifiably extraterrestrial," challenged Mark.

"And could therefore have been brought from space by us—there's no need to depend on the Group's phony panspermia explanation."

"But how would it get into the cattle?" he protested. "Ingestion is out of the question—unless you think I'm part of some great conspiracy."

"No, I don't think that. Again, if you're willing to believe that aliens deliberately created the virus and infected our cattle, why can't you believe that humans did it—or the

fallen divine beings of Genesis?"

"But I've seen impossible mutilations; that mystery is part of my life's work."

"So beings from outer space must be the answer, not divine beings? I'd repeat my earlier challenge to you, Mark, but I doubt it would lessen your resistance."

"And you, Melissa," the priest diverted his attention, "why would anyone want to kill you? And what about your earlier skepticism over the corpses we saw in Dr. Marcus's lab? What about what you found at Mount Weather?"

Malcolm and Deidre looked at her quizzically. Mark turned away from the window, redirecting his attention.

"It's true," she admitted. "Up until our meeting with Adam, I didn't think they were real."

"You still haven't shared what you thought with any of us," Andrew said in an accusatory tone, "except perhaps Brian ..."

"Brian and I did talk about it on the flight to Mount Weather. I'm no expert in anatomy or anything," she paused and deliberately nudged Brian so as to draw his attention to her remarks, "but I had my doubts. I'm surprised Mark didn't have some, too."

"They looked real to me, and everything I looked at under the slides checked out. I'm no expert in human anatomy, either—or humanoid, for that matter. I may not have been as dependent on Dr. Marcus for explanations of what I was seeing, but I did need some help. I only had one undergraduate class in human anatomy. If it has two legs, then I'm not your guy if you want an expert. I am curious, though. As an amateur, what did you think you were looking at?" Melissa proceeded to detail her idea that the corpse was actually a distorted, altered human fetus.

"That would be quite clever," Mark admitted.

"Ingenious is more like it," added Malcolm. "I'm impressed."

"I take it that you've rejected your suspicion?" Mark queried.

"Yes."

"I'd have to as well. The DNA sequencing was certainly not human, but was carbon-based and biologically viable. Ditto for the tissue samples. The specimen's categorization goes well beyond the kind of cosmetic chicanery you've suggested. I'd have to say it was definitely non-human."

"That's what I've concluded."

"Be that as it may," Father Benedict returned to his interrogation, "why would someone try to kill you?"

"I have no idea."

"Maybe you've made an enemy since you've been here," suggested Deidre.

"If I have, he's sitting next to me, and I know he doesn't feel that way."

"You never know," Brian smiled coyly. Melissa and the others laughed, with the exception of Father Benedict.

"She may not have made an enemy," the priest said knowingly, "but she has met a benefactor of some sort—and I'm not talking about Brian. That's another mystery none of you have included in your analysis. What do you make of Melissa's clandestine contact, the one who told her point blank there was a saboteur among us? If Deidre is right, not only the pie but also the incident involving the guard dogs was aimed at Melissa. Might not these attempts be part of such a plot?"

"I'm sure you realize that you just accused one of us in this plane of attempted

murder?" Mark said angrily.

"It's possible."

"Maybe her visitor was lying," he shot back.

"Equally possible but far less likely."

"Why?"

"Why not kill her when he had the chance?"

"Maybe he was wrong—that there is no infiltrator, but some-one on the outside trying to torpedo the project and get Melissa; or maybe he's just starting with her and will try and get the rest of us," Brian offered.

"I'd say that's more workable, but you're all still missing my point. How does all this fit into the bigger picture—in relation to the Group, the goal of the project, what we've seen, and—"

"And my dream," Malcolm added to the list, "not to mention what happened in Brian's and Melissa's rooms, and that weird smell."

"So doesn't that make any of you the least bit apprehensive?" Andrew asked them as a group. "Doesn't it give you less confidence about the neatness of the package you think you see? Doesn't it compel you to try and determine if the trees really make up the forest?"

"I think we can understand your concerns, Andrew," Brian spoke up, "at least I know I can. But I think honesty requires admitting that your view is only a viable option. You haven't overturned the other possibility."

"What about the attempts on Melissa's life!" the priest insisted adamantly.

"I think whoever's behind them is obviously serious, and that they want to intimidate us. It's probably someone who doesn't want disclosure of an extraterrestrial reality to occur, not someone who wants to convince us that the sons of God are involved. Melissa's visitor did tell her that the Group is divided over the project. I'm sorry, but the arguments as to who or what Adam is produce only a stale-mate, and I need something incontrovertible to move me from what I see as the more reasonable conclusion."

"I think you need to start seeing events through spiritual eyes," the priest sparred with him. "For myself, when there are loose ends to a matter, especially of the variety and significance of these, I suspect there's far more than meets the eye going on. I do hope I'm wrong on one suspicion, however," he disclosed, casting a worried eye on Melissa.

"What's that?" she asked uncomfortably.

"That whoever is targeting you will try again very soon."



## CHAPTER 32

"Victory goes to the player who makes the next-to-last mistake."

*-Chessmaster Savielly Grigorievitch Tartakower-*

"SO WHERE HAVE you been all day?" Melissa asked as Brian let her into his room.

"Here, just like the last couple of days," he answered, taking visual inventory of her as she made her way to the couch, "although I slept to almost two o'clock today." Melissa crossed her legs underneath a wrap-around jean skirt after she was seated. The white, floral short-sleeved pullover accented her bustline. White ankle-high socks and tennis shoes completed the casual ensemble. Brian tried hard not to look very long.

"Good grief—why?"

"I was up until about five this morning."

"Let me guess studying?"

He nodded.

"Making any progress?" she asked.

"Actually . . . not much."

"How come?"

"I started out okay, but only because I went back and re-checked the exegesis of all the texts I used in my infamous article. I'm just bogged down now in researching all the rabbis' and church fathers' opinions on the question of other worlds. If I'm going to convince Christian and Jewish leadership that they ought to embrace an extraterrestrial reality with open arms, I've got to be able to show the idea's consistent with their best thinkers of the past. Problem is, I'm not a church historian . . . my library really doesn't cover much of that sort of thing either."

"Now who do we know who might be able to help?" she asked, feigning ignorance.

"Sorry ... I guess I should have just asked you for some books."

"Too late now, but it wouldn't have mattered much anyway."

"Why is that?" he asked, puzzled by the refusal.

"I don't loan my books; you lose too many that way."

"I would hope you'd trust me."

"Nope."

"No?"

"No," she confirmed, making no attempt to conceal her amusement.

"Okay ..." he said, catching on. "What do I need to do to borrow some?"

"Nothing. I already told you I don't give any of them out. It's a firm policy."

Brian looked at her, dumbfounded.

"You may, however," she laughed, "come to my room and use as many as you like for as long as you wish. How does that sound?"

"Well . . . are you sure?"

"Of course. Is there something wrong?"

"I just don't want to wear out my welcome."

"Right," she smirked. "I'll be expecting you after supper. There is one condition, though."

"What is it?" he asked, unsure what to expect.

"You have to agree to converse periodically, not just sit there like an intellectual sponge."

"I think I can manage that," he smiled. "Do you want some tea? I've got a bunch of different kinds."

"Are you asking me to stay for a while?"

"If you like," he said, trying not to appear uncomfortable.

"I like. I did come over for reasons other than to see if you were still alive."

"What's on your mind?"

"You, actually," she said, taking him by surprise again. She could see he wasn't used to someone so direct, and enjoyed watching him try to adjust.

"You must have too much time on your hands," he said, disappearing into the bathroom for some water.

"I'm curious about something," she notified him when he returned. "How do you manage to get along so well with Father Benedict?"

"What do you mean?"

"On my planet, evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics have some major theological disagreements."

"Oh, I have definite reservations about Catholicism," he replied, pulling the drawer of one of his filing cabinets open and removing his coffee maker. "Anything specific you're wondering—" he stopped short, caught by the bemused look on her face.

"Oh, this," he said plugging it in. "I just use it to heat the water, and—"

"I know how it works, Brian. I just can't say I'd ever have thought to look for it there."

"I like having everything all in one place."

"So you can live in the smallest space possible?"

"I don't look at it that way."

"I think when you come over tonight we'll do something wild, like visit each room."

"Quit it, you're frightening me."

"We'll take it one room at a time, then," she laughed.

"So you're wondering about where I disagree with Andrew."

"Right."

"Some things are pretty obvious—adoration of Mary, some of the doctrines relating to her, like the Immaculate Conception, that sort of thing."

"I was wondering more along the lines of how a person gets to heaven."

"Oh . . . well that is a thorny question," he started, enthused by her seeking.

"I'm so used to Christians fighting each other," she noted casually, "mostly because of evangelicalism's insistence on there being only one way to get to heaven. I know that's my background, anyway. Catholicism seems to be much more syncretistic and adapt-able ... I'm just wondering where you stand on something so fundamental."

Brian prayed for guidance as he thought about how to respond. "Well, the

difference of opinion is over grace—what it is, how you get it, and what it does for you. Catholicism teaches that grace is something deposited in you—in the infant, actually, at its baptism. But for the average person who grows beyond childhood, their baptism doesn't guarantee them heaven. They have to keep receiving grace through the mass and the sacraments, and 'cooperating,' as their theologians put it, with the grace originally given to them in their baptism. Grace is essentially something that is dispensed in Catholic theology, and over and over again at that. You need as much as you can get, and your works have to blend with it to make sure it does what it's intended to do."

"And you don't believe that?"

"No. I believe grace refers to God's disposition, His kindness toward us when we were undeserving of any kindness due to our sinfulness. Regeneration is the work of the Spirit to enable us to believe that God loves us, wants to forgive us, and will do just that if we believe in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection—specifically, that he suffered on our behalf. Grace encompasses all this. The whole scope of salvation reflects God's kindness in giving it to us freely, no strings attached. We didn't earn it, so we don't need to maintain it. He transfers our sins to Christ, forgiving us for everything."

"Catholicism would teach," he continued, "that faith and works both are the result of grace, but adds the notion that a person needs to keep receiving grace—through the sacraments—and needs to keep doing good works in order to have eternal life in heaven. It sort of views salvation like two railroad tracks," he continued. "One track is grace, which is needed perpetually; the other is one's good works. The two tracks run parallel and lead to heaven. Both faith and works are necessary for salvation. Protestant theology believes a person is made righteous by God the instant he or she trusts in the gospel. Your good works extend from that faith, but you don't have to maintain your standing before God by keeping him happy with you by your works. Catholic theology blurs the distinction between having a spiritual birth and progressing as a Christian. Do you want anything in this?" he asked, stirring.

"Just some sugar. So is Andrew going to hell and would you say that to him?" she grinned mischievously.

"You go right for the jugular, don't you?" he laughed. "You should be used to it by now."

"Only Andrew and God know where Andrew has his faith, and no, I would never tell him that. I might say that to someone—Catholic or Protestant—who claimed to be following Christ but who showed no good works. If Andrew has his faith in Mary, or his baptism, or the fact that he goes to mass, then I have my doubts about him. But if he believes in his heart of hearts that the only way he's accepted by God is because of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, then his faith is well-placed—and I think his is. I won't sit in judgment on someone just because they don't use the nomenclature I do, or because their doctrine may be off a little. The issue is," he looked Melissa squarely in the eye, "are you trusting Christ for your eternal destiny, or aren't you? Here's your tea."

"Thanks ..." she said, taking the cup, "... and for the tea, too."

"Hope I answered your question."

"You've given me something to think about," she said, taking a sip. "You're a good teacher."

"I used to be ..." he sighed.

"I think I wonder who that is?" Melissa reacted as a knock

on Brian's door interrupted their conversation. Brian went to the door and opened it. It was Malcolm.

"Hey, Brian ... she's here again? Man, I need to come over here and take notes sometime," he whispered when he saw Melissa over Brian's shoulder.

"Use the back of a stamp when you do," Brian muttered under his breath. "What is it. Malcolm?"

"Either of you been online today?" he spoke up.

They both shook their heads.

"Try it *now*," he urged. Brian went and sat down at his desk. "I checked my email this morning and everything was normal, but I checked again about ten minutes ago and got this—I'll bet you did, too," he added, handing two sheets of paper to Melissa.

"One's just the first page of a website," she noted.

"Not just any website and look at the second."

She flipped the page. "A page from the USA Today weather site? What's the big deal?" she wondered, looking up from the page.

"Look at the weather report."

"Hmmm . . . two inches of snow . . . in Death Valley? Is this for real?"

"Yeah, and that's not all."

"Okay, I'm online," Brian informed him, "what am I supposed to be looking—  
whoa, what in the world's going on!"

"I knew it," Malcolm said anxiously. "I'll bet everyone on the team got this."

"What's the computer doing?" Melissa inquired, leaving the couch.

"It's some sort of executable file that changes your Internet browser's automatic homepage and sends you to this site. In another few seconds . . . there it goes!"

Brian watched closely as a second window opened, unsolicited, on his screen. It was the second page Malcolm had given Melissa.

"Whoever did this really wants to avoid being detected," Malcolm surmised.

"And wants us all to see this," said Brian, perusing the site. A series of loud knocks echoed on Brian's door.

"I'll get it," Melissa volunteered.

"She knows your passcode?"

"Yeah, I gave it to her," Brian shrugged.

"I didn't get my wedding invitation."

"Cool it, Malcolm. Who is it?" he called, still perusing the screen.

"You mean who isn't it," she replied.

Brian looked toward the door in time to watch the last of the remaining team members file into his room, including Neil.

"I was trying to find Malcolm," Mark spoke up. "He wasn't in his room, so I went down the row."

"We all came along when we realized we'd all gotten this," Deidre explained, waving the now familiar printout of the website. "Neil?" Brian asked.

"I was just on my way to see Father Benedict and saw the group moving from room to room. You got one too?"

"Yep," he said, looking at the screen.

"Do you know what this is?" Neil asked Brian, handing him the printout of the first webpage, his face full of apprehension.

"No. Never heard of the `High-frequency Active Auroral Research Project,'" he read the name of the website aloud. "I take it you have."

"It's under my jurisdiction at the DOD."

"I've heard of it too," Malcolm declared. "The padre's suspicions just may be right."

"How is that?" asked Father Benedict. "What is this High-frequency, what's-its-name—"

"HAARP," Mark said gravely, "the acronym is HAARP. I don't know much about it other than that, but when I saw this on my browser, it scared the crap out of me."

"I know what distresses me about this," Neil said to Mark, "but why are you so bothered if you don't know what it is?"

"Because of this," he announced, handing Neil the email he'd received from Kevin. "Read it for everyone."

"There's no message, but the subject line reads h-a-r-p-s-n-o-w-k-e-v."

"Harpsnowkev?" Deidre put the letters together.

"It was from Kevin!" Father Benedict cried. "The last three letters are 'Kev.'"

"Exactly, but what didn't make sense was the rest of it. I think he meant to say `harp snow.'"

"What's that?" asked Melissa.

"He must have misspelled HAARP as harp; he was probably in pain or disoriented when he typed it. Do you see the connection now?"

"He was trying to tell you about snow and this HAARP thing?" asked Brian.

"Look at the date on the snow story. Other than it being unheard of that it would snow in Death Valley," explained Mark, "what does the date tell you?"

"It snowed there on the day Kevin died," Melissa observed. "He was trying to tell you something about the snow. He must have known it was snowing outside—but how could he? We're underground."

"He was in the auroral viewing room," Neil said softly, the pieces coming together in his mind. "Good God ..."

"What the hell is this HAARP!" demanded Deidre. "HAARP," Neil began, "is a ground-based Star Wars weapon system."

"Among other things," clarified Malcolm.

"One at a time, please," Father Benedict insisted.

Neil continued, "In the early days the technology primarily focused on using the ionosphere as a sort of telecommunications shield. We discovered all our communications could be knocked out by magnetic storms, solar flares, or nuclear events, so we wanted a means to keep communication intact worldwide. Eventually, we developed the technology so that extremely low frequency radio waves could be sent through the earth itself, in addition to going through the ionosphere. The goals in that case were submarine communications, as well as the ability to jam everyone else's communicative abilities. It would also enable us to detect compliance with nuclear test bans worldwide."

"Does HAARP have any other capabilities?" Melissa asked. "Malcolm, you did say `among other things."

"Go ahead, Malcolm," Neil gave him the floor.

"I only know what I read, and what my roommate at MIT knew about it. He was

in atmospheric science, like Kevin, and spent a summer there on an internship. That's why I went to MIT; they're on top of all this stuff. HAARP is actually an antennae array located in the bush country of Alaska. Like Neil said, it can send super-powerful radio waves into the ionosphere. That's an electrically-charged layer of the earth's atmosphere about 40 or so miles above the earth's surface," Malcolm explained.

"What does that do?" asked Melissa.

"When these radio waves are sent into the ionosphere in a very focused beam," Malcolm elaborated, "specific areas of the ionosphere get heated up. These areas release electromagnetic waves back to the earth. The waves permeate everything in their path, whether it's dead or alive, and can cover a broad path or a very focused target."

"Depending on how the beam is manipulated," Neil broke in, "the electromagnetic pulse could be used as an explosive device."

"So, in other words," Brian rephrased his friend's explanation, "this antennae system could blow up large areas anywhere on the globe, or fire strategic pulses at other missiles in the sky—anywhere on earth?"

"Right—it's the Star Wars defense system, but on the ground."

"You mean this thing could set off explosive charges anywhere on the globe?"

Deidre exclaimed, eyebrows raised.

"Yes."

"Uh, how powerful would these explosions be?"

"Thermonuclear."

"I knew I shouldn't have asked. Whose brainchild was this?"

"The military's been working on the idea since the late Fifties, when it started out as Project Argus."

"What does all this have to do with snow?" asked Mark impatiently.

"Well, what else happens up there in the atmosphere?" Malcolm asked rhetorically.

"Weather," Deidre droned. "The damn thing can affect the weather, can't it?"

"You got it."

"HAARP technology has been used experimentally for rain production and lightning and hurricane control," Neil informed the team. "Those projects were called Skyfire and Stonnfury. Theoretically, it could also be used to heat the globe . . . or damage the protective ozone layer over an enemy territory ... oh my."

"Theoretically my ass!" Mark snarled. "Kevin tried to tell us they had access to this thing here. He must have seen it at work and paid for it with his life! I'll bet they've managed to fake this whole climate change."

"But why would they?" Brian questioned.

"He couldn't have gotten to see it without help," Melissa recalled. "Remember, the Colonel told us that he had no override card on him. Somebody wanted him to see this. He was a meteorologist; this would have been right up his alley."

"There's one other thing HAARP can do, theoretically," Malcolm said accusingly, looking at the undersecretary.

"Yes . . . dear God ..." Neil mumbled to himself. "They're really planning it ... I wasn't crazy after all." Before anyone could react he turned and headed for the door.

"Neil!" Brian called, "What are you doing?"

"This has to end today!" he said desperately, and carded himself out.

"Look out Colonel," Deidre said, shaking her head.

"So what else can this thing do, Malcolm?" Father Benedict urged.

"It can cause perceptual distortion and mental disruption in humans."

"Mind control?" the priest gasped.

"That's a little strong," Malcolm said seriously, "but President Carter's former National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, did say he wanted to use it to create what he called 'a more controlled and directed society.' Scary stuff."

"This is unbelievable," Brian said, reading another portion of the site. "We actually have a machine that can modify weather ... and influence peoples' mental states?"

"Yeah. And once you start disturbing the upper atmosphere," Malcolm elaborated, "there's really no limit to what you could pull off. It isn't just precipitation that could be manipulated. Heat, evaporation, wind currents—all that stuff affects tides, ocean currents, seasons, crop yield, that sort of thing. And those in turn have an impact on larger geophysical forces, like the ones that cause earthquakes. It's like something out of a Bond movie. Kevin would be able to give us a lot more detail."

"Which is why he's no longer with us," Mark said bitterly. "The bastards."

"So Mark's right," Melissa conjectured. "The kind of environmental changes that are forcing extraterrestrial disclosure could be contrived."

"Alleged extraterrestrials," Father Benedict reminded them. "I don't like how this is shaping up. Ready-made catastrophes and mental manipulation—now what good purpose could there be to all that?"

Malcolm had been pacing the room, head down, concentrating on a perspective that had begun to suggest itself in light of the new disclosures. He suddenly stopped, a disturbed look etched on his face. "I hate to sound like I'm agreeing with Father Benedict here," Malcolm said anxiously, "but what if the climate isn't the only thing they've faked? What if the biology is bogus as well? What if the bodies are phony?"

"No way," Mark objected. "We both went over the stuff in Marcus's lab. He let us conduct any inquiry we wanted. You can't fake DNA."

"Not in the sense of making DNA that isn't DNA," Malcolm's energy grew as he thought aloud. "However," Malcolm stopped and looked at Mark, "DNA can be created."

"You mean cloning."

"No, I mean creating DNA to one's own specifications—not just replication," he resumed pacing around the room, engaged in a silent intellectual struggle to grasp what was happening.

"I've never heard of such a thing; you're dreaming, Malcolm."

"Then I'm in the right place," Malcolm mused distantly. "This is Dreamland, isn't it?"

"Just what the hell are you talking about?" Melissa pressed him. He slowed his gait and then paused. He stared straight ahead at the wall he was facing, as though receiving some unexpected revelation from it, mentally interlocking the last pieces of the fantastic puzzle together.

"Nanotechnology," he answered Melissa's question somberly without so much as a glance in her direction.

"What's that?" Deidre queried.

"In simplest terms, the science of the extremely small," he answered. The team

exchanged confused glances.

"Nanotechnology is a field that combines physics, chemistry, biochemistry, and engineering. It's the attempt to create machines that are no bigger than a molecule—or three or four of them across, the actual width of a nanometer—that's one-billionth of a meter."

"Are you serious? This isn't for real, is it'?" Deidre asked.

"Yes on both counts. I took a couple courses in nanotech in grad school."

"You're telling us that we can actually build working, molecular-level machines? Come on," Mark guffawed.

"It's true—although the smallest I've ever witnessed was only as small as a strand of DNA."

"Oh, that's comforting," cracked Melissa.

"Your sarcasm is well-placed," Father Benedict said stoically. "If this kind of science is in our grasp, we'll be our own gods." "What do you mean?" Brian asked.

"You have to grasp what this kind of thing would mean," Malcolm explained. "Nanotechnology is molecular manufacturing, a process that involves building things one molecule at a time. Imagine a super computer no bigger than a cell. Theoretically, anything composed of matter could be assembled at that level artificially. Since we know how molecules are stuck together and in what combinations to form the elements, any chemical compound could be programmed into a computer the size of a nanometer, and the computer would assemble the compound. You could put some of these nanocomputers into a glass of water, and when the person drank it, the machines could be turned on by a remote control to, say, find a cancerous tumor in the stomach and zap it—disassemble the tumor into molecules and eliminate it."

"Or tell the little workhorse to manufacture nutrients in dead soil, producing arable land," Mark considered the implications, "or even materialize food on your table?"

"Yes! What's really wild is if such computers could be triggered by voice recognition software you could just speak and things would materialize. Let there be pizza! Nanotechnology is the principle behind the replicator technology in Star Trek. The possibilities really are endless."

"You could heal any disease, even reverse cell deterioration and hence aging," Melissa pondered. "It's positively ..."

"Godlike," Andrew said grimly. "Or how about putting the right nanoprobes into the air or water so that only people of a certain race would contract a fatal disease?"

"Always looking on the bright side," Deidre said facetiously.

"If I've thought of it," Andrew scowled, "I'm not the first. And I might add," he commented, "that this kind of technology is another artificial method of reproduction, in a manner of speaking." Brian looked at the old priest, knowing instinctively where he was going with the observation

"You're suggesting," Brian turned to Malcolm, his mind racing through the events of the past few days, "that the alien beings we saw were made of real organic . . . stuff. . . complete with unique DNA, all manufactured with the aid of this technology?"

"Only theoretically. Such advanced applications aren't reality yet."

"Yeah, like everything else we've seen around here," Melissa remarked.

"And these nanoprobes could be introduced to the body in a variety of ways—like ingestion, in your example?" asked Brian.



"Sure."

"Is there any obstacle to saying that nanotechnology could rebuild muscles and nerves?" he asked apprehensively.

"Nope. Like I said, anything that can be broken down to molecules could be reproduced if the atomic and molecular composition of the object was already known or determinable. You could manufacture anything out of thin air—although there would be more there than air; you just couldn't see it."

Brian looked at Melissa, whose speechless expression told him immediately that she had followed his thoughts, and then back at Malcolm.

"What would it take to materialize a human body?" he continued. His mouth had become suddenly dry.

"At least a thorough knowledge of the biochemistry of the human body. Knowing the human genome wouldn't hurt either . . . are you thinking what I think you're thinking?"

"I know we're in the realm of science fiction here—" Brian began.

"I think this place has a zip code there," cracked Deidre.

"—But the nanotechnology idea holds a lot of explanatory power for what Melissa and I experienced. I'm willing to bet that Melissa's visitor staged that brief demonstration to show us what could be done here. It certainly got my attention."

"That's wild . . . but possible, if the technology exists."

"Would these nanoprobes be at all traceable?" Brian asked another question.

"Sure. All you'd need is an atomic resolution microscope that could image individual atoms. We have one here in the lab we use. Why do you . . . ? Ohhhh, wow . . . now that's a little less fantastic—and checkable."

"Let's go."

Brian, Melissa, Mark, and Malcolm hurried toward the lab, moving as quickly but inconspicuously as they could, each of them filled with a mixture of expectancy and dread. If Brian's unvoiced speculation were true, it would expose another layer of deception laid by the mysterious Group. It would also push them even further toward the conclusion that the crisis ostensibly moving humanity closer to extra-terrestrial contact was a farce. These potential revelations notwithstanding, other questions still begged for answers: Who or what was Adam? Could there still be non-human beings at the Facility, and if so, what was their true nature, and what did they want? Who had tried to warn Melissa and Kevin? Who had taken the latter's life, and now sought to take Melissa's?

"You're sure Dr. Hastings injected you in the left arm on the way to Mount Weather?" Malcolm asked, preparing to take some of Brian's blood.

"Absolutelyhe stuck me when we got there, too. Every other time it had been in the rump. It had to be deliberate."

"Maybe . . . only one way to find out . . . make a fist."

Malcolm found a vein, inserted the needle into Brian's arm, and withdrew the sample.

"What do you think you'll find?" asked Melissa. "Do you know what you're looking for?"

"Anything unusual," he answered, mounting the slide. "We'll know in a second."

"This would be unbelievable," Melissa shook her head. "Shooting nanoprobes into you that restored your arm. This place is starting to give me the creeps. How do you know what's even real? What was Adam doing with you if you're right—I know he's

real; I didn't imagine getting my head filled with a non-existent presence. He was in there."

"Jackpot, folks," Malcolm said, peering into the scope. "Wanna take a look at the impossible Mark?"

"Holeee shit!" he exclaimed as he watched tiny, bumpy structures floating across the slide. "What are those things?"

"Nanomachines. Each bump is a single molecule. Not some-thing you're born with, for sure."

"And their job is?" asked Melissa, taking a look.

"My guess is to reassemble muscle, tissue, blood, cartilage, skin—everything necessary for a functioning, restored appendage, and all programmed to put everything where it belongs."

"Fantastic!" Brian gasped.

"And proof," a voice behind them said, "proof that we've all been used." Neil closed the door behind him, having let himself in unnoticed. The undersecretary stood before them, unmoving, a look of bewildered desperation on his sweat-streaked face.

"What is it, Neil?" Brian asked, backing away from the micro-scope.

"Uh, Brian," Mark observed in a hushed tone, "your friend has a gun."

Their collective attention moved quickly down to the semi-automatic pistol in his hand.

"It also has a silencer," Melissa managed quietly, her mouth becoming suddenly dry.

"I never intended for things to turn out this way," he said to Brian, his voice filled with regret. "I didn't know ... you have to believe me," he pleaded.

"I do, Neil," Brian said, trying to stay calm. "Why don't you put the gun away and tell us what the problem is. I think we'd all feel a lot better if you did."

"I believed the Colonel . . . and the Group," he continued, recounting the events that had brought them together. "I needed you here; it was too much for me to handle, and I knew you would have the answers . . . turns out you had too many ..."

"Why don't you tell us what you know," Brian tried to reason with him.

"I didn't know ..." he repeated himself, looking around the room, his eyes betraying an inner panic, "I'm so sorry."

"What kind of trouble are you in, Neil?" Melissa asked gently. "Let us help you; we need to stick together."

"Trouble? I'm in no trouble," he growled, suddenly turning antagonistic. "It's humanity that's in trouble ... all because of them ... and you!" he bellowed at Melissa.

"Me?"

"Neil, what are you talking about . . . we can solve whatever crisis you see coming," Brian tried again, but he could see his friend slowly slipping toward the point of impulse.

"No you can't! You don't understand ... she's the key to their plans."

"You!" she blurted out. "It's been you all this time! You're the one who's been trying to kill me."

Neil hesitated, as though even at this point he could absolve himself of guilt, as though he could avoid the shame of his comrades' gaze.

"I can't believe it!" Brian moaned in despair.

"It's true . . . I never meant for you to get hurt, Brian . . . you know that."

Brian could only stare in shock at the man who'd mentored him, who'd been his surrogate father, his friend.

"I'd arranged to take a later flight that morning . . . I sabotaged the second jeep, and ordered the MP to make sure you were the one left behind waiting," he said, staring at Melissa. "I knew I'd have to kill him later to avoid detection, but that was of little consequence compared to what I'd learned had to be done. I was inside . . . taking care of the other MP with the dogs when the first jeep left. I thought you were on it, Brian. I had no idea you'd overslept. Once I'd let the dogs outside, there was nothing I could do."

"But why?"

"It's all in here," he said, reaching into his lapel pocket.

Mark bolted for the armed man, seizing the opportunity. Neil tried to sidestep his advance, but he deftly grabbed Neil's gunhand by the wrist. The two of them struggled for control of the weapon. Mark stuck his hand in the undersecretary's face, and began to push him toward the wall, and the two of them careened into a table. His balance upset, Mark slipped and pulled Neil down on top of himself. Neither man surrendered his grip despite the struggle. Neil suddenly gained the upper hand, rolling on top of Mark, but leaving his own back unprotected. Malcolm took a step toward the scuffling duo, but by that time Neil had jammed his free elbow into his adversary's face. The pain caused Mark to lose his hold for a few seconds, but it was all the opening Neil needed. The three onlookers watched in horror as the graying man fired off two rounds into the prone scientist.

"What are you doing!" Brian shrieked in disbelief.

Neil got to his knees and then his feet. He wiped his brow and staggered toward them.

"You just murdered a man!" Brian screamed at him. "Are you insane!"

"No ... ," he gasped, catching his breath. "You'll understand when you read this," he reached once again into his suitcoat and pulled out an envelope. Brian didn't move.

"Take it!" Neil shouted. Brian obeyed him.

"Put it away, out of sight!" he insisted. "You mustn't let anyone see it." Brian again complied, folding the envelope and inserting it into his pants pocket.

"Now," he said, straightening himself and gathering his re-solve. "It's time to finish what they've started."

Neil raised his weapon and aimed it at Melissa, but before he could squeeze the trigger Brian stepped into the line of fire.

"Get out of the way, Brian," he demanded, lowering the weapon to his waist.

"No."

"I said get out of the way. They have to be stopped . . . you know the power they have."

"Neil, my arm wasn't healed by Adam—that's why we're here."

"I know that!" he snapped, becoming agitated once again. "I heard the whole thing. I'm not talking about that little charade, I'm talking about your research—you were right; they're pure evil . . . now stand aside!"

"I'm not moving," he said resolutely, feeling for Melissa behind him. "You'll have to shoot me."

Neil closed his eyes in anguish; terror and regret mingled in his face.

"I love you, Brian," he said, opening his eyes, "but it's better for only one more to die, even if it's you, than millions."

Brian swallowed hard. Neil raised the pistol and took aim. A shot pierced the tense silence, and then another, amid a hailshower of glass. Brian, Melissa, and Malcolm watched Neil's body absorb the bullets fired by the MP's rifle through the laboratory window from outside the hallway. Neil was dead before he hit the floor. The Colonel and his entourage carded the door and burst into the room.

## CHAPTER 33

"One death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic." —*Josef Stalin*

"I'M SORRY FOR your loss, Doctor," a disoriented Brian vaguely heard over the crunch of glass under the soldier's boots. "I know he was a good friend. I just wish I had an explanation for his behavior. We had no choice."

Brian wiped the tears from his face and looked up at the Colonel from where he sat on the floor, back against one of the walls of the lab, staring at the floor between his knees. The officer looked uneasily into his eyes, unsure of what else to add. "I know," Brian acknowledged politely, and resumed his position. He was still in shock over what had happened, but perhaps more over what had nearly happened. What could possibly have driven Neil so far over the edge that he'd not only be willing to kill, but to kill *him*?

"Brian ..." Melissa's familiar voice beckoned gently.

"Better not get too close," he mumbled a warning. "People who spend too much time around me tend to wind up dead."

"Don't talk like that," she tried to soothe him.

"It's true," he scoffed, "those who don't excuse themselves from my life voluntarily get removed somehow or another."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Then you're not as bright as I thought you were."

"Enough!" she scolded him. "You're the one who told me that everything happens for a reason. I'm not going to let you excuse God or yourself from this. The universe doesn't revolve around you any more than it does me."

Brian said nothing, stung more by her words than his own thrown back at him. He couldn't tell her how unjust he felt this latest providential twist of fate was, either. He had only to recall her own experience to know he had no corner on feeling maltreated.

"This is just really . . . hard to take."

"I know," she comforted him, and sat down next to him and took hold of his arm. "I know what betrayal feels like."

"I guess I do feel some of that, but . . . somehow I don't feel like he looked at me any differently than usual. What could compel him to make that kind of decision—and what about what he said, that millions would die if you lived? It's just lunacy."

"I think you need to face up to the fact that Neil just cracked for some reason. You saw how agitated and distressed he was. Something inside just snapped."

"It makes no sense. Stuff like what we're doing was his life."

"It doesn't make sense because there's no sense to it. He just reached the breaking point. That's why the psychological screening is so thorough here . . . unfortunately, the process isn't foolproof."

"How's Malcolm?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Fine. He just needed something to calm his nerves. They already took him back to his room."

"How are you?" he followed.

"A scratch or two from the glass, but fine . . . thanks to you again. How often do you think you're going to have to save my life?"

"I'd say until you learn not to bother with me."

"I wouldn't give you the satisfaction. You'll get admiration and sympathy from me, but not pity. Now promise me you'll stop this damn whimpering."

"You don't take any prisoners, do you?"

"Never have," she smiled, "and I'm not going to start now. Speaking of prisoners," she noted, gazing across the room, "I over-heard the Colonel muttering something about confining us. It looks like he's giving the marching orders to those two Marines."

Brian followed her glance and observed the grim-faced colonel instructing two MPs and pointing to the two of them.

"I don't trust him, Brian."

"Why would you believe that part of what Neil said?"

"I don't need Neil's word on him. I haven't trusted him from the beginning."

"We'd better zip it," Brian advised, taking notice of the Colonel's deliberate gait in their direction, followed closely by the two sentries.

"These two Marines will escort you both back to Brian's room, and will stand guard outside," the Colonel informed them. They exchanged a puzzled glance.

"It isn't permanent, obviously," he continued, "but this isn't over yet. I hope you recall that Neil had nothing to do with Kevin's death; then there's Melissa's unexpected visitor. We've still got trouble, so I want the two of you together. At least I know I can trust you," he added, looking at Brian.

"Colonel," Melissa broke in, "how did you know we were in trouble with Neil?"

"We've been tracking Dr. Bandstra by means of his cardkey for most of the day," he answered. "We suspected he was the one who'd tried to kill you in the cafeteria, but we were waiting for proof."

"What made you suspect him?" Brian asked.

"Lack of alternatives, initially. Since it was his pie we played a hunch that he was somehow connected to the incident."

"But the kitchen staff said no one had used their equipment."

"He didn't have to. I gave him a day's leave while you two were still at Groom Lake. He lives less than thirty miles from Mount Weather. He also had access to the dossier we've collected on you. We had his kitchen examined for evidence this morning, and found a partially used bottle of peanut oil there. We got the results of the fingerprinting this afternoon. We still didn't know absolutely if the evidence was more than circumstantial, since it wouldn't have been strange to find his prints on any item in his own kitchen, but we kept watch on him anyway. We didn't think he'd try anything in Brian's room because he had no weapon; at least he hadn't at the noon hour. Once he left there and went back to his own room, we figured some-thing was up. We followed him to the lab, and the rest you know."

"But how did he do it—the pie, I mean?"

"My best guess is, knowing the pie would be on the serving line at lunch, he was one of the first in line to make sure he'd get a piece. He took a calculated risk that no one else would have the same food allergy. He had nothing to lose by leaving the piece for you, hoping you'd take it. He couldn't very well offer it to you since that would amount to self-incrimination. He more or less engineered the circumstances where you would be

vulnerable. If you didn't go for it, nothing would be lost, but if you did ..."

"Does everyone else know about this yet?"

"No. Once we trailed Neil to the lab we confined the other team members to quarters with a guard posted at each door. They don't know why yet. You two are being put under the same protection as well. No one is allowed entrance. If anyone who's authorized by me wants in, they can use their own card. You're also not to leave under any circumstances. Is that understood?"

They both nodded.

"Good. Marines !" The two armed MPs snapped to readiness. "Get these people out of here."

The two guards accompanied Brian and Melissa to his room. Brian swiped his card silently and entered his access code. One MP immediately departed as soon as the door opened; the other took his post.

"So where do we go from here?" she muttered, as the door closed behind them.

"No idea," he answered, flicking the light switch. Nothing happened.

"Wonderful," she complained.

"Convenient, is much more accurate," a familiar male voice resonated from the blackness. "Don't either of you move," the voice warned, accompanied by the double-click of his weapon.

"Who—" Brian tried to ask, but Melissa stopped him.

"Figures you'd show up about now."

"Your visitor?" Brian whispered.

"Brilliant deduction, Dr. Scott, and there's no need to whisper. These rooms are soundproof. Have a seat on the couch, but don't get too cozy."

Brian and Melissa found the couch, their eyes adjusting to the darkened room, lit only by the screen of Brian's computer. They could make out the form of their intruder where he stood, whom Melissa now discerned by his hat was a military officer.

"If you're going to kill us," Melissa said angrily, "at least have the courage to let us know who you are."

"Come now, Miss Kelley. You of all people should know I have no intention of harming either of you. I'm here first of all to at least try and get your asses off this base ... it's the least I can do," his voice trailed off curiously.

"Why do we need to get out of here so urgently?" Brian asked.

"Weren't you listening to your friend before they shot him? You've been used. The Colonel cannot be trusted."

"Since you were listening and I'd like to know how you managed that," Melissa remarked, "you know my would-be assassin is dead. I'm no longer in danger."

"True . . . Your assassin is dead, of course, and you aren't in any immediate danger. I never said the Colonel meant you harm, only that you must not trust him."

"That makes no sense," Brian insisted. "Why did you say we need to leave then?"

"Because ..." he hesitated, ". . . I owe it to both of you."

"I want to know who you are," Melissa stood up defiantly, her curiosity getting the best of her.

"No!" he shouted, and put the gun to his own head. "Not until you hear what I have to say! Take one more step and you'll never know why you were brought here. I swear I'll shoot." Melissa reluctantly sat down again.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I'll get to that. Right now, I need to tell you what I know, and do it quickly. You may find it useful in the future, providing you have one. You were both brought here because the Group wanted a team of experts to be convinced that the disclosure of an extraterrestrial reality was imminent."

"We already know that," Brian noted.

"You know what they want you to know their cover, their grand illusion to conceal their true intention. You don't have any idea what the real truth is. You were deliberately fed the false scenario of the ET virus for the specific purpose of making you more credulous when they 'came clean' and introduced the notion that intelligent extraterrestrial life had forced the Group into complying with the ETs' wishes of disclosure and mutual co-existence. That was a lie as well. There never was such an ultimatum."

"Then all that documentation about UFOs was phony?" Brian asked.

"No . . . actually, that's all quite real."

"Then, how—"

"If you'll allow me to finish ..."

"Fine."

"Our government has indeed possessed technology for fantastic flying craft since the late Forties. But, as you assumed early on, Dr. Scott, this technology was an outgrowth of Operation Paperclip."

"So it's entirely human."

"No—although if you had asked me that a month ago, I'd have answered in the affirmative. Up until Dr. Garvey's unfortunate death—and he was murdered, but not by me, or Dr. Bandstra, for that matter I had never seen a true non-human life form, and I'm in a position to know."

"As a member of the Group," Melissa recalled their earlier meeting.

"Yes ...I've been in their employ and part of their efforts for the last six years."

"So now you believe the technology is alien?" Brian asked, confused. "We were told the MJ-12 documents contained disinformation. Which is it? Surely you aren't saying that someone classified them all those years ago just so someone could request them fifty years later and demonstrate a UFO cover-up."

"Of course not. The Freedom of Information Act didn't even exist then. They were Top Secret for reasons of national security, and, except for the MJ-12 documents, are genuine. The documentation trail is just as Major Lindsay laid out. Everything really goes back to Roswell. For what it's worth, Dr. Harper's version of events is the truth—Paperclip scientists were nearly caught red-handed in human experimentation that day, and had to invent a cover story. Due to the unusual appearance of the bodies—they were all mongoloid children—and Kenneth Arnold's recent flying saucer sighting, that seemed to be the best scenario. It had the double benefit of meriting the security that retrieval required, and creating a mythology so attractive that no one who distrusted the government would be dissuaded from it. The Nazi butchers on our payroll would never have to worry about anyone prying into the connection between the Roswell craft and captured German technology. The succeeding memos document only the cover story concocted by MJ-12. They call themselves the Group now to avoid their real name ever showing up in even classified materials."



"But now you think there are aliens?" Melissa repeated the question. "Why should we believe this new twist?"

"Yes . . . I believe there are beings . . . because I saw one kill Dr. Garvey."

"What!"

"I was the one who induced Dr. Garvey to go to the auroral viewing room for precisely the reasons Dr. Bradley deduced. The Group has access to fully functional HAARP technology here. Our nanotechnology is also thirty years ahead of where the best civilian scientists are. I staged the morning after rendezvous for the two of you to show you the ease with which we can create any alternative reality we wish. Incidentally, the human genome has already been mapped; we achieved that almost a decade ago."

"You mean to tell me you basically . . . materialized a Melissa in my bed and vice versa?"

"Yes, we have complete DNA information on each of you via the blood samples we took when you got here, as well as the necessary genetic information for body type, hair color, etc. The only tricks to doing what I did are facial appearance, vocal quality, sentient memory ... things like that. I tried to engineer the circumstances so that each of you would glimpse the body very briefly, and then only from behind, hoping you would each figure out who was being represented. If you had turned the specimen over you would have discovered the ruse, but the point would have been made—you each would have had a human body in your bed, at least for as long as I wanted it there.

"How did you get the bodies out of the room especially when the security logs indicated no one entered or left?"

"Nanotechnology by its very definition allowed me to place the necessary nano-material in your beds while each of you were out of your rooms earlier that evening. I have full access to the security logs, so I deleted my entries into each of your rooms. As for the bodies, there was no need to remove them. I simply programmed them to disintegrate on command by remote control. The specimens returned to the molecular level in a matter of minutes. I had merely to wait till each of you left the room for showering, and took care of the evidence."

"What was that smell we detected in our rooms?" Brian wondered.

"That's an after-effect of the compositional breakdown of the organic material which comprised the specimen. The molecular decomposition of the material creates a thermal reaction, which in turn causes some of the elements to be burned away, ergo the smell. We've been working on that problem, but haven't been able to totally eliminate it."

"But how did you know when to zap the bodies?" asked Melissa. "What if we had walked in on what was happening."

"It was a risk I had to take, but I felt confident I could time the disposal process adequately. I could know that the opportunity presented itself because I placed listening devices in your room—just the low-tech variety—stuck under an end table and behind a dresser."

Missella took a half step toward the bedroom, but stopped herself, remembering the intruder's threat.

"You wouldn't have found the devices anyway, Miss Kelley. I've already removed them both. They're in my pocket."

"I just can't believe that we possess this kind of technology," Melissa said, shaking her head. "I mean, making a machine the size of a strand of DNA like Malcolm

saw in graduate school is amazing enough, but these kinds of applications are just science fiction."

"I understand your skepticism, Doctor, but the fact remains that we do have these capabilities. I wanted to give you a dramatic demonstration, so when the time came that you either figured things out for yourself or I found it necessary to reveal what I had done, you would begin to see the implications of what might be possible—what the group might in fact, and has in fact, used this technology for."

"Where did the Group get this technology?" Brian interrupted his explanation with another question.

"That's been the latest revelation in my own odyssey. Before what I saw in the auroral room, I'd assumed the answer to that question was simply German scientists. Now, I believe the technology—antigravity, advances in nanotechnology, and so on was passed on to the Germans by *them* . . . your Watchers, Dr. Scott. They gave the Nazis the building blocks of all these advances first, but the Third Reich was defeated in World War II . . . at least on the battlefield. Up until Dr. Garvey's murder, I'd never have believed they existed. In fact, before your presentation the conference room is bugged of course—I'd never even heard the term. It's the only explanation that makes any sense to me now."

"Oh, come on—"

"I was in the room with Garvey," the mysterious figure continued, "but he didn't know it. I wanted to see if he could figure out what was going on in front of him, to avoid revealing myself to any-one else on the team. He got it all right, but before he could do any-thing with the knowledge, this . . . *thing* just came out of nowhere, and I mean no-where—right through the wall. It would have seen me, but I was behind it and off to the side. It must have been close to eight feet tall . . . thin but muscular, not small and gaunt like the little Grays . . . the skin had a burnished appearance. All it did was look at Garvey, and the poor gory just went up in the air and hung there. It must have just squeezed the life out of him, the way he was thrashing. Damnedest thing I've ever seen."

"Wait a minute," Melissa objected. "If you're on the Group and didn't know about these things—and I'm not saying I believe you—then how could the Group be in charge of all this?"

"Very astute observation, Miss Kelley. My guess is that these beings are using the Group the way the Group uses everyone else, without their knowledge. You see, once you were convinced that these little gray aliens were true extraterrestrials, we were going to mass produce them via nanotechnology for staging ET events."

"Malcolm's dream ..." Brian mumbled, looking at Melissa.

"And my own . . . whatever it was . . . experience."

"What?" the mysterious officer asked.

"Nothing ..." Brian remarked. "Some things happened along the way that confirm what you just said."

"I have another question," Melissa broke in, skepticism still resident in her voice. "If the small Grays are manufactured, how is it that they seem to be alive? It appeared to all of us that Adam was a living, thinking being."

"What would you get if you cloned a human being, Dr. Kelley?"

"A human being."

"Exactly. Sentience and intelligence are biologically transferable properties. Just

as when a man and woman create a child the old fashioned way, the brain function and conscious life are contained in the genetics of what's been conceived. Nanotechnology is just one-upping cloning. Instead of copying the genetic material of something in a cell and nurturing it along until birth or maturity, nanotechnology assembles not only the first cell, but all the cells from the ground up. It is at this point that Dr. Scott's Watchers hypothesis makes the most sense to me. How would we humans know how one of these beings is made genetically? We just don't have the recipe."

"I have a feeling there's more to this scenario," Brian speculated.

"Your instincts are correct, Doctor. Once `disclosure' was accomplished, with the help of your team's acclimation efforts, another staged event was planned: a phony conflict between us and the ETs, a contrived misunderstanding that would result in violent, global conflict."

"But why? That's what they supposedly wanted to avoid."

"The issue is control. Once everyone believed these beings were real and technologically superior, the solution for protecting humanity from them that would be paraded before the world would be a one-world, global government."

"Led by the Group," Brian concluded.

"Exactly. And, as you likely now know, HAARP could be used to, shall we say, nurture obedience in the masses should that be necessary. It's all part of their Agenda."

"Mount Weather is basically a staging area then."

"Correct—a great place for `protecting' a bewildered populace from the phantom enemy. There are dozens of such hideaways throughout the United States, and hundreds more that are smaller and less well-equipped. With HAARP we could cause any number of catastrophes—explosions at the nuclear level, earthquakes, floods and say the ETs were reinstating their policy of environmental ruin. We also have enough bioweapons to poison earth's fresh water supply. The level of upheaval would only need to be commensurate with the level of resistance to the Group's ultimate power grab. Hell, we could stage Armageddon if we wanted," he added, turning in Brian's direction.

"How did Dr. Bandstra's desire to kill me mesh with his goal of undermining the project?" Melissa inquired.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"The mole on our team; you said his goal was undermining the project."

"Bandstra wasn't the mole."

"What!"

"You heard me. The person who has sought to undermine the project has been trying to do so for months. Bandstra believed in the project, but only because he'd been told that disclosure was the goal. He didn't know what the Group's true Agenda was; we don't tell outsiders things like that, even when they're that high in project leadership. I have no idea why he was so hell-bent on killing you. In fact, I didn't even know who was behind the other attempts until today, when he tried again."

"If you don't share that kind of information with outsiders," Brian reasoned, "then why are you telling us all this? What's in it for you?"

Brian's question was met with eerie silence. He looked over at Melissa, whose stare was riveted on the shadowy figure.

"I have grown," the stranger finally spoke, "to despise the Group and what it stands for."

"But you could take them down without helping us," Melissa was quick to point out.

"Yes . . . I could."

"So why don't you?"

"Stand up, both of you," the man ordered from the darkness. "The time has come," he said cryptically, the gleam of his pistol catching their eye. Brian and Melissa complied apprehensively.

"Here's my personal pass key—the access code is 9663," he said, throwing the card on the floor at Brian's feet, "and a floor plan of the Facility. The way out is marked. It's a very convoluted route, since I've marked those doors that do not require a retina or palm scan. I can't guarantee you'll make it, but at least you have a chance. There's a jeep waiting topside. If you get out without alerting security, your own clearance badges will be good enough to get through the gate checks. It's the best I can do."

"Why don't you just walk us out?" Brian asked.

"Because I'll be dead."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I won't be alive what the hell do you think it means?"

"Are you going to shoot yourself?" Melissa asked. "No ... one of you is."

"What?" scoffed Melissa.

"You must be nuts," Brian added. "There's no way we're going to do anything like that."

"I think you'll fight for the job," he said, moving toward Brian's desk. "You didn't ask me why I've come to despise the Group as I do. I hate them because of what they've had me do for them, how they've dehumanized me in return for their precious secrets . . . not that I was an unwilling subject at the beginning, mind you. I was already well on the way to becoming what they've made me. I guess the simplest way to explain why I'm doing this is ... guilt."

Brian and Melissa exchanged confused glances.

"I know it's impossible to make amends ..." he said haltingly. "It takes a despicable man to do despicable things ... I'm sorry, Melissa, for what I did to you," he finished, and turned on the light on the desk, exposing his face. Melissa gasped, and stumbled backward. "It can't be ... this just isn't possible ... *Oh, my God!*"

"You know this guy?" Brian asked in amazement.

"It's him," she said in a daze. "Greg ... Greg Sheppard."

"The guy who raped you?"

Melissa sank back onto the couch, shocked into speechlessness by the revelation.

"After Penn State I took my officer's commission," Major Sheppard informed them dispassionately. "I spent most of my time overseas, actually. I eventually wound up in the intelligence field, and served under General Stanford Hartwig in a variety of capacities. He's the leader of MJ-12 presently. Six years ago he recruited me into the Group."

"You bastard!" Melissa ranted, finally recovered from the jolt.

"When I saw your name on the list of targeted experts," he continued, "I couldn't believe it was actually you. It didn't take much digging to confirm the equation. If it sounds more consistent, you should know I didn't decide then to help you. I knew you were going to be on the team for weeks, and didn't care. It was only when we started

investigating Dr. Scott that I began to think about the course of my life. You must understand, Doctor," he turned his attention to Brian, "you've been watched for the past several years, ever since your views on Christianity and ETs became public in an adult Sun-day School class you were teaching."

"You must be kidding."

"Hardly. You mentioned the topic in passing while discussing your views on the image of God. You of course didn't realize it, but the Group is in touch with a vast network of contacts that ultimately reaches into Christian churches."

"That's ridiculous," Brian scoffed.

"Is it? I'm sure Melissa could tell you that a good number of militia groups have conservative Christians in them."

"Why would the Group care?"

"Two reasons actually. One concerns assessing the threat such groups might present to the idea of global government. The other is more far-reaching . . . the Group has a special interest in neo-Nazi ideology, but that's a connection you'll have to explore yourself. The Group monitors all such groups, and regularly receives reports on anything of interest said in them. One such report concerned your comments. Needless to say, the Group took an interest, particularly given your credentials."

"Why would that make any difference to you personally?" Brian contested, struggling to keep his anger under control. His words to Melissa about forgiveness echoed faintly in his mind, but he too felt a loathing for the source of her suffering.

"I see in you . . . what I might have been . . . what I should have been, but can now never be. I know you feel that you have little to show for your journey, Dr. Scott, but you have something I can never have again: integrity. You see, Doctor," he said, straightening his uniform and standing erect, "what I did to Melissa wasn't the most heinous crime I've ever committed . . . that dishonor goes to killing your parents."

Brian gawked at the officer in utter disbelief, jaw wide open. Major Sheppard moved a step closer and looked Brian in the eye. Slowly the features of the officer visually harmonized with Brian's memories of the convenience store videotape. He was the gunman.

"As I said, the Group had been scrutinizing you for several years, Doctor," the major informed him matter-of-factly. "The Group recognized immediately how useful your position on religion and extraterrestrial life would be to its aim of control. Conservative religionists are always the most unstable element when it comes to governmental restraint, particularly when such restraint is tied to paradigm shifts that threaten their belief system's very coherence. Once we had you investigated, we discovered your relationship with Dr. Bandstra, whose position in the DOD was deemed advantageous to the project. You became ideal, even vital, to the plan. The only problem was that you had close relatives still alive. The Group found it essential that you be isolated for reasons you've already been informed about ..."

"Found it essential?" Brian said bitterly, his dumbfounded expression giving way to pent up rage. "The Group 'found it essential' to just murder innocent people in cold blood in case they decided to 'recruit' me!" he bellowed at the officer.

"Yes," Major Sheppard answered, holding up his firearm to make sure the safety was off. The weapon was the only thing keeping Brian where he stood.

Melissa turned toward the couch, hands on her hips, trying to process the flurry of

unexpected, shocking information.

"You're absolutely gutless!" Brian seethed through clenched teeth. "I could just—"

"Kill me?" the major seized the opening. "I was hoping you would have as much contempt for my life as I do. I have no expectation that you would forgive me, and don't deserve any compassion. Besides, there would be nothing to gain. I'm a dead man already. Coming here at this time sealed my fate."

"What do you mean?" Melissa asked quietly, staring at the wall.

"After your seduction fiasco with Dr. Scott, the Colonel gave orders that all master cardkeys, including those held by Group members, be taken off the security system. Consequently, I had to use my own ID card to get in here, the one you have now. It may be five minutes from now or five days, but sooner or later he'll discover that I came here and he'll put things together. Even if you don't succeed in escaping, I'll still be dead—eventually."

"My heart's breaking," Melissa taunted him.

"What did you mean by `eventually?'" Brian asked resent-fully, still seething with rage.

"They won't kill me right away. They'll do other things to me first. They don't do it to be vindictive, mind you. They just take the opportunity to utilize a human subject for one of their experiments. You do realize that the Nazi doctors had proteges, don't you? Or that some of the experiments conducted during the holocaust had very lengthy time-tables? You have no idea how deep the well of MJ-12 goes, Doctor, and who occupies space at the Group's boardroom table. Which is why ..." he said, turning the gun around and extending it to Brian, "I would like one of you to kill me first . . . I don't want to die dishonorably by my own hand. I hope the information I've given you, and the chance to get out of here without ending up as two more puppets in the hands of the Group, are payment enough for this re-quest. When you're finished, keep the weapon; you may need it. My only request is not to be shot in the back; I want to die like a soldier. I would be especially grateful if you would do it, Dr. Scott. I'd like to die at the hands of a better man than myself."

Brian stared at the shimmering, polished sidearm, but didn't move. By this time Melissa had turned back to face her adversary. She watched Brian closely, unsure of what his next move would be. She could see the temptation etched on his face, the building inner compulsion to lash out at the source of so much of his pain. She could identify with all of it only too well. Her mind raced back through her past, replaying the loss of her virtue in such an ignoble, repulsive way. She recalled Greg's smug expression in his father's office as her own father succumbed to the manipulative scheme that allowed her rapist and his fellow reprobates to go unpunished. Then there was the emotional torment of the realization that she'd allowed the child within her to be butchered.

She watched breathlessly as Brian took the gun from Greg's hand. Her mind, aroused by the remembrances of the crimes committed against her, screamed for justice. She could tell by the cold, inflexible stare on Brian's face that he craved revenge as well. But inside her, another voice beckoned her to consider memories more recent . . . Brian's insistence that she forgive and move on . . . her own contemplation, laying awake at night, of taking his advice . . . those moments of emotional insight intuitively reassuring her this road less traveled was the right path. She looked once more into Brian's eyes and recognized the titanic struggle for what it would mean—a descent into moral am-

bivalence.

"Brian," she whispered, coming alongside him, placing her hand on the arm that held the weapon, "put it down."

Brian closed his eyes, fighting the demons within that fueled his fury. Major Sheppard said nothing, but remained at attention, awaiting the young scholar's decision.

"Put it down," she coaxed him again. "If you do this, your life will never be the same . . . our lives will never be the same."

He turned and looked at her warm, lovely face, surprised at the calm he read upon it. "It's the right thing to do," she said in a hushed voice, a faint, reassuring smile pursing her lips. She moved her hand to the gun and felt his grip relax.

"You're right," he handed her the gun. She put her arm around his waist and hugged him, her cheek resting on his chest. She released him, observing the major's troubled expression, and placed the gun on a nearby end table. Brian took a deep breath.

"God never gave me the authority to decide who lives and dies, Mr. Sheppard, but he does require me to obey. I forgive you . . . not because I feel like it, but because it pleases God . . . and infuriates the wicked forces that want to mold me in your image. You'll live or die by God's hand, not mine. Make the most of His patience."

The recognizable click of the door suddenly drew their attention from the tension in the room. Father Benedict hastily entered the room and approached them. He looked disdainfully at the major, but without surprise.

"What are your plans now, Major?" the priest demanded defiantly.

"How did you know—?" Brian asked immediately, before the uniformed officer, still at attention, could answer.

"There's a listening device in your backpack in the lining of the smallest pocket."

Melissa spied the pack next to Brian's desk and wasted no time in checking. To her alarm, the priest's statement was true. There was a small hole in the interior stitching, and she plucked the device from it. "Looks like you forgot to tell us about this one, Greg," she muttered angrily.

"He didn't put it there," the priest informed her. "I did."

Brian cast an uneasy glance at Andrew.

"It had nothing to do with trust," he tried to explain.

"How can he be sure?" the major asked provocatively.

"Young man," Father Benedict addressed the major curtly and approached him, "are you Catholic?"

"No, sir, I'm not," he answered, curious as to the relevance of the question.

"Would you agree that, like Dr. Scott, I'm a better man than yourself?"

"Yes," he answered, "that wouldn't take much."

Brian glanced curiously at Andrew, just in time to see him pull a pistol, fitted with a silencer, from his lapel and, in a single, fluid motion, fire a bullet into the major's forehead. Melissa screamed, startled by the violent act.

"How fortunate," Father Benedict droned, looking down at the body while replacing his weapon, "no need for the last rites, plus you die as you wished."

"Good God, Andrew!" Brian clamored, watching the blood and cranial fluid ooze from the major's skull. "What have you done!"

"I think that's pretty obvious," he replied passively, as one who'd killed before. "What may not be as apparent is why I did it."

"I don't care why you did it! You just killed a man! How in God's name can you

justify this!" Brian shouted.

"We're in the midst of a holy war!" he growled, his anger aroused. "The sooner you realize that, the better. Think of me as your Rahab," he added, calming down.

"So we're supposed to believe that you just murdered this guy in order to—"

"Save your lives? Yes, that's what you're supposed to believe," he glanced at the stunned woman.

"He was no threat; he was trying to help us," Brian pro-tested. "I thought you were listening."

"We'd better get the Colonel," Melissa fretted. "I can't believe that guard didn't break down the door—wait a minute, how did you get in here anyway?"

"The guard left soon after you entered. I sent him away when I dismissed the others. I got in because I have access to this room—to all the rooms, actually. I have from the beginning."

Father Benedict waited for a response, but Brian and Melissa were speechless.

"This man would have killed you both when he was done using you," he asserted. "Although there's a remote possibility his guilt was genuine, he was most likely soliciting your trust for some future advantage."

"But he wanted us to kill him," Brian argued.

"I'll wager he was counting on your own goodness that you wouldn't go through with it," he countered.

"You sound paranoid, Father," Melissa charged.

"Really? Tell me then, how did the good major know you were going to be escorted to Brian's room?"

The two thought for a moment, but couldn't produce an answer.

"How is it that the major told you he was forced to use his ID card to enter your room, and not an override master," he interrogated Brian, "when I used my own override cardkey to enter just now?" he finished, holding up both cards.

Again, they were without a response.

"I'll tell you why," he said confidently. "By having you use his ID card instead of the override, yes—he gave you a chance to escape, but he also gave the Colonel a means to track you through the Facility. If you were caught, he could claim to have been overpowered, or held at gun point and to have made sure you got his ID card instead of the override so you wouldn't get far."

"That is possible," Brian conceded, looking at Melissa. "How is it that you have a second card anyway?" Melissa questioned suspiciously.

"Even if I'm wrong about his motives," the priest went on, ignoring Melissa, "he would never have been able to avoid detection by the Group after today. Once he fell into their hands, he would have found some way to barter for his own life. He'd have delivered your heads on a platter somewhere down the road if the Group promised him his life. I'm quite confident that I'm correct about his real intent—he'd have used you and then cast you aside. Your own refusal to kill him made my action necessary."

"I've heard of Jesuit ethics, Andrew," Brian said, shaking his head and still gazing at the major's lifeless form on his floor, "but this—"

"But nothing. You made the moral decision since you lacked the knowledge of this man's propensities and intentions. You had no biblical right to take his life. I, on the



other hand, killed him to save your lives. That's hardly Jesuit ethics."

"Give me a break," scoffed Melissa. "How would you know enough about him to defend killing him? And I'd still like an answer to my other question."

"He's a member of the Group, isn't he?"

"Yes, he told us," Brian noted.

"Yeah, you heard everything with your little spying device," Melissa sniped. "How do you know what the Group would have done anyway?"

"Because I'm a member, as well."

## CHAPTER 34

For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible.

—*Matthew 24:24 (NIV)*—

"I DON'T EVEN want to hear it, Andrew," Brian said with disgust.

"But what this man told the two of you is true!" he pro-tested. "The Watchers are here!"

"So you killed the guy we're supposed to believe? Give me a break—isn't this choice, Melissa?"

"Yeah—believe the guy he just killed since his intentions were false, or believe his killer—or both."

"I tell you they're here and they've begun to prepare! You must believe me!" the priest pleaded.

"Frankly, Andrew if that's your real name—I don't know which lie to believe."

"Or which liar," added Melissa, arms folded where she stood, glaring at Father Benedict.

"This whole escapade has been nothing but an elaborate facade," Brian griped angrily.

"You must get out of here," Father Benedict persisted firmly, "and I'm going to see that you do, regardless of whose side you think I'm on."

"How noble," retorted Melissa. "We're going to tell the Colonel just what happened here either way."

"But you must know that the Colonel was part of all of this. He updated the Group regularly. The deceptions were deliberately planned."

"So why not tell us you were on the Group earlier?" Brian demanded.

"I had to maintain anonymity."

"To whom? The Group knew you were a mole."

"But the Group doesn't know I was working against them."

"Oh, this is even better," Melissa mocked.

"Listen to me!" Father Benedict said, exasperation creeping into his voice. "I—" His words were interrupted by a knock on the door. Brian and Melissa looked at each other nervously, wondering whether to answer.

"That would be Malcolm—God willing," Father Benedict told them.

"So now we're psychic?" Melissa jabbed. "Is that what the Group needed you for?"

"Malcolm is working for me. If it's him, plans for your escape are in place. If not, we're all in deep trouble."

"I guess there's only one way to find out," Brian strode for the door and opened it. It was Malcolm.

The wiry scientist entered the room without a word, uncharacteristically serious. He looked first at the body on the floor, then at Father Benedict.

"Splendid work, as usual, Father."

"What the hell is this!" Melissa exclaimed.

"Our Father Benedict," Malcolm began, "is a member of the Group, but you probably know that already considering the circumstances."

"You knew that?" Brian asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"I suppose you are too; it seems membership does have its privileges," Melissa taunted.

"Of course not," Father Benedict answered, "Malcolm works for me . . . he's a fellow Jesuit."

Melissa could only stare, jaw agape, at the lanky, bespectacled black man. "But .... Then . . . ? You know, I don't even want to know," she threw up her hands. "I think I'm going to have a look in the mirror to see if I'm still me," she muttered, heading for the bedroom. Father Benedict grabbed her arm.

"You must stay and hear Malcolm. He can verify--"

"Verify, my ass," she shook herself free.

"It's true, Melissa," Malcolm acknowledged. "I met Andrew in college at mass. We hit it off because of our common scientific interest, especially in terms of Christian apologetics," he glanced at Brian, who was just as shell-shocked as Melissa.

"Your arguments need some work, man," he shrugged in Brian's direction, "but your heart's in the right place."

"I learned of Malcolm's interest in the priesthood shortly after we'd met," explained Father Benedict. "I encouraged him to consider my order because of its emphasis on scholarship. He earned his Ph.D. first, then went to seminary. He took his vows less than a year ago."

"So how come the Group doesn't know this?" Brian asked. "They aren't the only ones who practice secrecy as a profession," Andrew replied cryptically.

"I'm sorry for some of the suggestive comments I made to you Melissa," Malcolm turned his attention back to her, "but they were necessary for my cover."

"Stuff it. You're just another liar. God knows I attract them," Melissa stormed into the bedroom.

Andrew sighed and paced the room, gathering his thoughts.

"Surely you can believe Melissa's near death experience proves what the major was saying," he offered. "I was listening to your conversation with the major, and you admitted as much."

"That's true," Brian agreed grudgingly, "the scenario he laid out does have explanatory power. But with you coming in here like James Bond and blowing people away, I'm back to wondering who can be trusted."

"Man, you don't know how close that is to the truth," Malcolm said with his trademark grin. "Andrew here is the Jesuit version. He's been a Vatican insider and spy since World War II."

"What did you do then?" Melissa emerged, still irritated, "steal gold and art for the Nazis? Or maybe cover up the Vatican's piss-poor explanation for not helping the Jews?"

"Don't you dare speak to Father Benedict like that!" Malcolm stiffened. The anger in his voice was genuine. "This man," he said, pointing to the elderly priest, "personally

diverted thousands of Jews away from the death camps, even to the point of disobeying his vows of obedience to the Society of Jesus when the Church vacillated on what course of action to take to oppose the Nazis! He lost dozens of colleagues in the effort, including a brother and a sister. Opposing this shame has been his life!"

Malcolm and Melissa stood face to face, the former staring down the latter, whose unflinching exterior relayed the skepticism she held inside her.

"I think we'd better hear it all, Andrew," Brian said, taking Melissa gently by the arm and guiding her to the couch. Malcolm moved to Andrew's side, but the old priest remained silent. Brian and Melissa waited.

"This is the great evil about which I spoke to you earlier, Brian," he said finally, a distant look in his eyes. "There was a time when those in power in the Church saw things clearly . . . but this changed during the war," he bowed his head. "The leadership of the Church shared Churchill's insight that the Nazis could not be stopped by anyone on the continent . . . but many of them lacked his moral resolve . . . he was a truly great man. I don't think Pope Pious XI consciously chose to compromise with Hitler and the forces of darkness that drove him to his madness, but he didn't have the foresight to choose well. But all the time *they* were the real enemy, doing what they have always done . . . trying to eliminate God's people, to destroy the chosen lineage when they could not infect it with their demonic spawn. It puts anti-semitism in an entirely new light."

Brian felt a chill rise up his spine. He knew Andrew's prepared mind had already raced through dozens of intersections between the things the old man had seen in his past and what he had learned here in his role with the Group, things that Brian would never know, that he felt intuitively would compel him to believe the cleric. Yet, somehow, he had no need of these memories. Andrew had seen the face of evil and set his will against it. The aged priest's enemies were his enemies as well.

"I officially retired from what you would call active duty several years ago," he continued, hands folded behind his back, walking about the room, "but I never ceased working. I begged John Paul for the appointment I now hold at the university, and he graciously arranged it."

"John Paul and Andrew had been friends since the war," Malcolm informed them as the older priest paused. "Like Andrew, His Holiness firmly believed in the old honor of the Jesuits, as I do."

"Our society was influenced by conciliarists," Andrew resumed his discussion, "those who believed in the myth of neutrality when it came to the Nazis. Even worse, it became infected by them."

"You're saying there are Watchers inside your order, and the Vatican?"

"They may take any form they wish—you of all people know what the ancient texts say about them. This is why you were chosen."

"But I was brought here by the Group."

"You were brought here because of the insistence of Dr. Bandstra ..." he stopped again, looking sadly at Brian. "I'm deeply sorry about what happened, Brian . . . I had no idea it was he who was trying to eliminate Melissa . . . and neither did the Group ... which is a very disturbing thought," he added, looking at Malcolm momentarily.

"Apparently the undersecretary knew something about the project that the others didn't," Malcolm speculated.

"That does seem to be the case . . . but it hardly seems possible. Or perhaps he

drew certain conclusions about what he knew in view of his discussions with Brian and myself."

"Go on, Andrew," Brian prodded.

"I tried to inform some of my superiors in the Church years ago of my suspicions," Andrew returned to the subject, "but most of them laughed, enamored as they were by their anti-supernatural, modernistic theology. I had misunderstood Matthew 24, they said; I couldn't take Genesis 6 literally; I should disregard Enoch as containing anything of value; Watchers were a myth, they argued. This is the twentieth century, Benedict!"

"But the coincidences were too much for you," Brian sensed. "The weird flying craft in the ancient Hindu texts; the sons of God episode in Genesis 6; the same story's recounting in Enoch, along with the technology given to ancient mankind by the Watchers in that account; the application of such wondrous technology in the Tower of Babel incident, where God feared that humans would become like *elohim* if they were allowed to continue; the UFO events of the late Forties in Europe and in this country; accounts of alleged alien abductions exploding on the scene since that time ..."

"The founding of Israel as a nation in 1948... the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at the same time . . . the approaching stellar convergences ...," the priest added. "There are just so many touchpoints. Your dissertation brought all the ancient textual data together, and confirmed all that I had ever suspected about these beings but never had time to study for myself"

"Stellar convergences?" Melissa suddenly spoke up. "You . . . you believe that the second coming will be heralded by the appearance of some kind of astronomical event, just as with the first coming?"

"Yes ..."

"And you seemed so ignorant of them when I mentioned them during my presentation."

"I had to. I've been observing several unusual alignments for years," the priest continued. "This is why I implored the papacy for my appointment at the Vatican Observatory here in this country ... John Paul was well aware of my suspicions . . . . Unfortunately, while there are many in the Vatican unwilling to believe in the bodily presence of evil among us, many have warmed to the idea of benevolent extraterrestrials. Just a few years ago, a Father Balducci stationed there publicly said so."

"I remember that," Brian recollected. "Is Balducci someone you trust?"

"No, but I can't say he's deliberately trying to perpetuate the Watchers' agenda either. I think he's been deceived and is being used by the rogue element in the Vatican to parrot their lie—that the Grays are our technological and spiritual saviors. At least John Paul believed me. I asked him to release me from my other duties to go about what I believe will be my two final tasks. God wants the Evil One's great facade exposed. We aren't on the threshold of humanity's next evolutionary leap, or advancement into greater cosmic consciousness, led by benevolent extraterrestrial beings. We're witnessing the inauguration of what I call the *other* second coming—the unveiling of the Watchers, and their attempts to prepare for their final apocalyptic war against the head of the divine council, our Lord Jesus. This is the war spoken of by Isaiah and Zechariah, and the War Scroll from Qumran. The Watchers will parade their benign gray stooges before an unwitting mankind as earth's redeemers—that is the strong delusion spoken of by the apostle Paul. They must be exposed."

"How did you wind up in the Group?" Melissa queried, taking the discussion another direction. Brian sat wide-eyed on the couch, the priest's words and their implications gelling in his mind.

"General Hartwig, the leader of the Group, and I were once best of friends . . . in fact, he assumes we still are," Andrew continued. "When the occupation of Berlin began, the General's father wound up stationed in Germany. After a few years he was transferred to Italy, where we met. His son, the Group's general, had just turned thirteen; I was in my late twenties, studying in Rome. One day the elder Hartwig and I unwittingly found ourselves in a market that a small group of fascist terrorists had decided to bomb and spray with gunfire. The General's father was knocked unconscious by the blast, and I man-aged to drag him underneath one of the vegetable stands out of harms way. He was grateful, and the son came to nearly worship me. Eventually the younger Hartwig went back to America, enlisted in the Air Force, and became seduced and twisted by the secrets to which his various assignments exposed him. He had no idea, of course, of my own activities."

"Are you sure he doesn't now?" Brian asked apprehensively.

"Yes."

"There are no doubts?"

"None."

"So why were you placed on the team`?"

"When I learned of his involvement in continuing Paperclip projects, I was deeply disappointed. Nevertheless, I could see it was a providential blessing. I chose to present myself to him as someone who could keep him informed of Vatican activities, when I actually planned to use him. He still believes I identify with his causes. I knew from our own network of faithful Jesuits that Malcolm was working under cover somewhere in the southwest, but I had no idea where. I contacted General Hartwig, hoping to learn something about Malcolm, only to be solicited by the General to infiltrate this project team. I was shown the files of the three scientists already working at AREA 51 who would be part of the team I was to observe, and acted on the wonderful providence of being put together with Malcolm. As far as my specific duties, the General wanted me on this team for two reasons: to watch you, Brian, and Dr. Bandstra, since you were outsiders, and to help you in your own contribution to the project, if you needed it. I had read your dissertation, and hoped to meet you last year as I indicated at our first meeting, so when I learned you had been brought here, I was firmly convinced God was at work. Something very important was happening."

"You went well beyond observing me," Brian noted. "You said some pretty bold things about what you really believe—the Watchers and all that. That had to be quite risky."

"I took the risk for two reasons. I needed to take any opportunity to show you the connections I see and believe to be the truth, and I also needed to discern if anyone on the Group knew anything or cared anything about the Watchers. As far as I can see, they don't. Their agenda is just as Major Sheppard outlined. They don't believe in ETs or Watchers; they're using a mythology they've concocted to accelerate globalism and guarantee themselves control. They think they're the masters of their own fate."

"What do you mean?" asked Melissa.

"They're being used . . . by the Watchers."

"Again, as Greg told us—and you still killed him."

"Melissa, one of the differences between myself and your infamous major—and there are many—is that I am not afraid to die to ensure your safety should my true intentions be exposed. I have no reason to believe the same was true of him. He's shown his self interest more than once in his life as you well know, and when the stakes were much lower."

"What makes you think the Group is being manipulated?" inquired Brian, more than a little unnerved at the thought.

"There is an evil here, a presence that I have felt only once before," he answered.

"You mean you've seen one of them the tall creatures?"

"Not here . . . I once saw one kill a man in the precise manner described by the major. I have no doubt by his description that he saw what I saw."

"If this Watcher thing is for real, and it's here, what does it want specifically? What are its plans?" asked Melissa.

"That's one of the things I don't know. I haven't been able to discern how the Watchers plan to use the Group's preparations and goals, nor have I been able to figure out what drove Neil over the edge. It could be that they used him, but I'm far from certain about that. I'm a latecomer to the Group, so I lack the context for much of what they do, and they tend to be fairly cryptic in their comments, even at meetings. They've also naturally restricted my knowledge until they gauge my loyalty to the outfit. General Hartwig trusts me, but he can't just dismiss what amounts to the Group's version of pecking order deference. I know everything that he feels I need to know to keep tabs on you, which still amounts to more than our team knows, but not as much as I'd like. Of course, I'm looking at their plans through an altogether different grid."

"You mentioned that you thought God wanted you to accomplish two things," Brian noted, "what's the other?"

"Recruit successors," he managed a half smile. "I'm in my seventies, and I'm just too old for adventures like this anymore. You more than anyone else understand the textual records that describe these beings and their activities in times past. You lack only a feel for the contemporary context of their mission. God sent you here . . . for such a time as this. The Day of Christ will come, and the Church must be prepared. That task will fall to you . . . and whoever is willing to help you," he added, making eye contact briefly with Melissa.

Brian looked at Andrew, unsure of how to respond. He was afraid, but somehow he'd expected to hear something of this sort. At that moment, he longed more than ever for the simple, uncomplicated, but frustrating life he'd led prior to his being brought to the Facility.

"Father," Malcolm said, looking at his watch. "It's been nearly ten minutes since I arrived here. We need to proceed."

"You're right. Has everything we discussed been arranged?"

"It has, but you have to get to the surface and past any guards to take the advantage."

"Then you had best be on your way," he said, and headed for the door, Malcolm following. "I hope to see you again, but if not . . . I'm very proud of you . . . and be faithful to your calling."

"I will . . . we'll meet again, on this side or the other."

The two embraced, and Father Benedict ran his override key through the door. Access was denied. He tried once more with the same result.

"This is most unexpected," he remarked, anxiety creasing his face. "It worked when I came in."

"Are we trapped in here?" Brian asked, alarmed that anything could escape the priest's attention.

"No," he said calmly. "Someone just wants to be able to track us through the system," he deduced, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He suspected that the reprogramming was aimed specifically at tracking him, since the others had no master keycards. A feeling of dread swept over him.

"Malcolm ... ," he ordered, still meditating on the situation, "take my normal room card and leave; you know the code. No one knows you're in here since we admitted you, and it will appear, for the time being, anyway, that I've left the room if you're using my card on the outside. It'll take them a while to figure out who was using my card once we're discovered."

"What do you mean, discovered?" Melissa asked uneasily. "Surely you don't expect to reach the surface undetected, Melissa."

"I don't know what to expect after today. I suppose you have a plan."

"Yes, and I'm quite confident we'll get off the base, and that I'll get back."

"Get back!" Brian exclaimed.

"My position on the Group is too valuable to lose. I can learn so much . . . but surrendering my card necessitates some improvisation."

"Good—think it through while I talk to Brian," she ordered curtly, and took Brian by the hand into the bedroom.

"What is it?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"I don't trust him."

"Well ... I do."

"What he's saying just sounds . . . crazy. Do you really believe this stuff?"

"Yes," he confessed, "but I have to admit, I don't want to."

"Then you'd better go . . . I just can't trust what may be my life to people who traffic in lies."

"I'm not going ... without you," Brian said, surprised by the moment of boldness.

"What do I matter? You're the one he thinks he needs to get out of here. Besides, he's asking us to just leave. My whole library is here, and my clothes and my files. That stuff is my career," she lamented.

Brian looked about at his small quarters, pained by the thought as well. "I understand. Everything I own is here, but what good is all of it if you're not around to use it?"

"I don't know," she said in frustration. "It's just very hard . . . to trust anyone."

"I know," he whispered, touching her shoulder, "but you can trust me. I won't just look out for myself . . . you know that."

She touched his hand where it lay on her shoulder and closed her eyes, clearing her mind. "Okay," she sighed.

The two of them rejoined Malcolm and Father Benedict, who was rifling through the pockets of the dead officer's clothing.

"Here it is," he said, handing Malcolm what Brian and Melissa guessed was the



major's own override card. It too failed to open the door.

"All the override cards must have been rendered inoperable," Father Benedict said, rising from the floor. "That only leaves us with one course of action. Get going, Malcolm. There's still time to get Deidre out of here."

"Goodbye," he said shaking Brian's hand. "May God be with you." He grinned playfully at Melissa, who hugged him in return. "Thanks, Malcolm."

"Figures," he said to Brian as he broke the embrace. "She hugs me now that I'm a priest."

"Be careful," Brian cautioned.

"I always am. Till next time," he added, and departed.

"Come here, both of you," Father Benedict insisted with a tone of urgency. "We'll have to use the major's ID card. The Colonel doesn't know he's dead, so we should be able to buy some time with a Group member's ID. Unfortunately," he noted, removing a retractable knife from his pocket, "there's at least one entryway we can't negotiate without a required retina and palm scan."

"I hope you're not thinking about what I think you're thinking about," Brian said, his stomach churning.

"What would that be?" the priest asked casually.

"You're not going to take his eye out and cut off his hand are you?"

"No of course not. You are," he announced, handing Brian his knife.

"No way," Brian excused himself and backed away. "I'll never make it without throwing up, and why should I do it?"

"Assuming you get out of here, I'll be left alone. I can't have any of this traced to me. You need to do it for the same reason you need to carry my gun," he explained, and handed that to Brian as well.

"We could take Greg's gun," Melissa interjected.

"No ... ," Andrew said thoughtfully, "it has to be mine . . . you'll understand when we get off the base."

"But then my prints will be on a murder weapon!" Brian pro-tested.

"Exactly. If they were mine, my cover would be blown. Now take my gun; there's no other way."

Brian reluctantly took the priest's pistol, but refused the knife once more.

"I'm serious, Andrew. I don't have the stomach for it."

"Give me the knife," Melissa said in a resigned tone. The priest obliged. "Nothing I wouldn't have had to do in medical school," she deadpanned, kneeling beside the corpse.

"It's the right eye and right palm," Father Benedict instructed.

"Get me something to carry these in . . . a towel maybe," she requested. Brian complied hurriedly as Melissa grabbed the cadaver's forearm and began the ghoulish task. He returned just in time to see the point of the knife flick the eyeball out of its socket. He threw the towel at the priest's feet and turned away, fighting his gag reflex.

"Leave a little of the optic nerve so we'll have a way to hold it up to the scanner," Andrew said passively, watching Melissa's progress carefully. "Just pull the eyeball out another inch, and ..."

"Father ..."

"Yes."

"Add anything else and I'm going to lose my lunch."

"Is she done yet?" Brian asked queasily from where he stood a few feet away, watching Melissa insert the folded towel into Brian's backpack.

"Yes. Come here, I have some directions for you."

He took a deep breath and turned toward Andrew. Melissa went to wash her hands.

"Pay very close attention; you must do exactly as I say should the occasion arise. When we leave this room, behave as normally and calmly as possible. Get your backpack and put these in it," he directed, handing him two cassettes.

"What are these?" Brian asked, doing as he was told.

"I had Malcolm break into your computer yesterday and backup the hard drives. Your research is critical to what you'll be doing on the outside. I had him do the same to Melissa's. You can only take with you what will fit in your backpack."

"In that case . . . give me a second." Brian went to his desk drawer without waiting for the priest's permission. He opened the drawer and glanced back briefly at Melissa and Andrew, both of whom, to his relief, had their backs turned toward him. He hastily retrieved the item from its resting place and put it in his backpack.

"There's one more thing, Brian," the old priest added upon his return.

"Yes?"

"If at any time we're confronted by base security or the Colonel, you must take me hostage—and it must be convincing. Walk directly behind me at all times so you can threaten me at a moment's notice. Put the gun in your belt and wear a light jacket over it for concealment."

"I don't know ... I'm not much of an actor."

"My life depends on it, so knock me around or put a choke hold on me—whatever it takes. They have to be convinced that I'm being taken from the base against my will. It's also designed for your protection. They won't shoot at you if you use me as a shield since I'm a Group member—the General will certainly have given the Colonel orders to that effect but just to be safe, keep your head behind mine to guard against sniper fire. I'll help you by not putting up any struggle."

"Sounds like fun."

"Gee, I wonder who the alternate target might be," Melissa cracked nervously.

"They won't shoot at you either; the Colonel was absolutely beside himself after the attempts on your life. The ruse is for my sake, as well as to keep us close in order to prevent them from separating and capturing us. Besides, I have something for you that will give them an incentive to leave us alone. Getting off the base will be relatively easy; it's afterward that worries me."

"I think I'll just take one crisis at a time, thank you," Melissa said sarcastically.

"Speaking of which fetch the briefcase from under your bed, Brian."

"I don't have a briefcase."

"Oh yes you do."

Brian looked at Andrew uncertainly, and disappeared into his bedroom. He emerged a moment later, the item in hand, a perplexed look on his face. He handed the case to Andrew.

"It's pretty heavy, Andrew," he said, laying the case down on the couch. "What's in it?"

"This is our insurance policy," the priest said seriously, but with a hint of mischief.

"Melissa," he said, kneeling by the couch, "surely in light of your field you recall the major concern the world had over the breakup of the Soviet Union."

"Of course. Everyone was afraid of what would happen to their nuclear arsenal. It was expected that their nuclear technology would be available to the highest bidder."

"Correct," he replied, fingering the case's combination lock. "Which groups were our greatest concern?"

"Terrorists—mostly Middle Eastern lunatics like Saddam or Qaddafi."

"Correct again."

"But would any of the former Soviet republics have sold any nuclear weapons to people like that?" Brian asked, wondering where Andrew was headed with his questioning.

"They may not have had to," Melissa smirked. "The republics lost enough of their nuclear arsenal to destroy the planet; hundreds of bombs and missiles were just 'missing' when they took inventory. Talk about incompetence."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not," she affirmed. "In fact, they misplaced over one hundred nuclear bombs that could fit into something the size of ..." she caught herself as Brian read her thoughts instantly.

"A briefcase?" Andrew finished her sentence, popping open the lid. "You never know where one of those things might turn up, now do you?"

Brian and Melissa stood in entranced horror above the weapon of mass destruction. To their amazed chagrin, Andrew expertly flipped the switches, punched an extended code on the fixed keypad, and zeroed the timer.

"Not much more difficult than one of those confounded VCRs! Now how long do we think it should take to get off the base and to Las Vegas?" he asked.

"I don't like the way this is shaping up, Brian."

"I'm sure he's not going to blow us all up . . . right . . . ?" "Not unless the Colonel wants to die as well, or have his little anti-gravitic squadron obliterated."

"What a relief," Melissa deadpanned.

"I'll give us, oh, say . . . two hours. Synchronize your watches. Here," he handed Melissa a small device that resembled a handheld calculator, except it had only three buttons.

"What's this?"

"The remote detonator. It will stop the timer or detonate the device prematurely. The bomb stays here in your room, back under the bed; Melissa will carry the remote. To detonate the bomb you need to push the first two buttons in order and then release them simultaneously. The device routes the commands through a satellite and then to a beacon on this base, so we could detonate it from anywhere—that was Malcolm's idea. The third button will cancel this action—prior to release, of course. If we're engaged by anyone, especially the Colonel, you must tell him that the major gave you the device and instructed you in its use. He is to let us go unfollowed to our destination. Once there we'll phone him with the location of the bomb so he can defuse it. He'll believe you since the Group is in possession of several of these briefcase nukes. You're using me as a shield to avoid having to use the bomb. Understood?"

Melissa nodded.

"Are we ready?" Andrew asked, looking them both in the eye. "Once you pass

through this door with me, there's no turning back."

"I think we should pray first," Brian said, his pulse quickening.

"Absolutely."

Brian said a short prayer for safety and God's blessing, and at his amen, Andrew swiped the major's card through the locking mechanism.

## CHAPTER 35

"The devil has his elect."

—*Thomas Carlyle*

THE THREE FIGURES moved down the hallway past the team members' living quarters. As Andrew had told them, the posted guards were nowhere to be seen. Andrew led them to an unmarked door roughly fifty yards from the conference room, and carded into the unauthorized portion of the Facility. The area was eerily quiet, as though a trap had been laid, but Andrew guided them without hesitation through a labyrinth of hallways, doors, and staircases. They walked casually, making little eye contact, and elicited no attention from the scant number of scientists or base personnel they encountered. Malcolm had been right: look like you know you belong somewhere and you'll be amazed at the places you can get into. *Or out of* Brian hoped.

"This has been too easy, Father," Melissa worried.

"If you're bored, things will get more interesting when we reach the elevator around the next corner," the priest warned, stopping near a water fountain to make their conversation seem normal. "That elevator is the only one on this side of the base that leads directly to the surface. They'll want to intercept us with a minimum of disruption for unengaged parties, and topside would be the logical place to do it. The door opens on the inside of the main hangar, where there would be plenty of room for the Colonel to position and maneuver his SWAT unit. Have your gun ready, Brian, as soon as the door opens. When we get into the hangar, we're looking for a black sedan with the license plate ALH-MJH. It should be near the gateway to the tarmac."

"So let's go," Brian insisted uneasily.

"We need the contents of the towel."

"Great," Brian griped.

"Listen to me closely now," he said ominously. "There's a large research room located directly across from the elevator; it's a distance of about fifteen yards. There will be a guard posted there, and he'll no doubt watch us closely. Brian, you need to take the hand and the eye out here before we reach the elevator."

"Why must I do it?" he complained, feeling his stomach heave at the mere thought.

"Because you are only a little taller than the major. The scanners at this elevator are synchronized. Put the major's palm inside yours and hide your hand in your jacket. Hold the eye in your left hand, and make sure you're holding it by the nerve so that you can bring it up in front of your own eye quickly. The scan will take only a few seconds."

"Okay," Brian sighed, and closed his eyes, trying to displace his feeling of nausea. Melissa folded back the towel revealing her grisly handiwork. Brian swallowed hard and matched his palm to the backside of the now cold, rubbery appendage. Melissa carefully wiped a bloodstain off the surface of the eye and handed it properly oriented to Brian, who had become appallingly pale.

"We'll stand behind you to obstruct the guard's view," Andrew noted as they

assumed their positions in relation to one another.

"Don't worry about the guard," Melissa whispered to Brian as they moved. "He'll be no problem."

"Wha—?"

"Trust me."

They finally arrived at an elevator adjacent to a large research room, and Brian took his place facing the elevator. Melissa turned and gazed through the large glass doors at the scientists and support personnel, busily engaged in their projects. She smiled seductively at the soldier stationed in front of the door as soon as their eyes met. He enjoyed the connection for a few seconds before varying his gaze to her companions. She heard the doors slide open and turned away.

Brian quickly returned the severed hand and eyeball to Melissa, who rewrapped them and placed the towel in the corner of the elevator.

"We don't want to be carrying these around and forget about them on the outside."

"Yeah, like that would be easy," he replied, wiping his brow. Brian watched the buttons light up successively as the elevator ascended rapidly toward their destination. He felt yet another tiny bead of perspiration trickle down his temple. He could hear himself breathing, and the pounding in his own chest seemed to reverberate audibly throughout the rising chamber.

"We're here," noted Andrew ominously.

Brian put his arm around the priest's neck and tightened his grip with a jerk. Father Benedict's fingers instinctively went up to clear his throat. His gasp for air as the door slid open conveyed a credible impression on the Colonel and his phalanx of guards, about twenty yards from the elevator, firearms pointed directly at them.

"Hello Dr. Scott . . . Dr. Kelley ...I've been expecting you," he greeted them cockily. "Are the accommodations really that inhospitable? Why ever would you want to leave us?"

"I have pizza waiting at the guardpost; you let us go and I'll share."

"It will take more than your sarcasm to escape from here, Dr. Scott."

"Will the life of one of your precious Group members do?" he threatened, tightening his chokehold on Andrew, who wheezed uncomfortably, and pointed the gun at his head.

"You're bluffing," the Colonel replied with a sly smirk, "This is no time for amateur hour."

"Am I? Perhaps you're wondering where the good Major Sheppard is."

The Colonel said nothing, his mood darkening.

"He's dead," Brian answered the unspoken question. "I put a bullet in his head. Have one of your lackeys check out my room." "You don't have it in you."

"You're mistaken, Colonel. The major came to my room to help Melissa and myself get off the base. He said he wanted to bring the Group down and that getting Melissa and me off the base was part of the plan. He was doing fine until he was dumb enough to hand me his gun and only then tell me he'd murdered my parents. It felt positively exhilarating to even the score."

"Isn't that a sin?" the Colonel taunted, buying time for some of his men to position themselves. Brian caught the movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Eye for an eye, Colonel. I'm just an Old Testament kind of guy. Now let us

pass."

"But why kill Father Benedict? I thought he was your friend."

"I did too. The major kindly informed me that he was a Group member, which means he stinks to high heaven like the rest of you. I don't like being betrayed."

"Neither do I," he growled, looking about the hangar.

"Well?" Brian shouted.

"Go ahead and kill him," the Colonel dared him. "He can be replaced. I'm giving you ten seconds to drop the gun or we start shooting." He held up his hand to signal his forces, each of them taking careful aim. "Ten . . . nine ..."

"You know, the major thought you'd say that ..."

"Eight . . . seven ..."

"... so he brought something else to the room and showed us how to use it."

"Four . . . three ..."

"Melissa!"

Melissa held up the remote detonator for all to see, the first two buttons firmly depressed.

"Hold it! Stand down!" the Colonel shouted. His men relaxed, but held their positions.

"Where the hell did you get that!" he bellowed angrily.

"I told you," Brian replied, suddenly feeling more confident of the situation. "The major was going to be at the controls, but unfortunately, he's now unable to make the trip. The bomb is somewhere beneath us, Colonel, and it's a long way down."

"Why do you insist on dying today, Doctor?"

"I don't plan to. I'd rather not have to use this, so I brought the good Father. Here's the deal, Colonel—"

"I don't make deals!"

"You're right; it isn't a deal. You have no choice. You let us pass and get off the base to where we're going, and when we get there, we'll call the base with the location of the bomb. What's the time, Melissa?"

"Just over an hour and a half."

"One and a half hours, Colonel, and we'll use all of it. If I so much as see a dust cloud come down the road after us or hear a helicopter, we'll detonate it remotely—and I'll be a lot more trigger-happy when we're off the base. Shoot either of us now, and you meet your Maker even faster. We get to our destination, you get the location. It's so simple even you can understand it."

"Vernon " Father Benedict gasped.

"Shut up!" Brian yelled in his ear, jerking his head around.

"Do you really think the blast will kill us?" he jostled, a smug expression on his face. "We're half a mile above it."

"I guess you weren't listening, Colonel," Brian shot back. "I didn't say where we hid the bomb. It could be right underneath you for all you know. Besides, I don't care if you survive. Just knowing that all your toys and God knows whatever else you've got on this base will be vaporized is satisfying."

The Colonel stared at Brian, tight-lipped and visibly agitated. "You do that and I'll personally kill you," he raged, drawing his weapon.

"Am I supposed to care!" Brian screamed back, his face contorting in anger and

frustration. "What have I got to live for! You and your Group have killed my parents and my only real friend. I have no job and no career, and if I ever do get off this base, you'll see to it that I'm broke and either unemployable or wind up in prison! If I have to die, I'm going to do as much damage in the process as I can! Now get rid of the MPs!" he demanded, aiming his weapon at the Colonel, "or it starts with you."

The seasoned officer gritted his teeth, incensed at his adversary and his predicament. The Colonel deliberated a moment, but knew he was out of options.

"Get the hell out of here!" he snarled, and ordered the MPs to disperse. The three headed slowly but deliberately toward the sedan Brian had spotted behind the Colonel on the far edge of the hangar. Melissa held the remote tightly, knowing what awaited if she dropped her cargo. Brian opened the door, still eyeing the Colonel. She got into the back seat on the passenger side.

"In the back and down on the floor—face down!" Brian yelled at Father Benedict, loud enough for the Colonel to take note. "You so much as move and I'll reach back and put a bullet into your head!" The priest complied, rubbing his throat and gulping for oxygen. Brian got into the driver's side. The keys were in the ignition.

"Head straight for the gate directly across the tarmac—none other," rasped Father Benedict as soon as the doors were closed. Brian sped out of the hangar, taking note in his rearview mirror of the Colonel's detail of men scattering in all directions.

"Can I deactivate this thing now before I pee in my pants?" Melissa beseeched the priest.

"Not until we're well away from here," he coughed, remaining where he was.

Brian sped across the airfield toward the gate as Melissa gripped the detonator tightly, her fingers turning white.

"We're almost to the gate," Brian informed Andrew. "It's already open."

"Are there any guards visible?" the prone priest asked.

"Just one."

"Is he armed?"

"Yes, but his rifle is lowered."

"The glass is bulletproof, so just keep going, no matter what he does," Andrew informed them. "If they're stupid enough to try anything, keep driving for another mile or so and then blow the place to hell." Brian flew through the gate unmolested, to everyone's relief, and stayed on the dirt road leading to the interstate.

"How do I get to Las Vegas?" Brian asked after a few minutes, still tense.

"The directions should be in your visor," Andrew commented, finally rising from the floor, taking the seat next to Melissa. She looked at him and then at the device apprehensively.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but you'll have to give it another half-hour. Try and relax; we're out of harm's way."

"Easy for you to say. This isn't exactly my idea of a calling. It's just crazy!"

"You did quite well ... and have performed and behaved admirably in the last week or so. It appears I misjudged your constitution."

"Is that an apology?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then I accept it. I'm glad I didn't provoke you any more than I did."

"I'm glad as well. I don't make idle threats. You can't when you do this sort of



thing."

"I do think, though," she said, looking to the front seat, "that Brian was a little rough on you." He peeked at the priest in the mirror.

"You okay, Andrew?"

"I've been worse. I thought you were magnificent, Brian. I don't believe the Colonel suspects anything, which will make it possible for me to return. I still have one precaution to take, however."

"What's that?"

"You'll find out after we arrive in Las Vegas and make our call to the Colonel."

\* \* \*

"Sir, we've located the device and disarmed it," the soldier saluted the Colonel.

"Any word on where the call originated from?"

"No sir. TelCom thinks it was made on an untraceable cellular phone. They're confident they can track it eventually, but it will take more time."

"Let me know when they have something . . . And the ballistics report?"

"Another hour, sir."

"Good work, soldier. Dismissed."

"Yes, sir," he saluted once more. "Sir." A second officer acknowledged the gesture, and the soldier turned abruptly and left the Colonel's office.

"So what do you think, Vernon?" General Hartwig asked.

"It was brilliant," he smiled, shaking his head. "Vintage Benedict. He exceeds my expectations at every turn. And the Group?"

"They're convinced their plans have been compromised unless they eliminate Scott and Kelley."

"The Group certainly isn't abandoning the Agenda, is it?"

"No, not at all. We can still use Scott's work for effective propaganda, and we'll take what we need from everyone's hard drive."

"So there will only be a short delay?" the Colonel asked.

"I expect so. I'd still like to know what made Sheppard betray us. I guess you can never have complete knowledge about a person, can you?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"How long before you can mop things up, Vernon? I told the Group that eliminating Scott and Kelley would be your redemption. After all, it was one of our own who sabotaged the project, not you."

"Tell the Group I know exactly how this whole affair will be resolved . . . gather them tomorrow afternoon so I can brief them."

\*\*\*

The black sedan pulled into a darkened corner of the grocery store parking lot. "Leave the car here," Andrew instructed the two of them, and got out. Brian and Melissa did the same. "We're four blocks from the city hospital. It's that way," he pointed. "Once you get there go to the fourth floor of the parking garage. A car is waiting there for you."

It's the green Taurus parked in the handicap spot. Here are the keys," he handed them to Melissa.

"Where should we go?" she asked.

"There's a ten by thirteen manila envelope in the glove compartment. It has all the instructions you'll need to make sure the Colonel and his men won't find you, plus a few other items."

"What are we supposed to do then?" Brian inquired nervously.

The old priest took Brian by the arms and looked squarely at him. "Expose them," he said sternly. "Tell the world what you've seen, but especially the Church. Give them the truth, no matter what the reaction. It's sad to say, but people of faith may be the hardest to persuade. They've become so acclimated to how they think the end will come . . . how they think events will unfold . . . but their theology is based on their own evangelical or ecumenical traditions and inbred 'theological correctness,' not on the ancient texts—they're too shocking. There's no knowledge of the divine council and what it means for the apocalypse. The Watchers count on this intellectual laziness and spiritual passivity. Have the boldness to believe the unbelievable so God's Church might be prepared."

"But. . . how . . . ?"

"You have access to millions of people on the Internet. Study and then study more. You will uncover far more than you already know. You must publish anonymously for your own protection, and you'll receive no financial gain . . . but your reward will be great. God will illumine the hearts; you must expose the lie and unveil the truth."

"I'm never going to see you again, am I?" Brian murmured gloomily.

The priest released him without a word, his eyes darting to the concrete. "You mustn't let the loneliness you feel get the best of you," he said, evading the question's obvious answer. "The Evil One knows what you're about, and will use this against you. God has been in the quiet frustration as much as these dramatic details of your life. Exploit your solitude for the task at hand . . . God makes no poor choices, Brian. He will guide your path and meet your needs."

"I know," he said quietly, looking up at the stars, trying to contain his feelings.

"Melissa," he said, turning to her. "May God bless you on your journey and your new life. May I?" he asked, extending his arms. She hugged him warmly, an unanticipated sadness sweeping over her, unsure of what to make of his words.

"Could I have my gun back, now?" he asked Brian.

"Good riddance," he replied, and reached into the car for the weapon.

"I don't want either of you to worry about me," he requested, taking the pistol from his hand. "I know what I'm doing," he assured them with a smile, taking a handkerchief from his pocket. He quickly wiped the weapon clean and placed it in the palm of the hand protected by the cloth.

"Wh...?"

Before he could even voice the question, Andrew raised the gun to his own left shoulder and fired a solitary shot. He collapsed to the ground with a suppressed cry, the weapon falling from his hand.

"You . . . must go . . . now," he gasped, writhing on the ground in pain, to the two stunned onlookers.

"What did you do that for!" Brian exclaimed incredulously, dropping to the stricken priest's side.

"The Colonel must believe ..." he said wincing, catching his breath. "He must believe that I had no part in this. He'll kill me otherwise."

"We're taking you to the hospital," Melissa insisted.

"No ... I'm going inside the store," he struggled to his knees.

"It's almost midnight!" she argued. "They're probably closed!"

"No," he blinked, touching the bloody wound. "Nothing closes in Las Vegas. There are still a few people inside ... I'll be all right . . . help will be here soon; they're only blocks away. Now go!" he demanded with another gasp, and headed for the store.

Brian and Melissa looked at each other, shocked again by the twist of circumstances. Reluctantly, Brian retrieved his backpack from the car and took Melissa by the hand.

"You can't be serious!" she protested, looking back at the staggering silhouette, resisting Brian's pull.

"I am. He knows what he's doing. We have to trust him. Come on," he tugged at her arm.

Melissa wavered for another moment, but then, with a disgusted sigh, resigned herself to what was unfolding.

"It's good to see you again, Vernon," Father Benedict opened his eyes at the sound of the door opening. "I thought more than a few times that it wouldn't happen again," he smiled weakly.

"I thought so as well when the hospital called us."

"I don't remember much about the transport," the priest acknowledged. "I remember hearing the military was taking charge of me, but the medication got to me in the elevator."

"You got the royal treatment an all expenses-paid helicopter flight back home," the Colonel informed him, taking a seat on the edge of his bed.

"Have you caught them yet?"

"No, we haven't. I don't have any idea where they are. Of course, I'm not looking either."

"What?" the priest asked in alarm. "But the General came by this morning, and—"

"The General is an obese buffoon."

"You had best watch your tongue, Vernon," Father Benedict scolded, scarcely containing his shock at the Colonel's insubordination.

"You do realize that I wanted them to escape—oh, no, I guess you don't," the Colonel said with a confident smirk.

"The Group would kill you if they heard that—what are you doing!"

"I needn't worry about the General any longer," he said confidently, "or the Group for that matter."

The priest cast a wary glance at the officer. "What are you saying?"

"They're dead," he informed him passively. "I killed them myself on my way over to see you."

"Have you lost your mind!" Andrew cried. "Someone will find them, and—"

"No one will find them; it's already taken care of." "But someone will miss them!"

"Who?"

"Someone, anyone!" Father Benedict insisted, endeavoring to remain calm. "Most everyone on the base knows what happened here!"

"I've already circulated a memo that the `escape' was only a readiness exercise. Handed out a few reprimands, a few commendations . . . no problem, actually. After all, there's no more secure facility in the world than AREA 51."

"But why kill them?"

"They'd outlived their usefulness. It isn't complicated."

"But ..." Andrew sputtered, at a loss for words. ". . . How did you kill all of them?"

"The same way I'm going to kill you."

"Vernon . . ." Father Benedict's face hardened. "I know there were many in the Group who despised you, but it makes no sense to kill your supporters."

"Bravo, Andrew!" the Colonel praised, rising from the bed with mocking applause. "Take a bow, old man!" he taunted, looking into the priest's troubled, perplexed eyes.

The Colonel approached the head of the bed, exuding a satisfied air of conquest.

"You think you understand what went on here," he addressed the prone figure with contempt, "you understand *nothing!*"

"How did you find out?" Father Benedict asked, resigned to his fate.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Andrew," he said condescendingly. "I could cite Dr. Scott's slip-up about the gun—while he was threatening me, he inadvertently said that he'd taken Major Sheppard's gun and killed him with it. A ballistics test proved that to be false, of course. I also checked the logs into the room where we keep our nukes. Naturally, there was an override code in the system, but what was more important was the time. You see, Andrew," the Colonel fixed his gaze on the elderly man, "Major Sheppard was with me at the time the override was recorded. I knew you were the culprit, since no one else in the Group would be smart enough or resourceful enough to come up with such a foolproof way of getting off the base. It was a wonderful idea. And the self-inflicted gunshot—a simply marvelous improvisation!"

The priest closed his eyes in chagrin.

"This blunder notwithstanding, I've known from the beginning who you were and whose side you were on. For sure the major was an unexpected traitor, but I wanted all of you together to see how it would play out. I sent a message to the General for the whole Group detailing the Bandstra incident in which I `accidentally' let it slip that I'd be holding Dr. Kelley and Dr. Scott in his room. Once you entered as well, I had the security system disallow the overrides so I could track you. In yet another stroke of genius, you dismembered the major—a scheme that bought you some time while we looked for Dr. Bradley and Dr. Harper—and we will find them, I can promise you," he said, not attempting to conceal his amusement. "What a creative mind! I am sincerely going to miss these jousts, Father. It isn't often that one of your kind can keep me thinking."

Andrew felt a chill.

"You believe that the General brought you on board to watch Dr. Scott and encourage him in his contribution to the project. Who do you think planted the idea in his mind after you got in touch with him last year?"

Father Benedict remained mute.

"Let me see, now . . . You believe as well that the Group was using the team to

fake an extraterrestrial event, and to milk the non-scientific members of the team of strategies to keep the masses in check once the reality of extraterrestrial intelligence became divulged . . . you also believe this, too, would be chicanery staged by the Group, ultimately for the purposes of staging a conflict between humanity and our space cousins, complete with engineered environmental catastrophes that the Group would in turn blame on the extraterrestrials. The goal would be to compel humanity to look to the Group—who knew those nasty aliens the best, and who alone possessed matching technology—as its only means of survival. After a thrilling victory, the Group would reluctantly take control of earthly government, and then only because a new humanity—one now united as a species, illumined by the knowledge they were not alone in the universe—pleaded with them to do so. How does that sound?" he smiled scornfully.

Andrew turned his head.

"You believe all this," the Colonel jabbed, "because you alone were predisposed to believe it. Your predisposition to believing that the entire alien phenomenon was evil allowed me to direct you."

"But was I wrong?" he asked, his anger rising at the manipulation.

"No, you weren't. That truly is—I mean *was*, pardon me—the Group's Agenda. I, on the other hand, have had longstanding plans for . . . adapting their Agenda to my own liking."

"So you were using the Group?"

"Correct again, Father."

"For *what*?"

"In a moment," a thin smile creased his face, "yes . . . in a moment. First let's discuss some things that you don't know, some things that have been gnawing at you for weeks, that you can't piece together. For instance, what made Dr. Bandstra behave the way he did? Why would he ever want Dr. Kelley dead? Curious?"

... Yes," he admitted grudgingly.

"Dr. Bandstra did what he did because he understood. He was able to correctly pinpoint the true agenda—at least part of it. He perceived that our plan . . . had succeeded."

"You're working for *them*!" Father Benedict snarled.

"My, my, it's good to see you can still become so incensed!" the Colonel chuckled. "But you've missed the mark again." Father Benedict wrinkled his brow in confusion.

"I know what you've been looking for all these years," the Colonel seethed, suddenly overtaken by a torrent of bitter emotion, "squirreled away in your observatory, searching the heavens for a sign of the Nazarene's coming! These things are a harbinger only of your doom. Dr. Bandstra knew nothing of this. While the rest of your inept, bumbling colleagues interpreted the activity of the Watchers and their drones, the 'Grays' as you call them, as indicative of the effort to pollute the accursed Messianic line, you only surmised half the truth! We have no need of a competing race or an army of nephilim! No, the primary goal has been to genetically *eliminate* the conspicuous features—the height, the extra digits from a hybrid, while retaining the superhuman powers. We do not need millions of god-men, we need just one!"

"Wh . . . wh . . . why are you telling me all this?" Father Benedict stuttered, terrified by the words as well as the wicked glint in the Colonel's eye.

"Because I want you to die in despair," he growled, pressing his face to Father Benedict's. "Look upon me!" he commanded, abruptly stepping back from the bed. A voice suddenly burst into the priest's head: *Look upon me, and know your failure is complete!*

Father Benedict watched in utter unexpressed horror as the Colonel's body transformed before his eyes, replaced by a towering, brazen being, its thick, powerful chest heaving in anticipation of the kill. The Watcher lowered its narrow, serpentine face toward the helpless priest, its black, slanted, unblinking eyes locking onto its victim. *Your puny, pathetic mind cannot grasp the reality that awaits you, its voice hissed in his mind. For millennia we have cultivated the belief in humanity that their gods come from the stars—Sirius, Orion 's belt, the 12th planet—and that we are the ones who seeded life on this planet, that we were now taking your women to help prepare humanity for their own approaching evolutionary ascension—all for this moment, the moment of revelation, the time of humankind's duping. We have dangled our technological prowess before men who have coveted our power. Stories of our wonders punctuate your ancient texts. Tales of the spiritual masters we fathered are the basis for your religions. When we unveil ourselves as antiquity's benevolent creators, the world will worship. They will have no need of your Yahweh, but will bow before our master and us. Helel will finally take his rightful place as the Most High!*

"No!" Andrew objected boldly, suddenly energized by the creature's rant.

Jesus, it hissed again in his mind, *and you have helped us!*

Andrew cowered again in his bed as the Watcher pressed his unflinching face to his own. He could smell the stench of its breath, feel the warmth of its shining body.

*You were brought here for one reason and one reason only, fool—to convince your beloved Dr. Scott of our presence, and that we are the ex<sup>t</sup>errestrials upon whom humanity is so fixated—to convince him of the truth!*

The Watcher beheld the bewilderment in the priest's expression. Mocking laughter filled Andrew's mind.

*You see but do not perceive; listen but do not hear He and the woman are both indispensable to our plans, and now you have ensured our success!*

"Brian will never help you; he'll expose you!" Andrew said, enraged, still unable to comprehend the creature's narration.

*We're counting on it. We know he'll be faithful to your feckless Christ. This is why he was chosen as well.*

Andrew's face flushed with rage at the Watcher's blasphemy.

*You still do not understand ... the great, viperous being stood erect, his head nearly touching the ceiling. Your feeble-mindedness testes to Yahweh's ineptitude at granting dominion to your kind. Can you not conceive of our goal? Dr. Scott will blaze abroad the truth that we and our master, lord Helel, are behind an extraterrestrial facade, but who will listen to him? Only those who follow Yahweh and his Christ. They will be the lone dissenters when the new age of human consciousness is ushered in by alien contact; they alone will resist our presence; they alone will withdraw from the new global society; they alone will act to destabilize the new civilization that has dawned. Why? Precisely because what you have sought will be accomplished—they will have been warned of our true identity and strategy. And when the followers of Yahweh and his Christ are perceived by the global throngs who call us and our human liaison*

*blessed, humanity won't just cry out for and condone their annihilation, they will beg for it—and we will eagerly oblige. You and your fellow believers will be nothing more than a glorious holocaust to the mighty Held, he gloated triumphantly. You—have—played—the—fool!*

"You can slay us on your altars," Andrew glowered defiantly, "you can rob us of our children, you can throw us to your crazed mobs, you can choke your ovens with our bodies, but each murder will only yield one more set of feet *human feet* at which you will grovel on the day of His coming. May Jesus grant me the privilege of personally pronouncing your sentence!"

*Enough!* the malevolent entity screamed in fury. Father Benedict's body suddenly became taut, his limbs frozen by an unseen force.

*Look at the great Benedict, the creature scoffed, looming over the priest's thin frame, the storied defender of the faith. Where is Yahweh now? Where is your Jesus, your hero? They are nothing! How long I have waited for this day! You have opposed us for the last time . . .*

The Watcher stood motionlessly above Father Benedict's twitching, convulsing body, relishing his suffering. Blood streamed from the old man's eyes, nose, and ears, but this was not enough. Andrew's limbs began to flail wildly, forcibly contorted into unnatural movements. The popping of limbs from their sockets punctuated the air, but the sadistic being's lust for his enemy's misery was still not gratified. Even as he saw the life expire from the priest's eyes, its hatred for the faithful priest would not be quenched. By sheer thought the Watcher effortlessly lifted the broken corpse above the bed and began to pummel it into the mattress. The frenzied pounding drove the bed, inch by inch, across the floor. Finally the battery ceased, Andrew's lifeless body coming to rest on its stomach, yet his face rightside up, his neck having been crushed in the onslaught. Without a word the Watcher morphed into the familiar figure of the Colonel, and left the room.

## CHAPTER 36

"There will come a time when you think everything is finished. That will be the beginning."

—*Louis L 'Amour*—

"THANK GOD ANDREW finally discovered flight," Melissa moaned as she and Brian left the airport car rental agency.

"We must have driven three thousand miles over this last week."

"Twenty-eight hundred, actually," Brian noted as they walked into the terminal. "You're right—even I'm looking forward to a flight. At least the accommodations were relatively comfortable."

"Yeah, but you can have the 'drive all night, sleep during the day' routine—and then there's the criss-crossing all over the country. I think I've been in more states in the last week than I'd been in my whole life."

"It's all about misdirection."

"Well I'm vowing right here and now to never again take a trip that can't be completed in half a day."

"Want to get a bite to eat? Andrew's instructions just said to be here by noon. We're a couple hours ahead of schedule."

"No," she answered, "I just can't eat anything right now especially any more fast food."

"Still sick?"

"It's been off and on."

"I thought you got something for that yesterday. You were in the convenience store nearly fifteen minutes. Did you take it?"

"Yeah ... I used it."

"You look a little pale," Brian noted, bending slightly to get a good look at her face. "Let's sit a while."

Brian took her by the arm and found a seat. "Let's see what's in the last envelope while you rest," he suggested, retrieving it from his backpack and handing it to her.

"Do you have any change?" she asked as she read through Andrew's final installment. "Sometimes a soda helps take away nausea."

"I think so," he said, unzipping a smaller compartment inside the pack. "Yep, here's some—"

Melissa turned as Brian stopped mid-sentence. He was staring into his backpack.

"What did you do, leave something half-eaten in there?"

"No," he said, extracting another folded envelope from the pocket. "I couldn't bring myself to open it," he said somberly. Melissa recognized it on sight as the envelope Neil had insisted Brian take during the standoff in the lab.

"Open it," Melissa prodded. Memories of the lost friendship flooded Brian's mind as he sat unresponsively next to her.



"Would you like me to do it?" she asked sympathetically.

"No . . . I can handle it," he sighed, tearing open the top.

"I can see what that is," she said, glancing at several folded sheets of paper filled with typewritten text, one of which was on letterhead, "but what is that?"

Brian unfolded a lengthy computer printout containing nothing but numerical sequences interrupted at frequent intervals with either a capital A, B, C, or D. There was no punctuation or break in the lines of printed text. Three portions of the extensive printout were circled, but with no annotation. Both ends of the folded paper had been torn by hand.

"What do you make of it?" she asked.

"No idea."

"Does the other stuff help?"

Brian folded up the printout and placed it in his backpack, then turned his attention to what Melissa had already surmised was a letter.

He began reading silently, and was soon shaking his head. "Come on, let's hear it."

"I can't believe it," Brian said, his countenance lifting. "He doesn't say so in here," Brian began, "but apparently Neil was working out a way to get me off the base."

"Before or after he killed me?" Melissa asked wryly.

"Sorry," Brian reigned in his enthusiasm, reminded of the context for the material. "I don't know, but this is an explanation of his arrangements for me. I have ticketless reservations waiting for me to go to California. He got me a job at the Claremont Graduate School of Theology as a Semitics librarian! A real job in my field—and in California! He says here," Brian kept reading, his excitement building again, "that the president there used to be one of his colleagues in the DOD. The guy was also a former FBI agent who helped administer the witness protection program. This is really weird they've given me a new name, social security number, and bank account with \$75,000 in it," he said, obviously pleased, holding up the pages. "It looks like Neil gave me his salary for his work on the team. Can you believe it?"

"That's ... wonderful," she said quietly, continuing to read Andrew's letter.

"So what does Andrew command now'?" Brian turned his attention to the pages in Melissa's hand.

"I don't know if you want to hear this," she said.

"Why not?"

"Wanna live in North Dakota?"

"North Dakota?"

"Yeah—it's the Dakota above South Dakota. Not the end of the world, but you can see it from there."

"What's in North Dakota'?"

"Farms, a few trees ... an occasional biped," she quipped. "Come on, Melissa."

"Well ..." she paged through Andrew's correspondence, "Father Benedict and Neil were thinking alike ... sort of. He's made arrangements for both of us. I'm now a Professor of American Church History at St. Ignatius College near Fargo, North Dakota."

"Sounds impressive."

"Not really," she said, amused at the priest's explanation. "I'm also the department head ... in fact, I *am* the department. It seems ..." she kept reading, "that the position was

created specifically for me. His letter says he's been soliciting donations for the college for almost twenty years . . . it's devoted to what he calls `the original principles of the Society of Jesus. '"

"Sounds like it would be a pretty conservative school."

"No doubt. The President there has agreed to use part of the donated funding to establish the department. My position is fully endowed . . . Boy," she continued, "the salary is nearly what I was making at Georgetown as a non-tenured prof."

"That would mean you're much better off . . . things have to cost much less in North Dakota. But what about your old position?"

"You know that's history. If the Group hasn't already ruined my career there, they would. Andrew suspects in here that once we crossed them and escaped, they surely carried out their threats or just notified the university of my untimely death or something of that nature."

"Why would they bother?"

"My guess would be to cover their tracks. They would guess we wouldn't be dumb enough to just return to our old lives. If we went through the trouble of escaping, that would be the easiest way to get ourselves caught. They knew we'd have to hide."

"What else does he say?"

"We get to keep our first names—that's a plus," she remarked. "I'm now Melissa Carter. Here's my new credit card to prove it," she flashed the plastic at him. "Probably the last name of the local dairy princess. The rest is pretty much what Neil did—new ID, social security number, bank account . . . with \$30,000 in it! Andrew says it's to get me started."

"Sounds great!"

"Want to know what your new name is?" she asked.

"As long as it isn't Elvis or Sigmund I can live with it."

"I wonder what Andrew was thinking ..." she shook her head, a hint of amusement on her face.

"Let's hear it," Brian prodded with some urgency. "You're Brian Carter."

"The same last name?"

"What a keen observation ... now what do we make of that?"

"We're brother and sister," he said quickly, "you don't have to worry."

"Who said I'm worrying? Besides," she continued in a more subdued tone, "`this arrangement is nothing like what Neil has for you... and mine frankly isn't what I had, either."

"I'm Sony about your job," Brian empathized, "but what An-drew has arranged is still quite an opportunity. You'd get to mold your own department, your own major . . . you probably couldn't write much the first couple of years, but you'd be set. You could get into a house, too."

"You're right," she sighed, "I should be more excited—and grateful."

"What's wrong?"

"I guess I just feel under it. Give me a day or two . . . want to hear about your new life?"

"Sure," he agreed, somewhat warily in view of her comments.

"First the bad news . . . The short version is that Andrew didn't find a job for you. In fact, he says he didn't even try, since, and I quote, `you have a job to do already to which you need to devote all your energy.'"

"So I'm an unemployed North Dakotan . . . Not much of a transition, really. Do I have a credit card? It'll be handy for groceries and toilet paper."

"Yes, and you also have some cash this is the good news."

Andrew says that during the last four years of his employ at the University of Arizona he managed to live on just under half his salary each year. You now have the remainder; I'm sure it must have been his life savings, since he'd been under a vow of poverty prior to his university post. It's around \$50,000."

"Wow ..." he said, awed more at the generosity than the amount. "I've never had money like this."

"You know," Melissa suggested, "the way he has this set up, even with the names, you have no actual ties to North Dakota. You could wire the money under one name and one account to the other account Neil has set up for you in California. You could close the North Dakota account and basically disappear. You'd have a six-figure bank account, your job, and sunshine. Looks like you're set as well."

Brian sat back in his chair, overwhelmed at the hand of grace he'd been shown. Melissa sat quietly as possibilities ran through his mind.

"How would I wire the money ... could I just call the bank and have them do it?"

"Sure, but if you closed the account they'd most likely want a written letter of permission."

"Boy . . . It's like a dream come true."

"I'm going to get a soda and a paper," Melissa informed him unenthusiastically, handing the paperwork back.

"Okay ... I'll get the tickets taken care of while you do that."

Brian got in line at the ticket counter and shuffled through the papers for what he'd need. His thoughts drifted back over the events of the past few months. The upheaval; the extraordinary circumstances; the deceptions; his personal losses; his new, bizarre commissioning by Andrew; and ... Melissa. The thought of her prompted him to look back at the small stand where she stood. The skirmish between his mind and his feelings had begun before she'd even excused herself. He knew from experience that a job in academia, particularly one this suitable, was a rare commodity. He'd convinced himself that he'd never be employable in his field again, especially after the beating his reputation had taken. Yet here he was, on the threshold of a career that would keep him close to the life of study he wanted so badly. He coveted the job, but...

He watched Melissa move back to her seat in silence. She looked the same to him as the first time he'd seen her, but she was different now; she had changed. His heart sank as he got closer to the counter. Now that the future path was emerging, he could clearly see that he had gained so much through the ordeal, despite the tragedy with Neil. But what had Melissa accrued? To be sure, he'd had an impact on her life for the better. He knew God was showing her the way back, but she'd lost the thing that defined her identity in her own mind, her teaching post, and one at a very prestigious university at that. Andrew's efforts had indeed been generous, but Brian knew what a step down it would be for her. He also knew that it would be terribly difficult for her to adjust to the new location—no family, no friends, no colleagues ... but God had been good . . . and He would be good again.

Melissa sipped her soda and flipped through the paper with disinterest, trying in vain to divert her thoughts from what awaited her. The nearly twenty four hours that had

elapsed since yesterday had not managed to alleviate her fear, but she'd managed to conceal her emotions from Brian. *Nothing could be worse than what you're already endured*, she tried to convince herself; but deep down, she knew this was different. This really was much more than she could handle. Nevertheless, she steeled herself against involving Brian in her state of affairs. He'd been through enough, and now his moment of opportunity had come. She sensed tears surfacing in her eyes, and fought to maintain control. She glanced up at the ticket counter . . . Brian was nowhere to be seen.

In a panic she stood up and scanned the rows of waiting passengers, praying that they hadn't walked into another twist of fate. She broke into a jog to get closer to the lines she couldn't see, but a voice behind her halted her gait. It was Brian.

"I'm sorry, Melissa," he apologized, catching up to her.

"Don't *ever* do that to me again!" she blurted out at him, shaking. "How could you do that after all that's happened!"

"It won't happen again," he assured her, steadying her. "I had to make a phone call."

"The money?"

"Yeah."

"Well . . . I guess it won't happen again then," she remarked, recalling her earlier advice to him. "Why didn't you just tell me you were going to use the phone?"

"Because . . . I didn't want you to know what I was doing," he confessed, handing her ticket to her. "You would have just tried to stop me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you on the way," he evaded her question, removing Neil's letter from his backpack.

"No, tell me now," she demanded, becoming suspicious.

Brian looked at her and then took a few steps to a nearby trashcan. Without a word he tore his former friend's job offer into pieces.

"What are you doing!" Melissa shrieked, and grabbed his hand before he could drop the fragments into the trash. "Are you crazy!"

"I don't need it," he replied calmly.

"But you can't just throw away a career ... What are you up to?"

He looked down at his feet, avoiding her gaze, like a little boy caught in the act.

"What did you do on the phone?" she persisted, placing her hand lightly on his chest.

"I transferred the money Neil gave me . . . to your account . . . all but ten thousand of it anyway."

"What?"

"I thought you should have it," he tried to explain. "I could become a target in the near future, and anything can happen . . . I figured if I died I'd want you to have it . . . It's better to take care of things now. I left the account open, though; we might need it someday. Don't bother arguing with me about it either. I won't give you my account number to change it."

A blush filled his face. He pulled back his hand, still holding the shredded letter. Melissa refused to let go.

"What about the job? You're certainly going to need it more now than ever."

"I'm not taking it ... I'm going with you . . . if that's okay." "But isn't it what you

wanted?" she questioned, scarcely able to believe what she was hearing.

Brian looked down at her and into her eyes. "Not anymore."

Melissa stared at him, wide-eyed, stunned by the gesture, but only for a few brief moments. Without warning, she began weeping, the pent up emotions inside her overflowing. She put her arms around him and embraced him tightly. "Hold me," she sobbed.

Brian threw the letter away and put his arms around her trembling figure. He let her cry, unsure of what to make of her reaction. "Let's sit back down," he said gently, after a few seconds. "We don't want to draw too much attention," he reminded her, noting the curious glances of several onlookers.

"Right ..." she sniffed, "I'm sorry."

"There's no need to apologize . . . This just isn't the argument I was expecting."

"You'll get no argument," she said, drying her eyes with a tissue. "I'm so relieved ... I was praying you'd come with me ... I just wouldn't know what to do."

"I know it would be lonely at first, Melissa, but surely you've moved before."

"That isn't it ..." she caught herself lapsing into tears once more. "Oh Brian ... *what did thee' do to me?* I just don't know how..."

"What is it'?" he asked, alarmed by the confused, terrified expression on her face.

"What's wrong? *Tell me!*" he urged. ... I'm pregnant."