

Secrets and Lies

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Kevin,
the alien who saved my friend's life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A special thanks to everyone who
shared their stories and opinions.

Secrets and Lies

Authorities insisted this book be categorized as Fiction.

This is the only way it could be published.

1 SURPRISE VISITORS

Mornings at the Oasis Retirement Center are usually quiet, so the knock on my door was a surprise. The early knock was not as alarming as the trio that faced me at the threshold. Three men greeted me dressed like pallbearers ready for a funeral. The twins, standing in the back, wore black Ray-Bans and towered above the front man by a good foot. The front man's steely eyes scanned me up and down.

"Hello, I'm Ron Ell, of the FBI," he introduced. The agent flashed his wallet badge so quickly I didn't have time to read it. "Are you Geoff Polo?"

I straightened up. My stiff back screamed at the corrected posture. "Yes, I'm Geoff. How can I help? Is something wrong?"

The only reason the FBI would be at my door was because I exaggerated my income on a car loan application. It was only a few thousand dollars. I wanted the LX model with the hideaway headlights and electric sun roof. Would the FBI track me down for that? The little white lie didn't even help me get approved.

"Can we come in? We are looking for a friend of yours. You're in no trouble." The front man stepped into the room before I could answer, and the twins followed close behind. Ron Ell paused briefly at a large framed photograph on the wall next to the door. A steam locomotive crossed a trestle with its steam cutting through the iron beams of a bridge. I love old trains. They are a million moving parts making a monster machine. After a look, he moved on.

Quickening my pace to get ahead of them I guided the trio to the living room where the twins remained standing. Ron Ell took a seat on the sofa without invitation, and I faced the leader sitting in the chair across from him.

"Are you living here alone?" he asked, leaning back on the sofa and making himself comfortable. "Have you had any visitors lately?"

"Yes, I'm alone." My voice quivered, authority figures always shook my nerves. "No visitors have been here for a while. My cousin visited last Christmas, and maybe a salesman more recently." I sounded like a loner. That was over six months ago. Time flies. "I do have friends here in the center," I added to sound less like a hermit. "Who are you looking for?" I asked.

"When was the last time you saw Eric Marks?"

I was about to say I didn't know Eric Marks when a faint memory grabbed hold of the name ringing in my ears. My eyebrows arched revealing the recognition.

"Have you seen Eric recently?" The FBI man asked eagerly.

I was startled by his tone. "No. I almost forgot the name, it's been so long." Relieved that the FBI was looking into something thirty years past and not involving me, I sighed.

“Where did you meet Eric?” He asked.

“Eric and I were members of a writers’ group in Virginia. Eric was a good writer and worked on some newspaper in Washington D.C. Our group would critique each other’s stories looking for plot, and grammatical errors.”

“What kind of stories did Eric write?” he asked.

“Sci-Fi, same as me, that’s why we were in the same group.”

The man nodded but didn’t bother to write any notes. “Do you have any samples of his stories?”

“Gosh no,” I choked, “I don’t even have any of what I wrote.”

The FBI man rubbed his chin. “Do you recall what he wrote about?”

“Science fiction,” I answered after thinking back, “spaceships and aliens. That’s the kind of things we wrote about back in the ‘80s.”

The front man in the trio shared a slight smile, but the two at his side didn't flinch. "How long did you know Eric? You and he were good friends, right?"

Something in the tone of his voice told me he already knew the answer. I played a little poker here at the retirement center, and I could read that he was testing me. “Yeah, he was a little older than most of my friends, but we got along well and hung out together for a year or two. Over time we just drifted apart. About twenty years ago the doctor said the weather here in Arizona would be better for me, and I moved to Kingman.”

“Did he ever give you anything?” The FBI man asked.

“No, I guess he bought me a drink or two, maybe a meal. We didn’t exchange gifts on the holidays if that's what you mean.”

"No, I don't mean gifts. I mean anything to hold for safe keeping." He suspiciously looked around the room. “Did he ever talk about his work, what he did for a living?”

“He said he was a writer working at some newspaper and wanted to be a novelist.”

“When did you last see Eric,” he asked.

I almost started counting the years aloud, then cut to the chase. “It was a few years before I moved to Arizona, maybe forty-five years ago,” I guessed. He never met my wife, so it had to be around 1975. We would have been married 45 years this month had she beat the cancer. “Sorry I can’t help you find Eric Marks,” I said trying to end the interrogation.

“You should know he’s dangerous, and we need to find him.”

“He’s got to be around ninety years old by now. How dangerous can he be? What do you need with him?” I didn’t expect an answer, but I had to ask. “Did he do something I should know about?”

“It’s nothing to worry about.” The FBI man rose to his feet and held out a business card. “If he tries to contact you, give me a call.” His all-business face almost smiled. The two men behind him didn't show any expression but followed their leader to the door.

As I led them out, the front man added, "I think you were lucky to lose contact with him. If you've been truthful, you were lucky to have drifted apart before he got you into trouble." He was about to say more, but one of the silent twins placed a firm grip on his shoulder. Ron Ell stopped talking mid-sentence. "Just call me if you think of anything else," he finished.

As quickly as they came, they were gone and left me wondering if my old friend had robbed a bank or killed someone.

A while later Eddie knocked on my door. It was time for the Chess Club challenge. My friend Eddie drove a little EZ-Go golf cart around the retirement center like he owned the place. I hung on and tried to explain the morning's unexpected visit while he raced through the streets and jumped curbs. Eddie drove pedal to the metal as usual.

"Real FBI?" Eddie asked.

"They had a badge and everything," I explained.

This was the most exciting thing that had happened at the center since Melva Draper fell into the deep end of the pool. Melva couldn't swim. She was four-foot-seven, and as round as she was tall. She survived with only hurt pride, bobbing like an apple in a barrel. I was excited to share a story that could top that.

"Did they offer you a reward? You could get your own golf cart!" Eddie swerved around an oncoming car, never slowing. He put my side of the cart on the curb and drove unevenly until the next driveway.

"That would be a good idea," I said when we were back on all four tires.

"He's probably a terrorist," Eddie said. "The FBI doesn't fool around with common criminals."

I shook my head disagreeing, but it wasn't noticed on the jostling cart.

"Or, a serial killer," Eddie added.

A well-groomed nine-hole golf course snaked its way through the community, but neither of us played. Eddie took the shortcut across the seventh hole and nearly got killed when Doc Weaver sliced one into the cart's roof. Amazingly, we skidded up to the recreation building without an injury.

The Chess Club consisted of seven men from the center who agreed that chess wasn't too physical for their old bones. One guy constantly reminded everyone, "No one ever broke a hip playing chess." Last year, a man slipped on the shuffleboard court and ended up in the hospital. He was laid up for a week and then ended up in rehab. No one was sure what happened to him after that. The shuffleboard player never returned.

The seven chess players paired off in couples to battle, and the odd guy walked around watching the moves. He judged the wisdom of each play without comment. I started a game with Eddie, who played as speedily as he drove. Eddie played fast, but his moves were usually spot-on. I had to watch for a rare mistake and take advantage

of it when it occurred. Sometimes, Eddie didn't make a mistake and would easily win, but it only took one error to open up a chance to get the advantage. On those occasions, I could win if I was lucky.

Our game was fairly even, each of us had taken several pieces and it was getting down to the serious moves that would make a win or a loss. I scanned the board looking for the perfect move. A second ago, Eddie swooped his queen to the center of the board. Behind her, two pawns stood guarding the rear. I recalled the two FBI agents standing behind Rob Ell. It was the same, a leader who had two guards.

Maybe not, who was the leader of the FBI trio? Was it one of the men in back who placed a hand on Ron's shoulder and muted him from talking too much about Eric? Perhaps they were really in charge.

"Your move," Eddie said.

"Yeah, right," He caught me daydreaming and I slid a piece quickly, not considering the consequences.

Eddie smiled and countered a quick response. "Checkmate!"

2 ERIC RETURNS

The next morning, the FBI's warning of danger rang out in my ears when I opened the door. It had been over forty years since I last saw him, but he looked the same. Eric smiled his Joker's smirk and brushed his hand through salt and pepper hair. His blue eyes, looking young, bright and clear, darted from side to side, taking me and the entire scene in. He looked good for being in his eighties, maybe even ninety. I didn't know for sure, but I looked twenty years older than him. My hair was white and balding on top, plus I had twice as many wrinkles. How can that happen?

The knock at my door came close to 24 hours after the FBI visit. "Hello Geoff, it's been a while." I was shocked to see him face-to-face at the door. My hand dropped off the knob, and the door swung open. "Can I come in?" he asked.

"Sure," I said, looking out at the street to see if anyone was watching. His arrival was such a shock I didn't even think to shake his hand.

"Are you surprised I'm here?"

Nodding, I looked again down the sidewalk and closed the door. "I've been thinking about you ever since the FBI came looking for you yesterday."

Eric smirked. "Yeah, I saw them here. Ron has been trying to track me down for a while."

"You know about him?" I asked, guiding him to the sofa. "What have you gotten yourself into?"

Twenty-four hours earlier, the FBI grilled me sitting where I was now, across from Eric. "Are you a top-ten most wanted criminal or something?" I asked.

"I'm not on any posters if that's what you mean." That was good news. Eric continued, "It's just more of the same. They have issues with the way I work." He crossed his legs easily, no bones popped, and no signs of arthritis. "You know how it is with co-workers."

"Are you FBI too?" I knew he had worked in D.C. I couldn't recall any details except being a writer. When you live in the D.C. area, most everyone who's not in the restaurant business is tied to the government somehow.

"No, I'm not FBI, but I sometimes work with them." He skillfully danced around the guts of my question.

"Why are you here? After all this time I know you're not here to say hello to an old friend."

Eric leaned up and looked me straight in the eyes. He was reading me, judging me, summing up if I had any life left in me. "I need help with something and only you can help me." His tone was serious and his smile fell flat. I looked into the same face that Ron Ell wore yesterday. He was all business.

Forty years hadn't changed him much. Eric still talked as smoothly as a salesman. He was a good storyteller too. After all, we met in a writer's group. He could write as well as he could talk too. Even with his

serious tone, it was not an uncomfortable conversation. We were old friends picking up right where we left off. The talk was smooth and easy. I didn't have many friends like that at the retirement center. People gossiped, but not a lot of people really talked. I missed that, and even under the circumstances, it was good to see him.

"I know Ron was here for a while yesterday, what did he want?"

"He asked about you, if I had seen you."

"Yeah, I figured that." Eric nodded. "He left a car here watching you and following you all day."

That was a surprise. I hadn't noticed anyone following me. Eric continued, "That shortcut through the golf course almost lost them, but they caught up with you at the Chess Club."

I didn't see anyone unusual there either. Eric had been following all of us. "I guess they expected you to drop in yesterday, not today," I said.

"They've been watching you for three days now. I guess they finally thought you were a dead end and left this morning." The Joker's smile was back. "I've been here for a week. I didn't expect them to dig you up from forty years ago, but I wanted to sit back and watch, to be sure."

I spoke up, "There is something you are not telling me."

"There's a lot I'm not telling you, but all in good time. If you choose to help me, you'll have to beg me to shut up!" He was animated as if he wanted to tell the story right now. I was sure it would be quite a story.

"What do you need from me? What could I possibly do for you?"

Eric got serious again. "Remember when we built that fence in your mother's yard?"

That was over forty-years ago. The big job took a couple of days. He helped dig the post holes and set the cement. We stretched the chain link by hand, but it ended up looking pretty good. Eric was the kind of friend you could count on to help when you needed a hand. Even then, he was no spring chicken, being a little older than me.

"Sure," I said. "That was a tough job."

"I know your sister lives there now."

"Yes," I nodded. "She took the house after our mother died."

Eric continued. "I buried something in the corner of the yard, next to the fence pole. I need to retrieve it."

"I never saw you do anything like that."

Eric continued his story. "I came back after dark and put something in one of the holes. I had to hide it for safe keeping."

My mind immediately thought of a gun, and my concern must have shown on my face.

"It's not a bomb or anything like that," Eric said. "I just had some paperwork I had to put into safekeeping."

"Wouldn't a bank vault have been safer?" I asked.

Eric shook his head. "Not necessarily. People check those places."

My mind reeled through what I had been told and I put two and two together. The FBI and files added up to top secret papers. Maybe I watch too many spy movies, but that's what I guessed was happening.

“You want me to help you retrieve stolen, top-secret, documents?” I blurted out. “I could go to jail.”

“No one is going to put an old retiree in jail for digging up old papers,” Eric said. “And they are not stolen, top secret files.”

“What are they then?” I asked.

“It’s a manuscript and some research I started when we were in the writing group.”

I started to calm slightly, but still had questions about the FBI’s involvement. “If it’s not illegal, what’s the big deal?”

“It may take a while to dig up and I don’t want any issues with the police. You can explain things to your sister and she’ll allow you to put a hole in her yard. She would call the cops on me.

“Knowing my sister, Rhonda would probably shoot you.”

“I wouldn’t get past Bruno,” Eric explained. Bruno was my sister’s German Shepard. According to Rhonda, he’s a lovable teddy bear if he knows you. If you are a stranger in his yard, you are his lunch. How did Eric know about Bruno? The dog has only been with my sister for six or seven years, I met the dog as a puppy once. Even as a puppy, he guarded the yard. Eric was right. My sister wouldn’t need to get her gun.

Sure, I could help him get his manuscript, but it wouldn’t be easy. I wasn’t on great terms with my sister. After Mother had died, she was supposed to have sold the house and divided the money with me. That never happened. She just remained in the house and took possession. I could have used that money. We had heated arguments. Hard feelings and hard words were exchanged. Rhonda may not allow us to dig around her yard even after all this time. We haven’t talked much in many years. My last visit, seven years ago, ended in more arguments. I didn’t mention that stumbling block to Eric. His story seemed fishy, and I still had questions. “What’s in the manuscript? Why does the FBI want to find you if it’s not stolen, top secret files?”

Eric sat quietly for a second or two. The pause seemed long. He was searching for the words. The man who could talk an Eskimo into buying boxed ice was at a lack for words.

“The manuscript reveals some things that powerful people would like left unknown. In my work, I learned a few things. I met people who knew things. Sometimes I snooped too far into things I should have left alone.” Eric paused for a breath. “When we were in the writer’s group, I started putting things together and started keeping a log. The journal developed into sort of an expose’. I didn’t think many people would believe half of it at the time, so I hid it.”

“Right, I knew it was something like that. You’re a whistle-blower, a government spy telling secrets.” As I said the words, they sounded absurd. My best friend was not a spy. I didn’t know what he was, but he wasn’t a spy. I didn’t think he was a spy anyway. “You’ll need to tell me more before I take a cross-country trip to dig a hole in my sister’s yard.”

“Sure, that makes sense. Everything should be public knowledge soon enough anyway. At least, that’s the plan,” he said.

“Who’s plan? What am I getting into?” I asked.

Eric leaned back on the sofa. “Have you ever heard of The JASON Society?”

3 THE JASON SOCIETY

I was unsure if I wanted to get into the middle of Eric's trouble, but I asked anyway. "Who is Jason?"

"Not who, but what is JASON, is the better question." Eric sat at the edge of his seat eager to talk, and I was ready to listen.

I shrugged my shoulders. "OK, what is JASON?"

"When the Russians launched Sputnik in 1957," he began. "Our government was taken by surprise. It was the beginning of the Cold War and the fact that they had a satellite flying right over our heads scared everyone."

I remembered those Cold War days.

My uncle had a tornado shelter where we played war games. I was so young then.

"Our intelligence service dropped the ball, and the military top brass was caught off guard. We didn't know it in advance," Eric said. "Two years later The JASON Society was created to keep the government on the forefront of scientific development." Eric paused for a breath and continued as if he were giving a lecture. "It's nothing new. The people of ancient Greece had a think-tank that proposed laws called their senate. The Romans had the forum, and Kings have always had advisors."

I nodded in agreement.

"Our group originally consisted of about twenty university professors and researchers, but over time it expanded to include philosophers and even theologians. It was their job to help lead the government into a world with modern rules and new technologies."

"Are you part of The JASON Society?" I asked.

"Oh no, I'm nobody compared to them. I'm not smart enough to be in that class."

It was a back-and-forth conversation. He answered any questions I'd slip in and explained what he was talking about. It was interesting, but I wasn't sure what it had to do with anything.

"I was never in The JASON Society, but I've worked with a lot of people connected to them."

I took the moment to ask the big question on my mind. "What exactly did you do for the government if you're not FBI?" I asked.

"I've done a little of everything. My first mentor was Donald Menzel, a professor at Harvard who ran the astronomy department. I flunked out of Harvard Law, and changed my major to government and business. Menzel gave me a job at the observatory when I lost my scholarship."

"You're an astronomer?" I asked.

"Oh no," he said. "Mr. Menzel explained that when you are working in government it's better to be a staff member than it is to be an elected official. He told me a staffer can hold a job as people get voted in and voted out of office. So, I've worked as assistant and office manager for several people in Washington, as well as a writer and lobbyist." He explained, "I've been employed doing one thing or another through more than six presidents. I've

met a lot of people and heard a lot of things.”

“So, what does this have to do with anything?”

“Not everyone agrees with what The JASON Society lays out. Some follow the suggestions to the letter, and funding is moved to where it is needed. General policy is modified to fit JASON’s goals. Even new laws are passed on the suggestion of The JASON Society. Important people listen to them.”

“It makes you wonder who’s in charge in Washington,” I said.

“Exactly, but it wasn’t long before top officials were polarized into Jason followers and free thinkers.”

It's like Republicans and Democrats," I said.

“Not really, The JASON Society guides both parties, truly giving a non-political point of view. They influence domestic and foreign affairs, as well as the military.”

"Sounds like trouble," I said. “Do they still exist?”

“Yes, in the beginning we needed the guidance. The scholars in the group devised a plan to make the country competitive and strong. They gave the politicians a lot to think about.”

Eric went on to explain that many good things happened because of the Jason Society’s suggestions. Bad things happened too. Not everyone agreed all the time, and almost anyone with influence added details to fit their personal agendas.

Eric claimed he knew about secret plans and operations invented by the Jason Society that changed the country. He knew of untruths printed in major newspapers, invented to gain public support for unpopular causes that the Jason believed would ultimately be a benefit. Eric personally knew of illegal programs carried out by the government. Some of the details were in the manuscript he had hidden in my mother’s yard. He just wasn’t ready to go public back then, but things have changed.

We talked for hours until the phone rang interrupting the conversation. I grabbed my cell phone. It was Eddie. “Hey, I missed you at lunch. The cafeteria had meatloaf and mashed potatoes. You never miss that.”

It was Tuesday, meatloaf day. The excitement of meatloaf didn't match the visit with Eric. "I have an old friend visiting and I forgot all about it," I said.

I could hear Eddie’s curiosity humming through the phone. “An old friend, huh, anyone I know?”

My last guest was about six months ago. Eddie knew that, and he knew any visitor for either of us was a rare thing, and something special. Some people had family and those people always had guests, but most of the residents here at the Oasis didn’t have that luck. This had to be a big deal to miss meatloaf day. I explained that I’d talk to him later knowing he wanted to drop in and join the party. Without giving him an opportunity to ask, I ended the call and set the cell phone on the table.

“Do you want a sandwich or anything?” I asked Eric. “We missed lunch at the cafeteria.”

“Sure, what you got?”

“Ham and cheese or cheese and ham,” I answered.

“I’ll take one” Eric got to his feet and followed me to the kitchen bar. He sat on a stool while I worked.

“Do you want mayo and mustard?” I asked.

“Heavy on the mustard, please,” Eric was lucky I had mustard. The spicy condiment hadn’t been agreeing with me for the last year. I loved it and missed it, but the indigestion after eating wasn’t worth the treat. I scraped the crust off the top of the squeeze bottle and made his sandwich heavy on the mustard wishing that I could have done the same for myself.

“How do you stay in such good shape? You’re almost ten years older than me, but you look fit and healthy.”

Eric gave me one of his crooked smiles, “I don’t know really, but that’s another story for later.”

Apparently, there was a story to his health. I’d have to remember to follow up on that. With the sandwiches done, I sat at the bar across from him.

“Virginia is a long way. It will take a while. I can’t sit all day in a car like I used to,” I said.

“We’ll take lots of breaks. I want to stop at a few places along the route anyway. They are important to the story I’m telling. It will give us things to talk about during the trip too.” Eric continued convincing me that it was something I needed to do. “When was the last time you saw your sister anyway?” he asked.

Seven years ago, but I was too embarrassed to answer the question. “We talked on the phone a couple of times over the years.” I neglected to explain that we were estranged.

Eric didn’t push it, he had made his point. “Maybe a good ride and some new scenery will do you good. It will give us a chance to catch up.”

There wasn’t much to catch up with on my part. After Eric disappeared, I got married and continued working at the plastics factory making injection molded parts for a toy company. It wasn’t exciting work, but it was a living. Betty was a stay-at-home wife; I always thought keeping the house was work enough. When she got cancer, it didn’t take long for her to go. It was swift, and I wasn’t going to talk about that anyway. After she was gone, Dr. Barker recommended I move to Arizona for the weather. He said it was better for me, but I never noticed any arthritis relief. The humidity never bothered me much. So, that’s how I ended up in Kingman. It wasn’t much to talk about. I’d be done before we got out of town.

“What happened to you? One day you were there, and the next time I turned around you were gone?”

Eric nodded, “Yes, that’s about how it happened. The newsletter I was writing for sent me on a trip to investigate a story. My boss came along to show me around. While I was out there, I got into an accident and was in the hospital for quite a while. I never really made it back to Washington, or that writing job. My boss introduced me to some people and I stayed out here working with them.”

“Near Kingman?” I asked.

“Utah,” he explained.

“You just left your apartment and everything?” I asked.

“Yes, pretty much. I had a couple of things sent to me, but I live light. I didn’t have a lot to move.”

There was a natural pause in our conversation where I thought over all we had talked about.

“So, do you think you want a little vacation?” Eric asked. “It’ll be fun.”

“I’m not sure if I’m up to it.” I was thinking about the cost of such a trip.

“I’ve already got a reliable car, and I’ll cover all the gas, food, and stuff. After all, you are doing me a favor.”

“It’s a long ride. Wouldn’t it be better to fly?” I asked.

“Probably cost-wise, yes,” Eric admitted. “But, it will give me a chance to tell you about some of the things I’ve learned over the years. You won’t believe half of it, but I swear it’s all true. I will update the manuscript once I get it back.”

“You could just start over,” I said.

“As you said, I’m older than you. My memory’s not what it used to be.”

I didn’t believe that excuse. He’s as sharp as he was the last time I saw him, old or not.

“Besides,” he said, “the trip will spring up old details along the way. Just coming out here reminded me of a couple of things.”

“What about Ron Ell? Is he going to continue chasing us back to Washington?”

“Probably, if he finds us,” Eric admitted. “That’s another reason I don’t want to fly.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to get involved with it. The FBI said Eric was dangerous. I doubted that though. “It sounds like it could be unsafe,” I said anyway.

“No, it’s all fine. You met Ron. He’s harmless. He’s all by the book and won’t do anything risky,” Eric said.

“What about his two pals?”

Eric stiffened, “Well, his two buddies are another story. I’ll tell you about them in good time, but they won’t hurt you. They are after me. They don’t want my story told,” he said.

“I do want to hear more of what this is all about,” I admitted.

“You’ll hear it all, I promise.”

Headquarters was checking up on him, and he didn’t have anything good to tell them. Ron Ell knew it was them before he answered the phone. They called every day. Sometimes they gave him new instructions, and sometimes they just listened to his bad news.

“There is no sign of Eric Marks here. His old friend hasn’t seen him in decades.” The voice on the other end was silent for a moment. Ron took the opportunity to address his plans for the mission. “We’ve been watching

the friend for several days, and plan on being here the rest of the week in case Eric shows up."

Behind him, at the table in the same hotel room, the twins sat across from each other, silent. They listened to the phone conversation without moving or showing any emotion. Ron knew they were talking to each other telepathically. They were probably talking about him, but he didn't know for sure. He hated the fact they could communicate without speaking. It was like they could talk about him in a foreign language, but worse. You couldn't hear the volume or tone of the words. Ron never knew if they were upset, worried, or angry.

"Yes sir, we can do that, but if he's going to make contact, we have a vantage point here to see that," Ron explained his position, but the voice on the other end had different plans. "Yes sir, we'll do that. I'll be ready to report some good news tomorrow."

Ron stood up and turned around. The twins were looking at him as blank-faced as ever. For a moment he forgot they couldn't read his mind, even though they sometimes talked into his head. "We're moving on. The boss thinks this is a dead end," he said. The twins claimed they could only put words into his mind, and not take thoughts out, but who knew for sure?

The two turned to each other, apparently continuing their conversation in private.

Ron opened his laptop and finished the daily report. There was nothing new. They had been following up on any connections to Eric Marks to locate and apprehend him. For some reason not yet explained to Ron, headquarters was interested in this guy. They want him secured as soon as possible. Eric's bio told Ron his subject had a long government history, but all Ron knew for sure was that headquarter's interest had something to do with the aliens. Otherwise, why would the twins be assigned with him?

Tomorrow, they would start driving back to Washington. He preferred flying, but the twins didn't like flying in planes. Ron knew he had failed the mission, but everyone agreed this was a long shot. They had interviewed all of Eric's known acquaintances, and he was still MIA. Geoff Polo was a friend from way back, but they associated for several years. Eric didn't have many social friends like Geoff, who was a dead end. Still, Ron Ell had a gut feeling he was getting close.

4 SOMETHING BIG

The whole adventure had the potential for disaster. Trouble was inevitable. The idea of going intrigued me, but I was on the fence. Part of me wanted to take the trip with him, but part of me knew it was a mistake. The FBI had already knocked on my door. Eric told me they'd been watching me for almost a week. I was already on their radar. And, the kicker was, I wasn't on good terms with my sister, Rhonda.

The last time my sister and I were friendly was almost forty-five years ago. My anger over her taking the house has subsided some, but my pride has kept me from saying so. She did steal it, so to speak. Mother wanted the money from the sale split between us. That never happened and it's always put us at odds.

On the other hand, my sister and I were both in our seventies now, and an opportunity to visit may not come again soon. At our age, anything could happen at any time. It was hard to turn down a free trip to visit the old homestead. Besides, I didn't have anything important planned at the retirement center. It would be just more of the same old daily routine.

"Listen, just think about it and I'll drop in tomorrow afternoon." Eric got to his feet and slid the empty sandwich plate across the bar. "Thank you for lunch."

"No problem, I loved the visit. It was great to see you again."

"We'll have lots of time to talk on the trip" he said with a wink.

I walked him to the door, passing the train photo.

"Is that a Winston Link?" he asked.

I nodded yes, "It's my favorite treasure."

"That's nice."

I was surprised Eric knew the photographer; most people thought it was just a nice train print. "I bought it from his wife after he died, when she dissolved the estate."

"Excellent investment too," Eric commented.

I bought it because I liked trains, not as an investment, but I didn't say so. I was not great at planning financially. "Tomorrow is shuffleboard if you are interested." As soon as the words left my mouth I felt like a fool. I couldn't imagine him playing an old man's sport. He had so much vigor and pep in his step. He would be a great ringer on my team, and we'd win for sure.

"No thanks, I don't think I know the game," he said.

Not surprised by his answer, I opened the front door and walked out with him.

"That's fine," I said. My last word choked out. Sitting in my driveway was a midnight blue LX. It was the same car I had tried to get, but my loan had been denied. It even had an oversize moon roof, hidden headlights, custom wheels, and bucket seats.

“Do you like my car,” Eric asked.

I was about to mention that I had tried to get one just like it, but I bit my tongue. He knew that already. Getting this car was no coincidence. Somehow, he knew the LX was my dream car. How he found out, I don't understand, but Eric was full of surprises. At that point, I jumped the fence of doubt and made up my mind. This would be an interesting trip. I prayed he'd let me drive.

After notifying the office, I called Eddie and told him that I'd be gone for a few weeks visiting family. That's when the questions started. He asked if my visitor had anything to do with the last-minute trip. I told him not to worry, and I'd be back in a few weeks. The truth was that Eddie was lonelier at the retirement center than me. He didn't have regular family visits either, so we relied on each other for company. I'm sure he was envious of my plans.

The next morning, I discovered that the LX had more trunk space than it appeared. Eric already had a few bags in it and I added two duffels. There was still space for another, but I kept my little backpack of medicine and toiletries in the car with me. A few aspirin for aches and pains always came in handy.

The leather seats of the LX gave a deeper aroma to the new car scent. Eric drove, but I hoped I'd get my chance. We headed out of town, passing the old steam locomotive in the park that drew me to stay in Kingman in the first place. A few tourists were there, climbing in and out of old Engine No. 3759. It was a 1928 Baldwin. The city of Kingman was a water stop in the old days when it tracked between Kansas City and Los Angeles. Now, after two and a half million miles of travel, it rested along route 66. I hadn't been to the monument in years and missed the adventure of it. Especially the engineer's booth that was open to the public. At this time of day, the old black iron was as hot as if there was fire in the boiler. The Arizona sun was merciless. Happy I'd be missing the heat for a few days we drove past, beginning our journey in the new LX.

Eric set the air conditioning to a comfortable seventy-two. I opened the tinted moon roof just enough to circulate a breeze. The engine sounded like a quiet hum, and it felt like we were floating over the road.

I didn't mind being a passenger for the long ride. The bucket seat felt wonderful, but I knew my back would only agree with it for so long. Eventually, it would start aching. My meds were within arm's length on the back seat. So, for now, I'd enjoy the ride.

Eric broke the silence after we passed the city limits sign. Ahead I saw the desert, broken with small bluffs and mesas. Ugly scrub cactus and Joshua trees struggled to grow in the baked earth. Above us, the blue sky crossed the horizon with only a streak of white breaking the vastness. “Ever wonder about those?” he asked.

“Wonder about what?” I asked.

He pointed up, out the moon roof. “That white line in the sky.”

“No, not really,” I looked out the roof of the LX to the sky. “It's just a condensation trail from a jet.”

“Yes, it could be that.”

“What do you mean? What else could it be?” I asked.

Eric smiled. I had taken his bait and asked the correct question. "Do you remember The JASON Society that I told you about the other day?"

"Sure, the think-tank in Washington," I said.

"Right, in the 1970's Gordon McDonald was a university professor working with The JASON Society. He recognized that the build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would lead to the heating of the planet."

"That's global warming," I said. "I don't recall that being a thing in the seventies."

"Correct. It's a big deal now, but back in the seventies only scientists talked about it. Many of them thought it was hogwash."

"Some still do," I said.

Eric continued his story. "Shortly after his report came out, The JASON Society amended it with a series of recommendations."

"Like what?" I asked.

"They started with emission limits on cars. Other things we see every day now; wind turbines and solar panels to generate electricity. They even got the ball rolling on electric cars. It's all aimed to reduce carbon dioxide and global warming," Eric said.

"Yeah, I hope it is working."

"Not well enough," Eric explained. "McDonald estimated a doubling of carbon dioxide in the air by 2050. He theorized that would take us into a mini-ice age. We are ahead of that prediction by ten years."

I held my hand up to ask a question. "How does global warming cause an ice age?"

"The warming of the atmosphere causes more evaporation. With more water vapor in the air, we'll have more storms and a wetter climate. Eventually, the extra water in the air will cause the polar glaciers to expand and reach farther into Canada, and possibly into the States."

"Oh, is it that bad?" Eric saw the doubt in my face. I had heard the warnings before. Everyone has heard them.

Eric nodded. "Yes, it's that bad. The government has taken some big steps to try and help though. The pilot in the jet up there may be spreading an aluminum solution aimed at reflecting some of the sun's heat. It also has a chemical in the mix to reduce carbon dioxide."

"Science prevails," I cheered sarcastically. "Why haven't I heard about this solution before?"

"It's a secret," Eric began, "because the aluminum solution will eventually find its way to the ground and it is carcinogenic. It also accelerates the onset of Dementia and Alzheimer's disease."

Alzheimer's is a big issue at the retirement center. It's not joked about. Some people won't even say the word. In that population it is like an assailant in the night that attacks without warning.

"It can't be that dangerous if it's being used," I said.

"Only a few people know the risks. The top brass in the EPA feel the side effects of using the aluminum will

be less catastrophic than a mini-ice age." Eric continued. "Congress never saw it and it skipped a Food and Drug review. Even the president doesn't know all the details, if he knows about it at all."

"How can the president not know about something that important?"

"Plausible deniability," Eric explained. "It's a secret black-budget project inside a self-sustaining department. They only answer to themselves."

"How do you know about it," I asked, "if it's top-secret?"

"I dated a girl in the EPA for a while. Sometimes people with the same security clearance compare shop notes to get a fuller picture of what's happening." Eric continued. "Not everyone knows all the details. Sometimes sharing will help fill in the blanks and help make sense of things."

We drove in silence for a while watching the white line in the sky extend to the east. We followed the trail not even seeing the jet, high in the air. I wondered how a small white trail reflected any useful amount of sunlight. You'd need hundreds of jets in the sky spreading poison to do any good.

"The country can't have a referendum on every little thing that it needs," Eric explained. "We elect people to make the hard decisions." He could see that I nodded. But, I didn't like it. "Not everything I tell you will be easy to accept or understand," he said. "Things are kept secret for a reason."

"Yeah, I get it." I said, thinking about Betsy Harmon. She lived at the center until last month. Her Alzheimer's had progressed beyond the point where she could self-care, and she had to leave the independent living area of the retirement center. I wondered how much aluminum she had breathed, or ingested over the years.

"You believed your girlfriend when she told you this?" I asked.

"Yes," Eric said. "I don't doubt a word."

"And this is the kind of shit that's in your manuscript?" I asked.

He sighed, "Yes, this kind of shit."

The soft hum of the LX sang to us as we rode. It looked like the road would never end. In the distance I could see tall windmills, swinging their arms around, generating electricity. Every little bit helps, I guessed. I was afraid to think about what else was going on around me that I didn't know about.

Should I believe anything Eric said? For all I know, he could have Alzheimer's and be telling fantasies that only he believes. In any event, I knew it was going to be an interesting ride. I'd take one day at a time, and one story at a time. What would he tell me next?

5 A GRAIN OF SALT

We drove through a desert of beautiful desolation. Anything could happen to a person out here and nobody would know about it for weeks. Eric slowed to look at an old VW bus, abandoned on the roadside. Faded paint decorated its side with daisies and mushrooms. I noticed that most of the windows were broken, and two wheels were missing. It was an ancient, rusted hulk of a hippie past.

Eric asked an unexpected question. "Do you feel anything?"

My back wasn't aching yet. The LX had a great ride. "No, not really, what should I be feeling?" I asked.

"We are in the vortex area of Sedona. We just passed the Devil's Highway."

I had never heard of it.

"There are four sacred places near here famous for paranormal energies," he said.

"Energies?" I asked, remembering that the atomic bomb tests were done in the desert, "like radiation?"

"No, it's not like that. The local Indians consider them holy and magical places."

We were passing a flat-topped mesa. I admired the orange and brown rock formation that rose several hundred feet into a clear blue sky. It was held to the earth by dark evergreen scrub. Eric pointed out that some of the Juniper trees were twisted.

"Because so many trees around this sacred spot look twisted, they are called vortex trees," Eric explained.

"Energy Vortices," I said.

"Some people can actually feel the power."

I thought about it for a second. "You mean like psychic ESP power stuff?"

Eric smiled, "Yes, like ESP stuff. Do you believe in ESP?"

I felt another story coming on. "No, not really," I answered, remembering some psychic who bent spoons. It turned out to be a hoax, and it was all slight-of-hand. I'd never seen any real magic or mind readers. "It's all stuff from the movies," I said, as we passed another twisted tree.

"Some people get goosebumps and chills," Eric said, "and sometimes a compass will spin."

"I don't feel anything," I said. "The trees are probably twisted from the winds around the mesa."

"They say you have to be sensitive. Sedona has the largest community of psychics and mediums in the country."

"It's all bull," I said knowing Eric would have a different opinion. I was right.

"Did you know the US and Russian governments looked into using extrasensory perception to spy on each other during the Cold War? It was called remote viewing."

"Did they find anything?" I asked.

"Yes, enough to drop millions of dollars into the research."

I wondered if Eric could read my mind and knew how I felt about all his stories. "That was a long time ago."

“True,” he agreed. “But in the 1980s, Reagan used psychics to pinpoint Russian missile silos that were loaded with nukes.”

He must have seen my eyebrows rise, and he continued.

“Reagan tested the process first by having the psychics’ remote view on U.S. silos. He knew the placement of live missiles and could see how many they got correct. It was like a missile shell game for the remote viewers, guessing what silos were armed with nukes.”

“It’s just a matter of luck and educated guessing,” I said.

Eric continued. “The results were successful enough to spend millions on relocating our missiles.”

”Reagan did this?” I asked.

Eric nodded. “Yep, and we continue to move our missiles around so the Russians won’t know where the live ones are loaded.”

“So, the Russians are using remote viewing too?” I asked.

“Oh yes. They have a training facility with psychic platoons.”

“It’s a war of the minds,” I said.

“Yes, and research is underway to increase psychic powers in people.”

“How can they do that?” I asked.

Eric explained that at one time more than thirty universities were on the government payroll secretly experimenting with drugs to stimulate ESP. LSD supposedly expanded the mind and many researchers believed it would increase sensory perception. A secret program called MK Ultra ran tests for quite a while.

“LSD eventually leaked out of the research lab and students started using it for recreation,” Eric said. “Its popularity exploded when Timothy Leary advocated it as a mind-opening drug, saying turn-on and tune-in.”

According to Eric, our government just sat back, took notes, and continued with their experiments. He explained how FBI agents, acting as hookers would drug Johns, making them unwitting tests subjects. The agents would slip drugs into a drink and wait for it to take effect. Once the Johns were on the LSD, the agents asked questions to see if it would be effective as an interrogation drug.

Another story involved a U.S. Marshall who received LSD and was told to rob a bank. “The lawman did it,” Eric said. “People will do things out of character while on the drug. Reprogramming a person is still being researched.”

“Our government did secret tests on reprogramming people’s minds?” I asked.

Eric nodded. “This is way up the secret list. The president doesn’t even know about some black-ops programs.”

“Yeah, I’d bet.”

“The population can’t know the government has been using them as guinea pigs.” Eric pointed out. “Anyway, most of the project ended a few years ago.”

“Good,” I said.

Eric smiled, “Yeah, and in good CIA fashion, all the records were destroyed in a fire.”

“That figures,” I said.

“There are a lot of things kept secret,” he said. “It’s either for the good of society, or national security.”

“Politicians want to get re-elected too.”

“Yes, that too,” Eric agreed.

I was curious, but I didn’t ask for examples.

It had been a long day, and we had a long way to go. More stories would be coming. I knew that for sure. As we drove, Eric started looking for a hotel. Even though we’d been driving all day, my back was not aching. I considered it a blessing that the LX had good seats, with an adjustable lumbar support. It was doing its job well.

He turned into a gas station with a small casino hotel next to it. While Eric pumped gas, he leaned against the car and looked west into the desert sunset. In the distance, a contrail of poisonous aluminum cut through the perfect sky.

The casino didn’t look busy, but the game noises and electronic music pounded my ears. Eric got us each a room and each room came with fifty dollars in casino credits. It was loaded on the hotel key card that doubled as an in-house credit card. It was backed up with Eric’s visa card. If we spent more than the fifty dollars of credit any additional gambling would be charged to Eric. He handed me my room card without any budget rules.

“I’m going to the poker tables,” he said. “You can do whatever you want. I’ll see you later.” Then he disappeared around a row of slots.

My fifty dollars didn’t last long. The credits went up to seventy dollars once, but I quickly lost it. Once my credits were gone, I headed up to my room.

I was happy with my decision to travel with Eric. So far, everything was going well, and it was an enjoyable ride. Surprisingly, my back didn’t ache from so much time in the car. I felt pretty good. My only worry was that I still hadn’t told my sister we were headed her way. And Eric didn’t know we were not on speaking terms. I’d have to figure out how to handle that issue.

Next to the elevator, a small piano bar beckoned me in. A woman in a glittering red dress played a Sinatra classic on the keyboard. She was a pretty and played well. I ordered a rum and coke at the bar and listened. She didn’t sing, but the vocal line of the song sang out on the piano. Even though I didn’t know the lyrics, I knew the song.

I sipped my drink and considered Eric’s stories. His EPA girlfriend, the LSD, and psychic stories were interesting and made the driving time fly. Truthfully, I didn’t know if I could, or should, believe anything he said. In the old days, trust was not an issue, but that was a long time ago. Eric may be a different man now. I didn’t know for sure, but in my gut, I still trusted him and pushed aside second-guessing my choice to make the trip. A second drink and a sandwich washed my concerns away. I used my room key card. Eric did say he would pay for

everything.

A while later he knocked on my door. "How'd you do at the casino?" he asked.

"Lost the fifty dollars," I confessed. "Never have any luck on the slots."

"You can't win on those unless you're lucky," he said. "When you play poker, you can pay attention and play the odds. That's how you come out ahead at a casino."

I could tell by his attitude he had better luck than me. "How much did you win?" I asked.

"Just over four hundred," he said gleefully, "Enough to cover a good breakfast and another gas fill-up down the road!"

"Good job," I said, wondering what a three-hundred-dollar breakfast would look like in the morning.

Ron Ell watched the casino like a wolf watched prey on the prairie. His trained eye jumped from face to face looking for Eric Marks. His gut told him he was there, and this lawman trusted his gut. Ron wasn't sure how he missed his man in Kingman, but he was happy he had asked the local sheriff to keep an eye on Eric's old friend. That was a smart move. The word is that Geoff took an unexpected trip. That was too coincidental.

Ron saw a few people gambling, but more were walking around watching the action. From his position at the end of the bar, he could see down a couple rows of slot machines and he had a good view of the cash-out counter. The bartender had just refilled Ron's Pepsi for the second time when the FBI man saw his prey.

Eric Marks walked up to the cash-out teller with a stack of chips. Eric had gotten lucky gaming, and traded in all his chips for cash. Ron had gotten lucky and spotted him at the counter. As Eric started away from the counter with his wad of dollars, Ron jumped to his feet to follow. Four steps into the pursuit, a man at a slot machine also got lucky. Bells and whistles jarred him with a siren and flashing light from the super-match game. Eric spun around to see the commotion, so Ron dropped behind a slot machine to hide from being spotted. The FBI man inched his head above the machine to watch Eric, but his quarry was gone.

Chasing an elevator is not an easy thing. Typically, they are not in view from the stairwell, but this time, Ron Ell was lucky again. He made it to the second-floor stairwell door in time to see that the elevator didn't stop. Ron raced up more steps to the third floor and saw someone board the elevator. Then the doors closed. Nobody got off. Running two steps at a time he made it to the stairwell door in time to see Eric walking down the hall towards him. Ron spun away from the door's window and hoped he wasn't spotted. After a few seconds he peered down the hall again and saw Eric half inside an opened doorway, talking. A few seconds later, Eric went to room 311 and entered.

Ron's mission was to apprehend Eric, but he wasn't sure he could do it alone. One-on-one was always risky, and it was unclear what self-defense training Eric Marks may have had. Ron didn't want to ruin his element of

surprise, so he chose to collect the twins to help with the capture. As soon as he walked into their room, he knew the capture would have to wait.

The alien twins were unnamed. He mentally referred to them as Moe and Curley. Both of them were asleep. The aliens rarely slept. They would stay awake for days, but when they did sleep, there was no waking them. Ron had tried many times before to wake them from slumber. It was impossible. They would wake up on their own and be alert for another three or four day stretch. Disgusted with his partners again, he walked past, kicking the chair leg where Moe sat.

His daily report was accepted without acclaim. Ron's supervisor at headquarters rarely praised any agent's work. If you did something above and beyond the call of duty, you may get a nod. Today, Ron received new instructions, and his mission changed. He was not to apprehend Eric Marks, but to follow him and dissuade him from completing the trip. His goal was to stop Eric from doing whatever he was planning. The biggest problem Ron had with the new mission was that he didn't know exactly what Eric Marks was trying to do.

6 ON OUR TAIL

A three hundred dollar breakfast was only a dream. Eric woke me with, "We have a problem. Let's hit the road."

Opening the door and rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I asked, "What's wrong?"

"Ron Ell is having breakfast in the hotel restaurant."

"Did they follow us?" I asked.

"No, we didn't have a tail yesterday."

"They tracked your credit card," I said.

"It's not my card, different name anyway. It's clean."

A question crossed my mind. How could a person have credit cards with different names and not be a criminal or a spy? But I didn't voice my thought. "We are both headed east. Could it be a coincidence?"

"That's a possibility. It looks like they were scouting for us, and they got lucky."

Repacking my bag I asked, "How were they so sure you'd come to me for help?" It was a question that he hadn't answered yet.

"Back when we were in the writing group I had a story published in a small magazine called The Outer Fracture." Eric explained that the magazine was independently published and had a small circulation. Everyone in our group had been unsure of their storytelling skills. His submission to the magazine was a test to see if he was good enough to get published.

"Apparently some of the story details were close enough to real-life events that it threw up a red flag in the office of the FBI," he said.

"How could something you published almost fifty years ago put them on your tail now?"

"Since 9/11, everything is looked at by computers for keywords and connections to terrorist groups," Eric explained. "NSA computers look at everything. That small magazine has gone digital recently and put archives of past issues on their website."

"What was the story?" I asked.

"You heard the story in the writer's group," Eric said. "It was about the president meeting an alien from another planet."

I didn't remember the story. Aliens and monsters were his normal thing. All Eric wrote was science fiction. "I don't recall it." I said as I considered the bigger picture. We were trying to get home to retrieve a whistleblowers manuscript, and the FBI was chasing us because of a story published fifty years ago.

"Was the story true?" I asked.

Eric confessed. "I thought it was fudged enough that no one would see any facts in it, but I didn't expect a

computer to review it. I wrote it before the Patriot Act. Apparently, the NSA computers caught something strong enough to have it flagged.”

“So, our president has met with aliens?” I asked.

“Get ready to go. I’ll tell you more when we are on the road. Meet me at the car in thirty minutes.” He slipped out the door and left me to finish packing.

It was going to be another interesting day, for sure.

I didn't see Ron Ell or his buddies in the hotel as I hurried out through the back exit. The LX wasn't far from the door, and it was a clean getaway. The tank was full. Eric raced past the gas station onto the road.

“Do you think they know what kind of car we have?” I asked.

“There’s always a chance they know my alias, but I think it’s clean.”

“Did you write the magazine story under your own name?” I asked trying to learn something more about the story he had hinted about earlier.

“Yeah, that was a mistake. I didn’t know electronic text surveillance was coming. That was a long time ago. Who knew things would change so much?”

I nodded, agreeing.

“The Outer Fracture wasn’t a big magazine, and it was only in paper form at the time. I wanted to see my name in the byline.” Eric confessed.

We all did. I had submitted a couple of stories to magazines as well, but all I got were rejection slips.

“It was called National Secrets,” he said. “Maybe I should have named it something less obvious.”

“No wonder the NSA computers flagged it,” I said, laughing.

Eric tipped his head in agreement. "Hindsight is twenty-twenty."

I waited for him to continue telling me about the story, but he didn't for some time. Before long, we crossed the Arizona line and entered New Mexico. As if that was a cue to begin, he started his story.

“I told you about my mentor, Donald Menzel, the astronomer at Harvard. I was working for him in the early 1950s. I was still in school at the time.”

I remembered he had told me about the man.

“One of his projects was to photograph the stars every night. It was a project called the DASCH Project, and it was the most complete record of star charts in the world. One of my jobs was to file all the images, they were on glass plates,” Eric explained.

“It sounds like a lot of pictures,” I said.

Eric nodded and said, “Hundreds of thousands. Other institutions could borrow them for a fee, and the astronomy department made a little money from that.”

Eric continued to explain that one evening they received a visitor from Sandia Missile Base. “His name was Commander Montague, and he wanted to get some plates that were imaged a few years earlier.”

What does that have to do with anything? I wondered, but let him continue at his own pace.

“According to Menzel, there had been an event in 1947 that put the commander in hot water. One of his staffers reported that the base had retrieved a crashed UFO. The story hit the newspapers, and he’d been trying to clean up the mistake for years. He needed the plates to confirm there was nothing unusual in the air around that time.”

The Roswell crash had been in the news a lot. Many people thought it was a joke, but some people believed it. I was pretty young at the time and didn't care. Over the years it had become an infamous conspiracy theory. “If he knew it was a mistake, why did he have to prove nothing was in the sky?” I asked.

“That’s what I asked too,” Eric said. “Montague never returned the plates. The DASCH Project has a gap through that week.”

“So, do you know the truth?” I asked. “Did a UFO crash at Roswell?”

“Sometime later I learned the truth. Yes, there was a crash,” he admitted.

I wasn't shocked. I kind of expected that answer when the conversation started. It seemed to fit into the whole whistle-blower mantra that Eric had been singing. “So, your story was true. The president has met an alien?” I asked.

“Mostly true, yes,” he answered. “But, you are getting ahead in the story.”

I let him continue.

“Shortly after Montague took the plates, we had a visitor named Sydney Sourers. He was a government man, head of what was then the CIA.” Eric described him as a balding man with fine wrinkles all over his scalp. When the man smiled, he looked like a Shar-Pei dog.

Eric went on, “Sourers wanted Menzel to join a group that would answer directly to President Eisenhower regarding matters of national security. Sourers could see how much Menzel depended on me as his personal assistant, so I’d be needed too. Being truthful, my boss was not the most organized person. I didn’t know it at the time, but Sourers started the background checks to get me special clearance to work with Menzel on the project.”

“Okay,” I nodded.

“Later that year, I went to Washington with Menzel as he attended the first meeting. The codename for the group was the Majestic Twelve. The group was created to handle the flap over the rumors that we had captured a UFO at Roswell, as well as handle any other UFO news that might leak.”

“And that’s how you found out?”

“Yes, before the meeting, Menzel didn't believe UFOs existed. He had stood up to say all the sightings were natural or mistaken identities. The rest were hoaxes. He was even on a radio show with Edward R Marrow saying that.”

Eric paused and watched the rearview mirror for a second. I looked back and saw a car in the distance. Here, Route 66 was called I-40. It was not a busy highway, and I didn’t think anything suspicious of the car behind us.

Eric kept an eye on it and continued. "When Menzel found out the truth, he was shaken to the core. We were up all night with a bottle of whisky talking about the meeting. The job assigned to him by the president was to be a debunker. He had already explained-away many sightings and had gotten a reputation as a scientist who didn't believe that UFOs were real. He had to continue that role, even after he knew the facts."

"That must have been hard for him," I said.

"Yes, he thought his colleagues would mock him. He wasn't happy with the position he was put into by the president."

Eric was still watching the car behind us. It was a black sedan with tinted windows. It had gotten closer. I knew Eric was driving ten over the posted limit, so the sedan must have been flying. Eric slowed and turned onto a dirt road that headed toward a distant rock formation. He picked up speed again and headed away from the main road leaving a billowing cloud of dust. Our trail was obvious.

Just before we rounded a curve circling the flat-topped mesa, I saw the sedan turn off I-40 and follow us. I was surprised that Eric stopped after we were out of sight, behind the rock. "Get out and help me," he said.

We quickly got to the trunk of the LX. Eric opened it and fumbled to open one of his suitcases. Inside there were several canvas bags and he grabbed one and handed it to me. He took another for himself. It was heavier than I expected. Eric opened the sinched top and pulled out a handful of the contents. The bag contained four-inch nails bent around each other making dangerous-looking jacks.

"Toss these out across the road, empty your bag," he said. We spread the tire jacks over the dirt road making it a trap for any passing car. Then, we jumped back into the LX and raced away.

A minute later the sedan came around the mesa. It didn't go any farther. Before we were out of sight I saw the doors open and three men in black suits get out of the car. It was Ron Ell and his crew.

"I bet they have at least two flat tires," Eric said.

I agreed, the jacks would do a lot of damage. "Do you think they'll be okay? Stranded behind the mesa, no one will see them. There's no town within a hundred miles."

"They'll be fine," Eric said with a laugh. "They have a satellite radio in the car and I bet they've already called for help."

He seemed sure of himself, and he was probably right. Now we knew that Ron Ell was on our tail, and they knew I was with Eric. For seventy-five years I had been a law-abiding citizen, and now after only one day being with Eric, I am being chased by the FBI.

7 THE TWELVE

The dashboard GPS showed that we were driving in an open space on the map, it wasn't even a road. Eric didn't appear to mind and continued his story.

"Over the next couple of days, Menzel and another member of the twelve, called Moore, tried to explain to me what had happened in 1947. A day before the wreckage was found there was a terrible storm. That is what caused the crash," Eric said. "Some rancher found the site while herding cattle around his property. The sheriff suggested calling Sandia. That's how the Air Force ended up there."

"What did they find?" I asked.

"Well," Eric began, "It was an alien craft."

"Were there aliens in it?" I asked.

"They took the ship, and the crew, to Wright Patterson, in Ohio."

I was flabbergasted, "Aliens are in Ohio?"

"Yes, Eisenhower and Truman knew all about the Roswell crash. By the third presidential term after the crash, they kept it behind wraps. Roswell was a need-to-know-only topic, and most presidents after that were kept in the dark."

"They can do that?" I asked.

Eric explained that half of the Majestic Twelve thought it was an alien invasion and they wanted to prepare for war. The other half thought the aliens were friendly but wanted to keep it a secret. They thought it would cause panic. The JASON Society predicted it would destroy our society if the truth about flying saucers became public knowledge. They thought the public couldn't handle it."

I agreed and nodded. "It would have caused a panic back in the '50s."

"The first meeting of the Majestic Twelve was to decide how to deal with the leak that hit the newspaper," Eric said. "They decided to deny anything ever happened. Menzel and a couple of others planned to debunk any new sightings too. It was our job to make any UFO witnesses look like a fool," he explained.

"What happened after that?"

"As usual with the recommendations from The JASON Society, some people disagreed," Eric said. "A fair amount of the Twelve wanted to go public, and there was a big debate. They finally agreed to a slow disclosure process, over decades, to educate the public and prepare society for the news."

Eric took a pause, watching the rearview mirror for anyone following. It looked clear.

"Some of the Twelve even met with the Pope," he added, "to prepare religion for the big news."

That made sense. It was the kind of news that could test one's faith. The revelation tested mine. In 1947 a UFO crashed and our current President doesn't even know about it. Eric knew, the Pope knew, and now I knew, but the President didn't know. That was absurd. It was like the white trails in the sky. I wondered what else was

happening around us that the President didn't know about.

"What happened to the aliens?" I asked.

"Exactly what you'd expect," Eric continued. "They were poked at and prodded, tested, and interrogated."

"They could communicate with us?" I asked.

"Not at first, but a system was developed. The aliens didn't speak. They telepathically communicated with each other and they could express thoughts to us through the computer."

"Did the computer come from the ship that crashed?" I asked.

"I'm jumping a few years ahead," he said. "The translator machine came from a different ship and a different alien altogether."

"It sounds like a sci-fi movie."

"In the '50s and '60s, outer space flicks made the aliens appear like monsters. The army always tried to blow them out of the sky." Eric chuckled. "Over the years, the black budget has channeled millions of dollars into Hollywood to make movies about benevolent aliens. The JASON Society wanted to soften the public image of aliens, and give our population the idea that aliens could be friendly."

"How did they do that?" I asked.

"It was becoming clear the impact that movies and TV had on society," Eric said.

I thought back to the summer that Jaws came out. I wouldn't go near the beach after that movie.

"With the impact of movies in mind, The JASON suggested using film to change the image of aliens. TV shows and movies came out with friendly aliens. They even added an alien to the Flintstones cartoon. It was the start of changing people's opinions about creatures from other worlds."

"So are you telling me besides that crash, we've had contact with other friendly aliens?" Eric's stories were almost too much to believe. What was next?

"The crash was the beginning," Eric said. "We were lucky the crash was a friendly species. They didn't outright talk to us, but sent messages in the form of actions."

"What?"

"The aliens let us see them by showing up at different places," he said. "For days, they flew above the air base where we took the crashed saucer. Pilots reported UFO's following military jets. They would buzz atomic testing sites and bases. For a full week, they buzzed the capitol to display a show of force. We couldn't do anything to stop them."

Eric drove in silence for a while. We were in the middle of nowhere driving down an unmapped road. And, I was beginning to think I was with a crazy person. I couldn't decide if Eric was telling the truth or feeding me a line of bull. Was our government keeping all this a secret from its people? Part of me believed Eric. He told the story so well. If it wasn't a true story, it would make a bestseller. I was almost afraid to ask for more.

"Are we lost?" I asked.

“Not really. I know where we are. I’m looking for a landmark.”

The hills and mesas had thinned and the desert was mostly flat. On our left, miles of scrub faded into the distant purple foothills and mountains. To the right, the south, the scrub went on forever. Somewhere out there was our highway, I-40. It skirted the Apache National Preserve. I didn’t see anything that could be a landmark anywhere, and our gas gauge showed under a quarter of a tank.

Eric broke the silence, “Eisenhower had a meeting with the aliens and created the Treaty of Greda.”

“We have a treaty with them?” I asked, hardly believing what I heard.

“Yes, but we didn’t have much to bargain with.”

“What’s in it?” I asked.

“Eisenhower wanted assistance pulling new technology from the crashed disk. The Treaty of Greda helped with that. The Nordics helped broker it between the Gray aliens and Eisenhower,” Eric explained.

“Norway was involved?” I asked. “How did Norway get involved?”

“The Nordics are a second race of aliens,” Eric added. “Greda also guaranteed that the Grays and the Nordics would not interfere with Earth’s control over itself. In essence, they wouldn’t invade and take over.”

“What did we give up to stop that?” I asked.

“Our government had to promise to keep the alien presence a secret,” he said. “The JASON Society had already suggested that, so Eisenhower was agreeable.”

“Were you at the meeting?” I asked.

“No, I learned this from Menzel, Moore, and Sourers. Sourers was another member of the twelve. He was the director of the CIA. I mentioned him before.”

“Oh, yeah,” I nodded. There were too many names to keep them all straight.

“Eisenhower wanted alien tech. He wanted to advance the American war machine, but the Grays didn’t like that idea. They only agreed to share some technology with hand-picked private industries,” Eric said. “They started with Lear.”

“The jet guy?” I asked, and he nodded.

“Even though Lear was in the government’s pocket, the aliens were okay with him.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, but there was more. “What are we trading for the technology?” I asked.

Eric continued, “Eisenhower had to allow the Grays to do research on our people.”

“What?” I asked, not believing that would be allowable. “You’re pulling my leg.” I tried to smile and laugh, but his straight face told me it was no joke.

“It’s true. They can abduct our people as long as the aliens wipe the person’s memory, so they don’t have any recollection of it.”

The conversation went on, but my thoughts bounced around that statement. Abductions are a real thing too.

“So, we are their guinea pigs.”

“And we got limited alien tech in return,” Eric said. “We had already dissected the alien killed in the crash. That didn't sit well with them. We were disassembling the disk and trying to figure that out too, but it was slow going. And, we had Kevin.” Eric said.

“Who's Kevin?” I asked.

“Kevin is the alien from the crash who did not die.”

I jumped in my seat. “We have a prisoner?”

“He's not a prisoner. He is our guest.” Eric corrected.

“Okay,” I said, not sure if I understood the difference in this scenario.

Eric explained. “Now, he can leave any time he wants.”

“Why would he choose to stay?” I asked.

“We are not enemies,” Eric explained. “He is as curious about us, as we are about them.”

Eric paused to let it all sink in. Then, he pointed ahead of us. “Look.” Eric said, and nodded out the windshield.

It looked like a small white building, but I couldn't tell for sure. As we got closer, I could see it was not building at all. It was a huge radio dish pointed to the sky.

“It's the Socorro VLA,” Eric said. “That is one of twenty-seven radio telescopes called the Very Large Array.”

It was huge and spotless white against the brown earth. The closer we got, the larger it grew. A paved road from the south led to the dish. Eric turned onto the pavement and drove toward where I believed we would find I-60.

“See, nothing to worry about,” he said.

His words did not comfort me. I had nothing to worry about except UFOs, aliens, poisonous clouds, and the FBI.

8 ROSWELL

“Here’s the issue that started the whole headache,” Eric said.

We arrived in Roswell, and it looked like any other small town, except it had a UFO museum. We parked in front of it before going anywhere else. He gave me a guided tour detailing every exhibit.

A framed 1947 newspaper front page spelled out in bold font, Flying Saucer Captured! Next to it, a framed issue recanting the story explained it was a weather balloon.

“This started it all,” he said.

There were only a few other people in the museum. A couple of kids ran around us and moved noisily from exhibit to exhibit. A woman wearing a flowery dress that looked like my grandmother's wallpaper ignored them and took more interest in the various displays. She moved along ahead of us.

“As an excuse, the Air Force claimed it was a secret weather balloon designed to spy on Russia,”

Eric said. “The secret weather balloon story was an invention by Montague to try and quell the leaked saucer story.”

We viewed a large diorama of a UFO landing site with mannequin aliens standing under the mock craft. Every fifteen minutes a fog machine puffed smoky clouds out of the saucer. Eric explained it was a Hollywood movie prop. The two youngsters ran around the saucer and loudly shot the aliens with toy ray guns. In my day, kids just didn’t act like that, alien invasion or not.

Moving on, Eric pointed out important framed documents relating to flying saucers that covered the walls. Many of them had US military stationary and government seals. A couple of them were stamped Top Secret. I didn't read all of them, but Eric explained what each said.

I’m not usually the paranoid type, but ever since we flattened Ron Ell’s tires I’d been looking over my shoulder. It didn’t take too long for me to notice that the woman walking nearby was paying more attention to Eric and me than the children making the ruckus.

“This one mentions the Majestic Twelve,” he said. “Here is one that mentions President Eisenhower going to Groom Lake.”

I glanced over a few letters and slowly moved on. The woman who was ahead of us, let us pass. But, she stayed close, following us through the museum.

Eric pointed to an operating room display. “This is supposed to be the alien autopsy, but it doesn’t look much like Kevin’s partner.” A mannequin nurse and doctor performed an autopsy on a paper-mâché alien. It didn't look real. I'd seen better figures at wax museums. "The gray aliens don't look like that," Eric added.

With his guidance, we navigated the museum in less than an hour. He cherry-picked the important displays and skipped many decorative items. He gave me the entire Roswell story in complete detail, with facts and documents to back it up effectively. Eric knew what he was talking about, believed it, and delivered it better than

a History Channel documentary. The woman who was following us got an education too.

There was a gift shop at the end of the tour where I bought a T-shirt that read, I survived the Roswell Crash! I thought it was appropriate and amusing. Eric looked around but left empty-handed. When we walked out, the lady behind us was on her cell phone, looking at the shelves of souvenirs. The two kids were nowhere to be seen.

“We will stay here overnight. There is a hotel down the road I’ve been to before.”

"What about Ron Ell? Don't you think he'll head straight here to look for us?" I said.

“Without a doubt,” Eric agreed.

“There was a lady in the museum who listened to every word you said," I told him.

“Yeah, I gave her something to report, didn’t I?” Eric beamed. I was surprised he didn’t care that she might be FBI.

Ron Ell had the Roswell field office on his phone even before he arrived at Sandia Air Force Base. He let the twins sit in the heat for hours while he flew back in the Blackhawk. A crew to fix the car tires was on the way, but it would take hours. Moe and Curley could have gotten a ride too, but chose to stay and wait in the car.

“I want close surveillance on those two old men. I want to know what they are up to.” Ron Ell shouted louder than needed, the helicopter wasn’t very loud. “I want your field agents to be on them like glue,” he added. “I’ll work on convincing them they’re headed for trouble. Whatever they are up to is a bad idea.”

Not all small towns in New Mexico have FBI stationed in them, but Roswell had a small field office in city hall. It’s a rare hotbed of activity. This small town always brings out the crazy in people.

He wasn’t on the ground long before the first reports rang through his phone. It was the voice of the lady with the dress that looked like an old wallpaper print. “They toured the UFO museum,” she told Ron. “Your man told his companion the whole story in detail. He even knew things I’d never heard before.”

"Forget everything you heard. None of it is true," Ron said.

The field agent knew better. “He’s going to go public. I have the feeling he knows more than he is saying,” she said.

Ron knew she was correct and hung up on her without saying goodbye. He understood Eric had been in the loop and knew a lot. He hoped Eric would be smart enough to keep his mouth shut, but it didn't look like he planned to honor his sworn duty to keep things secret. Eric published that story fifty years ago and he still talked too much. He would have to teach Eric a lesson.

The Crash Inn Hotel was on the edge of town. It was no Ritz Carlton. Eric checked us in and parked in front of his room. My room was the next door. I pulled my duffel from the trunk, and he grabbed a small suitcase setting it on the walkway next to the LX. Eric was in no hurry to get to his room. He rested his butt on the trunk lid and looked down the road. The New Mexico sunset glowed orange behind the cityscape of Roswell. I saw the silhouette of birds far in the distance.

“What kind of birds are out there in the desert?” I asked.

“I’m no naturalist, but those are not birds.”

I watched the black spots in the distance getting closer. “You’re right.”

“Those, my friend, are the legendary black choppers.”

A moment later, I could see they were helicopters. Black, without any marking lights, they were nearly silent. The birds looked like military jet copters with hardware mounted on their sides.

“It looks like Ron Ell finally made it to the party,” he said.

“Do you think it’s them?”

“Who else could it be?” he answered.

Eric didn't appear to care. "Let's get a bite to eat across the street." He pointed at a small bar and grill called the Moon Glow. A couple of cars sat in front of it and it looked respectable enough.

“Sure, a burger sounds good.” We threw the bags into the back seat of the LX and walked over.

My burger was good, and the onion rings were crispy. My frosted glass mug of beer couldn't have been colder. I hadn't had a better meal in a long time. Eric beat me at a few games on the quarter-slot pool table. It was just like old times. We talked and joked, drank, and laughed. Maybe it was the change of scenery or the form-fitted seats in the LX, but I felt pretty good. I was worried the long ride would be an issue, but I was wrong. I was enjoying myself. Even with the FBI chasing us, I was having a good time.

“I think I better get to my room. We have a long ride tomorrow,” Eric said.

I had just started another beer, “I’ll be right behind you.” It dawned on me this was bottle number five. It must have been ten years since I drank more than four beers in one sitting. I was going to have to be careful walking to the hotel. I took a long swig, but the bottle would need at least another. Eric was out the door as I stood and headed to the bar with my bottle. I walked a straight line, but I admitted to myself I was feeling the alcohol.

“Hi, you want some company?” A woman sitting at the bar gently caressed my arm as I set the beer on the counter. “Want to buy me a drink?”

I was flattered. Her pretty smile invited me to sit beside her with the tip of her head and the bat of an eye. I almost accepted, but something caused me to pause. She was thirty years younger than me, sexy and willing. Something wasn't right. This just never happened to me. She had to be a prostitute. I set the bottle down and gently pulled away.

Words fumbled out of my mouth. "I'm sorry, but I have to go." I was long out of the dating game, and I sounded that way.

"Just a little while, don't you like me?" She insisted.

"I've got to go," I said, and headed towards the door.

When I got outside to the sidewalk, I realized I had a slight sweat on my forehead. I shook my head and chuckled, Boy, am I out of practice with women. I was glad Eric didn't see my embarrassing lack of smoothness with the ladies and looked up to see him halfway across the street. I took a step in his direction as a car pulled out from aside the bar and shot towards him. The headlights were out but the tires squealed slightly. The rev of the engine was enough to give Eric a warning. He skipped out of the way and onto the sidewalk near the Crash Inn's office. The car followed him onto the curb but swerved away just before hitting a pole. Eric was flat against the office wall, but still on his feet when the car bumped back into the street and sped away. A lost hubcap rolled in a small circle and clattered to a stop against the curb. By that time, I was across the street with Eric.

"Stupid drunk!" I shouted with beer breath and waved a fist down the street at the tail lights popping on. "Are you okay?" I asked, turning to Eric.

"Yeah, I'm good." He bent over and picked up the hubcap. It was metal, not cheap plastic. "Lucky I'm quick on my feet."

"You bet."

"Did you see what kind of car that was?" he asked.

"Sure, and I got the plate too."

He smiled and Frisbee threw the hubcap into the garbage dumpster next to the office. "I think we better get an early start tomorrow. Let's aim for seven."

"Do you think it was them?" I asked.

"I don't know. It could have been a drunk."

"They wouldn't try to hurt you, or kill you, would they?" I stammered. "If that woman hadn't stopped me I would have been with you."

Eric looked up. "Someone stopped you?"

"Yeah, some hooker propositioned me." There was more pride in the statement than I intended.

"Oh," Eric nodded. "I don't think you have to worry."

"What do you mean?" I asked, thinking he doubted that a hooker propositioned me.

"It looks like they wanted us separated when they made their attempt."

"Oh," I deflated. That made sense. Then, it dawned on me. "They are trying to kill you!"

Eric patted me on the back and guided me toward our rooms. "If they wanted me dead, they would have finished the job. They are just trying to scare me."

9 MARILYN

Eric walked into the office lobby of the Crash Inn while my puffy, hung-over eyes tried to focus on a rack of tourist attraction brochures. An advertisement for the UFO crash site jumped out at me. The VLA array and the Roswell Museum promotions were tucked into the rack too. Greater sites such as the Grand Canyon, and Meteor Creator teased my sleepy eyes. We were just passing through, but we could have done a lot within a day's drive.

"I think we'll need our rooms for another two days," Eric said to the girl behind the desk. She looked up with eyes circled in heavy mascara. "I'd like to pay in advance," he added.

Her dark purple lips smiled. "Yes sir," she said in a polite voice. "Do you want to use the same credit card?" Her black glossy fingernails started typing on the keyboard even before Eric answered.

"Yes, the same card would be great. We are going to head south toward the Mexican border to see a few sights. We should be back tomorrow night."

"Go visit Carlsbad Cavern." There was unexpected excitement in her voice. "I did the tour last year. It was way cool."

That sounded interesting, and I stepped closer to the counter to listen. The clerk suggested the Mexican Market too. She went on to explain they had black-market Gucci and other good deals, but I had to look away from the conversation. The rings through her nose and lips kept tugging at my eyes. I didn't want to stare, so turned to the brochure rack again. Kids these days are so weird. I remember my parents saying the same thing about my generation, but somehow this was different.

Eric took the receipt and tapped my shoulder as he left the office. Our bags were in the trunk, so we jumped right into the LX. We were getting an early start as planned; it wasn't even seven o'clock yet. When we pulled out onto the main street, I noted the difference between the desert sunrise and desert sunset. Where the sunset had been vibrant orange, now the sunrise was pastel yellow fading to baby blue higher in the sky. When we passed the city limits and broke free of the buildings obstructing the view, the vastness of the pale sunrise overwhelmed me. We were truly in the middle of nowhere.

With the sunrise to my right, I realized we were heading in the wrong direction. "We're not going south," I said.

"No, we are headed north."

"I thought you said we were heading to the border."

"I did, but that was because the Men-In-Black would question the clerk about our plans. When they do, they'll think we are sticking around town for a couple more days. It might give us a chance to lose them."

"Oh," I nodded. I was a little let down on missing a trip to the border market but realized a trip anywhere was better than loafing around at the retirement center. "Who are the Men-In-Black," I asked.

Eric grinned a half smile. "The Men-In-Black are a special, secret service that works for the government on

sensitive matters."

"You mean extraterrestrial," I confirmed.

Eric nodded, "Beyond top secret."

"So, Ron Ell is not FBI," I said.

"Probably not, but the Men-In-Black could be tagging along with him. It's hard to say."

For once, Eric didn't seem to know the exact details. There was a hint of doubt in his tone. "Whatever the case, He's got tier-three authority."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"He has a lot of power." I kept quiet and allowed him to continue. "Besides the typical FBI actions like surveillance, he can place bugs and tracking devices or intercept phone connections without a judge's approval."

"Have we been bugged?"

"We had a tracking device on the LX. I found it this morning and put it on a border patrol truck parked near the hotel. Hopefully, the truck is headed south."

"That will throw them off."

"That's the plan," Eric said. "Tier-three can also pull pranks like the hit and run last night."

"They did try to kill you." I gasped.

"Possibly, but they may have been trying to scare me." Eric finally confessed. "The point is they can do whatever is necessary."

Taking this trip may not have been the best idea. Whatever was in that manuscript might not be worth risking my life. "Have they killed others? Does it happen often?" I asked.

"That's hard to answer. A good agent will always make it look like an accident."

"Like a hit and run," I added.

"Uh huh, take John Murphy," Eric explained. "He was a reporter who witnessed the Kecksburg UFO crash. He lucked into the story of a lifetime. Murphy had his camera with him and a tape recorder. He took statements from other witnesses and photos of the scene. He was just doing his job, and wouldn't be quiet about what he saw. He talked about the crash on his radio show all the time. But, the government confiscated everything. The Men-In-Black took it all. Later, when he still wouldn't shut up about it, Murphy was killed by a hit-and-run driver."

"Another hit and run, and another UFO crash. I never heard about that one," I said.

"That's exactly why they did it," Eric said. "And then there is Rummel. He was the editor of Alien Magazine. He promoted the fact that aliens were on the planet living among us. That went against the plan of the Jason Society. Police reports say he committed suicide, but I don't believe that. His gun had no fingerprints on it. Plus, the suicide note was left-handed. Rummel was right-handed."

I began to understand that the Men-In-Black could do whatever they wanted. Eric wanted to prove that aliens were real. John Murphy tried to do the same thing, and now he was dead. I was about to suggest turning back

when Eric continued his story.

“Phil Schneider lectured about his experiences working with aliens in secret underground bunkers. He supposedly took part in a firefight between aliens and our troops at one of the research centers. The news claimed he committed suicide too, but most people doubt it.”

Eric paused for a moment and drove silently. In the distance, I could see mountains breaking the flat horizon. “It's all rumors. The Men-In-Black cover up the facts pretty well.”

“But, do you know of any killings firsthand?” I asked.

“I haven't witnessed any if that's what you mean,” Eric said, “but I knew an agent involved with Marilyn Monroe’s murder.

That piqued my interest. “Can you tell me about that?”

“At this point, your clearance level does not matter.” Eric laughed.

“So, who killed Marilyn Monroe,” I asked.

“According to my old girlfriend Carol, the government did. Carol was CIA. She was watching Monroe because the star had a friend in town from Mexico who was a known communist. Senator McCarthy wanted to know more about the visitor, named Fredrick Field, but the job snowballed into something different.”

“I never heard of him,” I said.

“He turned out to be a nobody,” Eric added and continued. “Do you remember Kennedy's birthday party, where she sang him the Happy Birthday song?”

I nodded. “I saw the news clips on TV.”

“According to Carol, that was the beginning of a three-night affair with the president.”

“No!”

“Yes! Because they were monitoring Monroe, they had her place in Brentwood bugged. The CIA listened to the whole weekend.”

“They bugged the president?” I was astonished.

“No, they bugged Monroe. He just happened to be there.” Eric said. “On that weekend, Kennedy tried to impress her. My girlfriend heard the tapes, and I read the transcripts. He told her he had met an alien.”

“He was the president of the United States. He didn't need to impress her,” I said.

“Maybe so, but she was a legendary TV goddess.”

“Did she believe him?” I asked.

“Monroe may have been a blond, but she wasn't the dumb blond she played on screen. She believed him, and she knew that kind of information was valuable.”

Our highway skirted a small, craggy mountain jutting from the desert floor. Deep red and purple boulders surrounded the mighty rock formation that stood almost vertical. It wasn't snow-capped, but big enough to be called a mountain. It filled the whole windshield and some. In the distance, I saw another mountain. It was

beautiful country.

“I thought you said Kennedy didn’t know about aliens,” I said.

Eric corrected me. “No, I said it was policy after Eisenhower not to tell the president. Kennedy seriously looked into the subject and wanted disclosure.”

“Did they kill her because the president told her about the aliens?” I asked.

“They couldn’t keep her quiet,” Eric said. “The wiretaps recorded her talking about it. Then, a couple of days later, she committed suicide. She had taken too many sedatives to consider the death an accident. The public didn’t question it much because it was Hollywood.”

“Just another Hollywood suicide,” I said.

“Right, but one witness saw Robert Kennedy at Monroe’s home the night before she died. Two other men arrived with him, and one carried a doctor’s bag. Besides that, someone had cleaned the house of fingerprints. They didn’t even find any of Marilyn’s prints in her home.

“Do you believe that story?” I asked.

“I believe what Carol told me is true, yes.”

“Do you think the Men-In-Black are trying to kill you?” I asked.

“Times have changed. UFO disclosure is closer now than it ever has been, but I don’t know.”

“If the JASON Society wants to keep what’s in your book secret, they would do it.”

“Maybe, but they don’t know what’s in my book,” Eric said.

“They have an idea of what’s in the book from that story you got published.”

Eric nodded, “The story about Eisenhower meeting an alien.”

“Exactly,” I said

“Or, maybe a different story,” Eric confessed.

“Did you get another story published?”

“Only one other,” Eric looked sideways at me. “I wrote a story about who killed Kennedy.”

“Oh well, that doesn’t sound like a good reason to silence you.” My words dripped with sarcasm. “Didn’t Oswald kill him?”

10 KENNEDY

“Kennedy demanded the names of the Majestic Twelve members, he was a thorn in the side of The JASON Society by wanting disclosure put on a fast track, and he was closing down secret CIA programs too. Kennedy rubbed a lot of people the wrong way.”

Eric explained they needed Oswald as a patsy to take the blame. “He was the perfect scapegoat. Lee Harvey had been to Russia. He even lived there for a while and had practically defected. When he returned to the States the CIA kept tabs on him. It was easy to loop him into the conspiracy. They doubted he could make the shot, but he was planted there to try, and take the fall.”

“Were you part of it? How do you know all this?”

Eric shook his head, “I told you, I’m not an agent. I’m an office manager and assistant with a high clearance level. I worked with agents but never went on missions.”

“Who told you?” I asked again. I should have known the answer.

“It was an agent I dated.”

I laughed out loud. “How many CIA girls have you dated?”

“Yeah, I’ve dated a few. It’s a relationship of convenience,” Eric explained. “Both of us needed a partner with top-secret clearance. It sometimes helps to talk to someone about work.”

“Sure, I get that. The pillow talk must be interesting,” I said.

Eric nodded. “It can be.”

He continued his story. “Admiral Hillekoetter had gotten word that Kennedy wanted CIA director McCone to give him all the UFO files labeled as unknowns. He believed that Kennedy was preparing a speech to announce that aliens had made first contact.”

“That would stir up a hornet’s nest,” I said.

“Right,” Eric agreed. “It went against The JASON Society’s big plan, so the MJ-12 scrambled to find a solution.”

“I see where this is going,” I said.

“Kennedy also wanted to know what the members of the MJ-12 did.”

“He didn’t know about the Majestic 12?” I asked.

“The MJ-12 started before his term in office, and their activities were outside the president’s daily routine.”

It dawned on me that my clearance was now higher than the president's. While I tried to wrap my head around that absurd thought, Eric continued.

“Ten days after Kennedy ordered the collection of the UFO files for his disclosure speech, they killed him in Dallas. He was planning full disclosure within the year. Even though Kennedy planned to release information

slowly, it was not slow enough. Most of the MJ-12 and The JASON Society were against it.”

For about a mile we sat in silence. They killed the president over policy. "Do you know who did it?"

“Rogue members of the MJ-12 took action. A solid faction of UFO holdouts that followed the Jason Society’s plan to keep the aliens a secret, worked covertly against members who wanted disclosure.” Eric said. “Only hand-picked agents were involved. It was not an agency-wide mission. It was individual agents who answered only to their MJ-12 counterpart.”

I listened but found most of what I was hearing hard to believe. Eric told a completely different story than the lessons I learned in school.

“The man that made the kill-shot was an FBI, D-5 agent named William Greer," Eric said. “Greer had to take action when other agents failed to do the job. Directly behind the president’s limo one agent shot twice but missed Kennedy completely. The two shots hit Connelly.”

Eric looked over at me. “Have you heard about the grassy knoll?" he asked.

“Of course,” I answered.

“The last shot came from the grassy knoll. The bullet hit Kennedy’s neck but didn’t kill him. That miss pushed Greer into action. He used a pistol with a poison-tipped shot to kill the president.”

“Poison killed Kennedy?" I asked. I’d never heard that claim before. It was beginning to sound a bit outlandish.

“Right, but because Greer’s shot was a head shot, the mission had further complications. Kennedy's brain had to disappear during the autopsy. If they analyzed the brain, the poison would be discovered and raise too many questions. That afternoon, agents scurried around the Dallas hospital to dispose of Kennedy’s brain permanently. That's why it's missing.

“Oswald didn’t do anything,” I said.

Eric nodded in agreement. “Oswald was a patsy designed to take the blame. The Mafia and the communists hired him to kill Kennedy, but he never even took a shot.”

Eric’s manuscript would rewrite history if it ever got printed. The dirty little secrets exposed would change the public’s view of the government. The book would shatter the belief that our elected politicians were doing good work.

Ron Ell warned the goth clerk at the Crash Inn that he’d know if she lied to him. “Did they say anything about what they were doing before they left?" he asked.

“They reserved the rooms for another two days.” She nervously fidgeted with her hair. “They were going sightseeing.” The clerk looked up at the trio of suited lawmen as if she were guilty of murder.

Ron wasn't expecting that answer. "Are they still here?"

"No, they are going to the Border Market and maybe Carlsbad. They just kept the rooms," she said.

"Let's have the keys to their rooms."

The clerk didn't hesitate or even think that they needed some legal warrant. They had shown their badges, and they looked real enough. She handed Ron the keys, and he passed them to Moe, "Go check the rooms, I'll finish here."

Moe and Curley walked out and left the clerk alone with Ron Ell. He leaned over the counter into the young girl's space. "Those two men are dangerous criminals. Don't let them fool you," he said.

"Yes sir," the girl nodded. "I can outrun them." She said.

"Probably," Ron admitted, "they look old, but don't underestimate those two."

"Can you print out a copy of their receipt?" It was more a command than a request. The clerk tapped a few keys and it printed.

Ron looked it over. The name on the credit card used was unexpected. Eric had registered under the name Ron Ell. "Can you print the whole card number?" he asked.

The clerk looked worried. She couldn't. "The computer will only show the last four numbers."

Ron expected that. Eric used a card with the same last four numbers as his personal card. The lawman tried to stay calm.

The twins came back into the office but remained silent. Ron heard their report on the room in his head. They were clean. They took everything. They were not coming back.

Ron pulled a small tablet from inside his jacket and tapped the screen. "The tracker has them heading south. They may be making a run for the border," he said to the twins. He slid one of his business cards across the counter to the clerk. "Call me if you think of anything else."

As soon as they left the office, she grabbed the phone. "You were right. They came looking for you," she said. "Are you really wanted by the FBI?" It sounded like it was the thrill of the young girl's life.

Eric had so many stories. I didn't know if I should believe them or not. My certainty wavered back and forth on that question. "Have you been to every state?" I asked.

Eric smiled broadly, "I love to travel and I got lucky with a job that paid for most of it. But I've not been to every state."

"The newsletter?"

Eric nodded. "Yes. My editor, Keyhoe, wanted first-hand UFO reports. He loved military first-hand reports so I visited a lot of bases. He felt that servicemen were more believable. That moved me around the country."

That made sense. "So, you traveled checking out UFO sightings."

"Right, Hillenkoetter got me the job with Keyhoe after I left Harvard," Eric said. "The newsletter job was perfect for me because I knew UFOs were real. The UFO Insider was a natural fit."

"That was around the time you met me. I remember you told me you worked for a government newsletter."

Eric confirmed, "Yes, it was around that time I joined the writers group." He swerved the car into the lot of a roadside restaurant that had a couple of gas pumps. "I'm starving, how about an early lunch?"

The Stagecoach Inn was nothing fancy. Rustic would be the best description. A life-size carved wooden Indian greeted us at the door. We walked past a trading post, with everything from Indian blankets to cap guns to find tables and chairs that welcomed weary travelers. Framed photos of the Pony Express lined the walls with cowboy hats, stirrups, and saddle bags as decorations.

"Can I get you a table?" The hostess asked.

She was a curly-haired blond with a round face and a happy smile. I'd guess she was about 20. The buttons on her blouse were working overtime holding in her figure. Eric gave her a wink. The old man was flirting. He looked younger than me, but I knew he wasn't.

"Table for two," Eric answered, and we followed the hostess through the maze of tables. Her three-inch heeled cowboy boots clicked on the hardwood when she walked. Her short tan skirt swayed with every step. The cowgirl gave us a table and handed out menus that Eric didn't even look at. "Two coffees and two pulled pork sandwich platters," he said.

"You've been here before?" I asked.

"No, but it's a staple around here. You're going to love it."

It sounded good so I didn't argue. I looked around the room as Eric continued his story.

"I did travel around a lot," he said. "I went to Michigan once to check out a mass sighting. Hundreds of people saw crazy lights in the sky."

"Hundreds?" I asked.

"Yeah, practically the whole city of Dexter saw them. Hyneke was there too, working for Bluebook. This was before he believed that some sightings could be real. He wrote this one off as swamp gas."

"Swamp gas?"

Eric explained. "It was carrot country in Michigan. The farms had soft mucky black soil. It was very damp. It did give off gas, mostly nitrogen and methane from manure. I think it was the first time he used that explanation."

"Swamp gas sounds made-up," I said.

"Most people who believe in UFOs laugh at that term, but debunkers lean on it for a go-to explanation."

The hostess came back and set our coffees on the table. When she leaned over, there was no way not to notice the cleavage in her figure. "Any cream with that," she asked. We both said yes with a smile, and she leaned over again to pour milk into our cups. "I'll be back in a minute with your plates."

“Pretty girl,” Eric said as she walked away. “Another time I had to go to Homestead Air Force Base in Florida.” Eric continued. “I went to interview a radio operator there. He had intercepted some radio traffic from a Russian Mig fighter.”

“What happened?” I asked.

The Mig was following a UFO near Havana. The pilot said it was oval and changing colors. It was outrunning him too. He tried to shoot it down but failed. The radar operator said the jet disappeared or went down. We never found any wreckage, and it never came back on radar.”

“Oh my,” I said. “They can be violent.”

“Not often, but there are reports,” Eric said.

“What do you know about Colorado?” I asked. “I’ve never been here before.”

“I passed through the Denver Airport a few years ago. It’s a big airport, much bigger than it needs to be,” Eric said. “People say, and I tend to agree from what I saw, that there is something more going on there.”

“Like what?”

“Some say they have tunnels that connect to NORAD, 130 miles away. Others say the airport has underground bunkers for the most powerful people in the country to use in case of nuclear war. Have you ever heard of the Illuminati?” Eric asked.

“No, not really.”

“It’s the New World Order,” he explained. “They planned to save the rich, the powerful, and the connected to start a new world.

“The best of the best,” I said. The pretty hostess had returned with plates of pulled pork on open-face buns with fries.

“The sauce is on the table.” She said, but before she left, she added, “Some people say the tunnels under the airport go all the way to Area 51.”

Eric smiled and looked up. “I didn’t know that,” he said. “Do you know about them?”

“My brother worked at the airport in 1994. He told me the military took over the project. Then he was laid off.”

“That makes sense,” Eric agreed. “But Area 51 is pretty far away.”

The hostess planted her hands on her hips defensively. “That’s just what I hear, and I’ve been around here my whole life.”

Eric didn’t argue. “It could be true. The airport wasn’t finished until 1996 and went three million dollars over budget. That’s more than enough for a tunnel to Groom Lake.”

“See, I know what I’m talking about,” she said.

“American tax dollars wisely spent,” I sighed.

“It depends on how you look at it. The powers running the country during the Cold War thought so.” Eric

said and took a bite of his sandwich.

How many other people knew about these things? Why was I just now learning them? Maybe, he was making it up as he went along. I didn't know what to believe.

We were three states into the trip and I hadn't told Eric we might not be welcome when we arrived at my sister's home. I kept putting off calling her too, and now the sun was setting on another day. I hate confrontations. Eric found a light on at a Hotel 6 and registered two rooms side by side. He parked the LX in front of his door while I tried to hide my worry.

"I need to make a pit stop down the road at the dispensary. Want to go for a ride?" Eric asked.

My eyes went wide, "Dispensary?"

Eric smiled. "This is Trinidad, Weed Town USA. Per square mile, it has more suppliers than any town in America."

I didn't know that and wondered how Eric knew that. He was a wealth of information. When we hung out in earlier years, he didn't even drink. It surprised me that now he smoked marijuana. I wondered if it was the secret to his health and vigor in his old age.

"Is that the secret to your health?" I asked.

"It helps me sleep," he explained. "It puts my mind to rest."

"Want anything?" he asked.

"No thanks, I'll stay here."

"Suit yourself," he said and was out the door.

About twenty minutes later, he came in and we sat in the room's matching chairs facing the TV. The CNN news was playing on one of two channels that came in clear enough to watch. The second channel was PBS. Barney, the purple dinosaur, was talking about bullies. We watched the news.

"Don't believe everything you see on TV news," Eric said. "They only say what they are allowed to tell."

"I thought we had a free press."

"TV news is not press, it is entertainment," he said. "But, even the press is controlled. What they don't know, they can't report."

I knew he was about to give me examples and pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket. Eric held a machine-rolled joint from the store he had just visited. "In 1966, there was a car accident that killed the occupant. It was someone who was considered a national treasure."

I listened, wondering if it was a politician or a celebrity.

Eric continued, "The government believed there would be widespread grief if the news went public. It was considered a national loss that would affect business, banking, and commerce, so the government covered it up."

It sounded like the disruptions that followed the car crash of the Princess. "Who died? Was it Diana?"

Eric lit the end of the joint and took a slow draw. "It was Paul McCartney." A moment later, Eric explained. "MI5 hired a look-alike from a recent contest to replace the Beatle without letting the press know there was an

accident."

"You're joking! How many of those have you smoked already?"

"It's the truth," Eric restated and passed the joint to me. "Paul and George often squabbled. One day thing went too far and Paul cursed them all and sped off into an accident."

I took the joint. I hadn't smoked pot in a long time. "MI5 covered it up?" I asked, doubting the story. I took a draw from the joint, then handed it back, coughing.

"All governments protect their people from what may do society harm." Eric clarified in another puff of smoke.

I wondered what someone would think if they walked in on two geriatrics smoking pot.

"Why did the rest of the band go along with it?" I asked, carefully taking another hit.

"Partially guilt," Eric explained. "Everyone took George's side and ganged up on Paul. Besides, if word got out, it would end their careers."

I had to admit the group did have a different sound after the Revolver album, but it was still a little hard to believe.

I put the conversation back on the track of what I was curious about. "How long have you smoked pot? Does it help you stay young?"

"Stay young? No, like I said, it just helps me sleep."

"Well, look at yourself." I declared. "You are older than me, and you look and act twenty years younger."

"I stay fit," he said.

I shook my head knowing there was more to his story. I could tell by his Jokers grin he was hiding something. "Come on," I said. "Fess up." The room held a smoky haze, and I was feeling the THC soften my nerves. I'd sleep well tonight too.

He leaned back in the chair and took a hit. They were uncomfortable, straight-backed chairs, but we made the best of them. Eric continued, "I used to travel a lot getting stories for the newsletter. That's why I missed a few of the writer's group meetings. When I was in town, I attended them, but I missed a few."

"Yeah, you missed a few." I agreed. "Then, you just disappeared and never came back. The next time I saw you, you knocked on my door in Arizona."

"Travel keeps me young." Eric insisted. "That's a story for another time. We are talking about freedom of the press now." He handed the joint back to me.

I was almost satisfied. He admitted there was indeed a story to his health, and he would get to that at another time. But until then, I could only guess how he kept fit. Eric was a fountain of information, but was anything he said more than a figment of his imagination. He talked like he knew what he was saying. There had to be some truth to his stories, otherwise, why would the FBI be following us? They may have even tried to kill him.

"Did you know," Eric added, "the government has a plan to suspend the free press and freedom of speech."

“It’s in the constitution. It’s against the law.” I said, knowledgeable of that fact, and inhaled a short draw of the marijuana.

“If, in the case of a complete government melt-down,” Eric explained, “a second constitution will give whoever is in charge complete control, like a dictator.”

“Really?” I asked in a smoky exhale.

“It’s called continuance of government. It’s another great plan by the Jason Society.”

“Who runs this country anyway?” I asked. “I can’t believe that”

“When Lincoln said we have a government of the people, for the people, by the people, it was a different time.”

“I guess so,” I agreed.

Eric continued. “TV news is all opinion and entertainment. You can’t even count on the weatherman being right half of the time.”

“Or weather woman,” I added.

Eric smiled, “Like I said, it’s entertainment. It’s all for ratings so they can make money with advertising.”

This wasn’t news to me. Ratings were no secret, and commercials were part of the package. But, I still believed in the freedom of the press. “Do you trust the newspapers?” I asked.

“More than TV,” Eric said. “Ratings and circulation still control the advertising. But, the papers know that TV news is a joke and try to be more idealistic and stick to the rules of journalism. Most newspapers still live by the rules and only print what they can corroborate.”

I nodded.

“You know the country runs on gas and oil.”

“Sure,” I agreed and returned the dwindling joint to Eric.

“When you interrupt production a little, prices jump,” he said.

I agreed.

Eric explained where he was going with this. “Offshore drilling is dangerous, and the government has been under-reporting deaths on the job, to keep the oil rigs staffed.”

That didn’t seem so terrible, but it was false reporting to the public, and that was Eric’s point.

“That’s just the beginning.” Eric continued. “The effect of the carbon levels in the air has been known for decades. Our government loves oil money, so they kept it quiet. In 1975, they limited emission levels on cars. But it wasn’t until the 2000s that they admitted why. The danger of carbon in the air was kept secret back then. Teachers talk about climate change in elementary schools now.”

That sounded about right. I owned a ’75 Gremlin when I was younger and removed all the extra emission control parts. I plugged the tubes and ignored them. The motor ran fine without all that extra nonsense, and all that stuff got in the way of working on it. That car always needed work.

"Another thing that big oil kept quiet was water fuel," Eric said. "Back in 1935, a guy named Garrett patented a carburetor that used water instead of gas. The newspapers wrote about it when he displayed the engine running for ten minutes at a press conference."

"Oh," I had heard about such claims before.

Eric continued, "Some people say it was bought up by big oil and hushed." Eric had almost finished the joint but handed back the short roach. It burnt my fingers, but I took it for the last toke. "Then, in 1980, another person invented a way to break the water into hydrogen and oxygen. It was a hydrogen fuel cell with positive gain, making water fuel a real possibility."

"What happened to it?" I asked

"In 1996, he was accused of fraud. He was still fighting it in 1998 when he was killed by poisoning. Many people claim Big Oil arranged his murder."

"Did anyone look into the death?" I asked.

"No, the family was broke after fighting the fraud case."

"Now, manufacturers offer cars with fuel cells," I added.

"Yeah, funny thing, huh?" he said. "They are part of the big oil monopoly." Eric got to his feet. "You can have the rest of that," he said, pointing to the pinch of a joint in my smoldering fingers. He went to the door and said goodnight, "I'll see you in the morning."

I snuffed out the tiny bit of joint and dropped it in the garbage. I was lucky the diabetic neuropathy in my fingers left the fingertips numb. The thought of that reminded me to take my evening meds. Sugar pills, blood pressure pills, and a water pill were my nightly routine. I never saw Eric take any meds, and I again wondered about his health secret.

Without actually thinking about it, I dialed up the number to my old house in Virginia. My sister had never changed it. She never moved or sold the house either. She just took it. It must have been the pot that gave me the courage to call and break the news that I was coming to visit.

"Hi Rhonda, this is Geoff." I could recognize her voice still, just as gravely as ever from chain smoking four packs a day.

"Geoff? Are you alright?"

I tried to sound relaxed, but even the pot couldn't completely calm my nerves, "Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just calling."

"What do you want?" she asked. "I haven't heard from you in years."

"I've got good news."

"What's that?" she asked.

"I'm coming to visit." There was silence on the other side of the line. "I'm on the road now."

"Are you sure you are okay?" she asked again. Her voice almost sounded concerned.

"Is it alright if I visit?" I asked.

There was a pause on the line. "I don't think it's a good idea," she said.

"We are on the way, think about it," I said

"Who's with you?" She asked.

"It's Eric if you remember him."

I heard Rhonda's gasp over the phone. "Is he still alive?"

"Yeah, and he's in better health than me," I laughed.

"I never liked him," She said. "You left me alone in Mama's house, but you kept in contact with him."

"I left for medical reasons. Dr. Barker said it would be better for me in a drier climate."

"Whatever, you left me," Rhonda said.

"You had Mama's house. You were fine." I shot back.

"Don't bring that up again."

I tried to calm the conversation, but she hung up the phone. I fumed and hung up my cell. That went about as well as expected.

12 LEAVING TRINADAD

I was surprised Eric wasn't pounding at my door when I woke up late, so I rushed to pack my things. He always likes an early start. Grabbing my bag, I darted out the door but stopped dead in my tracks when I saw the LX was gone.

The maid was cleaning the room next to mine. It was Eric's room. I walked over to the housekeeping cart and looked inside. A young woman was redressing the bed. "Excuse me. Do you know how long this person has been gone?" I asked.

She looked up and smiled but didn't respond. I stood there looking at the room. All Eric's belongings were gone.

Finally, she answered in a blur of foreign words I didn't understand. I knew the check-in hostess did speak English, so I headed for the lobby. The LX turned into the hotel parking lot before I reached the door. Eric was behind the wheel and pulled up to where I was standing. "Jump in," he instructed. His voice was hurried and serious. "We've got to hit the road."

I threw my bag into the back and slipped into the passenger's seat.

"What's up?" I asked.

"We've got company. I went to get some donuts and was followed." There was a donut box wedged between the seats.

We figured Ron Ell was headed south following the border patrol truck. "Who is it, you think?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"Ron Ell and his guys," Eric answered, "Who else?" He pulled away from the hotel and onto the street. The LX picked up speed and headed away from town. Trinidad was in the rearview mirror with a couple of other cars. I could see the worry in Eric's eyes as he kept a watchful eye.

"They found us," I said. "Maybe the border patrol truck stayed in Roswell."

"Yeah, I guess it did. I drove around town this morning, and I think I lost them, but Ron was at the hotel.

"There doesn't seem to be anyone following us," I said.

"True, but that doesn't mean they don't know where we are." Eric corrected. "They know we are on Highway 160 East, and there's not much between here and the next major town. My guess is they have a team waiting for us. They may even have a tracker on our car again."

"Well, let's check the car for a tracker, and not head to the next major town. We'll get off 160." It sounded like a pretty easy plan to me.

"If we change our route, the trip will be days longer," Eric commented. "We are in the middle of nowhere."

"That's fine with me. Let's take the scenic route and lose the tail again."

Eric nodded, "We'll stop and look for a tracking device."

A ram-shackled old building with a roof nearly caved in came up along the side of the road. Most of the adobe mud walls were still standing and a faded, painted sign still read Trading Post, but there was nothing left to trade. An abandoned Ford pick-up rusted alongside the old building. It was so decayed I couldn't tell what color it once was. Eric stopped at the old trading post and we both inspected the LX.

With the front and back bumpers of the car being plastic, we narrowed our search to the undercarriage and metal frame. Eric explained the FBI textbook never recommended magnetic trackers be attached to the wheel well because road debris would destroy them. I never knew they had an instruction book on placing trackers and bugs, but it made sense.

The temperature was about two hundred degrees outside, and there was no wind. The air conditioning in the LX was working overtime to keep us in comfort. I appreciated that. It was obvious what the heat could do to anything left out in the elements.

I didn't know what a tracking device looked like, but I had seen some movies. I looked for anything suspicious. Eric and I got on the dusty ground and looked under the car. We circled the LX twice with a fine-tooth comb. There was nothing to find. Before long, sweat was running in my eyes. It didn't take long before I had enough of the heat. Eric didn't seem to mind it as much. That was no surprise, but we were both happy to get into the comfortable car, knowing it was clean. I sure appreciated the air conditioning a lot more after that.

Eric checked the navigation on the dash GPS and looked for our options. After a review, he picked a route and hit the road again. We kept driving on 160 East. "There is nowhere to go," he explained, "until we get to 133. Then, we'll go south through some small towns and cross into New Mexico again. At least it will be a change of scenery."

"Sounds good to me," I said, and it was true. I was truly enjoying the ride and it didn't bother me that I wasn't driving the LX. I was amazed at how good I was feeling. Even after riding for three days, my back didn't ache. I hadn't had any headaches either. Maybe all I needed was some fresh air and a change of scenery to bring some life back into my old bones. A few extra days on the road could be fun.

Before long we came to State Road 133 and turned south. It was a small two-lane road with the same view. But, at least there wouldn't be FBI waiting for us when we got to the next city. We passed a roadside sign that showed the New Mexico border was 130 miles ahead. The way Eric was driving that would be under two hours.

"The way we are going will put us near a crater. Would you like to stop?" Eric asked.

"I thought Meteor Crater was in Arizona."

"That's right," Eric confirmed. "Meteor Crater is in Arizona, but New Mexico has several old volcanic craters."

I didn't know that volcanoes were in New Mexico. "If we drive by one, we'll see it. It's just a hole in the ground."

“True,” Eric agreed. “We should have taken the time to see the crater in Arizona, though.”

“Is it worth the stop?” I asked.

“I’d say so. It’s the best example of a meteor impact on the earth, about a mile wide and five hundred feet deep.”

“That’s big,” I agreed, but I wasn't very interested. It was still a hole in the ground.

Eric continued, “NASA used the crater during Apollo training. It looked so much like the moon the astronauts practiced working in the center of it, dressed in space suits.”

“Oh,” I nodded.

Eric noticed my disinterest, “Are you alright? Is everything okay?”

“Would you have left me stranded at the hotel?” I asked. I’d be lost without him. Sure, I’d be able to get home, I have a credit card. I’m not helpless. But, being left by him would hurt.

“I thought about it,” Eric confessed, “but I didn’t. I wouldn’t leave you alone stuck out here.”

That was comforting, but it still worried me. We had a long way to go.

Eric sensed my worry and with an attempt to change the conversation, jumped into one of his stories. “The astronaut in the crater reminds me of the trip that, as you say, I disappeared. Hillenkoetter took me out west to a secret base. It turned out to be Area 51, but he called it Groom Lake, and it was still secret at the time.”

I had heard of Area 51 and nodded.

“Hillenkoetter was there to debrief a Russian defector that landed his MIG fighter in Israel rather than bomb a school. The MIG and the pilot ended up at Groom Lake.”

How did NASA astronauts at Meteor Crater remind him of interrogating a Russian defector? I couldn’t make the connection.

Eric continued, “Anyway, while I was there I met a woman working on a film. She said she was on Kubrick’s team.”

“You mean Stanley Kubrick, from Hollywood?” I asked.

Eric nodded. “They had several huge hangers filled with grey sand and were filming what looked like scenes from the moon.”

“Are you telling me they faked the moon landing?” I had heard of such foolishness on the internet, but didn't believe it.

“I had clearance to be at the base and peeked in for a minute. They had a moon landscape with the Lunar-Lander in the hanger. Astronauts were all suited up in the scene.”

“I don’t believe it,” I said.

“All I can say for sure is what I saw. The woman I talked with said that NASA was still worried that the cameras wouldn't be able to handle the cold temperatures on the moon. They were shooting scenes to use as simulations in case the cameras failed again.”

That sounded plausible. I had seen subtitles indicating simulations on TV before.

Eric continued. "The woman said they had been shooting for weeks, and were almost done. What little I saw sure looked like what I saw later on TV."

We rode in silence through the country, it was slowly becoming hilly. In the distance, we could see the mesas of New Mexico again. It looked like an alien landscape. I couldn't believe they faked the moon landings. Were all of them faked? Eric couldn't say for sure, but he had his doubts.

"Why didn't you ever return?" I asked. "What kept you from the writer's group and your friends in the east?" I assumed Eric had other friends besides me.

"I had an accident, and it took a while to recover." He sighed. "It's a long story."

I didn't push him. He knew we had a long ride.

"While Hillenkoetter worked on comparing the MIG to our fighters, I had time to look around the base and explore what others were doing. I had a high clearance badge and wasn't held back much. I had the run of the place."

"What did you find?" I asked getting curious.

"In some hangers, teams were developing new aircraft. You know they invented the U-2 spy plane there. They had other projects too."

I nodded. That's no secret now. I knew the stealth bombers unveiled during the Iraq war came from there as well. Eric paused for a second as if to decide if he should continue. I still only half-believed many of his stories and sometimes felt he wasn't telling me everything.

"Groom Lake is where the Roswell crash eventually ended up. I saw them working on that too." He finally said. "That was why Hillenkoetter took me there. He used the excuse of needing me as an assistant with the defector issue as a reason to be there. He wanted me to see the crashed saucer."

"They were still working on it? That must have been years after the crash."

Eric nodded. "They were still trying to figure it out. They had no idea what made it go."

"What happened, how did you get hurt?" I asked. I had a feeling it had something to do with the saucer.

"I was watching some engineers work on a component they had removed from the craft. They thought it was a power source of some kind. I was outside the lab, viewing the work through a large window. Whatever they did caused a flash explosion. All I saw was a bright white light. It incinerated the three men working in the room."

"But what happened to you?" I asked.

"I was burned over my upper body. I blacked out. When I woke up, I was in a hospital of some kind."

"What did the doctors do? You look fine?" I said, "You have no scars."

"Right," Eric said, but there were no doctors, just machines. I was in an alien hospital."

13 HEALING

"I didn't know where I was or what was happening," Eric said. "Pink light from long glowing tubes warmed me. Between the tubes, sprayers were constantly misting me. It was medicine. Somehow, I knew it was medicine without being told. I recalled the flash of light that had burned me but I didn't know what had happened after that.

Eric told the story without a pause, or time to think of what would come next. He sounded like he was telling the truth or had the story all made up beforehand. My thoughts leaned towards the latter.

"I wasn't in any pain, thank god, and I wasn't in a normal hospital because I was floating in mid-air, surrounded by the misting machine."

His story was getting more farfetched. He had told me many things that were hard to believe, but this was getting out there even for him. I kept quiet and let him continue.

"I slept a lot, maybe weeks. I don't know. I was drugged and didn't fully wake up for a long time. I would be half awake and drift out again. When I was in that middle state of consciousness, voices told me that I would recover, but it would take time, and I was safe. The weird thing was that I didn't hear the words. They sounded in my mind, and I knew they were from an alien speaking to me telepathically."

I didn't argue with him or say he was crazy, but I thought the aluminum dust from the con-trails had gotten to him. He had lost his mind. My worries that the trip with him was a mistake started to grow again.

"Eventually, they took me out of the misting machine. The alien procedure had grown new skin on my body. It was incredible. It was flawless, like a baby's skin."

"Where were you?" I asked.

"I was at an alien base on the dark side of the moon."

"You went to the moon?" I repeated not believing what I heard.

"It was an alien hospital," he said calmly.

"Are you saying aliens are living on the moon?"

"Neal Armstrong saw them on his moonwalk. He messaged NASA and said the aliens were watching them."

I thought I saw a flaw in his story and I could catch him in a lie. "That was after the treaty of Greda. Didn't the astronauts expect aliens?"

"Not everyone knew about the treaty," Eric explained conveniently.

He had an answer for everything. I took another approach to punch holes in the story. "Why did they save you? The aliens let the other people in the lab die but they saved you. Why?"

"The guys in the lab were trying to disassemble the power source of the craft. The treaty of Greda had limits to back-engineering the power source." Eric said. "There was no way to save them anyway. I was not breaking any rules, and I was an accidental injury. They had to help me."

"Was that part of the treaty, too?" I asked.

Eric smiled, "No. That was just the ethical thing to do. They could help me, so they did."

"Ethical aliens?" I asked.

"Kevin explained that not all alien cultures are violent. Some are, but most want a friendly relationship with our planet."

"Wait, who is Kevin?" I asked.

"Kevin was my alien guide. He explained my medical procedure and showed me around the hospital."

"You met an ET?" I asked.

"Yes. I was in an alien base, or mother-ship or something. I know it sounds crazy, but it's the truth." Eric said. "People from Earth worked there too. Human scientists and researchers were side by side with the aliens. Kevin said it was an exchange program laid out in the treaty."

"Tell me about Kevin, what did he look like?"

"Kevin was a grey alien, like the models we saw in the Roswell Museum. Other aliens looked human, but they were very tall. Some were over six and a half feet."

"They look like us?" I asked.

Eric nodded, "You can't tell them apart from us, except for the very tall ones."

"The NBA would love them."

Eric laughed, "Yeah right, the New Jersey Aliens"

I didn't know what to say. It was all beyond words. Eric had outdone himself with this wild story.

"Kevin told me the treatment would renew me with more than just skin. I'd be healthier overall from breathing the mist. It penetrated my cells and melded with my DNA. He said I now radiate health from within, and people near me will benefit too."

I wasn't sure what that meant, but I didn't interrupt.

"Have you been feeling better than normal?" he asked.

I didn't want to admit that I had. I didn't want to support this outlandish tale, but I couldn't lie. "Yes, I'm better than usual." My back had not hurt the entire trip, and sleep had been better too. That's all good, but it didn't prove his story was true. My doubts showed on my face.

"You don't have to believe me. I know what happened. Look at me. I'm ten years older than you. How do you explain that?"

That was indeed a mystery I had been trying to figure out.

"How long were you away? I asked.

"It was a few years. I came back in the early '80s, and everything had changed."

Eric pulled into a roadside motel and parked in front of the office. "Hillenkoetter had completely retired and he died right after I got back."

"Oh, Sorry," I knew they were close.

“Some of my other contacts had died too. My connections to the MJ-12 are gone.”

“So, you’ve decided to go public on what you know,” I said.

“The Majestic Twelve have all but disbanded. I have no guidance from my mentors, but I feel the world is ready to know the truth.”

A long, hot shower barely calmed my nerves, or put anything into perspective. I redressed for dinner still edgy from Eric’s story. I told him I needed time to think. I’d go to dinner alone. I had enough of his storytelling for one day. He didn’t argue and retreated to his room.

Betty’s Café sat in front of the hotel. It was nothing special. Red vinyl covered the tables with simple wood chairs. It was a truck stop specializing in fast, friendly, comfort-food. That was exactly what I needed, and it was within walking distance.

A young waitress brought my meal. She couldn’t have been much over eighteen years old and wore tight jeans and a tighter top. Girls didn’t dress like that when I was dating. It reminded me that I was too old to think what I was thinking. Perhaps being around Eric was causing me to believe I was young again.

"They make girls better-looking these days, huh," a voice from the next table said.

It was a stocky man, with dark hair and a bushy mustache. He carried a coffee cup from the lunch bar and sat at a nearby table. “My name is Brandoff, and you are Geoff,” he said in a heavy foreign accent. It sounded Russian.

“Do I know you?” I asked, knowing that I did not.

“No, but we should be friends. You may need a friend soon.”

“How do you know my name,” I asked.

“That is a good question. I know your name because the FBI knows your name,” he said.

“You’re with the FBI?” I asked, doubting that from his accent.

He laughed, “No, quite the opposite.” His eyebrow over one eye rose as he looked toward me. “We’ve been watching you too.”

Oh great, now the Russians are following us. This was not good for calming my nerves. Are they after Eric too?

“Why are you watching me?” I asked, playing dumb. “How did you find us? We checked the car.”

“Yes, you checked, but we do things differently than the FBI. We use a different textbook you might say.” The Russian smiled at his half-answer.

“Why are you following us?” I asked, not expecting an answer.

“That is no secret,” he said. “If the FBI watches you, we watch you. That is just the way it is.”

“So, you don’t know why,” I said.

The cafe’s chair creaked under the strain when the big Russian leaned back and sipped his coffee. “I love American coffee. Good to the last drip, yes?” He set his cup down and looked me straight in the eye. “Your friend Eric is an interesting fellow,” he said. “He has lots worked with many important people.”

“Yeah, so I’ve been told.”

“Tell me,” the Russian asked, “Why are you running from the FBI?”

I had guessed correctly. The big guy didn’t know why the feds were following us. We were caught in their monitoring of the government men. “We’re not running from the FBI,” I lied.

He chuckled “Better to play it safe and keep your cards close to your chest, I know.” His Russian voice hushed as he leaned toward me. “I am not your enemy here. The FBI can be very dangerous if they don’t get what they want.”

I had pretty much lost whatever appetite I had.

“So, what has your friend Eric been doing? He just disappeared from our radar, like a ghost.”

“You’ll have to ask him?” I said. Eric’s disappearance jived with his outlandish story of him going to the moon. Could any of this really be happening?

The Russian nodded. “In good time, in good time,” he said. “I plan to speak with Eric soon.”

I took a bite of cold meatloaf trying not to look completely freaked out. My stomach rolled, I wouldn’t eat anymore.

“Remember,” the Russian said, as he slipped a business card onto my table. “If you feel threatened and need help you can call me. I will help you. You just need to tell me what’s going on. Keep our meeting a secret for now. Your friend has enough to worry about with the FBI chasing you. I can be a friend if you cooperate.” The Russian accent in his words made that hard to believe, but I put the card in my pocket in case I needed it.

14 You Can't Trust Government

"You just can't trust them." Eric was lecturing about our government lying to the public. "Eighty percent of what they say is designed to sway people's opinion to favor an agenda."

I listened. We were headed east again, but we were still in New Mexico. The Texas border was an hour away. Running alongside the road I saw a railway line. The train had a hundred and two cars. It's bad luck to count them, but I tempted fate. It was pulled by three engines. Many of the cars were stacked double high with truck trailers. I doubted the old steam engine in my Winston Link photo at home would have the guts to keep up.

"Are you listening?" Eric said. "You need to know this stuff."

"Yes," I said while still watching the train. "You can't trust them."

If I needed to, I could take a train back to Kingman. If things came to that, it would be a good option. I had never been on a train. If I could, I'd take an old steam engine all the way home.

"Right! Remember I told you about J. Allen Hynek? He was the guy working for Project Bluebook investigating the UFO sightings."

I nodded.

"They were so busy following up on sightings that they got sick of it. The reports created more questions than answers. The Air Force wanted the program closed. So they tried to embarrass people who saw UFOs. Reporting them made you look stupid or crazy.

"Did that help?"

Eric explained, "Yes, It slowed down the reported sightings, but it wasn't until the Condon Report that they closed Bluebook for good."

"What's the Condon Report," I asked.

"The Air Force paid the University of Colorado to study if it was necessary to continue investigating them."

"Let me guess. The Condon Report was fixed."

Eric smiled. "Now you are catching on. Even though the study could not explain half the sightings, they reported that UFOs were no threat and not worth investigating."

"You can't trust them," I repeated. "Is that when they closed Bluebook?" I asked, guessing the answer.

"Exactly, and since then they have been lying to us."

I wasn't surprised we were back to that.

"For the past fifty years, they have been secretly recording sightings. They do consider UFOs a threat to national security, but they don't want to panic anyone."

"Let me guess. Your CIA girlfriend told you so," I said.

"No," Eric explained. "It was in the New York Times."

That caught me by surprise. "What?"

"Senator Harry Reid pulled the black budget dollars to open an investigation of sightings by military pilots. It's been going on for years. The project leader went public when they stonewalled his reports," Eric explained. "He considered UFOs to be a threat, but the chain of command wouldn't let the reports go to the top of the Department of Defense."

"So the top brass didn't know anything about the sightings."

Eric nodded, "Not until the New York Times published the story."

"So the truth is out. Aliens are among us."

Eric held his hand up, "No, they didn't go that far. They admitted to seeing unknown aircraft, but held back from saying alien."

"But the government knows they are alien," I added.

"Many do believe that, but only a few know that's truly the case," Eric said.

"So, I can't believe the universities. I can't believe the TV news. I can't believe most of the newspapers, and I can't believe the government. What am I supposed to believe?"

"Believe me, Geoff. Believe your friend."

That hit me hard. For the last hundred miles, I had doubted every word since we started the trip. I came close to telling him to turn around or drop me off. We were passing through some unknown city called Clovis and nearing the Texas state border. I was getting farther from home every minute, but I couldn't tell Eric to stop. Even though I only half believed him, I wanted to hear more of his stories. He had me hooked, and now he played the friend card.

I wanted to say I believed him, but I could only nod. Eric was a friend, and I think I trusted him even if he did believe he went to the moon. Guilt washed over me, I was no friend at all.

"If they don't find us around Dodge City, I figure they'll know we changed our route," Eric said. "Kansas is a big state and they'll probably put out an APB and have the state police look for us."

"Maybe we should change cars?" I said. I'd miss the LX, but it might do the trick.

"Not yet, let's see what happens. I like this car."

I did too, and I almost told him that. "It's a good car."

Eric gunned the engine and the car jumped into action. The LX would fly if it had wings. He settled down and let the car cruise at 90 miles per hour. The cracks in the concrete sounded like a metronome.

"You know, Lubbock is the next major town." He said, "It's the birthplace of Buddy Holly."

I knew Buddy Holly was tall, over 6 feet. His guitar always looked too small on him. "Was Buddy Holly a tall alien," I asked.

"No, I just said he was born in Lubbock. Are you okay," he asked. "You seem like something is bothering you."

"It's a lot to take in," I said.

"Yes, it is." He drove in silence while I tried to put my head on straight. If half of what he said was true, the world is far different than what I thought. Eric tried his best, but he couldn't stay quiet for long. "After we get through Lubbock, we'll go toward Fort Worth. Then we'll head north again."

We'd have to head north eventually to get to Virginia. "Yes, that sounds good," I said. I have to call my sister again and try to calm her down. I didn't look forward to that.

"On the way, we'll pass Stevensville," Eric said. "That was the location of a huge UFO sighting. Witnesses said it was over a mile wide."

"Could something that big fly?" I asked.

"Hundreds of people saw it, even the police. Two F-16 jets were following it, but they were too slow."

"How fast could it fly?" I asked. "It was so big."

"Sightings at different locations put it at over five thousand miles per hour."

"Wow, that's fast."

"Yes, the military told reporters there were no jets in the area that night, but they had to change their story because so many people saw the F-16s. They later admitted the jets were over the town but didn't say why."

"They lied to us again," I said.

Eric looked at me. "Get used to it."

We drove through Lubbock's city traffic and continued heading east. The sun was setting behind us in pastel colors and the evening stars glittered on the horizon ahead of us. The cars coming toward us had their headlights on already. We'd needed to find a hotel soon or drive all night.

I saw that one of the cars coming toward us was a police car. The red strobe on the cruiser's roof was off, but that didn't calm my nerves. I watched it pass, and to my horror, it did a U-turn to follow us a couple of cars back. Eric saw it as well. He eased up on the pedal to a legal speed and tried to stay calm. The trooper remained a few cars back as we drove. We both sighed in relief. We were safe.

"They may be reporting that they found us," Eric said.

"What will they do?"

"Maybe nothing," his words sounded doubtful. We drove, eyeing the mirrors more than the road ahead. "Maybe they'll just keep an eye on us," he said.

As if on cue, the trooper passed the cars ahead of it, and slipped in directly behind us, but the strobe was still dark.

Another cruiser, heading towards us, came into view. That car veered around and did a U-turn in front of us. "This doesn't look good," Eric said as the red strobes flashed atop both cars.

"Registration, IDs, and insurance," The Texas State Trooper at Eric's window said. I fumbled with my wallet and handed my driver's license to Eric who passed it to the trooper with the car's paperwork.

“Who is Geoff Polo?” he asked.

I raised my hand, “I am Geoff.”

He studied the driver’s license. “And you are Eric Marks?” he asked.

Eric nodded. "Can I ask why you pulled me over? I don't think I was speeding."

Without answering, the trooper walked back to his cruiser behind us.

I waited until he had gotten back to the cruiser. “What are they going to do?” I asked.

Eric didn't answer, but watched the trooper now returning to our car, and a second trooper approached from the cruiser in front of us. The lawmen stood at both our doors.

“Please turn off the car and step out of the vehicle.”

15 Jailed

I'd never been in real handcuffs before. The trooper squeezed the heavy cuffs on tighter than he needed. He pushed me against the LX and frisked me. All I had in my pocket was a bottle of aspirin. The trooper grabbed my shoulder and roughly twisted me around to face him.

"Stay put," he growled, and walked around the car to assist the other trooper who was arguing with Eric. What was I going to do, try to run down the shoulder of the freeway in cuffs?

Eric was asking why we were pulled over and what was being charged. The troopers never answered, but roughed him up against the side of the car and cuffed him too. He got the message soon enough that they were not answering, and the questions only made matters worse.

Within five minutes I was alone in the back seat of one car and Eric rode in the other. A third trooper drove the LX and the whole parade headed for Fort Worth.

I made eye contact with Eric at the station as the troopers prodded me into a room labeled as an interview room. It was empty except for a table and a chair. One wall had a large mirror. It was obviously a one-way viewing window. This was an interrogation room, not an interview room. I'd seen cop dramas on TV. Eric's expression didn't give me any clue as to what to say. We had not collaborated on a story or an alibi. I decided to tell the truth, some of it.

"I asked you to call me if you saw Eric." Ron Ell poked my chest hard with a stiff finger. "Instead, you drive across the country with him." He pushed my shoulder, forcing me to sit in the chair. He was alone, pacing the room. There was no sign of the twins.

"Eric's not dangerous," I said.

"Danger comes in many forms," he shot back. "Where are you going? Don't tell me you are going to visit your sister."

"We are. Eric and Rhonda are friends." I lied.

"Your sister hates Eric. They are not friends. Do you take me for a fool?" His temper reddened his face and he was shouting.

I tried to lean back in the chair, getting distance between us. Even two inches helped my jittering nerves. "They were friends once," I pleaded.

"She didn't want to see him when you called her." I realized they had bugged her phone. He slapped the table hard and walked around me. I expected to be struck from behind, but he kicked the chair leg hard. It had the same effect. My heart raced.

"You are impeding an FBI investigation, conspiring with a known threat, and evading lawmen. Did you help him give us flat tires? Even if you didn't, you are a conspirator to that crime. I can put you away for years right now."

Everything he said was true. Eric's knowledge could be considered a threat. Did they know about his plans to go public?

"I think I should charge you. A little time in the box would probably do you good." He stepped to the door and touched the knob, but he didn't open it. Ron Ell turned and slowly returned to the table. He placed both his hand on the table and leaned towards me. "But maybe we can make a deal."

A deal sounded better than going to jail. "What kind of deal?"

"Eric has worked with a lot of powerful people. We know that. He's had more than enough opportunities to steal state secrets. I need to know who he plans to sell them to, and when he's going to make the deal. I have to catch him in the act red-handed. I need you to help with that."

Ron Ell didn't know how close he was to the truth.

"I know you are going back to Virginia to visit your sister, but there is another reason too. Find out why Eric needs your sister. That's all. Be my eyes and tell me what he's doing. You can walk away from this if you cooperate."

"We are going to visit Rhonda. What makes you think there is another reason?" I asked.

"Eric hasn't seen you in almost fifty years. He pops in and drags you across the country. He needs something from you or your sister." Ron Ell looked down on me. "If you play nice you can get yourself out of trouble. When you find out what he's planning, tell me. You have my number. We can be your friend, not your enemy."

The offer sounded familiar.

"Think about it for a while. Sit here and stew." The FBI man left the room without giving another option. I needed to spy on my friend or go to jail.

The FBI held us in the police station for twenty hours. There was no clock in the interview room, and the hours dragged. My back was stiff from falling asleep in my folded arms and my shoulders ached. A trooper kicked my chair leg and woke me. "You are free to go."

Eric was already in the lobby when they released me. "I told you everything was going to be alright. We didn't do anything wrong." My angry eyes told him I was not happy. "They could only detain us a while without a crime." He almost acted cheerful.

He opened the door, and we left the station. A cloudy sunset was a few hours away. It had been raining. We walked towards the LX parked at the curb. "There was a lot they could charge me with," I said, "including just being with you."

"I'm sure they told you that, and if you told them what I was planning, you'd get off scot-free."

I nodded, slipping into the passenger's seat of the LX. "All I have to do is turn you in," I said. It had been a

rough two days. I could have told them his plans when they had me locked up. It could be all over, and I'd be on my way back to Kingman. But instead, I was riding with Eric Marks again. I believed he was harmless. I still wasn't sure if he had gone to the moon, but I knew he was my friend.

Eric pulled into a hotel that had a pool with umbrella patio tables. "We need a break and a good night's sleep."

I didn't argue.

Our rooms were side by side. Our front windows looked over the pool. It was almost like I was on vacation, except I felt worse than I had the entire trip. If being away from Eric for twenty hours made me feel this bad, perhaps his magical alien cure didn't last long for the people around him. It frightened me that his story weighed into analyzing how bad I felt. After all I had been roughed up by troopers who were thirty years younger. After a shower, the pool had less appeal than the bed. I was asleep within minutes.

Eric knocked at my door, pulling me from slumber. "It's still early, let's go get dinner and talk." It was eight-thirty, and I was hungry. From my door, the smell of grilled hamburgers wafted from a bar across the street. We headed that way, following our nose.

The last open table was in the back of the crowded room. Waitresses with beer trays dodged dancers in front of a jukebox that played country music. We must have chosen the most-popular honky-tonk in town without knowing it.

"Beers are two for one until nine," the waitress said. She held a fully stocked tray.

"Two please," Eric said, "and give my friend two." The waitress placed the beers on the table. Can we get two burger platters with fries?" Eric added.

"Sure thing honey, I'll start a tab." Then she disappeared into the crowd.

"I know that freaked you out today," Eric said. "The troopers didn't need to treat us like most-wanted criminals, but they didn't know why the FBI wanted us detained."

"You don't need to apologize for the cops. They were doing their job." I said.

"Ron Ell doesn't know why we are going to your sister's home."

"I didn't say more than we were going to visit." I took my beer and downed a third of it.

"Me either. He said we weren't welcome there."

I needed another sip to explain that. "My sister is mad at me and says to stay away. It's a family thing. I'll talk to her."

"I'll need those notes to finish my book," Eric said. "It won't be the same if it's rewritten."

"No problem. It'll be alright." I assured him.

"What did they offer you to keep them informed?" Eric asked.

He knew the tactics of the FBI well. He must have had a few girlfriends in that agency too. "You were right. They said I'd stay out of jail if I kept them informed."

“You can tell them anything you want or nothing at all. Going to get my notes is no crime. There are no secret documents there, just hear-say and my experiences.”

"What about the secrets you know about Marilyn and Kennedy and Roswell?"

“It’s all hear-say. It’s rumor and gossip,”

“But it’s true, right?”

Eric smiled, “You bet it is.”

“I think I’ll string Ron Ell along for a while.”

“That’s what I’d do.” He smiled.

The waitress danced through the crowd and placed two platters on our table, snatched up our empty mugs, and set two new ones down. “Anything else?” she said.

“All is good.” I grabbed the cold one.

Eric grabbed his burger. “This is a lot better than jail food.”

“What goes in must come out.” The voice carried a Russian accent, it was Brandoff. I looked down the row of urinals to see him doing his business while drinking a beer. A foamy white head covered his bushy mustache. “Two for one, I love America.”

He met me at the sink while I washed my hands. "I heard you had some excitement today."

"It wasn't fun," I said.

“True, it never is.” Brandoff grabbed a towel and handed me one. “In Russia, it would have been torture.”

Did he mean that figuratively or literally?

“I could have gotten you out of there a lot quicker,” he said. “The commander of the State Patrol is a comrade. He would help me if I asked. You should have called me.”

“I didn’t have the chance,” I said. “They couldn’t charge us with anything.”

“This time, perhaps,” Brandoff said. “Have you got anything to tell me?”

I remembered what Eric had said. “We are going to my sister’s house to pick up some papers. It’s nothing illegal.”

“What kind of documents?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I lied.

“Very good,” Brandoff said. His voice echoed around the tiled room. “We are becoming good friends, yes?”

I tried to smile.

“Next time you get in trouble, you call me. Your new friend can help?”

“Yes Brandoff, you’ll be the first person I think of.”

He patted me on the back with a damp hand as he left the room. “I love happy hour in America. Have a good night.” I watched him stumble through the door.

I needed another beer too.

16 Poolside

"I think we should just go," I said. "What are we doing anyway?"

Eric tipped the umbrella on the patio table to shade the lounge chairs from the noon sun. Cool water splashed on his legs from the pool where a couple of young boys played. "We are taking our time. There's no need to rush now, they know where we're going." Eric said. "Besides, it annoys Ron Ell to watch us and wait for us to make a move." Eric sat down in his re-shaded chair and waved to the dark SUV in the parking lot. Ron Ell sat behind the tinted windows. "It will be a long day for him sitting in there."

"What's the use? When we get to Rhonda's house they will take your manuscript anyway."

"If they have the chance they will." Eric agreed.

"They think it's full of state secrets."

Eric smiled. "It's more like state embarrassments."

"You'll never get it published. We've already lost," I said.

"The game is yet to be played," Eric corrected, "We are just gathering the players."

"What does that mean? Do you have a plan?"

"Not yet, but we have time." Eric sipped his cold beer and toasted towards the SUV. "Right now, I plan to aggravate Ron Ell. I bet they'd love a cold one."

I pulled a beer from the cooler between us. "Hope so. I'd still rather be on the road than annoying the FBI." My pale skin couldn't handle much sun. I was never a sun worshiper like others. I kept my t-shirt on even sitting in the shade.

"Think of it as a vacation day. Relax and enjoy yourself."

I hadn't enjoyed a real vacation in a long time, so I leaned back and tried to calm myself. It was hard. Ron Ell's threat of jail echoed in my mind. Eric was not selling government secrets. He was going public with what he had learned and seen over the years. Was that wrong? Was it illegal?

One of the kids cannonball jumped into the pool. Most of the water missed us.

"Did you know UFOs can go underwater?" Eric asked.

"No, that would make them UDOs, unidentified diving objects."

"You're right, funny," he said, "but military pilots have pursued UFOs and they evaded the jets by diving underwater."

"Can they really do that?"

"Yes, they can. We know there are alien bases underwater." Eric said. "Hillenkoetter claimed there was a base of unfriendly aliens at the South Pole. Plus, I know we destroyed a base at Bikini Atoll with a nuclear bomb. The Government said it was a test, but the target was an alien base."

"How do you know that? You're making all this up." I was in the mood to challenge everything he said.

“I haven’t made anything up. I dated the secretary to the Joint Chief of Staff for a while. She told me so.”

“Of course,” I said. “Your girlfriend told you. What’s that mean exactly, unfriendly?”

“Unfriendly aliens don’t abide by the treaty of Greada, or they threaten Earth,” Eric said.

“Do we have alien enemies?”

“Most are friendly. The Grays, Nordics, Reptilians, and Mantoids are all agreeable enough, but some aliens don’t even try to associate with us. They just do what they want and we can’t stop them.”

“Reptilians?” I asked. “Are you sure you aren’t making this up for some sci-fi story?”

“I stopped writing fiction a long time ago.” Eric shot back.

“Okay,” I said. “Tell me more.”

“They have snakeskin, but you’ll never see that. They are masters of manipulating your mind and making you imagine you’re seeing a human in their place.”

“Oh, That’s sneaky,” I said. Two women walked across the patio to the pool. Looking younger than us, they could have been the mothers of the boys in the pool, but the kids didn’t acknowledge them. Both the ladies wore two-piece swimsuits and they were attractive. “I wish I could change how people see me,” I added

“That would be a sweet trick,” Eric agreed.

Being old is not the worst thing in the world, except your mind never gets old. Your body gets old and wrinkled but your mind still feels and thinks that it’s young. It’s nature’s tragedy. Now that I am feeling better being around Eric, I have to keep reminding myself to act my age. “Yes, sweet,” I agreed.

Eric grabbed two beers and walked around the pool to where the ladies were sitting. He set the beers on their table and said a few words. A moment later he was back under the umbrella in his lounge.

“What did you say to them?” I asked, worried he was trying to get us dates.

“I told them I hated to drink alone,” he said.

“You’re not alone.”

“Not anymore,” Eric said as the two ladies walked around the pool to sit with us. They sat together on the other side of Eric, thankfully. I was never a smooth-talking ladies' man, and I was uncomfortably out of practice at sweet-talking. Besides, my mood wasn't right for flirting, having just gotten out of jail. Eric, on the other hand, started up a conversation. Penny was the brunette, and Angie, who sat farthest from me, had short black hair.

“Thanks for the beer,” Angie said.

One of the boys swam over to the pool's edge near us. “Look, Mom, it's the FBI,” he said to Penny.

Ron Ell had gotten out of the black SUV and walked in front of its grille. He leaned on the wrought iron fence that circled the hotel’s patio. His dark blue T-shirt had big yellow letters on his chest. His shoulder holster and gun didn't cover much of the FBI printed on the shirt.

“It looks like they are watching us,” Penny said. There was no one else on the patio. “Are they watching you?” She asked Eric.

I shrunk back in my lounge chair.

"Well, they may be," Eric said. "They think we are spies."

"Cool," the kid in the pool said and swam to his pal on the far side. "Those guys are spies!"

"No, no. We are not spies" I tried to clear up the confusion.

"Why is the FBI following you?" Penny asked.

"They think we are selling state secrets," Eric answered, "but it's a misunderstanding."

Penny stood and grabbed her towel, "Come on, boys, It's time for lunch." She looked back at us. "Thanks for the beer, but it's time to feed the boys." The three of them gathered their belongings and left the patio. Angie remained with us.

"Are you with them?" Eric asked.

"I just met them," she said. "She's kind of jumpy."

Ron Ell rounded the front of his SUV and opened the driver's door. As the sun beamed into the darkness of the cab, we could see the twins sitting in the back seat for a moment. Ron's smile told us he was happy to have broken up the party. As the driver's door closed again, the tinted windows hid everyone.

"So if you're not spies, where are you headed?" Angie asked.

"We are going to visit my sister in Virginia," I said.

Eric added, "We are taking the scenic route because my buddy doesn't get out much."

"I've never needed to get out. I'm happy at home." I said. "It was your idea to drag me across the country."

Angie smiled at us. "Getting out once in a while is good," she said.

"Who knows, we may end up going to Florida for a few days," Eric announced.

I had no intention to go to Florida, and we never discussed that possibility. "What?" I asked.

"I was going to surprise you. I've got to pick up a package in Tampa," Eric said.

That was way off the route to Rhonda's house. "When did you plan to break that news to me?" I asked.

"It will only take an extra day," Eric said. "You'll enjoy the ride."

I finished my beer and popped another can open. I let Eric know I was annoyed with stern eyes and silence. He acted like he didn't care and kept conversation with Angie.

"You know, Angie," he said, "we were thinking of getting a different car for the rest of the ride. Are you driving anything nice you might want to trade for a slightly used LX?"

I almost jumped out of my skin. That was the last thing I wanted to do. "You said you liked the LX," I said.

"I do," Eric said, "but it's rather conspicuous."

"I've got a Mustang that's a few years old," Angie said.

"I'll think about it," Eric said. That wasn't even close to a fair trade. "Maybe we'll find a dealer and trade for something else."

"What's so important in Tampa?" Angie asked. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

“Nothing like that,” Eric answered, “I’ve got to get some papers from a deposit box in a bank downtown. It’s secret spy stuff,” he joked.

“Sounds exciting,” Angie played along. “But, you said you weren’t spies.”

“You can’t believe anyone these days.” Eric reached into the cooler. His hand felt around the empty box. “Out of beer, we need to make a beer run.”

Eric got to his feet and grabbed the cooler. “Come with me, Geoff. I’ll need your help.” He didn’t need my help, but I followed him to the car. “We’ll be back in a jiffy,” Eric said.

When I slid into the car I noticed my bag in the back seat. “When did you move my stuff?” I asked.

“Earlier, when you walked to the diner for breakfast,” he said, “and I’m glad I did, now.” The LX started up and he smoothly pulled out of the lot. Angie was still sitting at the pool, and Ron Ell’s SUV hadn’t moved.

“What’s happening,” I asked.

“Angie is working for Ron Ell, pumping us for information,” Eric said. “And, we are using this beer run as an exit to hit the road.”

“That nice lady is FBI?” I asked.

“Ten or fifteen minutes is probably the best head-start we’ll get with them watching us like hawks at the hotel,” Eric said.

“So, now we are heading to Florida?” I asked.

Eric smiled, “That was just to throw them off.”

“Oh, good.”

“And, I’m not trading the car,” he added.

17 On The Run

We got our fifteen-minute head start, and then some. I looked for the black SUV a million times, but I never saw it behind us. "Do you think they are headed to Tampa?" I asked.

Eric shrugged. "Could be if they took the bait," he said, "but I'd bet they are on the way to Virginia to wait for us at Rhonda's house."

"She'll love that. The FBI camping out at her place won't make our visit easier."

"They won't knock on her door. They'll stake out her yard and watch for us."

I didn't think that was good either. "She's sharp as a tack and watches that street like a dog. I'll bet you she'll spot them."

"You didn't spot them," Eric pointed out.

"That's what I mean," I said. "She's the smart one in the family."

The Texas border welcomed us to Oklahoma. There were a few more cattle in the fields, but nothing else changed. Wide open country with grassland baked brown under a cloudless sky stretched as far as I could see. It would be a long ride if we didn't strike up an interesting conversation. I'd begun to doubt the truthfulness of Eric's stories. But, I didn't have any proof either way. I believed he sensed that. The subtle improvement in my health didn't convince me that he was telling the truth either. I did find it strange that I'd been feeling better, but that could be a coincidence.

I couldn't quiz him on things I knew little about, so I chose to pull exotic topics from the back of my mind and see what he had to say about them. I figured that if he knew something about everything, he was probably making stuff up. As we passed a large herd of cattle, I started my test.

"What do you know about cattle mutilations?"

"Funny you should ask me that. I was just now thinking of a friend who has experienced some." Eric said.

I nodded, checking that one off a mental list.

"He's been working cattle since he was a kid. It's his family business."

"I heard of people finding cattle cut up," I said. "Are aliens doing it?"

"If you ask me, they are. It's not other ranchers or pranks by kids."

"How do you know," I asked.

"Anyone slaughtering an animal would take a good cut of meat, or rustle the whole cow. They wouldn't just take the tongue or an ovary," he said.

That seemed like a good answer.

"I don't know for sure though." Eric continued, "There's no mention of killing cows in the Treaty of Greda."

"What about the deadly Bermuda Triangle? Is that a real thing?"

"That's all hype and propaganda. If you pin every ship or plane that's disappeared on a map, you could plot

triangles all over the globe. Caribbean hurricanes pass through that triangle all the time. There's nothing mysterious about it."

"Seems to be a lot of people that think otherwise," I said trying to taunt him into saying more.

"There have been sightings," he added. "A few military pilots have reported UFOs in the triangle."

"You got to believe military sightings," I said. "You mentioned earlier that UFOs could dive underwater."

"I didn't think you were paying attention," Eric said with a smile. "Navy General Harry Sambit claimed a base existed underwater in the triangle. It could be a Reptilian stronghold," he added. "His ship saw several UFOs enter the water in the triangle. It's just word of mouth though."

"But a General saw it," I said.

"He never made a formal report of the sighting."

I thought that was good enough. I checked off another conspiracy theory he knew details about, two for two.

"I hear there are real vampires in Louisiana." Maybe this topic was reaching too far into fiction.

"Yes, I've heard that too. But, there is a stronger bloodline in Great Britain, and you'll never guess who."

"The king," I said, guessing someone outlandish.

Eric looked at me, surprised. "Correct."

I wasn't expecting that.

"The basis for Bram Stoker's Dracula is Vlad, The Impaler, who happens to be a distant ancestor of the king," Eric explained. "Many in the royal family have a disease called Porphyria. That causes them to be sensitive to light."

"You're kidding me," I said. "King Charles is a vampire?"

"Could be," he answered.

I didn't want to get further into that topic, so I moved on. "What about the hollow Earth theory?"

"There are stories about that," Eric said, "Admiral Byrd claimed to have flown into a gateway at the North Pole and entered a different world."

"Is that real?" I asked.

"Some believe it. Do you think it's strange that most religions place Hell underground, inside the Earth?" he asked.

"Do you think Hell is inside a hollow Earth?" I asked.

"I'm just saying. The stories have to come from someplace."

Eric turned off the paved state highway and headed down a dusty side road. "Where are we going?" We rode down a thin slip of road that cut through endless pastures spotted with cattle.

"Just a side trip to visit an old friend," Eric said. "You'll like him. He's a real cowboy."

I wasn't twelve years old anymore and cowboys didn't thrill me like they used to. "Is he expecting us?" I asked.

“It’s an open invitation. I visit whenever I’m nearby.”

We passed a no-trespassing sign that featured a handgun for emphasis. “If you say so,” I said.

In the distance, I could see a small ranch house. As we neared, it grew into a full campus of barns, buildings, and covered patios. Eric parked the LX under a stand of tall oaks with a couple of other vehicles, taking advantage of the precious shade. A long, covered porch on the main house offered several chairs with tables. Eric’s friend, the cowboy, was in one of the chairs.

We climbed the three steps up to the porch and headed towards the man. “Hello Roland, I see you are working hard today. This is my friend, Geoff,” Eric said.

Roland didn’t stand. He nodded his head in greeting and tapped the brim of his hat. “Good to meet you Geoff. I’m Roland MacDeen. Have a seat.” His weather-worn face held a friendly smile, and his blue eyes looked me up and down. His six-foot-six frame was folded into the chair, with one jeaned leg jutting out, resting on a wicker table. The turquoise stones in his cowboy boots matched his belt buckle. They were mounted with silver that would shine in the sunlight.

Eric pulled a chair closer to Roland. I did the same, forming a comfortable grouping for conversation. Roland took a bottle from his side table and poured two glasses of a brown liquid. His huge hands passed them to us.

“Old Crow helps beat the heat,” he explained. “What brings you to these parts, Eric? I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Retirement is a bitch, I’m busier now than when I worked full-time,” Eric answered.

“You never could lie worth a shit, Eric.” Roland shot back. “Where’d you find a friend? I didn’t know you had any friends.”

Eric ignored the remark. “We were passing through and Geoff wanted to meet a real cowboy.”

“Sure, okay,” MacDeen said. “But you always have a reason when you stop.”

“You’re right,” Eric confessed. “Geoff was wondering if you ever had any cattle mutilations.”

I figured the visit had a reason, and he was putting it on me. I sipped the whisky and looked up to the cowboy, interested.

“You know I have. We’ve talked about that before.”

Eric explained, “I’m filling in Geoff’s knowledge about the birds and the bees and I knew you could help.”

The big cowboy grabbed his drink. He dropped his feet to the floor, standing. “I can’t help with that, but if you want to talk about the cattle follow me inside.” As he walked, he ducked to keep his hat from hitting the rafters over the porch. Roland MacDeen’s home held a western theme and smelled of leather and wood polish. When we entered the dining room, he tossed his hat onto a deer antler mounted on the wall.

MacDeen pulled a folder from a desk and dropped it on the table. “They’ve been a bitch. I’ve lost seven head this year already.”

Eric's eyebrows hit the ceiling, "Seven this year alone?" he asked.

"That's the ones I've found, could be more. It's a big spread," he said as he took the seat at the head of the table. Eric and I sat across from each other near him. MacDeen stretched to the decanter at the center of the table with his long reach and topped off our nearly full glasses. "Old Crow will help settle your stomach," he said.

He showed us the registry papers of the lost cattle, recording the weight, breed, and medical records. "I have to get a vet to sign off on the loss to claim them on insurance," he said. I noted that the cause of death on each form indicated an animal attack. "That's the best answer for C. O. D.," he explained.

He fanned out the folder of 8x10 color photographs. The Old Crow helped. I couldn't describe the injuries as mutilations. Medical precision cuts circled the eyes, opening the socket to remove the eyeball. Straight-line incisions opened the belly of some cows, while arcs cut into others. I couldn't tell if any organs were missing, but these were obviously not animal attacks.

MacDeen broke the silence. "It's not the financial loss that bothers me," he said. "It's the mystery."

"Have you seen any signs of trespassing?" Eric asked.

"No horse trails or truck tire marks," MacDeen said, "and they are miles from any road."

"Have you seen anything else unexplained?" Eric asked. I was wondering the same thing.

MacDeen downed his glass. "You know I've been seeing things in the sky for years. If you boys want to spend the night, we can go out later. You can see them for yourself."

"Let's do that," Eric said.

I agreed. What harm would a wild goose chase do? I kept my doubts to myself. "Sure, it sounds like a good idea."

MacDeen slapped his empty glass on the table. "It's settled then. Eric knows where the guest rooms are. Get some rest. We'll have dinner at nine and head out after that. Finish your drink. The Old Crow will help you sleep."

We'd been on the road since early afternoon and a few hours of sleep did me good. The aroma of steaks charring on a grill woke me. I could almost taste the meat. Following my nose to the back porch, I found MacDeen flipping thick hunks of meat on a grill. It was apparent he had done it a few times before. MacDeen had branded crossed grill marks on both sides and claimed they were a perfect medium well. Baked potatoes and green squash rested on a warming tray. Eric was down a few seconds later and we moved to the dining table. I hadn't had a better meal in a long time.

We packed the Jeep with folding chairs and a cooler. I found a pair of binoculars in the back seat next to me. Eric sat shotgun with MacDeen driving, and we headed out. The moon was only a sliver, and the night was dark. I couldn't see what was ahead of us, but somehow MacDeen navigated us from gate to gate without fail. Eric jumped out at each gate, opening and closing them after we passed. He said each pasture had cattle, but I didn't see one cow. After miles of travel through several pastures, MacDeen pulled to a stop.

“This ought to be far enough out,” he said. “It’s as good a spot as any.”

We set out the lawn chairs and relaxed in the night breeze. Although I couldn't see them, the bellows of cattle sounded all around us.

“As long as they don’t stampede, we’ll be fine,” MacDeen said.

Somehow, in the dark, Eric saw the expression on my face and calmly added, “Don’t worry, they won’t.”

I felt something hard hit my chest and instinctively grabbed it. "Old Crow will calm your nerves," MacDeen said. We were drinking straight from the bottle now.

The sky was awash with stars. We were on top of a rolling hill. I could see the distant tree line all around us, but that was about it. I couldn't see the Jeep, except for the green glow from the radio playing old-time country music. My companions were invisible too, but somehow the bottle made its way from hand to hand. Sometimes, I passed it along, sometimes, I took a sip.

Later, I thought I saw an object flying low above the tree line. I'd be eating crow if we saw a UFO. As much as I wanted to see something, I wasn't sure I was ready to admit their existence.

“That looks like a plane,” Eric said, “I see blinking wing lights.”

“It may be a satellite,” MacDeen said.

The experts agreed it wasn't a UFO and the watch continued, and continued. I was ready to give up after a few hours of star gazing, but Eric and MacDeen kept hopeful. Eventually, the eastern horizon and the bottle of Old Crow started to lighten.

“This is when it gets good,” MacDeen said. “I usually see them at dawn.”

Why were we sitting out all night if they came out at dawn? My eyes scanned the sky and the fading stars.

“There,” MacDeen said, pointing into the distance. I followed his line of sight, following his finger to a yellow light above the tree line. The object was larger than a star and moving slowly to the right.

“I see it,” Eric said.

I strained to see it more clearly and remembered the binoculars around my neck, “Me too.” Through the lens, I could see it better. It was a round, yellow, glowing orb that changed direction and went back towards where it started.

"Did you see the 180-degree turn?" Eric asked.

It had no wings or noise. The orb would speed up, and then stop in mid-air. Twice, it went vertical and dropped back to the trees. The flight plan had no true destination, it was meandering across the horizon. After a few minutes, it hovered in place for a moment, and then it shot vertically at the speed of a bullet and was out of sight.

MacDeen threw the empty bottle in the back of the Jeep and folded his chair. “We came. We saw. Now it’s time to go home.”

"It wasn't a helicopter," Eric said. "It was a craft." He was slicing his breakfast steak. Fried eggs and biscuits rounded out the meal. MacDeen had steak at every meal. His Old Crow was on the table as well, but it stayed capped. Eric lifted his cup of coffee. "Here's to Geoff seeing his first UFO," he toasted.

"It wasn't a flying saucer. It was a floating light." I explained. "It could have been a hot air balloon." I'd been analyzing my sighting all morning, with little sleep. "I was a little drunk last night, you know."

Eric argued, "Not the way it was moving. Balloons go in one direction, not back and forth."

"I see those things all the time," MacDeen said. "It's not of this Earth."

"It didn't look like a UFO," I said, finishing my breakfast. "I'm stuffed."

"So, what does a UFO look like?" Eric asked. "There are all kinds of sightings, including orbs." He explained.

I couldn't argue, but it wasn't what I was expecting. Truthfully, I was a little let down by it. "I can't say for sure it was alien," I said.

"It was," Eric said.

"No other explanation," MacDeen agreed.

The arguments continued after we said our goodbyes and were on the road again. "Just because you didn't see a metallic silver disk with landing struts doesn't mean it wasn't a craft," Eric said.

"I don't know what it was."

"That's why they are called unidentified," he continued. "World War II pilots saw the same thing in the sky and called them Foo Fighters."

I had heard that term before, but didn't know what it was. If pilots chased them, maybe what I saw was something after all. But how could anyone ride in an orb of light?

"Orb sightings are common near Area 51," Eric said. "In England, orbs are believed to be the genius artists behind crop circles."

"Maybe I did see a UFO," I admitted.

Eric slapped the steering wheel. "No doubt about it."

18 OKLAHOMA CITY

“You have not called me. I’m checking to see if you are alright.” The voice held a Russian accent. I knew it was Brandoff without looking. He snuck up behind me as I traced our route on a huge map displayed at a rest area. The red “you-are-here” arrow was a few miles south of Oklahoma City. “Don’t turn around,” he said calmly. “I thought you were going to tell me why the FBI is following you.”

I looked around us, Eric was in the LX waiting for me. People walked past the big map heading to the restrooms and vending machines, but no one noticed the Russian spy hiding in plain sight. Brandoff looked like another ordinary traveler.

“I did tell you,” I answered without turning. “They want to know what information Eric has on them.”

Brandoff huffed. I could smell fish on his heavy breath. “So, Eric has something incriminating on your FBI. It’s no wonder they tried to put you in prison. I need to know what he knows.”

International espionage is not my forte. Every time I opened my mouth something leaked out, but I had to respond with something. “He hasn’t told me everything.”

“Oklahoma City has a huge FBI office with many agents. Why would he be going there?” Brandoff waited for an answer. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” The Russian had a good question. Why would we even be close to another FBI office while running from Ron Ell? The map showed the city as a big metro area. Jails, prisons, hundreds of cops, and agents had to be nearby.

“Perhaps to make a deal?” he said.

“I don’t think he needs money.”

“In America, everyone has a price. Trust me,” he said. “I can protect you from the FBI and pay you if the information is valuable.” He patted my shoulder from behind me. “Remember, I’m your friend.”

Before this is over I may need both money and protection. “I’ll try to find out more. We are still headed to my sister’s house in Virginia.” I offered.

“Yes, I know. Tell me something I don’t know before you get there.”

Virginia was still half the country away. I didn’t know how much longer I could hold up this charade. I was no spy. I turned to plead my ignorance of what Eric had planned, but he was gone. The big Russian could move fast.

Eric had the engine running in the LX when I returned to the passenger’s side. “What took you so long?”

“I was looking at the map. We are near Oklahoma City.” I said.

“Yes. I want to drive by the bomb site.”

“What?” I searched my memory. Brandoff didn’t mention a bomb.

“It’s another government cover-up I want to tell you about from when the Clintons were in office.” He said it as if Hillary held a position in government. “It happened on April 19, 1995.” Eric had the LX cruising, and we merged back onto the freeway. I figured Brandoff was following us, but I didn’t see a tail.

“What happened?”

Eric looked towards me. “You need to brush up on your American History.”

“That was never my best subject,” I confessed.

“A bomb was exploded that took down most of the FBI headquarters,” Eric said. Hundreds of people died and even more were injured. The daycare in the building was destroyed, even children were killed.”

“Who did it?” I asked.

“My sources say it was the Clintons.”

“No way,” I said, “The president wouldn’t do that.”

“Not directly,” Eric said, “but Hillary and her staff had a motive.”

“Nope, I don’t buy it.”

“Many people agree with you, but facts paint a different picture,” Eric continued. “Demolition experts say it would have taken four different bombs planted inside the building to do the amount of damage that was supposedly done by a single truck bomb.”

“Experts can be wrong,” I said.

“Sure,” Eric agreed, “but two days before the explosion, Hillary Clinton was indicted on charges of fraud and corruption on the Whitewater land deal. She had her attorney, Vincent Foster, working the case even before the indictments went public.”

“She was a good attorney and saw it coming,” I said. “Anyone would want to be prepared.”

Eric continued with his accusations. “All the records for the case were stored in the Alfred Murrah Federal Building that was bombed.”

“Coincidence,” I argued.

“Vincent Foster committed suicide three months after the bombing,” Eric added.

“Do you think he did it?” I asked.

“It was his job to get Hillary out of trouble.” Eric stayed on the freeway heading towards Oklahoma City. The skyline of buildings grew larger outside the windshield of the LX as we neared. It was a beautiful, modern city of modern office buildings and hotels.

He continued the story. “Foster had an associate named Timothy McVeigh who worked for the FBI under the Clintons. Friends of McVeigh testified that he claimed to be an assassin for the agency. Plus, he knew how to make the bombs because he had demolition experience in the army.”

"That's all circumstantial evidence and coincidence."

Eric continued with his facts. He recited the bombing details like he was lecturing a classroom, making it clear that my job was to listen and learn. Why did I need to know all this? He was the one writing a book about government cover-ups. I was just along for the ride.

"They found the rear wheels of the van that held one of the bombs. It traced back to a rental agency in Ohio. An FBI sketch artist made a drawing of the guy who rented it."

"Was it McVeigh?" I asked.

"It could have been," Eric answered, but it also looked like an FBI agent who came up missing after the explosion. The same guy kept company with McVeigh on prior days."

"So, you think he set the other bombs inside the building?"

"Maybe," Eric said.

"Do you think they killed all those people to destroy the case against Hillary?" I asked.

"That is one theory. Remember the Waco incident two years before that?" Eric asked. "The FBI attacked a militant group holding illegal weapons and doing military-style training. It ended up a massacre with many civilians dead."

"I remember that," I said.

"After Waco, white supremacy and militia groups exploded into public view. Congress had been trying to pass legislation outlawing military-style training and private militia organizations, but all bills had stalled." Eric's voice was getting animated. Politics agitated him. I guessed it was from him working so close with the government for so long, but it didn't slow the story. "After the bombing, a new wave of anti-terrorism bills flew through the houses. McVeigh was called an American terrorist and Congress used him as a scapegoat to get military-style militias outlawed. The FBI building explosion was exactly two years after Waco."

"The bombing had a double duty," I said.

"It was a twofer. It ended the Whitewater case against Hillary and helped pass the anti-militia bills. That was the Clinton agenda from the start." Eric pulled off the freeway. The exit ramp was long, and we slowed to turn onto Fifth Street. Eric drove with the traffic past the memorial. Not too many people stopped, but everyone looked from their cars at the reflecting pool and monuments set up for those killed in the bombing. A corner of the lost building, sitting in rubble, marked where the building once stood.

"In the end, it backfired for them," Eric said.

"It sounds like they got what they wanted."

"At first they did," Eric agreed, "but Vincent Foster had a secretary named Linda Tripp. She worshiped Foster and thought he was the only good person on the Clinton team, especially after she learned that her friend Monica Lewinski was having an affair with Bill. She's the one that exposed the affair that caused the presidential impeachment."

"That was a mess," I said.

"That's what brought down the Clintons," Eric added. "With all the skeletons in the closet, Hillary couldn't get a foothold getting back into the White House." Eric turned off Fifth Street and veered toward the ramp to get back on the freeway. My history lesson was complete.

"Why are you telling me this now? Maybe, I want to wait for the book."

Eric looked across the car at me. "I want you to understand what's secretly happening. I need you to tell me if it's too much to go public." His voice took on a serious tone. "I need to know if people will believe me, or think I'm crazy."

I think that was the most honest thing he had said to me. Eric believed everything and didn't want others to think he was insane or making up stories. I wasn't sure how to respond, but I tried to be as honest with him as he was with me. "Most of it all makes sense," I said. "But, the accident and going to the moon is hard to swallow. People will question that."

"Explain my health and how you're feeling better since you've been around me," Eric said.

"I can't." He had a good point. I had been feeling better and better every day. Eric was the healthiest ninety-year-old I had ever met. I had met a few of them at the retirement center, and they usually did little more than watch TV and spill food down their shirt.

"See, you can't explain it. I can hardly explain it, but it happened."

"I'm starting to believe you," I confessed. "It's just a lot to take in."

Eric nodded. "Okay, you need more proof."

19 SHOW ME

We crossed the state line into Missouri, the Show-Me State. I had an open mind, but Eric needed to show me something solid before I drank his crazy Kool-Aid. So far, most of what he told me was secondhand and circumstantial. His story was good, but nothing more.

"I think I want to take in a show," Eric said as he veered into the right lane and took an exit for Branson. I'd seen the brochures. The city was a tourist trap destination with everything from casinos to wax museums. It was a circus of entertainment. If Eric wanted to take in a show, I was game. It was his dollar.

He knew his way around town and took us to the Queen's Casino on the river. We took the steps out of the parking garage under the hotel onto a back patio with the rivers view. It was more industrial than exotic. Tugboats pushed coal-laden barges along the murky water. The smoke, from stacks across the river, smelled of sulfur. The Queen's Casino was obviously not in Vegas.

After we dropped our luggage in the rooms, we met back in the lobby. "We'll get dinner later," Eric said. "We're almost late for the show," and he led the way to a performance hall. The marquee on the wall, outside the door, featured The Gypsy: A World-Famous Psychic! I'd never heard of him, but it was a capacity crowd in the theater. We found two empty seats in the second row and put ourselves center stage.

"Do you remember the MK Ultra project that was closed down in 1973?" Eric asked.

"That's where the CIA drugged people and programmed them," I said.

"Right, just like in the movie *Manchurian Candidate*," he said, "but they were trying to make psychic spies called remote viewers."

I nodded, remembering the story.

"The Gypsy was one of their star viewers," Eric explained. "You wanted proof."

The red velvet curtain on the stage sparkled with gold threads, even after the house lights dimmed. The audience offered a spattering of applause as a man took the stage. I expected to see him dressed in a robe with a pointed hat, but there was no wizard costume. He wore a mustard yellow tuxedo. The only extraordinary thing about him was his hair and beard. His belly-length grey beard was uncontrolled, and a gold scarf bandana topped a mess of salt and pepper hair that covered his shoulders.

The floor rumbled with a thunder of timpani and a recorded trumpet fanfare when the show began. The Gypsy waved the audience to a hush and stroked his beard. After a moment, he spoke. "Would Karen stand up please," he had a clear and soothing, deep voice.

Heads in the audience twisted to find Karen. Two women stood up. The Gypsy knew who he wanted. She was a large woman clutching an orange handbag. The Gypsy waved to her. "They'll have your car fixed in the morning. It will cost less than expected. You will make it to your daughter before she delivers your grandson."

"It's a boy! Thank you, thank you," she said, happy that everything would work out well.

The performer continued, "I'm The Gypsy. I'm a clairvoyant. This means I see and feel things that other people miss." Respectful applause filled the hall. "I'm here to entertain you, but I'll also help some of you."

The Gypsy pointed to a young lady in the front row. She was right in front of us. I thought he was pointing to Eric and me. "How can I help you, miss?"

She straightened her skirt as she rose to her feet. "I've lost my mother's necklace. I've looked everywhere and I can't find it."

The Gypsy put a finger to his temple and paced a few steps across the stage and back. "It was a star necklace," he said.

"Yes, that's it."

The psychic closed his eyes and turned his head to the right and left as if searching. "The necklace is under a blue chair near a fireplace," he said.

"That must be my brother's home," she said. The audience reacted with whispers of amazement.

The man on the stage laughed out loud. "That was too easy. Who is next?"

A man on the far right of the stage got to his feet. "I've lost my son. He's been missing for three weeks, and the police can't find him." The sad situation hushed the audience. The Gypsy walked the length of the stage before answering. He faced the distraught father.

"This is a terrible thing. A missing person is never easy. I've worked with the police before and have helped close cases. Sometimes the news is not good." The entertainer stayed at the far side of the stage and consoled the grieving man. "This time it's different. I see your son at the ocean with a friend. He's alive and well."

The gentleman dropped to his seat with weak knees. The expression on his face told everyone he was at ease. With his worry set aside, the crowd happily clapped with impressed enthusiasm.

The show continued with more of the same. The Gypsy explained where missing trinkets and money could be found. He located stolen cars and lost dogs. Everyone was satisfied with the answers that The Gypsy offered, except me. It was entertaining, but not proof of ESP or psychic viewing. There was no way I could verify anything he said. I was still a Doubting Thomas.

When the show ended, everyone exited through the doors behind us, but Eric and I headed to the front of the theater. Eric opened a door at the right of the stage that led to the backstage area. No one tried to stop us, so I followed along. The hall had several doors on the right, and the left had a few short stairways to the stage level. There were no stagehands or workers around at all. It looked like a one-man show.

Eric stopped at the third door on the right and was about to knock when a voice called from the other side. "Come on in, Eric." The Gypsy must have seen us in the second row of the audience.

The walls in the dressing room displayed posters from performers who took the stage in days past. Everything from Elvis impersonators to magicians greeted our eyes as we met the current star in person. He was

sitting at a table littered with jars and had just finished removing his make-up. A red couch, against the back wall invited us to sit. The coffee table in front of the couch offered a large tray of chicken wings. "Hello Eric, it's been a while. I'm glad you could come by again," he said wrapping his arms around my friend in a big bear hug.

"It's always fun to see one of your shows," Eric said. "I'd like you to meet my friend, Geoff."

The Gypsy held out a hand to shake. Almost every finger had a ring with a large stone. I navigated around them and was greeted with a firm grip. "It's nice to meet you, Geoff. Did you come by train? I saw a train when we touched."

I pulled my hand away, feeling being intruded on.

Eric spoke up. "Geoff is a train guy, he loves the big machines."

"Fire, smoke, and power tell a lot about your personality. Sit down, sit down, and have some cold wings. They are always better cold."

I didn't think he could be further from the truth on both points, but I nodded. "Hello," I finally said. "I enjoyed your show."

"You would have enjoyed it more if I had picked you," he said, "but I know Eric likes his privacy."

"Thanks," Eric said as we sat. "My friend here doesn't believe in ESP. I'm explaining the Ultra project, and he doesn't believe any of it."

He put me on the spot again. "It's a little far-fetched," I confessed.

The Gypsy moved his make-up chair closer and sat facing us. "I'm sure everything he's told you is true. I'm a psychic spy who worked with the program till 1974."

"What kind of things did you do?" Eric asked, directing the conversation.

"Mostly, I spied on Russia. I enjoyed locating their submarines. Occasionally, my sightings were confirmed. That always helps the ego."

"You just knew where they were?" I asked.

"I knew the general area, or if they were in port. They could monitor the ports and tell me if I was right."

"Did you locate warheads?" I asked.

"Sometimes, but that was a different team. I did interviews with CIA staff to see if they were vulnerable to Russian blackmail, or if they were double agents. I was more a person-to-person psychic," he explained. "It was like when we shook hands, I felt something about trains and smoke."

"What else did you feel?" Eric asked.

The psychic tipped his head in thought. He reached out and grabbed a wing. "Excitement," the Gypsy answered. "The last few days have been exhilarating."

"That's for sure," I agreed.

The Gypsy went on. "You need to call your sister. It's important," he said.

That was true. I had been putting it off.

"It won't be as bad as you think it will be," he added.

The Gypsy may be psychic after all. How did he know about my sister's temper?

He continued. "It's unclear what I'm seeing. You're on a journey and someone is chasing you." He took a bite of the wing and grabbed a napkin from the table to wipe his beard before he continued. "Geoff doesn't know who to trust, the FBI, the Russian, or his friend."

Eric sat back, surprised, "The Russian?"

The Gypsy tossed his wing bones on the table next to the tray. "This reminds me of searching for double agents," he said with a smile. He knew he had dug up a surprise detail for Eric.

"You talked to a Russian agent? Are you a double agent? What did they pay you?" Eric demanded.

"No, he talked to me," I said. "I'm no agent at all."

"What did you tell him?" Eric hissed with a red face. "You should have told me someone talked to you."

The Gypsy sat back and smiled, enjoying his discovery and listening.

"The guy was following Ron Ell and wanted to know why the FBI was following us," I explained.

"He just asked you why they were following us."

"Yes, he said they follow FBI agents, and he wanted to know who you were. You were a mystery to them."

"Good," Eric said. "That's the way it should be."

The Gypsy spoke up, "Did you tell the Russians more?"

This was worse than a lie detector test. I didn't know how much the bearded wonder knew. Maybe he really was psychic. "I told him Eric knew secrets, and they wanted to stop him from going public."

Eric bounced back on the couch, nearly as red as the fabric now, "Oh, great!"

"What kind of secrets?" the Gypsy asked.

Did the psychic know Eric claimed to have gone to the Moon? Did The Gypsy know who killed Kennedy? What could I say that wouldn't expose Eric more, or make him sound crazy to his friend?

"It doesn't matter," Eric said. "They will want more. We'll figure something out."

"Eric has always been shielded from me. I can't read him at all," The Gypsy said. "He's the only person who can do that."

"I bet," I said, thinking it probably came from the alien medicine.

"It's just my high intellect and complicated personality," Eric said with a smile.

"No, it's something else," the Gypsy maintained. "I can't put my finger on it, but you are a different kind of person."

I couldn't argue with the psychic. If what Eric had told me about himself was true, he may not be entirely human. I'm not sure what he is, but he was truthful about MK Ultra, or at least this Gypsy character. The man knew things he shouldn't know.

"You should have told me a Russian agent had talked to you." Eric had been lecturing me on my lack of faith in him since the psychic revealed my secret.

"I didn't want to give you more to worry about. Brandoff said he'd talk to you later."

"I guess he forgot to do that," Eric snapped.

We met for dinner in the hotel's seafood restaurant called Finn's. The aroma from our plates was appetizing. I hoped the fish didn't come from the smelly brown river outside. The Gypsy, a human lie detector, sat with us. "I sense that the Russians are as confused about you as I am," he said.

"Brandoff knows Eric worked for important people in Washington," I said.

"He will keep following you," the psychic said, "Brandoff suspects you are up to something."

"I'll figure out how to deal with him," Eric said. "But, you must tell me if he contacts you again."

I nodded in agreement.

Eric continued, "You have to believe what I say is true. I'm trying to convince you that the government is lying to us."

Eric took me to see giant radio telescopes hidden in the desert. He pointed out government documents at the museum that supported his stories. We went UFO spotting, and I witnessed something unexplained with MacDeen, who had photos of cattle mutilations. Eric told me of mysterious deaths and murders. And now I believe that Eric's Gypsy friend has ESP, and he worked in a secret government program. Eric was trying to prove the unbelievable to me, and I was starting to accept it.

"It's a lot to swallow," I said, "but you've convinced me."

"What's hard to believe?" The Gypsy asked. "I've worked as a psychic spy remote viewing on the Russians. I admit it." There was so much more about Eric that The Gypsy didn't know. Eric blocked his insight.

Eric spoke up, interrupting anything about him that I might reveal. "We have a new rule, Geoff. Tell me if anyone asks about me or what we are doing."

"I'll do that, I promise."

"Good," The Gypsy said, "Now let's enjoy this dinner. I hear a roulette wheel that's calling my name." The thought of gambling alongside someone who could predict the future sounded fun.

Rhonda picked up the phone on the second ring, "Hello, Geoff."

"How'd you know it was me?" Was my sister also psychic?

"My new phone has caller ID," she explained. "I was expecting a call from you anyway. Are you still on

your way?"

Her voice sounded unusually cheerful. "Yes, we are in Branson."

"Oh, how fun. Win some money for me," Rhonda joked. "Are you still bringing Eric? He used to be so handsome. I had a crush on him, you know."

"I didn't know that. Are you feeling okay?" I asked.

"Never been better," Rhonda said. "I've got your rooms all made up. Don't even think about getting a hotel while you're in town. Tell me when you'll get here and I'll have a dinner ready for us."

"It will be a few days yet. I'll call the day before we arrive."

"That would be perfect. I'm so excited to see you both."

"You're not mad at me for leaving you?" I asked.

"I've been over that for years. I can't stay mad at my little brother," she said.

"I'm happy to hear that. I'll see you in a few days."

"Good," she said. "Don't forget to call a day in advance."

The call was short and sweet. It was like nothing had ever happened between us and we were again best friends. Rhonda's one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turnaround thrilled me, but it didn't feel right. It almost felt like we were heading into a trap.

We were on the road again when I told Eric about the call. He had been driving quietly until I started the conversation.

"Ron Ell may be at Rhonda's house waiting for us," I said. "She would side with him if she thought it would make trouble for me."

"Ron could be there," Eric said, "or she had a change of heart."

I chuckled aloud. "That's not likely. She sounded sincere, but that's not like Rhonda."

"We'll find out when we get there."

"If she's setting us up, what will the Feds do?" I asked.

Eric thought about the question before answering. The mid-west countryside was passing us by, and I felt we were heading into a trap with every mile.

"They could have locked us up in Fort Worth if that's what they wanted," he said. "They want to know what secrets I know, and what I'm going to do."

"I've already told Brandoff we are picking up some papers you left with my sister. He wants to know more."

"Tell him you'll make copies when we get to your sister's house if he will give you some get-away money."

"How much?" I asked.

"I think ten thousand sounds good."

"Just ten thousand dollars for who killed Kennedy?" I argued.

"He doesn't know what he's buying. We can't be greedy."

"Okay, I'll call tonight, but I'll demand more."

"See what he can do. Ask for more if you want. I don't think you'll see any of it."

"Have you got a plan?" I asked.

"If they are waiting at Rhonda's house I may have to come up with one," he said.

The city of St. Louis was an hour away and once we crossed the Mississippi River, we would be one state closer to our destination. It would still be a few days drive, but most of the trip was behind us. There was light traffic heading in both directions, but there were no cars close behind us. I was surprised when Eric said we had a tail again.

I disagreed. "I don't see anyone." There was a semi-truck with a trailer a half mile behind us, but that was all.

"They're not on the road, look behind us to the right."

I craned my neck and looked back. No Jeeps or buggies were off-roading along the highway, but a moment later I saw it. There was a helicopter far above the road and a good distance back. "How do you know they are following us?" I asked.

"Missouri is famous for the black copter sightings, and there are no lights or markings on that one."

"It could be private," I said.

"The FAA would still require lights on it," he countered.

"Big brother is watching us," I said.

That's all it took to get Eric talking again. "The New World Order has a stronghold near here," Eric said. "It's called the Pensmore Mansion."

"I thought the Illuminati were under the Denver airport."

Eric continued, "Yes, but they have safe havens countrywide. This one is a seventy-two thousand square foot mansion built to withstand Armageddon. The walls are five feet thick and it's completely off-grid. It has a radar dome and a private heliport as well."

I looked back at the unmarked chopper following us. "Who owns it?" I asked.

"That's not known. Pensmore is what the consortium of private owners calls itself. The mansion could house and protect hundreds of people. New World Order members are politically connected and rich, but we can only guess who they are."

"Why do they stay secret and need protection?" I asked.

"If society collapsed, common folks would climb the mansion walls and kill for a chicken nugget."

"Survival of the fittest," I said.

Eric corrected, "Survival of the rich and most prepared."

"What can we do about the chopper following us?" I asked.

"Nothing, let them watch us," Eric said.

"They know where we are going," I added, "and are probably there, waiting."

“We’ll plan on that and be prepared.”

“What’s your plan?” I asked.

“I’m still working on that.”

The back of the van had little room to move. The twins stood to the side, doing nothing to help. Ron Ell worked at the audio console with the recording equipment. He listened to the conversation playing out on the phone with headphones wrapped around his head. Video monitors on the console revealed exterior views of Rhonda’s home. They even had a camera hidden in the backyard.

The phone in his breast pocket chimed as Rhonda’s call ended and Ron removed the headphones. He put his cell phone to his ear. It was his supervisor. “We are in place and ready,” he said. “They should be here in a day or two.”

Headquarters outlined the mission's objective. “Yes, I understand. We will record everything,” Ron Ell said. “When they retrieve the package, we will confiscate it.” He repeated the instructions to verify that he understood. “After we have the package, we apprehend Eric Marks. No one gets hurt.”

Moe and Curley looked at each other in silent conversation. The lack of expression on their faces didn’t reveal if they agreed with the plan. A movement on the monitor caught their eyes and they both turned to watch. Rhonda walked out of the house wearing a flowery nightgown. She was dragging a dog leash. The twins watched as she walked into the yard and circled the green lawn. Rhonda talked to her imaginary dog, waiting patiently at the tree for it to do its job. A moment later, she went back to the house and reentered. Ron Ell was busy talking with his commander and didn't see the odd activity. The twins didn't tell him about it.

Stanley’s Plumbing Service owned several work vans, but it was not one of the company vans parked across the street from Rhonda’s house. Even though the FBI’s van looked just like the real thing, Brandoff knew who was in the truck. He had been watching the FBI all day, from a few driveways down the block. He wasn’t hiding inside a van. He was sitting behind the tinted windows of a new Corvette. The yellow sports car was conspicuous, but he loved fast American automobiles.

Yankee Doodle rang out on his cell phone and Brandoff let the chorus play till the last bar. “This is Brandoff,” he answered. Geoff Polo was on the other end of the line. “Hello, my friend. I was worried you would not call.”

Geoff explained that they were another day or two away and would head straight to Rhonda’s home. He’d get copies of Eric’s papers to give him, but if Eric found out about his disloyalty, his friend would be furious. Geoff asked for fifteen thousand dollars to help get back to Arizona.

“Are you flying first class? That’s a lot of dollars,” the Russian said. “It is not possible to get that much

money from my superiors." He listened to Geoff's response and bartered back an offer. "Yes you are taking all the risk, but I am buying with blind eyes. I can offer half of that, seven thousand dollars." Geoff assured Brandoff that the documents would be eye-opening and they settled on ten thousand. Geoff was less than thrilled. He'd call back when he had the package ready.

Leaving the Gateway Arch behind us in St. Louis started a rush of old memories. My family had taken a trip there when I was young and every once in a while I'd see something again I had seen long ago. More and more landmarks and cities sounded familiar. The memories were making the trip home more exciting.

We were heading due east. Passing through the state wouldn't take long, especially with Eric's speeding. "Aren't you afraid of getting a ticket?" I asked.

"No, not really. We may get pulled over, but I'll only get a warning."

He was confident of this point. "How do you know that?"

"When I show him my ID, I'll show him my official government card. It's like a get out of jail free pass."

"It didn't work in Fort Worth," I reminded him.

"Those were FEDS controlling the stop, a state trooper will only tell us to be more careful."

"I hope so." The digital speedometer on the LX dash read 92 miles per hour.

"Don't worry, we are safe," he added.

We were passing fields of corn. I glanced over my shoulder to see if the unmarked black chopper was with us. It was there, above the corn. "The eye in the sky is still up there," I said.

"I'm not surprised. It's probably heading to the chopper base at Wright Patterson."

"That's in Ohio," I said.

"Yes, we are headed there too. It's on the way."

I mentally plotted our route in my mind. That trip would require a detour. The chopper base was not exactly on our path. "Why are we headed there?" I asked.

"It's part of the plan to distract the Russians and the FBI as we retrieve my notes. We need some help from an old friend."

"Who?" I asked.

"I'm going to ask Carol to help us."

"Is that your CIA girlfriend?" One of many, I assumed.

"Yes, I've not seen her in years."

"Do you think she'll help?"

"Maybe, we go back a long way."

I felt a story coming on.

"I met Carol in Washington DC when Menzel attended his first Majestic Twelve meeting. Not so coincidentally, UFOs were buzzing the capitol that weekend. It was a big deal on the news and everything. I was walking the National Mall, watching the lights in the sky, when she started talking to me. Over the next few days, we became friends watching the light show. I was only in town for a week or two on that trip, but I caught up with

her every time I came to town.”

“You told me about the secret pillow talk,” I said.

“Yeah, I eventually relocated to DC and she moved in with me.”

“It turned out to be no chance meeting. She was working with CIA Director Sourers. He had seen how much Professor Menzel depended on me and started my security check. Carol was working undercover to vet me.”

“Didn’t it upset you that she led you on?” I asked.

“At first, yes, but it didn’t take long for her to tell me the truth. It was Washington and she was doing her job. I got over it and we became close pretty quick.”

"And the exchange of top-secret information began," I quipped.

“It wasn’t like that.” Eric shot back. “We were not agents working each other for secrets.”

"She was good-looking," I said.

"Very good-looking," Eric agreed. “We were quite the couple hitting all the Washington hot spots and events.”

“Was this the Carol who told you about Marilyn Monroe?” I asked.

“Yes, she worked that case.”

“What happened? Why did you two break up?”

“I was held up by the accident at Groom Lake. I didn’t go back to DC and time passed,” he explained.

“So you just disappeared and she thinks you dumped her,” I said. “Now, you plan to go back after all these years and ask her for help?”

Eric was silent for several seconds. I thought the chances were good he’d get the door slammed in his face. He was probably thinking the same thing.

“Maybe it’s not the best plan,” he finally admitted.

Another state was behind us when Illinois gave way to Indiana. It was a noticeable change. The roads were pocked with poorly plugged potholes and the grass medians along the highway were tall and overgrown. My back wasn’t aching anymore and the LX smoothed out the pavement well enough to enjoy the ride. The woods along the highway were thick, lush, and green.

“Keep an eye out in those woods,” Eric said. “You might see a Bigfoot.”

I almost laughed at the comment but thought he might be serious. "Do you think there are Bigfoots out here?"

“Indiana has the most sightings of Bigfoot in the Midwest, even more than Michigan,” Eric said.

“So, you know they exist?” I asked.

“I’ve never seen one,” he said, “but...”

I cut him off before he could continue. “But your girlfriend has, right?” I asked. Carol was his usual source of information.

“You’ll have to ask her,” Eric said. “She never told me if she’s seen one, but there are a lot of sightings around here.”

The woods were deep. I imagined I could see things in their depth, but I knew it was my mind playing tricks on me. “I think I saw one,” I joked.

“It was probably a deer or a wild turkey. There are a lot of them, too.”

“Tell me more about Carol,” I said, changing the conversation. “Do you think she’ll help you?”

“Maybe, she loved the job. It was a power trip for a woman to be an agent back in the day. She was thrilled to work in the CIA. If we give her a Russian spy, she might forgive me.”

I started to see what Eric had in mind for Brandoff. “When are we getting the FBI and the black choppers off our back?” I asked.

“The plan is still in the development process. I haven’t figured that out yet.”

I looked around to see if the unmarked chopper still followed us. I couldn’t see well enough to know for sure. The tall trees blocked my view, but it was not directly over the highway behind us.

“How was Carol involved in the Kennedy assassination?” I asked.

“She wasn’t there, but she was part of the investigation after the shooting,” Eric explained. “Everyone was scurrying to pick up the pieces and hide things. Rumors and theories were shooting around like popcorn out of an open pot. The public loved Kennedy but he wasn’t popular in Washington.”

Eric continued. “Carol followed up on the Mafia’s connection to Jack Ruby. He owned a night club that laundered money for the mob.”

“I’ve heard that before,” I said.

Eric went on, “The organized crime kingpins didn’t like Kennedy because he was shutting down a secret CIA program that sold guns to rebels in South America. The CIA used the illegal money to buy protection for the rebels from the drug lords. The hope was that the rebels would overthrow the corrupt government there. But, the interruption of that protection money would cost the Mafia millions. Carol discovered that Ruby killed Oswald to keep him from flipping on the Mafia’s plan to get rid of Kennedy. Later, the Mafia killed Ruby while he was in jail to keep him quiet as well.”

“What do you mean nobody liked Kennedy?” I asked. That was news to me. “I thought everyone loved him.”

Eric shook his head no. “Most of Washington thought he looked weak dealing with Khrushchev. Some people even thought he was an embarrassment. Cuba was an even bigger failure. Most everyone in Washington wanted him out of office.”

“I didn’t know that.”

Eric explained, “When the CIA discovered Oswald’s plan, backed up by the Mafia, the powers in Washington let it happen. The MJ-12 would only act if Oswald failed.”

“The Majestic Twelve wanted to get rid of Kennedy because he planned to go public with UFO details,” I

said.

“Right, and they stepped in when Oswald failed.”

World history would change if what Eric and Carol knew became public knowledge. When Eric’s book hit the market there would be uproar. The people’s view of Washington would shift from trust to suspicion. The country was about to change and I was right in the middle of it.

I had to lighten the mood. “What is Carol like?” I asked. “You told me what she did, but tell me about her.”

"She's dedicated to her job and loyal. She was proud to be a woman in the CIA and serve her country," Eric said. "You can count on Carol to do the right thing. She's by the book efficient and she doesn't play games."

"You said she was pretty," I added.

“Those were the days of pencil skirts and collars. She made them look good.”

“Are you worried about seeing her again?” I asked.

“Anxious maybe, but I’m not worried.” Eric’s voice hinted that he was concerned.

“Why didn’t you go back to her sooner?”

"I didn't know how to explain what happened," Eric explained. "I had her name tattooed over my heart, and now it is gone. How can I explain that?"

“The truth,” I said.

"It took you a week of constant bickering before you accepted my story," he reminded me. "It was easier to let it be."

"But you missed her," I said.

“It’ll be nice to see her again, I’ll admit that.”

We drove through the Indiana countryside but never saw a Bigfoot, or the unmarked black helicopter again. The woods gave way to farm country and miles more of corn. Occasionally, a house broke the monotony, sitting back off the road with a long dirt driveway. The farmers in those secluded little homes didn’t know what was coming. Their trusted, elected officials had dark secrets that would soon explode into the light.

Would those secrets change the farmer’s life? Does knowing who killed Kennedy matter to them? If they knew aliens visited our planet, would it change their plans? All they want is good weather and a plentiful harvest. Maybe, ignorance is bliss, and some secrets should remain secret.

22 WRIGHT PATTERSON

We passed a sign indicating Dayton was eleven miles away when Eric pulled into a trucker's motel restaurant for lunch. "How are you going to reach out to Carol?" I asked.

"I'll call her while we stop for lunch," Eric said. "Wright Patterson is the home of NASIC. That's the Air and Space Intelligence Center. The last I heard, Carol was working there with the Defense Department," he said. He had been keeping track of her even though he kept his distance. He pointed across the street. "That eight-foot fence is the boundary of the Air Force Base."

Beyond the fence on the opposite side of the road, the lawn went on forever. In the distance, a few buildings spotted the horizon. "Wouldn't Carol be retired by now?" I asked.

"Yes, but you never really retire. She's a consultant now."

We entered the greasy spoon, took a booth, and ordered fried chicken with salted French fries and coffee. It was a cardiologist's nightmare. As soon as the coffee arrived, Eric took a sip and excused himself. "I've got to make this call now, or I never will."

It was going to be a tough call to make. I couldn't imagine how Carol would react to his surprise return after ghosting her forty years ago. Eric walked to the empty end of the lunch counter and took a stool. Elbow on the counter with his phone against his ear, he looked like a pouting child ready for punishment. I couldn't hear the conversation, but I'm sure it was intense.

Lunch had arrived before the phone call ended, but it was still warm when he returned to the table. "How did that go?" I asked.

"About as you'd expect. She didn't remember me and didn't want to acknowledge me."

"She's pretty pissed," I said.

Eric nodded and looked down at his plate. "I'm not hungry anymore."

"Are you going to see her?" I asked. "You've got to try."

"I'll see her tonight, alone. If things go well, I'll introduce you tomorrow."

That was fine with me. I didn't want to be in the middle of that initial meeting. I'm sure it would be interesting. A fly on the wall would have quite a story to tell. There would be more tension than a first date. He would have to do some smooth talking after abandoning her that long ago.

We checked into a couple of rooms at the motel. Shortly after I settled into my room, I watched the LX pull out of the parking lot. I wished him luck.

The show called X-Files was on TV. According to Eric, it's one of the shows backed by the Jason Society to ease the shock of aliens on Earth? It seemed to fit that bill. This episode revolved around a UFO sighting and abduction. I'd seen it before, but it took on new meanings as I watched it again. Did Agent Scully know about the Treaty of Greata? She didn't let on if she did.

Eric knocked at my door at seven in the morning. I had fallen asleep watching the tube and it was still playing the X-Files. The sci-fi channel marathon ran all night. It was a little early for that sort of thing so I switched it off as I opened the door.

“Good morning,” Eric said with a smile.

Things must have gone alright from the look on his face. His crooked smile said a lot. “Hi, how’d it go last night?” I couldn’t help but ask anyway.

“Just fine, Carol is the same old fireball,” he said. “We talked all night and reacquainted.”

“Did you tell her everything?” I asked.

“No, just enough for her to understand why I didn't fly back to D.C.,”

“So you didn’t tell her about the injury and the moon,” I confirmed.

“That might be too much under the circumstances,” he said. “She's still a little upset about me not reaching out sooner, but Hillenkoeter explained I was badly injured and in rehab. Carol wanted to rush to my side, but he told her it would be better if she gave me some time.”

“She’ll want to know more,” I said.

“In due time she'll get the whole story,” he said. “She's already got a lot to think about, so I'll wait for the right time.”

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Let’s go to the truck stop for breakfast. She’s waiting for us.”

Carol was about my age, younger than Eric. They made a well-matched couple because of his health. Her short white hair was stylish in a smooth cut that framed a smiling face. I could see why Eric fell for her. She was an attractive woman even at this age. He sat across from her at the table and they even held hands while we talked. There was still a spark between them.

“Eric told me you met in DC,” I said, trying to start a conversation.

“Yes. He was watching the UAPs on the mall in front of the capital,” she said.

“UAPs?” I asked.

Eric explained, “That’s the new term for UFOs. It is Unidentified Aerial Phenomena.”

“On our first real date we went spotting Russian subs in the Potomac,” she said.

“It was a dolphin,” Eric argued.

“There are no dolphins in DC” Carol snapped back with a smile. It sounded like an old argument that neither would ever win. “Remember when we snuck into the White House and helped the First Lady escape for a night on the town?”

Eric shook his head no. "That was all you. I was just the driver."

"I was part of the security team at the time," Carol explained. "Everything was by the book."

Eric smiled, "Of course."

There was a quiet moment at the table. I was sure I wasn't the only one wondering why this reunion was happening.

"So after forty years, you pop back into my life. It's nice to see you, but why are you here?" Carol finally said.

"You're right, as much as I love seeing you again, I'm here for an additional reason." Eric was choosing his words carefully. Patching up an old relationship is hard, especially when you need a favor.

He rubbed his chin, "I've got something for you, and I think you'll like it."

This surprised me.

"Go on," she said.

"Geoff has a Russian problem he needs taken care of."

I felt naked. The woman looked me up and down in judgment. She appraised my value. She analyzed risks. Her pretty blue eyes turned hard, and a lifetime of experience read me like an open book.

"Why is a Russian agent following you?" she asked.

"He said his name is Brandoff," I said.

Eric added, "The Russian wants to know more about me, and what I'm doing."

"How did he find you?" Carol asked.

"Brandoff was following the FBI agents who were tailing us," I said.

"The FBI is following you too?"

Eric tried to clarify the story. "Geoff and I are trying to retrieve my disclosure notes."

Carol laughed, "You still have that old manuscript?"

"It's in safekeeping," Eric said.

"Do you plan on publishing it now?" she asked.

Eric smiled his crooked smile. "It's time."

"I can see why they are tailing you. You're planning to open Pandora's Box." There was a tone of concern in her voice. "They won't like what's in your book, true or not. They'll press bogus charges to stop you."

"Probably," Eric agreed.

Carol's eyes went wide, "They may connect you to me as well."

"Our tail is clean now. We think they are waiting for us at Geoff's sister's house."

"How much do they know?"

"Not enough to stop me," Eric said.

Carol turned to me. "The Russian is following you to learn more about Eric. You have nothing to worry

about.” She looked over to Eric, “The FBI is another story.”

“They want to know where I’ve been and what I’m doing.”

"They're not the only ones," Carol said.

"I'm here now. I'll fill in the details later." Eric offered.

"It better be good," Carol said. "I told you yesterday I'd help if I could. I'm not an active agent anymore. But I've got friends who trust my word. If you've got a Russian, I'm all in.”

“Do you believe everything in his manuscript? Is it all true? I asked.

Carol looked me dead in the eye. "Yes, I know everything in his notes is true. I've read most of it."

The conversation bounced back and forth from nearly forgotten days to planning a sting on the Russian called Brandoff. Carol could detain him and find his place in the intelligence ranks. She hadn't heard of him, but that didn't mean he wasn't important. The Russian would be the final feather in her hat as she retired from the service. The swan song would allow her to walk away from her work being effective till the very last day.

“I’ll fly to DC and meet you at the Washington Monument on Sunday at noon. Is that enough time to get there by car?”

Eric nodded, “No problem.”

"We'll be staying with my sister, and they'll monitor us there," I said.

“No doubt they will,” Carol agreed. “We’ll have a few minutes to walk around the monument, looking like tourists, and finalize plans. I’ll have some agents on hold for when we need them.”

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked.

“We’ll copy some encyclopedia pages and you hand them to Brandoff,” he said.

"My guys will witness the handoff and arrest him," Carol added. "It happens all the time, no big deal."

“All the time?” I asked.

“More often than the public knows,” Carol said.

Eric looked at me with his crooked smile. He didn’t need to say anything. I knew he had been trying to convince me that the government was full of secrets, more than I could imagine. This was just another example of how the public is in the dark.

Eric stood up and patted me on the shoulder. "I'm going to visit more with Carol," he said. "I'll catch you later back at your room and we'll make plans for an early departure in the morning.”

That was my cue to leave. Eric and Carol still had a lot of catching up to do.

23 Virginia

We pulled up in front of Rhonda's house, and I almost didn't recognize it. The siding was now dark blue, with the windows trimmed in white. It looked good but it was not the home I grew up in. My house had always been light yellow. Eric parked and pointed at the plumber's van that was across the street. "The FBI are here."

"How do you know it's them?"

An educated guess," Eric explained."There are little clues. Tinted windows in a work van windshield, area code on the van is wrong for this city, and the extra antenna is a giveaway." We had only been there thirty seconds and he had already scoped out the scene.

Walking up to the house was like reliving history. Memories swamped me. Cutting the grass in the front yard was my weekly chore. It needed a trim. The first concrete step to the porch still had a little wobble. I sat on the same porch with my father, watering the lawn with the hose. The screen door still had the decorative letter P wound into the metalwork. It was the Polo residence. I was home.

Rhonda was behind the screen door, watching us approach. "I asked you to call me before you got here."

"I did. We talked yesterday." We had been on the road when I called.

"Come in. Come in anyway." She opened the door and welcomed us. "Hello Eric, you are looking good." As we walked in I could smell a garlic pasta sauce cooking. Rhonda always worked in the kitchen with our mother. Mom's cooking skills rubbed off on her.

"Hello Rhonda, Nice to see you again." I tried to be polite.

"Thanks for letting us stay here. It will only be a day or two," Eric said.

"That's no problem. A friend of Geoff is a friend of mine. What's your name, young man?"

She had already greeted him by name, but I answered, "This is Eric Marks."

"Oh yes, Eric. Good to see you again." Rhonda invited us to sit and visit as a woman entered the room from the kitchen. She wore a cooking apron over hospital scrubs. Bruno followed her but went to Rhonda's side. "This is my nurse, Nancy," she added.

"Nurse?" I asked.

"Hi, I'm the support nurse." The newcomer said. "I'm here from eleven to five every day to see that everything is alright and she gets a good meal, or two. Her Alzheimer's Disease is considered moderate and she doesn't need continuous care yet."

"I didn't know she had a nurse. She has Alzheimer's?" I asked.

"It's not severe. I'm more of a helper than a nurse, Rhonda is physically in good shape," Nurse Nancy said. "She mentioned you were visiting, so I made dinner, I hope you like spaghetti."

My stomach dropped at the thought of eating. The dreaded word rarely uttered at the Oasis Retirement Center was too close for comfort. Rhonda circled the room slightly adjusting decorations and knickknacks. The

dog followed her every step. Ignoring us, she walked around our small group to fine-tune a crooked framed photo on the wall. It was a picture of our father, who looked like me.

"I didn't know she was ill."

"She has a lot of mood changes and forgets things, but she is doing well. Mostly the evenings are rough for her. It's like Sundowner's right now. Before I started assisting, she missed paying a few bills, and a welfare review brought in the services she needs."

"It's good someone is watching over her," I said.

"I've been working with her for almost a year. Her Medicare handles everything, but when the time comes, she'll be assigned a live-in nurse or go to a full-service care facility."

"I'm glad you are here," I said. "Is there anything I should do? I didn't know about this." Rhonda was sitting in a chair now talking to Bruno about the weather. Was I too late to become a caring brother?

"No, she has good insurance. Everything is taken care of at the moment. Eventually, you will take charge of the estate, but that shouldn't be soon."

For now, I could continue to be the terrible, out-of-state brother who ignored his older sister. She could have told me what was happening. Someone should have. I would have helped. I don't know what I would have done, but I would have done something to help.

Eric pulled me from continuing my self-pity. "It's great that she's being taken care of so well. The spaghetti smells wonderful. I'm sure she eats well."

"The monthly check from Geoff does help her with bills and the groceries," Nurse Nancy said. "She couldn't make it without that."

I interrupted the conversation to ask what she was talking about, but Eric held up his hand. "I'm sure Geoff is trying to help his sister keep the homestead in good standing."

"Oh yes, the financials are in good shape. A state-appointed lawyer takes care of that. Without her home, she'd already be in a state facility."

Eric was protecting his manuscript by sending Rhonda money in my name. Did he know she was ill? Did he plan on telling any of this to me? It didn't help me feel like a better brother. It made me feel worse.

"Geoff, you are staying in your old room upstairs and Eric has the bedroom next to it," Nurse Nancy said. "The sheets are fresh, and dinner is in about thirty minutes. Get settled in. It's nice to meet you," the nurse said with a smile and returned to the kitchen.

"Why didn't you say something to me about this," I whispered to Eric as we went to our rooms.

"I would have, but we were busy dodging the FBI."

"A lot of good that did, they are outside watching us," I said

"Careful what you say. They might have the house bugged."

I wasn't sure if that was a possibility, or if Eric didn't want to talk. I was upset he wasn't honest with me.

My room brought back old memories. I hadn't been there in over forty-five years, but it looked the same. The bed and dresser were in the same place. It even looked like the same quilt covering the bed. The walls were the same light blue as when I was a kid and the curtains around the backyard window were the same color too. Nothing changed.

I opened my duffel and removed a few shirts to hang in the closet. The dart board was still on the back of the closet door. Two darts stuck out of it. I reached up onto the closet shelf, far to the left. I felt around to find the rest of the darts. Nope, but my hand found a fist-size block. Surprised, I pulled it out. It was a stack of baseball cards wrapped with a rubber band. It was my old collection. I sat on the edge of the bed and shuffled through the cards wondering if any of them could be worth anything when there was a knock on the door.

"We have a problem." It was Eric.

"What? Is my sister having Alzheimer's a problem in your plan?" I spat the words at him. "Why didn't you tell me about that?"

"I didn't think it was my place to say anything. I thought it was a family thing." He guided me to the bedroom window with his hand on my back. "What do you see?"

It was my backyard. The garage was on the left, and the grass was on the right. Nothing was different. I was about to say that when I noticed the new fence. The chain link fence that Eric and I had installed was gone. A six-foot wood privacy fence replaced it. That threw a wrench into the gears of his plan.

"We have to find out if they found my manuscript," Eric said.

"If they did, what would they have done with it?" I asked.

Eric shrugged, "Toss it in the garbage, I'd guess. It was in a PVC pipe with caps on each end."

"If it looked like a pipe bomb they probably called the police," I said. "I'll ask about the fence at dinner. This has been a total waste of time if it's gone."

"Not completely," Eric said. "I enjoyed the ride here with you."

I tried to be mad at him for not telling me about Rhonda, but I couldn't. "I enjoyed the ride with you, too," I confessed.

The kitchen table was set for three, but we requested Nurse Nancy dine with us. She happily added a setting. "I usually eat with Rhonda, but I thought today would be more of a family gathering. Thanks for inviting me."

"Nonsense, you are part of the family," I said.

"Besides, you cooked it. We can't let you eat alone in the other room," Eric added.

She sat next to Rhonda. Eric and I sat across the table. Bruno sat between the ladies, waiting for food treats. Nurse Nancy filled our plates from a big pot centered on the table. She even baked some garlic bread to add to the meal.

"This is delicious. It beats road food," Eric said.

"I can see you take good care of my sister." Rhonda had a six-inch length of spaghetti held by one end and

was feeding the dog. "And Bruno too," I said.

"Like you said, we are all family. It's hard not to become emotionally involved when I'm here so much."

"She's lucky to have you," Eric said.

"Yes, the house looks great. When did it get painted blue? I never saw it this color."

Nurse Nancy shrugged. "It was blue when I started visiting."

Rhonda looked up from feeding Bruno another string of pasta. "It's always been blue."

"I remembered it yellow. When was the backyard fence changed?" I asked

"Oh, I can help with that," Nurse Nancy said. "We changed that last year because Bruno kept jumping the old fence."

"Who did it? Did they find anything unexpected?" Eric asked.

"A local fence company did the work. They never told us about anything," Nurse Nancy answered.

An idea came to mind. "We should check the foundations and see if they did a good enough job." Eric nodded in agreement.

Nurse Nancy had a questioning look on her face. "That was a year ago. I'm sure they are fine."

Rhonda fed Bruno another pinch of the pasta, "Some roses in the corner would be nice."

"We can do that," Eric said.

Rhonda continued, "The creeping kind. I like pink. Maybe we need an oak tree to shade Bruno's doghouse."

"We'll do what we can," I said.

"It's nice to have you home again, Geoff," Rhonda said. "The house needs so much work."

The house looked fine, better than expected, but I agreed. "It's nice to be home."

I wasn't lying. I was unexpectedly comfortable there. I didn't even care that Rhonda should have sold it. I could have used the money back then, but I was happy she had a home now, especially with her illness. All the anger I had at her evaporated as I thought about the reality of the situation and how everything turned out. I almost wished I lived closer to her, now.

We continued dinner with small talk. Rhonda didn't say much. She fed the dog off her plate one noodle at a time until it was gone. I didn't see her eat any of it.

"Sometimes she eats, sometimes she doesn't." Nurse Nancy explained. "Every day is different."

"She'll be hungry tomorrow," I said.

Rhonda looked across the table with a stern eye. "Geoff, it's nice to see you again, but you can't tell me when I'll be hungry. This is my home. I'll tell you when I'm hungry." She sounded like my mean old sister again. Some things never change.

"How long have you been staring at that foundation?" Carol asked. She had walked up behind us. "Don't turn around. I don't the FBI to know we are acquainted."

There was a small group of tourists walking around the Washington Monument. Some were in line for the elevator ride to the top. We didn't have a reservation, so we were stuck to walking around the landmark. We had been there about fifteen minutes.

"Just a couple minutes," Eric answered.

"I'm sure you have a tail, so don't make eye contact with me. Be another tourist."

"When I said noon, I meant noon. If you've been stumbling around here long, staring at the concrete, they will know you are waiting for someone." Carol said.

"Not too long," Eric said again.

"Have you figured out what you need from me?" Carol had her phone out and was taking pictures of the monument. She caught nearby tourists in the photos to possibly identify later.

Eric stepped out of her shot. "I need a couple of hours without surveillance. We have a job to do at the house."

"We need to get Brandoff and the FBI agents away from Rhonda's house," I added.

Carol stepped away from us and walked to another point of view for a quick selfie with the landmark behind her. We slowly followed her within a group of foreign speaking visitors. They broke away from us as we rejoined her.

Carol kept her distance. "I think the best way to handle it is to get them together in an exchange, and my guys will take them down. It should take a couple hours for the FBI to clear paperwork and then get back to you. We will hold the Russian in custody."

"How do we get them together?" I asked.

"That's for you to figure out. I'll have my guys ready wherever you tell me."

"You keep Ron Ell busy for a couple of hours and we'll be good." Eric said. "I owe you one."

"I'll keep him as long as I can," Carol promised. "Yes, you do."

The National Mall with the monument was about thirty minutes from Rhonda's house. Museums and memorials flanked both sides of the long grassy park with the Capital Building at one end and the Lincoln Memorial on the other. "Why don't we have them meet here someplace?" I said. "Ron Ell is expecting some documents, and Brandoff will be bringing money."

"They will be expecting you to be there," Eric said.

"Find a place where they won't know it's not you until the last minute," Carol suggested. "Having the Russian bring money will make it look like he's paying off the FBI. I like that."

"Sounds like a workable plan." Eric said. "Let's walk around and find a good meeting spot."

"I've got some things to do now," Carol said. "I'm staying at the 32nd Street apartment. Come see me later."

Eric looked surprised. "Do you still have our old place?"

Carol smiled at him as she started to walk away. "I thought you said you've been keeping an eye on me."

"I must have missed that," Eric admitted.

It didn't take long to find the perfect spot. Behind the Native American History Museum is a walkway that meanders through a tree-filled statue garden. We found a secluded park bench facing a bronze warrior on horseback. Walkers in the garden couldn't see who was on the bench until they were there.

I called Brandoff from the park. "I have the papers copied," I said.

"Can you tell me what they look like?" he asked over the phone.

I wasn't sure what to say, "Lots of words, some say Top Secret on them."

"You didn't read them?" he asked.

"No, they are secret," I said. "Some blueprints are in the package, too."

"That's interesting."

"Meet me on the bench in front of the Chief's statue behind the American Indian Museum on the National Mall. I'll be sitting on the bench waiting at 3 pm tomorrow."

"I will bring your money. This will begin a profitable friendship between us, yes," The Russian said.

"I hope not," I answered.

"I love you Americans, so funny."

I hung up and we started walking back to the LX. We didn't shake our tail on the way to meet with Carol, and we saw the plumbing van parked down the street. We ignored it and drove home.

"They may have seen Carol with us," I said as Eric pulled into the street.

"I know," Eric said. "But they won't have time to identify her before tomorrow. She knows how to lose a tail better than me and she can be a ghost when she doesn't want to be found."

I sat back and watched the city fly by as Eric drove. Virginia was just across the river. I'd be home soon, and call the FBI from Rhonda's phone. It was probably bugged, but that was fine with me, as long as my cell was not.

"Tomorrow afternoon you'll have to drive toward Washington like you are going to the drop, and lose the tail. They'll race to the bench and think it is you."

I looked at him wide-eyed. "How am I supposed to do lose the tail?"

Eric explained. "It's easy. When you see the plumber's van following you, get on the freeway and go towards the Capital staying in the slow lane."

"I can do that," I said.

"Wait for a couple big trucks and trail them. When there is an exit a half mile ahead, weave around in front of the trucks and back to the right lane. Quickly take the next exit. The van will be navigating the trucks to find

you. If you're lucky, they'll miss the exit."

"That sounds easy," I said.

"It's nearly foolproof. Once you are on city streets make a few turns and see if the van returns."

"I can do that," I said.

"If they are still on your tail, you can shoot the gap."

"What's that?" I asked. We were almost home, and Eric pulled into a left turn lane at a busy intersection. We waited for the light to turn green.

"Be sure the van is close behind you, but not the first car following you," Eric explained. "Then, as the light turns green, jump on it!" The light turned green, and Eric floored the LX. Before oncoming traffic even started, he was speeding through the intersection. The second car moved a few inches but didn't try the turn. Oncoming traffic stopped any further left turns.

"That's easy enough," I said.

"After you shoot the gap, hit a few side streets and change your route back to Rhonda's house. We have some holes to dig."

Forty-five minutes before the planned meeting at the bench, I left the house. I saw the plumber's van tailing me as we expected it would. It was the first time I had driven the LX, and it was everything I expected. The pedal was so responsive I had to be careful not to squeal tires as I left the curb. I could lose the tail by outrunning the van with speed alone, but I held to the plan.

I told Ron Ell to be at the bench before three o'clock, and I'd meet him with a package. I guessed he was not in the van but on his way to the National Mall to meet me. I'm sure the van contacted him to say I was on my way. I pulled onto the freeway and sped up. The air was like a tornado whipping into the sunroof, but I left it open. I was going the speed limit with the gas pedal barely depressed. Even with the stress of the plan in action, I was enjoying myself. If we didn't have a schedule to follow, I would have driven all day.

I found a couple of trucks hauling trailers and pulled in behind them. The van was two cars behind me, and I waited for the right time to pull out around the trucks. Speeding up, I made my move. My timing was good and as I pulled back in front of the lead truck, the exit ramp opened. I waited until the last minute and took the exit. The van was out of sight behind the trucks. Easy as pie, I lost the tail. At the end of the exit ramp, while I was stopped at a light, the plumber's van pulled in behind me. My technique was flawless. I don't know how they followed me around the trucks.

I had no choice but to shoot the gap, but when I came to a light the van was again right behind me. At the next light, the van was a car back, so I made my move. I was first in line at the red light in the left turn lane. The

van was third in line. When the light turned green I jumped on the gas. The LX spun its wheels. Squealing rubber and smoke erupted from under it. I was half through the intersection before I started to pick up speed, but when the molten tires finely grabbed the road, the LX was launched like a rocket.

A hundred yards down the road, I checked the rearview mirror. Traffic was crossing behind me in my cloud of burnt rubber. The van was stuck at the light waiting for an opening to turn left. Remembering my instructions, I took my first right and hit the side streets to hide. After a couple more turns, I found my way back toward Rhonda's house. I kept an eye out for the FBI van but didn't see it again.

I pulled into the yard and crept into Rhonda's garage. Eric was already in the backyard with a couple of shovels. He was digging around the corner post when I got there.

"Any problem with the tail?" he asked.

"No, but I had to shoot the gap to lose them. The freeway trick didn't work."

"As long as you did the job," he said.

I didn't tell him we might need new tires on the LX. I grabbed a shovel and started helping on the corner post. It had a heavy concrete base that dropped almost two feet below grade. We had to dig two feet around it to get to the bottom of the foundation. We didn't find any PVC pipe anywhere near the corner.

"Are you sure it was the corner?" I asked.

"Yes, but let's dig down the fence line a few feet to see if it's still here."

We both started new holes a foot down the property line, without better luck. We tried again, and again. Our excavation was getting big, and the fence was wobbling by the third hole. "It's not here," I said.

"I think you're right," Eric agreed. "The fence installers must have found it and thrown it out thinking it was trash.

"It looked like a pipe bomb. Would they have called the police?" I asked.

"Rhonda and Nurse Nancy said that nothing unexpected was found," Eric reminded me. "It's just gone."

I looked at the holes along the fence line reaching far in both directions. "If it was here, we would have found it."

"Uh huh," Eric agreed. "Let's fill them back up and figure out what to do."

"Wait a minute," I said, as I raced back to the garage. I opened the trunk of the LX and pulled out three pink, creeping rose bush plants.

Carol called Eric as we were patching up the yard. He put the call on speaker so I could hear the conversation.

"Everything went as planned," she said. "Brandoff arrived at three and met Ron Ell at the bench.

Brandoff recognized Ron as FBI and almost didn't speak to him. When he did, we made our move."

"What did the Russian say?" Eric asked.

Carol laughed on the other end of the line. "He figured it out quickly and said, it looks like we've been conned."

"How many men did you have," Eric asked.

"I had four at the bench and another two at the van. We've got them all in custody now, but I'll have to release the FBI in a few minutes. How did everything go on your end?"

"Not so good as your sting," Eric said. "The manuscript is gone."

"What? That's a letdown. Maybe we can rewrite it." She suggested. I had already thought that was the best plan, but Eric disagreed.

"I think I'll just let it go," he said. "There is no way I can remember all the names and dates that make it believable." I was surprised, after everything we've gone through he would let it drop like that.

"That may be the best idea yet," Carol said. "Ron Ell will be coming to arrest you on suspicion of treason even without the book. He is pissed about the con and wants you even more now. The only good news is that I captured a Russian agent."

"Brandoff will love American prison," I said.

"He won't be in prison long," Carol said. "He'll either be traded back to Russia for one of our political prisoners or become a double agent for us."

"If he had a choice, he'd jump sides," I said. "I think he loves the American lifestyle too much to be sent back to Russia."

"That's good to know. It will make quite a swan song to my career."

"I thought you guys never retired, you become consultants." Eric interrupted Carol before she could respond to my point.

"Let me finish here and I'll see you at our 32nd Street place," he said.

"I'll be another hour here dealing with Brandoff. You know where the key is," she said. "Get out of there before Ron Ell gets back to you.

"Yeah babe, I'll see you in a few hours."

Eric and Carol were getting close again. They were sharing their old apartment. He hadn't even stayed at Rhonda's house one night. That was nice for him, but where did that leave me?

Eric patted the soil around the new rose bushes with the back of his spade, and I watered them from the hose connected to the back of the house. We put everything away and went inside just as Nurse Nancy prepared to leave.

"I see you got the rose bushes in," she said. "I was watching from the kitchen window while I made sandwiches for everyone. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, the fence is fine," I said.

Rhonda walked in from the other room. "What fence is fine?" she asked.

"The boys planted your rose bushes at the back fence," Nurse Nancy explained.

"I hope they are the deep red ones. I like those the best," she said. Everyone's eyebrows arched at that fresh news.

"Thanks for the sandwich," Eric said. "If it's okay, I'll take mine to go after I get cleaned up."

"No problem, I'm just heading out too." Nurse Nancy hugged Rhonda and started for the door. "See you tomorrow."

Rhonda was at the table inspecting her sandwich. "Nancy makes it just the way I like," she said. "I like lots of mayo and ham with yellow cheese, then cut into quarters."

"That's good to know," I said, sitting in front of my sandwich plate. "It's my favorite too."

Rhonda looked up "You know Geoff, it's nice to have you here."

"I'm happy to be here." It was true. I enjoyed being home again. Being social, with my sister after a thirty-year grudge, was refreshing. I didn't think things could be so good between us again. Now our fighting was all water under the bridge.

"That's nice, but don't overstay your welcome." Rhonda was sounding more like her old self. "Nancy is here to help me, and I don't need you to babysit me."

I hadn't planned on staying forever, but the thought had crossed my mind if she needed help. "It's a big house and Nancy does a great job," I agreed.

"It's my big house," she reminded me.

Some things are set in stone and never change. "Yes, Rhonda, I know."

"Thank you for the rose bushes though," she said.

"They are Pink Creepers. Not deep red," I confessed.

"I know that Geoff. I was pulling your leg. I'm not as bad off as you think."

"I guess not," I agreed. It had been so long since I'd spent time with Rhonda that I had forgotten she had a weird sense of humor. "I'm glad you still have your wits about you."

"Some days are better than others." She admitted, "But I don't need you to care for me. I have Nancy."

"Right, I understand." Eric was coming down the stairs carrying his small bag. He dropped it by the table and wrapped his sandwich in wax paper. "Are you leaving now?" I asked.

"I need to be gone before Ron Ell gets here," he said. "You may want to go, too."

"It won't take me long to pack," I said, knowing Rhonda would be happy to have the house to herself again.

"I'm sorry Geoff, I need to leave alone. Ron Ell doesn't have anything on you. You are just a bystander for him to harass. And he will, but he is after me."

"Where will you go?" I asked

"Goodbye, Eric," Rhonda said. She finished her sandwich and started toward the living room. She turned and spoke directly to Geoff. "See how it feels to be abandoned?" Then she left the room. Same ol' Rhonda, she's always getting the last word.

"I'm not abandoning you, old friend," Eric said, "I'm joining Carol."

I had guessed as much.

"Carol needs me more than you need me," he said. "I didn't tell you earlier, but she has an inoperable brain tumor. I need to spend as much time with her as I can."

I understood completely.

"She has a second home in the Caribbean. It's a place she bought as a retreat if she ever needed to get away," he said. "No one knows about it."

"So, you are just going to disappear again?" I asked.

"We are both going to disappear," he corrected. "It's what has to happen."

"What about the book?" I asked getting to my feet. I couldn't believe this was over.

"The book is history, I can't do it without my notes," he said. "Thanks for trying to help."

What was so important two days ago was nothing compared to spending time with Carol and letting the alien magic in his DNA help her. I didn't know if it would save her, but I knew Eric had to try. I didn't blame him at all.

Eric embraced me with a friendly hug, "I left some travel money in the glove compartment of the LX. You can return the car to the rental agency in Arizona. I paid for it in full."

"I've got my credit card you don't have to do that," I said.

"After the accident, Hillenkotter advocated a settlement through the Navy red tape. Don't worry. They pay well when they have secrets to hide."

He had his Joker's smile on his face. "Enjoy your drive."

"Take care of Carol. Tell her I said Bon Voyage."

And Eric was gone again. The mystery man disappeared from the radar again. He was good at doing that. Carol knew how not to be found too. Both of them knew Ron Ell would be searching for them. Tomorrow, they would be out of the country. If they were lucky, they would live their days on some Caribbean Island. I was almost jealous.

It didn't take long to pack my things and say a final goodbye to Rhonda and Bruno. She was cordial and almost friendly but she reminded me again the house was hers. Rhonda invited me to visit again, maybe next year, and we hugged for a long time. That was a step in the right direction for a better brother/sister relationship.

I threw my duffel into the trunk of the LX and noticed Eric's bags were gone. It would be a long, lonely ride. I had a lot to think about. When I slipped into the car the leather seats hugged me like a friend. "Adjusting seat for driver one," the car said in a friendly female voice. At least I wouldn't be completely alone.

A bank envelope in the glove box held a thick stack of fifties. Eric said he had more than enough money and he liked to share. Getting back to Arizona and returning

the rental would be no problem. I could keep driving for a while if I wanted. Especially, after I found that the rental contract was truly a year lease agreement paid in full and made out in my name. Eric was full of surprises.

The LX started with a deep growl and the rumble echoed inside the garage. I planned to drive through the night and put as much distance between Ron Ell and me as possible. The hide-away headlamps automatically flipped up and turned on. I opened the moon roof and started to back out.

My eyes hit the rearview mirror, but the view through the windshield caught my attention. Leaning up against the back wall of the garage, several rolls of chain link fence sparkled in the headlight glare. I hadn't seen them during the day hiding in the recesses of the building's shadows. The headlights lit the fencing brightly and I could see metal posts leaning alongside the wire fence. Could I be this lucky? I got out of the car to get a better look.

Each metal pole had two feet of concrete foundation on the bottom end. I remembered pouring the dry mix into the holes and watering them long ago. They were solid as a rock now. The corner post would be a bigger diameter. There were three corner posts. On one of them, I found what I was looking for. Embedded in the concrete, I found a wide PVC pipe with caps on each end. A hammer from the workbench made retrieval easy. I attacked the cement base. It only took three good hits to crack the old mix and free the time capsule that held Eric's manuscript.

The PVC pipe sat on the passenger's seat while I drove. I didn't open it. I wasn't sure I wanted to open it. As the miles passed under the LX, I remembered Eric saying it was a story that needed telling.

What would my friend Eddie think of what I had learned? Was he ready to know the book's truth, or would it shatter his beliefs in God and country? Could the JASON Society be correct and the news be too much? My mind bounced from question to question with every mile of the trip back to Kingman.

Eddie knew I was on the way home. He and his golf cart were parked in my driveway when I got there.

We entered my apartment, and my mental alarm went off. Most things looked normal, but someone had been

in the house while I was away. The sofa pillows were in the wrong place, and the window curtains were closed. I always left them open to watch golfers on the green behind the apartment. Maybe I was paranoid, but when I saw my Winston Link hanging crooked, I knew someone had been there. The FBI must have searched my apartment for Eric's treasure while I was gone.

I didn't say anything to Eddie and opened the curtains. "Let's go to lunch." I grabbed one of my duffel bags. I knew it held Eric's manuscript.

"Are you taking that?" Eddie asked.

"Yep," but I didn't explain.

In the dining room we both took our plates to a small table against the wall. It wasn't private but it was the most secluded table in the cafeteria style room. I hoped it would be safe to talk there. Just as I was about to start explaining what the trip was all about, Doc Weaver walked past our table. He made a double take when he saw me and stepped back to us. "Geoff, you're back. Some of us had worries when you disappeared the day after the FBI visited."

Most of my friends had gotten the story of Ron Ell's visit. Eddie had gossiped every detail he knew. Thank goodness he didn't know a lot. I expected as much, knowing it was the biggest news since Melva Draper fell into the swimming pool. Word travels fast in the community.

"The Chess Club started a pot, betting on why the Feds arrested you," Doc Weaver said. "I put my money on smuggling."

I casually slid the duffel under my chair with my leg. "I wasn't arrested. They only questioned me."

"Well, I'm glad you're back safe," he said and then walked away to another table.

"I had my money on assisting a terrorist," Eddie said.

"You knew I was going to visit my sister," I said. "Why waste your money on a stupid bet?"

Eddie looked me in the eye. "Tell me there's not more to that story."

I could not. Eddie knew me better than I wanted to admit, and I knew him well enough to know that if I said to keep something close to his chest, that he would. I never asked that of him when the FBI visited. "You're right. There's a lot more to the story."

I started off slow and explained who Eric was and how he was employed by a number of high-ranking players in government. I told Eddie we had retrieved a collection of notes and a journal that Eric wrote when he was in the thick of it. I had read the contents of the time capsule during my overnight stops within the safety of hotels that I paid for in cash. That's what the paperwork amounted to, but I didn't explain to Eddie the outlandish details the papers held. I made copies at a public library in Flagstaff. There were one hundred and forty pages of handwritten notes recounting many of the things Eric told me during the ride east, but there was much more.

I reached into the duffel and pulled out one set of copies and handed them to Eddie. "This is between you and me until I know exactly what I'm going to do," I said. "My buddy has left them with me trusting that I'd do

the right thing.”

“What do you want me to do with this?” Eddie asked.

“Read it and keep it safe. I know what Eric wanted to do, but what do you think I should do?”

Eddie looked at the papers in my hand. “Is this what the FBI was looking for?” he asked.

“They still are.” I said.

He was as white as a ghost and his hands trembled as he took them. “Am I breaking the law?” he asked.

“No, you are just reading someone else’s journal,” I explained. “Tell me what you think.”

We finished our meatloaf while I recanted stories of the trip. I kept it light and described seeing the Gateway Arch, and gambling in Bronson. He liked the story about meeting the cowboy, Roland MacDeen, but I didn’t get into details about why we visited. Of course, I didn’t mention seeing a UFO. After lunch I bought a small backpack at the gift shop and we inserted the copy of Eric’s notes. “Read this,” I said, “and tell me what you’d do with it.”

Two days later Eddie was knocking at my door. He had the backpack with him and set it on the coffee table as he dropped into the living room sofa. “What are you going to do with this?” he asked. “It’s a bombshell.”

I sat across from him in my usual chair, with the backpack between us. “What would you do?” I asked.

Eddie looked at the ceiling, searching for some answer, and inhaled deeply. When our eyes met again, he gave me his thoughts. “You can’t just sit on it. If any part of it is true, it needs to come out.”

“So, what would you do?” I leaned back in the chair and let him continue.

“I’d call Brad-The-Man on TV Channel Two. He’s the newsman who solves people’s problems,” Eddie explained. “He could get the whole thing on the TV.”

The fact that Eddie wanted Eric’s notes presented to the public was more important to me than how the news was released. Eddie was an old-fashioned regular guy. If Eric’s notes didn’t freak him out, others could handle the information too. Still, Eric’s story of what happened after he buried the paperwork couldn’t be ignored. I knew what Eric wanted to do and I was going to stick to his original plan.

“Eric wanted to write a book,” I said.

“That’s a good option too,” Eddie nodded. “A book is a lot more work but if it’s what he wanted, I guess it’s the right thing to do.”

We were talking about Eric as if he was dead, but I knew he and Carol were relaxing on a beach someplace in the tropics. Without meaning to, he left the job to me and made a clean get-away. He was good at that. They would be no help. “Yeah, it’s going to be a lot of work.” I agreed.

“How are you going to tie everything together?”

I shrugged my shoulders without an answer.

“I’ll help.” Eddie said.

“Thanks, I’ll need all the help I can get.”

I didn't mean it literally, but Eddie shook his head in agreement and repeated, "I'll help."

Eddie drove a little slower than usual to the Chess Club Challenge, but I didn't complain. "I've started the book." I said. "It's not a lot, but it's a beginning."

"Really? That's good because I'm ready to help," he said. "I was an English teacher before I retired."

"I thought you taught Elementary School."

"Yes, elementary school English, I taught grades 3 through 6."

Would that be enough? My worry must have shown on my face.

"English is English." Eddie said. "The rules of grammar are the same for all ages."

Eddie pulled his cart up to the community center, but before we entered Eddie stopped me. "I've got a surprise for you."

Inside the recreation center the Chess Club's tables were set up differently. Only two of the other five members were playing chess. All the remaining tables were grouped together with the last three players standing alongside, waiting for us.

"Meet your book team," Eddie announced with flare and a wave of his hand.

My jaw dropped. I didn't even have a chapter written. I wasn't ready to announce the project to the public yet.

"You said you could use all the help you could get." Eddie smiled.

I did say that.

"We've been playing chess with the best team I could find," he said. "Jimmy was a copy editor for a small magazine before he retired."

Jimmy raised his hand. "I mostly wrote advertising copy for Christmas catalogs," he said. "The internet put us out of business."

Eddie continued introducing his team. "Dan is a graphic artist with twenty years experience."

Dan waved hello. "I designed greeting cards. They are still using my art today," he said proudly.

"Tony is a retired plumber," Eddie concluded, "but he wanted to be part of the team. He knows how to run the internet and is willing to be our researcher."

I was about to apologize to everyone for Eddie's misunderstanding of needing all the help I could get when Doc Weaver opened the door.

"What kind of mess have you gotten yourself into, Geoff?" The Doc was holding Eddie's small backpack.

Eddie spoke up. "Doc Weaver's sister is married to a guy who has a brother that works at a publishing house in New York."

I looked at the crowd in the room. Rick and Walter were sitting together near the back wall with the chess pieces laid out on a board. Rick looked up and waved. “We are here to play chess.”

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born near Detroit, Michigan, and transplanted to Tampa, Florida, Douglas has been writing for most of his life. Married to his soul mate, Julie, since 1998, he has two children, Pam and Dallas. They love to read, learn new things, and travel.

You can view all the work by Douglas Deach at:

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Daech's first novel, titled *Time Travel and Dimensional Journeys* was published as an e-book at Smashwords.com and it is still available at most online retailers. This collection of short stories brings old time science fiction back to readers. The digital and now paperback versions can also be ordered at Amazon.com.

Haunted Romance was originally published as an e-book in 2013 at Smashwords.com. It is still receiving rave reviews. *Haunted Romance* is a love story and a murder mystery all in one. The digital and paperback versions can be ordered online at Amazon.com.

Haunted Rescue is the sequel adventure to *Haunted Romance*. Returning spirits, Sam and Tori, help save a kidnapped girl. Along the way, they bring mourning relief and romance back into Carol's life, after a breakdown caused by her daughter, Tori's death. The digital and paperback versions can be ordered online at Amazon.com. The digital version is available at Smashwords.com.

In 2014, *Seedy Hills, an Odd Little Town* was released at Smashwords. The ebook satires life in a small town plagued with odd occurrences ranging from Bigfoot to UFOs. Seedy Hills is available at many online retailers, including Amazon.

Warp Drive, Patent Pending is the fast-paced adventure of science fiction and espionage as scientists' back-

engineer a UFO. It's available on Kindle and paperback at Amazon.com as a 2016 release. The digital version is also available at Smashwords.com.

Finding Kray, released in 2017, puts evil back into the vampire character. They are not your friends anymore. It's available as a paperback at Amazon.com. The ebook is also available at Smashwords.com.

Strings Attached, released in 2017, is the first book of the James Magnum Cook adventures. In this book a rare guitar is stolen while Cook works as security for a rock band on tour. The search for the guitar leads to adventure, comedy and love. It's available at Amazon.com, and Smashwords.

Hindsight is Twenty Twenty, released in 2018, is Book II of the James Magnum Cook adventures. When Cook stumbles onto a paranormal camera that takes pictures of events that happened in the past he uses it to help solve local mysteries. What it reveals about him, and others, leads to trouble.

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