

ENCORE

A NOVEL

BY

Dave Lindsay

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Two scientists are invited to participate in the balance of a Top-Secret Cryonic project. Their objective: To rejuvenate a prominent man who was frozen down in 1996.

Maggie begins to explore the spiritual aspects that are inherently linked and entices her agnostic companion into the scientific realm of theological tenet. Their aberrant perspective leads to an astonishing revelation. If the monumental achievement yielded a man who no longer possessed a soul, Hell could very well be poised to unleash its legendary fury.

Dr. Grisham 'though' he was prepared for anything. Are you?



Dave Lindsay, the former two-time World High Diving Champion, is presently soaring even higher on the statueque wings of "Encore".

The author's vivid and rather spirited imagination is now reflected in tantalizing full-length novels, and the art of conveying those extraordinary futuristic visions seems to have sparked a creative literary talent.

"Encore" has simply set the stage. "Mirror-Mirror", a unique adventure in Time-Travel, will be released in 2002 and several others are currently under 'Lindsay Construction'. Of course, his future in the literary arena is yet to be determined. That potential, he leaves in the hands of his readers.

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DAVE LINDSAY

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DAVE LINDSAY

Encore is dedicated...

To my brother, Glenn, and sister, Donna. They checked out a little earlier than the rest of us, but I'm certain that, with their heavenly enhanced perspective, they have a mighty cheering section routing for a best seller!

To my niece Katie. For reasons we will never understand, we were forbidden to share in your life. May you someday come to know how much your mother truly adored you, your grandparents painfully missed you and the rest of us sincerely loved you.

Very special thanks to...

Mr. Kasper Knapton, the very talented artist in Skelleftea Sweden, who designed Encore's superb book cover. Regardless of the literary content, the unique packaging is First-Class! Thank you for your artistic input and creative contribution!

Dana Kunze and the many divers (knuckleheads) who sprinkled my life with an assortment of cherished memories. Lou Cionko, always there and willing to listen, regardless of what I had to say. Need I say more? Delta Dawne and the gang from Dave's Cappuccino, thanks for the many songs I will forever have in my heart.

Lake Saylorville in mid-July on a cool clear Iowa night, a wonderful person inspired a spirited young man to reach for the stars. I've been reaching ever since, even touched one or two! Thank you, Angie.

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Dave's world!

Cryonics is an altruistic science striving to render an invaluable service to an incognizant world, but there's much more to the equation than mathematical principals and **Encore** explores that unforgiving realm.



If scientists eventually liberate the first man from his frozen grave, will the global community amiably embrace what they perceive as an unencumbered benefit to society? Will the pious spiritual considerations that are inherently linked be lost in the technological bewilderment? Join Maggie Bennett and Eddie Grisham as they delve into theological tenet, but with a contemporary scientific perspective that will pilot them toward an astonishing revelation.

Naiveté is a poor excuse, particularly when considering mankind's obligation to guard against the pernicious effects of unrestrained scientific exploits. If we allow the infinite realm of technocracy to dictate our future, we may someday be forced to bear the consequences of that unbridled endorsement.

If you still believe that the concept of rejuvenation is a farfetched philosophy, prepare yourself for an enlightening **Encore** presentation. It's simply a matter of time. Eddie thought he was ready for anything, but he wasn't, not for this! Are you?

* * *

CHAPTER 1

AN INVITATION TO ANOTHER DIMENSION

With women's intuition double-parked on a back street in her mind, Maggie Bennett slid cautiously into her typical office routine without checking the clock, raising the blinds or breaking a nail.

Though she never truly understood the tenet, on those rare occasions when the innate forewarning descended on Maggie, there was usually a sound reason. This morning she knew right down to the core of her soul that a specter of fragile events was about to unfold.

"Ms. Bennett?" The deep unfamiliar voice forced her into a frigid stance with wide green eyes focusing hard on the well-dressed stranger who was standing just a few feet away. "Please, forgive me. I certainly didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh," the kindhearted woman stammered, then swallowed to clear the intuition that had suddenly re-emerged and seemed to be lodged in her throat. "That's all right. It's just that I wasn't expecting anyone, so I guess you did kind of catch me off guard...a little."

"Again, my humble apologies. I'm here to see Dr. Grisham."

Maggie fumbled for a reply. "Well, sir, Eddie...I mean, Dr. Grisham's not in just yet and I personally set all the doctor's appointments. I'm sure he has nothing scheduled."

"That is correct, Ms. Bennett, I have no appointment."

It was odd that the unfamiliar person had addressed her by name. That and his buoyant approach prompted an initial thought, 'A very slick salesman for sure.' She took evasive action to avoid the inevitable sales pitch that would typically follow. "Oh, I'm sorry, but it would be quite impossible then. Dr. Grisham receives no visitors without an appointment. You really must call well in advance, but if you'd care to leave your name," she rattled on, politely guiding him toward the door.

He maintained a pleasant smile but was resolute in his objective. "The doctor is due any moment, is he not?"

"Well, it's hard to say. Dr. Grisham is a very busy man. Again, if you'd like to leave a card..." Before she could turn an outright lie into an amiable dismissal, the office door flew open.

Carrying several books, toting three briefcases and with a worn-out satchel dangling from a frayed strap on his left shoulder, Dr. Grisham bobbled into the unusually crowded morning.

A wrinkled herringbone blazer mismatched perfectly with the faded denim jeans and a scuffed pair of untied tennis shoes, but the visitor didn't seem the least bit interested or inhibited by his tacky attire. "Right on time, I like that."

Eddie tilted his head to the side and pointed to the man as if to ask, 'Who?' Maggie answered with her eyes and shrug. "Excuse me," he said sardonically.

"I said you are punctual and that I admire the quality."

"Gee, thanks. I'll sleep much better now." He rolled his eyes and proceeded to step past as he delivered his message.

"Hold my calls, Mag. I do not want to be disturbed."

"By all means, Ms. Bennett, we wouldn't want to be disturbed," the man boldly reiterated.

Dr. Grisham braked hard, grudgingly surrendering to the haughty persistence. "Just who the hell are you anyway?"

"Forgive me, my name is Daniel Karrington."

"DOCTOR Daniel Karrington?" Eddie repeated with lucid astonishment. The visitor acknowledged with a modest nod. "Woe, another one of my great first-impressions. Sorry, doctor, I hope you weren't too offended. It's just that, well, I've seen photographs and even attended some of your seminars, but we've never actually met, so I..."

"That's quite all right, no apology necessary."

"Thanks," Eddie said earnestly, extending what he could of his cluttered hand. Dr. Karrington politely clutched a finger and shook to accommodate the gesture. "Aside from the southern hospitality, what brings you to the wonderful state of the Crimson Tide?"

"You, doctor. I'd like a moment of your time."

Eddie dumped his load onto an already muddled desk. "YOU would like a moment of MY time?" Karrington nodded again, still wearing the same enduring smile. "I'm flattered. Believe me, there's nothing I'd like more than to chew the fat with you. I've followed your research for years. Unfortunately, time is one of the many luxuries I just don't enjoy much of these days. Matter of fact, you have picked the worst possible time. I am swamped."

"I can certainly appreciate your position."

"Maybe we could have dinner some time, I'm sure we can schedule something. Mag," he called out. She had been doing her best to eavesdrop and quickly appeared at the doorway. "I'd like you to meet someone. This is..."

"Dr. Karrington," she completed. "We sort of met already."

"Dr. Karrington, my associate, Maggie Bennett." He greeted her with a chaste bow. She knew the name too but was somewhat skeptical. A man of his stature doesn't just show up for casual visits, particularly unannounced. "Check the calendar and find us an open evening. Since Dr. Karrington was kind enough to take time out of his busy schedule, the least I can do is buy him dinner." Assuming his modest invitation had temporarily concluded their brief meeting, Eddie attempted to dismiss his distinguished guest. "Again, it's been a pleasure, but I'm sure you understand."

"Of course, I do," Karrington said as he casually shuffled some papers together on a nearby chair, placed them to the side and sat down. "Your time is quite valuable. I would think that it's worth at least a hundred thousand dollars."

Eddie focused his eyes on Maggie. "Beg your pardon?"

"A modest contribution to your research fund in exchange for thirty minutes of your time." Maggie frowned a charade of 'Interesting proposition, and we could certainly use the money'.

"Well, you certainly know how to get a man's attention, that's for sure, but there's a boatload of work piling up on a sinking ship and I'm the captain. So as much as I would like to take you up on your gracious offer..."

"I understand," he said with a conceding lift of the hand. "You have a very hectic schedule." Then, just as Eddie began to relax, Karrington folded his hands together, casually crossed his legs and spoke again. "Perhaps five would be more appropriate?"

"Come again?"

"Five-hundred thousand for thirty minutes of your time, if..." Karrington punctuated with a sharply raised finger, "...you consider it wasted." The man obviously had something to say and at the current rate, Eddie was much more inclined to listen.

"Five hundred thousand, for thirty minutes." Eddie restated to clarify. Karrington nodded casually to confirm. "Well then,

consider the next half-hour yours and by all means, feel free to waste it." He said with a huge grin. Maggie shot him a subtle apprehensive frown and then politely excused herself, slowly closing the door behind her. "Make yourself comfortable, as comfortable you can anyway. We don't entertain much around here."

"I'm fine, thank you. With your permission and since I am on the clock so to speak, I'll get right to the point. There is an elite group of scientists, who have combined efforts on an exclusive project. There are four other Cryonic experts. I am Chief Administrator. We are conducting research in one of the largest, most technologically advanced facilities in existence."

"We are kept well-informed of any progress in all related fields. Consequently, we are fully aware of your research here at Cryotech. You have developed a unique approach to the science and garnered some rather astonishing results." Eddie mentally questioned which results Karrington might be referring to. "Unfortunately, your resources and funding are severely limited."

"That's an understatement," Eddie said in a laugh to emphasize the fact. "However, I too make it a point to research all aspects associated to the science. I've read nearly every publication and attended a myriad of seminars. In all honesty, I've never heard of this prodigious facility, nor am I familiar with any such project. I think I would be acquainted with something that significant."

"Actually, your lack of awareness offers a slight indication of just how well-protected our organization is. Like yourself, we don't publish all the details concerning our research." Eddie hadn't published any findings in more than a year. "We are probably one of the best kept secrets in the world and our funding is virtually unlimited."

"Unlimited funding?" he challenged. "Oh, I get it. This is a Government project."

"No, it's actually private and very exclusive."

Eddie leaned back, raised a pencil to his lips and began tapping lightly. "Private," he said skeptically with a grin

slowly tugging at his cheek. "You wouldn't be experimenting with a human subject, would you?"

"In this country, that would be considered illegal." Though his response was intended to avoid the question, his eyes delivered another message entirely. Eddie was convinced, but still puzzled.

"And what does any of this have to do with me?"

"It's really very simple. I'd like you to meet the other members and consider working with our organization."

"Why? Most of my techniques are based on methods that were printed in public journals, one or two of your own as I recall. There's no revelation here."

"On the contrary, you have achieved fascinating results in an area of research that we had discontinued many years ago." The statement seemed to imply that Dan was aware of Eddie's most recent Cryonic experiment, the details of which were still confidential.

"That's an interesting observation and I am intrigued by the prospect, but even if I agreed to meet with your colleagues, I couldn't make any promises, no guarantees."

"Of course not, and I'm in no position to offer any either."

"All right then, let's get together." He glanced at his calendar. "How about Monday, the eighth?"

"I'm sorry, but we're on a slightly tighter schedule."

The subtle rejection prompted a curious hesitation. "Well then, how about..."

"Right now."

"Right now, ...as in?"

Karrington shrugged his shoulders and replied with the same pretentious smile, "Right now."

"You're kidding? Leave now?" Eddie tested with a chuckle and then waited for a reply. "C'mon, you can't be serious?" Karrington raised a decisive brow and was no longer smiling. "You are serious! No offence, but that might just be the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. That would stir up some major T-F-P."

"T-F-P?"

"Yeah, that's an abbreviation for a technical term we use a lot around here. It stands for Total Fucking Pandemonium." Dan laughed. "Look, I'm sure you have your reasons and I respect that, but I can't just abandon my work on a whim."

Karrington was unwavering. "We do have our reasons, but I'm in no position to offer any explanation other than to express an urgent need to maintain absolute confidentiality."

"C'mon, doc, you're a scientist. Put yourself in my shoes. I like a good mystery as much as the next guy, but this is just a little farfetched, kind of out there, don't ya' think?"

Karrington chuckled and then spoke with a tone that expressed genuine sincerity, "Believe it or not, I have been in your shoes and though I haven't given you much reason to trust me, that's what I'm asking you to do."

There was something in the voice that he couldn't quite put a name on and something behind the eyes that seemed to pull like a magnet. "How long do you think this meeting of yours will take?"

"I'll have you back in the morning."

"In the morning?" Eddie whined. "That's a whole day shot to hell. Where do you hold these meetings, China?" Eddie's facetious guess wasn't quite as absurd as implied.

"I'm not at liberty to say, but I am authorized to sweeten the pot a little. I'll increase the offer to two million. That should more than compensate for any inconvenience. We meet, we talk, and we vote. If you're voted in, the final decision is still yours, but if you elect to join us, you'll gain access to

the most sophisticated technology available. If you are voted out or if you reject our offer, we'll consider it two-million-dollars-worth of wasted time."

More than anything else, Eddie was considering how two million dollars could bolster the impact of his research, but he was also beginning to imagine the possibilities if he elected to merge.

He was nervously stroking his jaw as he silently contemplated the extraordinary proposal. "Well, I can't say I like all the terms, but the last one...that was a doozy. I suppose you've struck yourself a bargain." They shook to seal the deal. Eddie began haphazardly shuffling notes together and stuffing them into one briefcase and then reached for his coat. "Will I need it?"

"Probably not, but feel free to bring it along if you like."

"Okay," he said with a heavy sigh. Karrington led the way out of the office and nodded to Maggie as he whisked by. She was glad to see him leave, but the last thing she expected to see was Eddie following suit. He was lagging behind, fumbling to move his glasses to the inside pocket of his blazer.

"Listen, Mag, you haven't seen me all day, okay?" he rattled as he walked briskly through the office. "You don't know where I am. Matter of fact, I don't even know where I'll be. Anyway, I'll explain everything when I get back. It's important, Maggie. I've got to go. Bye."

"Hey!" She scrambled from behind her desk to give chase. "Hold on. Wait a minute! What about? Eddie, W-A-I-T!" By the time she reached the hallway, he had already disappeared behind the elevator door.

With the morning's premonition weighing heavy on her heart, trepidation took hold of her senses. The sudden chain of events sent her into a gloomy state of complete confusion. She pressed her face to the office window and watched as Eddie stepped into a long gray limousine, one step in a new direction that would eventually lead to another dimension.

* * *

The two men were whisked away via private jet slightly after 9 AM. Since Eddie had only flown coach on commercial airbuses, Dan's plush Leer offered an entirely new perspective on air travel. After a brief period of adjustment, he began a conversation with his long-distance mentor. "Doctor Karrington."

"I prefer Dan."

"Okay, Dan. I've got a few questions, if you don't mind." Dan nodded to invoke the session. Eddie forced a laugh as he asked, "You weren't really going to pay me five hundred thousand dollars if I declined your offer, were you?" Dan leaned over to retrieve his briefcase and opened it on the floor. It was filled with neatly stacked bundles of crisp \$100 bills.

Eddie conjured up a syllable, then a half-choked reply, "Uh, I guess I could interpret that as a 'yes'." Then, with his composure partially in-tact, he continued, "I'm still a little confused though. It's kind of hard to believe that any organization, even yours, could gain access to unlimited funding. What I mean is, I've got to fight for every dime I get. Where does the money come from?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, but I can assure you, we've got it. Any other questions that I can't answer?"

"A few. Like, I still don't understand...why me?"

"That one, I might be able to shed some light on. You're very good at what you do, doctor. You've managed to achieve success utilizing an obsolete technique that all others have failed with and that includes us. You are the type of commodity that I like to invest in." There was a prudent pause. "May I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Eddie said with a nonchalant shrug.

"Is it true that you experimented with the body of a gorilla that had expired due to a fatal heart condition...suspended the primate for eleven months...then

revived the animal?"

Eddie froze with a cup of hot coffee quivering at his lips. There was measurable silence before he could formulate a timid reply, "Like you, doctor, I never discuss UN-published details of my work. Perhaps you'd care to enlighten me as to how you might have arrived at such a preposterous conclusion."

"There's no need to be alarmed," he reassured. "We simply have an elite and very resourceful conglomerate."

"A private company, unlimited funding and what...espionage?" Eddie aggressively indulged. "Let's face facts here. Corporate funding is distributed among the sciences based on some ridiculous formula established by the League of Nations and where Cryonics is concerned, it's almost nil. The science is still considered by most to be a farfetched philosophy, yet you have somehow managed to secure unlimited funding and establish your own...spy-network. There has to be a whole lot more to it."

"Of course, there is, but..."

"I know, I know, you're not at liberty to discuss it," Eddie sighed. "And I suppose I'll have to accept that for now. You certainly haven't given any reason to doubt the contention. On the contrary, you've provided two million substantial reasons to convince otherwise, but it's only fair to warn you. My guard is up and I'm not about to let anyone make a laughingstock out of me. I'd rather starve."

"I haven't come all this way and gone to all this trouble just to mess with your mind." Karrington seemed to be expressing more sincere emotion than scientific protocol.

"There's no cherry there."

"In this business, I don't doubt that, but if you...WE decide to go through with this, we'll be in it together."

"All right," Eddie said more receptively as he settled back. "We might as well dispense with the formalities on my end too."

"Thank you, Eddie." Dan said as if practicing the name. "As I mentioned earlier, I have been in your shoes. Many years ago, I found myself in a very similar situation and as I recall, it was more than just a little nerve-wracking, but I am where I am today because I took that chance. I had absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into, what the next day would bring or where I'd end up..." The sentence seemed to remain unfinished. "But I can tell you this, it has proved to be one very rewarding experience."

"I would have preferred a much more conventional method of introducing you to the organization, but if this meeting leads where I hope it will, you'll understand why it is essential that we do things the way we do." He took advantage of the casual conversation. "By the way, I bellied-out on some pretty thin ice to get you here. It's only fair to inform you that not all my colleagues are in agreement with me on this one. But if I didn't think it was in your best interest, as well as our own, we wouldn't have put you through all this."

"And where do you expect -- all this -- lead?"

"If we reach an agreement and our experiment is successful, you will be a participant in one of the most remarkable achievements of modern science." He paused with an encouraging grin. "Look, I've probably said way too much already, and I can't answer most of your questions anyway, so why don't you hold on to them until the meeting? Try to get some rest."

"Rest? I don't think so, but I'll hold off for now."

There was a long list of questions and it was growing rapidly. Jumbled thoughts were racing through his mind as rapidly as the clouds outside his window.

He glanced down at the vast ocean below, then stared up, looking through, but not seeing the endless blur of blue that an atheist could never perceive as heaven...a pastel hell, perhaps, but not heaven.

* * *

CHAPTER 2

SOMEWHERE IN THE WORLD

While Eddie was silently considering the possibilities, Dan was reflecting on a former meeting with his colleagues. In a plush conference room, five illustrious scientists had gathered around a large oval table to discuss the most controversial issue of their careers.

Dan began the debate casually. "There's no point in beating around this bush, we've been together far too long. We have established a long list of tremendous achievements, but regarding what we had set out to accomplish, we're still in the same desperate deadlock. Of course, there's always a chance that we'll stumble on that lucky break. It could happen next month, or it could very well take us another twenty years. We just don't know. But there's one thing I do know, we aren't getting any younger."

"I'm not saying this guy's our only hope. With or without him, we might never get there, but you've seen the report. Grisham is running circles around our program and with a fragment of the resources. He is young, he's intelligent and we're running out of time."

"But Dan," argued one of the men. "That's a big risk to take. Is it worth jeopardizing the entire future of the project? Maybe we should just keep an eye on him for a while."

"We've had our eye on him for five years, Charlie. That hasn't gotten us anywhere. Sure, we could continue surveillance, but we wouldn't be able to guide him and that's all he really needs. We're scientists," he argued, "he's a scientist and that's what we do, take carefully calculated risks. What do we risk if we don't bring him in, another ten years of stagnation? Either way, there's a risk, it's simply a matter of which one we're willing to take."

A third man, the bold and rather stout Wallace McCarty, removed his coke bottle glasses, stroked his fluffy mustache and stood to make his position known. "Bullshit! You said it yourself, Dan. He's young, just another over-ambitious kid out to make a name for himself. I don't know about the rest of you, but I certainly don't need some odious, snot-nosed college punk telling me how to do my fuckin' job. I'm with Charlie, if we pull it off without him, Jim fuckin' Dandy. If we don't, sorry about your luck."

"Now, wait a minute, Wally," another calmly pursued. "You haven't even met the man. Is that an eccentric brand of deductive reasoning or an over-inflated ego talking?"

"Fuck you, Stan."

"All right, that's not going to get us anywhere," Dan advised.

Dr. Archer continued calmly, "All I'm saying is, we can't base our decision on such trivial details as age. The guy is thirty-seven years old. That may be considered young by our standards, but we were a hell of a lot younger than him when we started this project. So, he's a little ambitious? We were too. I still am. I just think we should base our evaluation on the man's credentials. So far, being young is the only negative factor that's been expressed. Hell, Wally, you're a grumpy old fart, but we still put up with you."

Wally flipped him a casual 'bird'. "Up yours, Stan."

"Gentlemen, please," Dan indulged. "Keep in mind, we've got a legitimate shot at rejuvenation. If we pull this off, we go down in the history books and charter an entirely new course of scientific study. If we don't, we fade into the past like yesterday's news. Bernie, we haven't heard from you yet."

Dr. Winters slowly leaned forward and rested his elbows on the oak table. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to talk with the guy. Let's find out just how good he really is, then make our decision."

"Charlie?"

"All right," Brome agreed. "I'll listen."

"Wally?"

Wally spoke brashly, "I think it's a waste of fuckin' time, but hey, it's not my call. If you want to waste valuable time finding out what I already know, go ahead and get the little fucker in here. Let's see what he's made of."

"In a roundabout way, I guess that makes it unanimous, but keep this in mind too, if he bites and we like what we're reeling in, we've got to get him in the boat."

"You'd better hope he doesn't sink it," Wally added.

"He might surprise you," Karrington was quick to inform.

"Wanna bet?"

"I know better. You'd vote him out to keep from losing a five-dollar bet."

As the room began to clear, Dr. Brome approached the Chief Administrator. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"I'm only sure about one thing, Charlie, we've got to do something, and we've got to do it now!"

* * *

WELCOME TO SOMEWHERE

After nearly ten hours in the air, their jet finally touched down on a desolate tract of land and taxied towards a hangar at the end of the isolated runway where another limo was waiting. The air was hot and dry, the sky crystal clear. The terrain offered no insight as to their geographical location, but Eddie was sure that they were well out of the continental United States. "Let's go, Steve," Dan instructed as they climbed inside.

"Yes sir," the driver replied in military fashion.

"We'll be there in about five minutes." Dan reached for a button beneath the armrest. "Sorry to have to do this," he said as protective shields began rising to cover the windows. "Standard procedure."

Eddie sat back and pressed his palms tightly against his thighs. The irritating security measures were getting a little too bizarre for comfort. "I've been thinking, I might be in a little over my head on this one. Perhaps I should..."

"Listen, to me. I know what I'm doing. You're a brilliant man, Eddie. You know as much about the science as the men you'll be meeting with, so don't let yourself be intimidated. Answer the questions that you feel need to be answered and ask the ones that need to be asked. This is no time for modesty."

The remainder of the ride was silent. Eddie gathered his thoughts. 'They want me,' was the only rational assurance he could come up with. 'Why should I be nervous? I have nothing to lose. I must have something THEY want, or I wouldn't be here in the first place. I'm the one in the driver's seat. I've got the leverage.' Even with all the private mantra he could muster, he couldn't help but wonder, 'Then why is it, I don't even have the slightest idea of where I am?'

"This is it," Dan announced. The driver opened Eddie's door and he stepped out to find himself in an abandoned garage. Dan reached out to press his hand against the glass plate of a fire extinguisher cabinet and a small hollow-metal door next to it opened automatically. The two men entered what appeared to be a broom closet. Eddie refrained from asking the obvious as another set of steel doors sealed the cell and the tiny elevator began

to descend. Dan chuckled. "This wasn't my idea either."

"More standard procedures, right?" Eddie snickered.

"Um hmm."

In less than twenty seconds, the thrill ride came to a well-controlled halt and the door opened into a long, narrow hallway. Karrington made quick passage with wider strides than Eddie's normal pace could match, but after a short sprint down a long maze of corridors, they arrived at the entrance to the conference room. It was 7:15 PM, Alabama time. "Wait here," Dan said with a wink.

"Where did you think I was going to go?" he said as his only link to the outside world disappeared behind a set of steel doors.

Inside, Dan began the proceedings. "He's confused and a bit on edge, so go easy on him." He directed his last word to Wally with a sneer. "Okay?" Wally responded with an exaggerated smirk. Dan opened the door and motioned for Eddie.

"Gentlemen, I'd like to present Dr. Edward Grisham." Eddie's tension level increased substantially as he began to recognize the faces. He found himself being scrutinized by four more of the finest minds in the Cryonic field. Dan began the very brief introductions. "Stan Archer, Neurology. Charlie Brome, our Cryonic Engineer. Wally McCarty, Cryonic Cardiology. And Bernie Winters, DNA Development."

"I had no idea," Eddie humbly acknowledged. "This is quite an honor."

Just as Eddie had begun to develop a more comfortable frame of mind, Dr. McCarty proceeded to burst the proverbial bubble in his typical, outspoken fashion. "Let's dispense with the formalities, shall we?" he said before darting his words across the table. "Do you know why you're here, son? Do you have any fucking clue what-so-ever?"

The rude awakening wasn't at all what Eddie had anticipated and a far cry from what he was hoping for. "I beg your pardon."

"Wally," Dan warned, but to no avail.

"I asked if you have any fucking idea why you are here?"

"Well," Eddie took a deep breath and let it out slowly as his temper began to flare. "Apparently," he began innocently enough, "to be insulted by an arrogant asshole." He turned sharply toward Dan, pointed his finger at Wally and took another deep breath. "I'll take the fucking money! So, before I say something I'll regret..." He paused and lifted his hands with clinched fists, then flashed a set of surrendering open palms. "You know, as much as I wish I could, I just can't bring myself to leave it alone."

The frustration that had been building for the past ten hours began to pique. He leaned on the table, pressed toward his adversary and began to unleash. "FUCK YOU!" The look on Wally's face was one of complete and utter shock, a priceless moment for his colleagues. The thick glasses magnified his startled eyes and his brow was scrunching high on a wrinkled forehead.

With his jaw clenched into a tight frown and the veins of his neck protruding, Eddie continued to vent. "You contemptuous bastard! You come knocking on my fucking door, interrupt my work and drag my ass off to God knows where -- then, on top of that, you have the audacity to insult my intelligence? I think not, friend. I've got much better things to do with my time than sit around here taking shit off some feeble-minded jackass!"

The group was accustomed to Wally's ill-mannered approach but seemed rather stupefied by Eddie's notion to stand firm. Wally sat shell-shocked with his mouth locked in open awe. With a consoling arm thrown around Eddie's shoulder, Dan managed to take charge of the situation. "You're right, doctor, absolutely right. Every man in this room, at one time or another, has disputed Dr. McCarty's crude lack of tactfulness, not with the same vigor, perhaps, but..." One by one, the other three men began to relax into muffled laughter. Dan focused his attention sharply. "Damn it, Wally! You owe this man an apology."

"What?" Wally clumsily defended. "What'd I say? What'd I say? I asked the man a simple fucking question. What's the big deal?"

"Wally," Karrington urged with distinct authority.

"All right, all right, I'm sorry. All right, kid? I'm fucking sorry. I've been a little on edge lately, probably gas," he offered as a lame excuse. "I had beans for lunch. I'm sorry, all right? C'mon, sit back down." He motioned to Eddie with a halfhearted wave. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Eddie doubted if McCarty was even the least bit sincere and was becoming even more apprehensive. His eyes moved warily from face to face, but not one of the men seemed inhibited by Wally's callous tactics. If anything, their expressions were relatively pleasant and even hopeful.

Stan Archer was smiling as he stood to pour a cup of coffee. "I hope you will excuse our notorious colleague. Though I'm sure it's difficult to realize, Dr. McCarty truly has the very best of intentions at heart. Unfortunately," he added, dragging the word out as he handed the silver mug to Eddie, "he has the couth of a rabid dog and the manners of an amoeba. Please, don't be too hasty passing judgment on the rest of us based on this cantankerous old coot. We have a very tight group here and when you've worked together for as long as we have, you get to know one another rather well. Wally, we know and make allowances for. You, on the other hand, we don't know at all, but there appears to be some good reasons why we should."

Charlie joined in the more pristine manner of welcoming their guest. "Allow me to rephrase Wally's question. Do you know why we've invited you to meet with us?" Eddie slowly lowered himself into a chair. "You see, Doctor Grisham, the five of us are members of what you might consider an elite alliance. Since its inception, we have never even considered breeching the parameters of that exclusivity...not once, not ever...until now."

Dr. Winters began to elaborate. "Our work is completely confidential. We each have our own private research, much of which has been made public to some degree, but the core of the effort is concentrated predominately on one objective. Nothing in reference to that project has ever been released. You are being considered as the first outsider with whom we might share that information. Once we do, you could conceivably become our greatest liability. So, if you're feeling a little insecure

right now, you're not alone."

Eddie's tension was beginning to ease, but his words were spoken with clear apprehension. "Obviously, there's a great deal that I don't understand, but as far as Cryonics is concerned, you're five of the best. Matter of fact, most of my work is predicated on methods that you gentlemen originally developed and even if I weren't my own worst critic, I would consider my research primitive in comparison. Since you apparently have access to all available resources, I seriously doubt that I have anything significant to contribute."

Dan had been silent to this point, allowing the others to voice their concerns, but quickly began to reassume his role as Chief Administrator. "We know that you have been experimenting with Solar Diathermic Incubation. We did too for many years but had concluded that it simply wasn't a viable method. It appears that we have overlooked something. You have apparently progressed to an advanced stage of rejuvenation development, which presents some intriguing possibilities. Simply by eliminating the negative findings already derived in our laboratories, we should be able to accelerate the process. Of course, we hope to modify and redevelop our own research as well."

"We envision a mutually beneficial alliance, one that would permit you to gain access to our extensive technology and one of equal reciprocity to our project. There is, however, one catch." There had to be, and Eddie's eyes studied the grain in the oak table in anticipation. "If you are accepted into the cartel and elect to work with us, we will require you to make a substantial commitment, the same commitment the five of us have made."

"We have all agreed to achieve success or die trying. That's a lifetime commitment and the same would hold true for you, but if we are successful, you would be entitled to an equal share of the pot of gold at the end of our prodigious rainbow, and it's one hell of a pot." Dan hesitated and then added, "Of course, we enjoy a very affluent lifestyle, but we live to work. Our biggest drawback is that if we fail, everything up to this point is virtually meaningless."

Eddie had listened carefully to every word, but most of what was said made no sense, particularly the last statement.

"Let me see if I've got this straight. Just like that," he said with a snap of his fingers. "I'm expected to forfeit my entire career and make a lifetime commitment to some top-secret project that I know absolutely nothing about." He settled back and shook his head in disbelief. "Quite honestly, gentlemen, I don't know if I'm out of your league, or if you're out of your minds."

"I don't claim to be some sort of genius, but I'm not stupid either. Cryotech is a successful program and I'm perfectly content with my work. So, it's not that I question your integrity, it's just that I haven't seen any evidence that even warrants consideration, much less a lifetime commitment. If that seems brash to you, I apologize, but I can't make a commitment like that based on what I've heard, could you?"

The room became deathly quiet as they considered Eddie's well-validated perspective. It was Dan, who finally broke the silence. "He's got to see the basement."

"I don't know," came an immediate objection from Charlie Brome.

"Charlie's right," Wally boasted. "You can't walk the kid through forty years of technology in a ten-minute tour. Hell, most of it doesn't make sense to me. What's it gonna prove to him? The kid's no dummy, fellas. He knows what we're doin', he just doesn't know how we're doin' it or who we're doin' it to. Frankly, it's none of his fucking business. We're wasting his time and ours. I say we drop the whole fuckin' thing."

"That's right," Eddie barked in rebuttal. "You're wasting my time. That means I get two million dollars of your money!"

"Big fuckin' deal!" Wally fired back. "You just don't get it, hotshot. Two mill ain't shit. I could wipe my ass with that kind of money."

"Prove it."

"What do you want me to do, wipe my ass for ya?"

Eddie was quiet for a moment. "Do you play cards?" Wally stared blankly before nodding. "All right, then. You're indicating that you've got a Royal Flush, but as far as I know,

you're bluffing. All I'm asking you to do is show me some cards. If I think you've got a winning hand, I'll fold mine and back yours."

"We'll show you four," Dan's voice serenely intervened.

"What's that?" Eddie was puzzled.

"Yeah, Dan, what the hell are you talkin' about?" Wally grumbled.

"You want to play poker, right?" Eddie shook his head in vague agreement. "The game is Five-Card Stud. We show you four cards to that Royal Flush, a little tour of our facility. If you're not satisfied after that, you take that briefcase of ours and go on about your business. You come out a modest winner. But we're betting that you're our 'Ace in the Hole', in which case, we would all win, and considerably more than two million dollars."

A smile found its way to Eddie's face. He had played his cards well. It was their turn to sweat a little and he was still able to walk away. "Deal 'em," he said boldly.

"How about it, fellas?" Dan addressed his colleagues. They were still trying to untangle the curious chain of events. "Look," Dan encouraged, "we take him to the basement and give him a glimpse of the future. Once he sees where he'll be working and what he'll be working with, he'll want in. Even if he were to renege, he couldn't really hurt us. He doesn't even know where we are."

Surprisingly, Wally was first to concede. "Ya' know something? As much as I hate to admit it, I kind of like the kid. He's got spunk." He stood and started for the door as if the decision were final. The others didn't seem quite so eager. "Well, let's go."

Wally was the last person Eddie expected to compromise and was shaking his head in response to the drastic transformation. Dan was more confident too and smiling as he coaxed the others with a comment to Eddie. "C'mon, you're going to love this." The rest of the team reluctantly followed suit.

* * *

THE BASEMENT

"Eddie...You don't mind if I call ya' Eddie, do ya'?"
Before he could reply, Wally answered for him. "Good."

"We've got a staff of about eight thousand upstairs, but the five of us are the only ones allowed in the Basement." They followed a ramp downward with the set of un-timed footsteps creating a constant echo. At the foot of the ramp, another seamless wall slid open revealing a large elevator. The group moved silently in, silently down. "Well, kid," Wally proudly announced as the free fall ended, "this is it."

Eddie took a deep breath and unknowingly held it. The unique architecture was from something beyond any page of a Star Trek novel, a fascinating, futuristic world. The first corridor was lined with individual aquariums recessed in stainless steel walls, each tank containing human organs preserved in a gel-like substance.

"My God!" Eddie finally managed to respond. "This is incredible!"

Wally pointed to an area where dozens of human brains were being monitored. A complicated maze of wires extended from a network of electrodes attached to an intricate wall of extensive monitors. "We've been observing some of these rascals for more than twenty years, kind of like a Cryonic E-K-G. They still emit traces of minute activity. Fascinating, huh?"

Eddie was spellbound by the proclamation, which prompted a request for clarification. "How many years?"

"Twenty, give or take."

Eddie was wrestling with the technological time frame, which didn't seem to fit with all he had come to understand about the science. Then, there were the magnificent stainless-steel archways that lined the enormous corridors that traced the perimeter of a huge climate-controlled terrarium. "That baby contains about five acres of recreated rain forest, home to an abundance of exotic plant and animal life. It's even been

programmed to emulate natural weather conditions."

Like a network of steel caves, the maze branched off in all directions. It was truly a spectacular structure. Though the team had grown accustomed to their surroundings, Eddie's astonishment invited them to recall just how incredibly magnificent their facility was.

"I guess you never really get used to it. Do you?"

"Trust me, kid, you'll get used to it," Wally countered, as if Eddie had already been voted in.

Dan began a detailed explanation. "About six years ago, we began developing a new process called A-C-R, Anthropomorphic Cryonic Reincarnation."

"I'm sorry?"

"A new cell rejuvenation process. It seems to have excellent potential."

"That's an interesting concept. I gather you have a number of patients then."

"No, just one."

Eddie found that fact very intriguing. "Male or female?"

"Male."

"How old?"

"Sixty-five at the time of death."

"Sixty-five?" Eddie replied with insightful astonishment. "Your chances of success would have been much greater with a younger specimen."

"Of course, and we would have preferred it, but a variety of conditions and some rather unusual circumstances surrounding this particular patient made him an ideal selection from virtually every other perspective."

"How long after expiration before preservation?"

"One minute and thirty-eight seconds under electronically controlled CPR."

"That's excellent. And Uncle Sam isn't in on any of this?"

Dan hesitated. "Sometimes, in the true spirit of science, it's best to keep the government at bay. They have a history of hindering progress."

"They don't know anything?"

Wally pitched in again. "Just us, kid...and now you."

"That's a bit risky, isn't it?"

"Let me put it to ya this way. If we don't succeed, it really won't matter now, will it? On the other hand, if we are successful, it really won't matter now, will it? Besides, we've managed for forty fuckin' years and nobody's knows diddly-squat."

Eddie's mind grappled at the mention of forty years. 'What would anything forty years ago have to do with a project they're working on today?' "Why the big secret?"

Dr. Archer attempted to justify Wally's casual illustration. "The patient insisted on it."

"The patient insisted?" Eddie's fascination piqued. "Who the hell is this patient of yours anyway?" Again, there was a period of silence.

Dan placed his hand on Eddie's shoulders to guide him. The group walked into a circular room with a large control panel situated in the center. Dan flipped a toggle switch. The intricate panels rotated back to reveal an observation window angled downward to view another room below. "Dr. Grisham, our patient."

Eddie cautiously approached the window and slowly leaned forward. He folded his arms and lowered them onto the edge of the steel cabinet. He could see the body, but it was too far

away to make out any identifying features. "No encasement?"

Dr. Brome began to elaborate. "This is our most recent version of Cryonic preservation. We've only transferred the body three times since the original cocoon. In most respects, the atmosphere in this room is very similar to the suspension chamber that you have been utilizing, but it's about ten times larger and permits direct access. The temperature is pretty much the same as with liquid nitrogen, but with the new formula, cells and tissue are even less susceptible to crystallization. This is the only one of its kind anywhere in the world."

"When did the last transfer take place?" Eddie was asking all the right questions.

"About twelve years ago."

Eddie turned back to the group of men with his eyes fixed in deep thought. He was hypothesizing as to just how long the patient had been suspended. "I'd like to see the original chamber."

Dan responded to that. "I'm sure that you would find it quite fascinating, but most of our outdated equipment is stored in a remote vault in another section. Perhaps some other time."

Eddie followed up with another showstopper. "What was the cause of death?"

Dan redirected the question. "Wally?"

In anticipation of Eddie's response, Wally answered in a muffled voice. "Acute Circulatory Collapse."

"I beg your pardon?"

Wally glared up at the ceiling, then repeated with exaggerated annunciation, "Acute -- Circulatory -- Collapse."

"Oh, come on!" Eddie's chuckle was quickly reduced to a faint smile, as if waiting for the punch line to a bad joke. "You can't be serious. You had the patient's consent for suspension, I've got to assume that you were aware of his condition." Wally arrogantly nodded. "A simple By-Pass surgery

and who knows...the guy might have lived another twenty or thirty years."

Wally couldn't wait to reply. "For your information, H-O-T-S-H-O-T, the By-Pass procedure hadn't even been developed when this guy kicked."

Eddie was trying to calculate another technological time frame. "Wait a minute. Then, that would mean...let's see...what you're saying is...what are you saying?"

"You heard me, Poncho."

"Well, how long has this guy been down?"

Dan broke in with a quiet laugh. "As I mentioned before, due to some rather extenuating circumstances we were forced to begin this project in 1966."

"You mean to tell me that this guy was frozen down in sixty-six?" The faces of the men answered his question. "My God, I hadn't even been born yet."

"No shit, Sherlock," Wally needled.

"I didn't even know the potential for suspension existed forty years ago. That would make this guy...a hundred and ten years old."

"Actually," Dr. Winters inferred, "from a genetic perspective, he is still a sixty-five-year-old man." Dan prompted him to continue with a circular wave of his finger. "However, there has been a mild form of brain-cell decomposition taking place. That began about three years ago. At liquid nitrogen temperatures, we didn't think it was possible. Including the time allotted for Cryonic transfer, it's as though the patient's brain has been deprived oxygen for one minute and fifty-eight seconds, and the rate is beginning to accelerate. We can only speculate as to how much time remains before irreversible damage begins to occur."

"Medically speaking," Wally boasted, "he's fine. I repaired the damage to the circulatory system in '93." He was seeking Dan's nonverbal approval to expound and got it. "And this is

where it really gets good. Our patient had a heart transplant."

"A heart-transplant? No offense, but that was considered a relatively simple procedure, even in '93."

Peering at Eddie over the rim of his glasses, Wally bobbed his head up and down with distinct merit. "Simple? Simple?" Wally gloated. The other men were openly snickering at Wally's unique approach to the facts.

"I don't get it. What's so funny?"

"Well, hotshot, the transplant was simple enough, but it just so happens that this heart was his." He threw his thumb over his shoulder.

"Whose?"

"His," Wally echoed. Eddie looked to Dan for a straight answer.

"Charlie, I suppose you deserve the honor."

"The size, the shape, even the genetic structure, is identical to the heart it replaced. In every respect, it's a perfect match."

"By perfect, you mean..."

"Damn, kid, what part of the equation don't you get?" Wally clamored. "It's his."

"You're telling me that it was cloned."

"Bingo, big-shot."

"It's true," Charlie added.

"Unbelievable."

"Of course," Dan was quick to add, "we'd deny it if anyone were to ask."

Eddie replied with both hands raised, "Understood."

Wally continued to boggle Eddie's mind. "Except for being dead, he's in better physical shape now than when he died."

"That's absolutely amazing which," Eddie thought long and hard before continuing, "brings me right back to square one. All things considered, what could I possibly bring to the table?"

"Maybe nothing," Dan offered. "The next card on the deck could be the Ace, in which case, we wouldn't need you at all. The Ace might not even exist, but if it does, there's a good chance that you're holding it. The odds are stacked against us either way, but with you on the team, maybe we can reduce them. There's only one question left. Do we deal you in?"

"Wow," Eddie whispered, as he took one final look at his options, or lack thereof. He focused on the man who would most likely express opposition. Wally McArty scrunched up his chin forcing his upper lip even farther behind the confines of the bushy mustache. "If you want me."

There wasn't even a brief hesitation. "I've got no problem with it," Wally declared.

With that, the men began welcoming him aboard. Wally avoided the typical formalities. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, like there was ever any doubt. Can I go back to work now?"

One by one, the others followed Wally out of the room, leaving Dan and Eddie alone to sort out the details. "We've got a wing reserved for you and a team standing by to transport your laboratory. We'd like to get started immediately."

"Were you that sure I'd say yes?" Dan just smiled. "Where the hell are we anyway?"

"Bir Seri, an oasis in Southeast Syria."

"Syria? Of all places on earth, why Syria?"

"It's in a remote, relatively unexplored region and we were granted complete freedom to operate with no interference."

"Big Brother has to know you're here."

"Sure, but they have no idea what we're doing. It was a carefully calculated decision at the time, and we were well established long before any threat of discovery. We have one division that monitors all technological advancements and takes steps to avoid penetration. We can detect and scramble any signal long before it becomes a concern."

"Wow, sounds like you've got everything under control."

"For the most part anyway, but at this juncture, it wouldn't be economically or technologically feasible to relocate. Since we opened shop here, we've had complete immunity and paid well for that privilege, but there is a struggle for power in the Syrian government. Certain officials have been exerting pressure to reveal the nature of our work."

"As you know, tension in the Middle East has been escalating and another war appears to be inevitable. We're too close to the heart of the discontent. Once Syria gets involved, there's a good chance that we could get caught in the crossfire. We'd sure hate to see forty-four years of research obliterated as a casualty of war."

"Of course, provisions have been made for an emergency evacuation, but that would mean scrapping the entire project. The irony of it all is that our patient could very well be holding the key to preventing that war. There's a lot of pressure here, Eddie."

"Who is this guy?"

"Believe me, I look forward to sharing that information, but you've been overwhelmed enough for one day. We'll cover all the fascinating details soon enough, maybe over a nice quiet dinner before you leave the states. Right now, you get to go home and relax."

"Can get a lift?"

"Your plane is waiting."

"Oh yeah, what about Maggie?"

"Like I said, anything you need. Of course, that would include Ms. Bennett, but we still need to take precautions. The project, in every respect, must remain completely confidential." Though Eddie pleaded with hopeful eyes, Dan declined with a regretful shake of the head.

Another elevator took them to the main floor. "Your contact in the states will be a man named Curt Crushock. He'll be heading up the relocation and serve as your liaison." He reached into his pocket, retrieved an envelope, and handed it to Eddie. "This is a corporate credit card and a pre-programmed cell phone."

"That might come in handy. My credit is pretty well shot."

"Not anymore. As of today, you've got a clean slate. I just saved the company two million dollars, so feel free to abuse it." Dan laughed. "You'd better get a move on." The elevator doors opened into a stylish lobby in an entirely different section of the complex. It resembled that of a contemporary hospital with a crosscurrent of minor foot traffic. The limo was waiting just outside the main entrance.

Eddie's humble handshake seemed to adequately express his appreciation. "Have a pleasant flight, Eddie. We'll be in touch."

The protective shields were lowered and as the car drove away, he got his first glimpse of the massive complex. After takeoff, he was treated to an aerial view as the aircraft circled the enormous facility, which slowly disappeared beyond the mountains.

* * *

CHAPTER 3

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Eddie's flight home was considerably more pleasant. The crew aboard the corporate jet had been instructed to cater to every whim, but he was a simple man as such needs go. With some of the mystery resolved, he was able to manage scattered moments of sleep between splinters of exasperating thought.

There were still more questions to be answered, but it seemed as though the opportunity of a lifetime, maybe two lifetimes, had somehow found its way to him. It had all the mind-boggling ingredients for an astounding challenge, the kind that all scientists long for.

Though he had hoped to beat Maggie to the office, his flight didn't arrive in Mobile until 7:45. "Where can I take you Dr. Grisham?" the driver asked politely.

"How fast can you get me to the office?"

"In rush-hour traffic, maybe twenty minutes."

"Can you make it fifteen?"

"Fifteen it is."

They began racing through congested traffic, then a series of back-road detours. "We are going to my office, right?" Eddie asked with uncertainty.

"Yes sir, but a few alternate routes should shave some time."

Eddie was baffled. The driver knew back streets that even he wasn't aware of. "If you're not from around here, but you know all these backroads?"

The driver coaxed him to lean forward. A small in-dash computer screen provided a detailed map. A variety of routes were highlighted in a dozen different colors. Estimated Time of Arrival blinked boldly for each and with a quick two-key entry from the driver, only three of the outlined routes remained. "This little gadget comes in handy."

"Yeah, I'll have to get myself one of those."

A few more quick turns and the neighborhood looked familiar again. The sun was fighting to break through scattered clouds that threatened rain and a bright streak of sunlight caught Eddie's eye as he stepped from the limo. "Have a nice day, Dr. Grisham."

"Okay, thanks, you too." Eddie walked in to find two burly men hovering over his devoted assistant. Maggie's arms were folded across her chest with her fingers agitatedly tapping out a coded message on her ribcage. She didn't speak. She didn't have to.

Eddie nervously looked in her direction with a sheepish grin. "Hi there," he greeted, hoping to ease the tension and at least delay the inevitable confrontation. As he made a dash for his office, one of the men reached to open the door for him. "Thanks." He paused. "Um, Maggie. There's no hurry or anything, but when you get a moment, we've got a few things to catch up on."

"Do you think so?" she blurted sarcastically from the outer office. She stood sharply, sending her chair slamming into the wall behind her and then stomped forcefully past the two men,

slamming the door shut behind her. "All right, buster, spill the beans. I want to know what's going on and I want to know NOW!" She didn't give Eddie an opportunity to reply. "We've got some serious T-F-P here." The men outside looked at each other and gave nonverbal shudders.

"These two slabs of beef claim they work for YOU." Eddie raised his arms defensively and chuckled. "It's not funny, mister. I've been doing the payroll for this two-bit operation for ten years and I don't recall seeing their names on it. And just where in the world have you been for the past twenty-four hours? Not even a phone call."

'Where in the world' was appropriate question. He held to the miserable hope that a casual comment might create a diversion. "So, how have ya been?"

"How have I been? I'll tell you how I've been, worried sick!"

"Relax, Maggie, everything's cool." He leaned back and folded his arms behind his head. "Matter of fact, everything's great."

"Oh, it is?" Her hands knotted at her hips as she prepared for scolding. "Well for your information, there are about twenty guys downstairs ripping our laboratory apart and loading it into 'Toys-For-Tots' trucks. On top of that, these two brick-for-brain buzzards have been following me around like lost sheep. I can't even use the bathroom without one of them breathing down my neck. So, for the sake of what's left of my sanity, define 'great' for me, would you?"

"Wow, I didn't expect things to progress so quickly." Eddie was only beginning to realize the effect his decision would have on Maggie. She was upset, and with good reason. He moved to the front of his desk, gently took her shoulders and guided her into a chair. "Maggie, I know that this all seems a little strange, even radical, but everything's fine, honest."

"Eddie," she finally surrendered in an exhausted whisper, "what's going on?"

"Quite a lot actually." He chuckled softly as he began to

consider his explanation. "I know this is going to sound crazy, but yesterday Dan, Dr. Karrington, took me to meet with a team of scientific experts. They invited me to work with them on a special project. I accepted."

"You're kidding?" She waited, hoping for the reply she wanted to hear. "C'mon, Eddie, you're not exactly the impulsive type. Now, just like that, you turn your whole world and mine completely upside down and inside out. That's not like you, Eddie. There's something wrong, isn't there?"

"Nothing's wrong."

"Okay, then, what's it all about?"

"Well," he sighed with a nervous grin, "I can't really say. I mean, it's just that, well... it's...a secret project."

"Oh, it's a big secret. Well, that explains everything, doesn't it?"

"It really is a top-secret project," he defended, but as soon as he said the words, he began to realize how ridiculous it all must sound. "I can't tell you much just yet, but what I can tell you is this. It's the kind of thing a guy like me dreams of being involved with. They have a facility like you wouldn't believe and the big bucks to back it up."

She was emotionally distraught, and he wanted to put her mind at ease, but he only knew the workings of a woman as a man. She was entitled to an explanation. He just wasn't sure that he could provide a valid one.

"I don't know all the details myself, not yet anyway. Everything is very confidential, but whatever their story is, you can bet it's a good one. I know enough to know that it's all absolutely necessary."

A sad smile lifted the corners of Maggie's mouth. "No offense, Eddie, but if they're the experts, why do they need you?"

"I wondered about that myself at first, but you know the progress we've made." He took a deep breath. "They know all

about 1-B-4."

"They know about Billy?" She was stunned. "How could they? I haven't even typed up a report."

"I'm not sure how they know or how much, but they know enough. What's more important is what they apparently don't know. If they knew how we did it, they probably wouldn't need us, but they're going to let us write our own ticket in order to find out, anything and everything I need."

"That's pretty scary."

"What?"

"Doesn't that have just a slight ring of 'too good to be true'?"

"Yeah, I know, and I thought that too before I met with them, but they know I don't have any money, so they damn sure aren't after that and I don't have anything else. It's an incredible opportunity, we've just got to be cautious."

"Okay, let's say it's legit. Where does that leave me? What about us?"

"We're a team, Maggie, we always have been. We didn't cover all the details, but you're in there...if you want to be. After you hear the terms, you may not want any part of it."

"First of all, they're set up in a foreign country, pretty much in the middle of nowhere, and it's basically an all-work-no-play kind of deal. There's even a chance that it could be a little dangerous and I'm okay with that, but I don't know if it would be very fair to you."

"Fair? Is any of this fair?" she asked, hoping to entice the one reason she needed to hear. "What are you saying, Eddie?"

"Hell, I don't know what I'm saying." He shook his head and began fumbling with a stack of papers. "With your credentials, you could get a job anywhere you want, and you know I'd give you the best reference ever."

"I don't want a reference." She was quiet for a moment before she added, "Why don't you just ask the question?"

"I thought I did."

"Well, you didn't."

"C'mon, Maggie. Don't do this to me." In the quiet space between them, he saw something new in her eyes. There was more to their story than work and for the first time in ten years, he was faced with that reality. "Could you commit to a project without knowing where, what, why or how long? Could you do that?"

Maggie stood and began walking toward the outer office with determined steps. "I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

He rushed to the door left standing open. "Where are you going?"

"That's none of your business." She grabbed her jacket and purse in one sweeping motion and headed out the door, leaving Eddie with a well-deserved dose of his own medicine.

"Is everything all right, Dr. Grisham?"

"Oh yeah, everything's fine, just dandy." Eddie paused in the doorway with his hands pressed to both sides of the jam. He shifted his stare from one man to the other and back again. "Who are you guys anyway?"

"My name is Curtis Crushock, this is Tommy Bartles," the tall blue-eyed blonde replied.

"Oh yeah, Dan mentioned you. Well, come on in. Maybe we can start by clearing the air a little." Crushock signaled his partner with a tilt of his head. "I don't suppose either of you has any idea what I'm supposed to be doing?"

Bartles pulled out an electronic day timer and began dictating the itinerary. "For the next twenty-four hours, our crew will be packing your equipment and transporting everything to its new location. It's imperative that we move quickly and discretely. Dr. Karrington would like to meet with you for

dinner tomorrow night, if convenient."

"Tomorrow night?"

"Yes, sir. He also indicated that you would most likely prefer to choose the location. He'll be staying at the Beverly Hills Hotel."

"In California? And he'll be here for dinner tomorrow?" Bartles nodded. "What about Maggie? I'd like her to join us too, but I don't even know where she is."

"Her whereabouts is being monitored, sir."

Crushock had a more down to earth approach. "It's simply a matter of security, doctor, a standard precautionary measure. Surveillance is a necessity, at least until the relocation campaign has been completed."

"Standard procedure, that's a term that I'm becoming all too familiar with. So, you'll know where she is at any given time."

"Yes, sir."

"Cool." Eddie stood, signaling the end of their meeting, and then escorted them to the door. He closed and locked it behind them.

"He seems like a pretty nice guy," Crushock said.

"Maybe," Bartles replied, "but I don't think we should be using the network for personal objectives."

"Maybe not, but Karrington says this guy has priority one clearance. Anything he wants, he gets. Besides, who's to say it's personal? I sure wouldn't want her against us." He laughed.

Bartles took the cellular from his jacket pocket and punched a direct dial number. "Ted, this is Tommy. We'll need a regular update on Mark IV. Yeah, okay, I'll tell him."

"Tell me what?"

"You're on your own, Curt. They want me with the equipment crew."

"No problem."

* * *

At 10:45, Curt was knocking on Eddie's door, but there was no answer. He tried the doorknob. "Dr. Grisham?" he called out as he shook at the door. "Are you all right? Please, open the door." Convinced that something was seriously wrong, he pulled up his sleeve, activated a peculiar weapon attached to his forearm and burst through with a swift kick.

The spectacular intrusion startled Eddie who leaped nervously from a reclined position into a fetal heap on the floor. A tremendous burst of Rock-n-Roll music blared from the high-powered headphones as he yanked them from their comfortable position. "For God's sake, man. What's wrong?" Eddie dropped the headset and reached for his heart. "Jesus Christ! What's the problem?"

"I'm sorry, doctor," Crushock replied as he quickly pulled the sleeve down to conceal the intricate device. "I knocked, but there was no answer. I got worried." He paused and shook his head, then continued to apologize. "I guess it comes with the job. I'm really very sorry."

Eddie slowly picked up the blaring headphones and clicked off the C D player, then sat back down. "Damn, you've got to learn to relax. If anybody's under any pressure around here, it's me." Eddie pointed to an empty chair. "Have a seat. What's the name again?"

"Crushock, sir."

"Come on, I don't go in for all that yes, sir - no, sir crap. Lighten up a little. First name?"

"Curtis, sir." Eddie smiled and motioned with his hands as if opening a curtain. "They call me Curt."

"And you can call me Eddie, okay?"

"That'll take a little getting used to. That type of treatment is rather unusual for a guy in my line of work."

"What exactly is your 'line of work'?"

Curt looked through the open door before clarifying. "I'm pretty much your personal valet, but I'm also the chief of security."

"What, my bodyguard?" Eddie concluded with a smirk.

"I guess you could say that. It's my job to make sure nothing happens to you, but anything you need, it's also my job to see that you get it."

"Anything?"

"Anything within reason, on a very unreasonable scale. You've got top-security clearance authorized by Dr. Karrington himself. Whatever it is you do; you must be good at it. Security has never been this tight."

"I see. Well, I don't need much, but the one thing I do need just ran out of this office like a scared rabbit. Maggie knows her stuff, all the programs, the ins and outs of our research, all the codes...she knows everything and it's all in her head. On top of that, she can make a computer sing. As far as I'm concerned, she is irreplaceable." Curt made mental notes, recognizing the sincerity of his concerns. "How much can I tell her?"

"Well, you really can't say anything about the project. That authorization comes directly from Karrington. I've been with this company for fourteen years and still don't know what they do."

"Well, Maggie's more than an assistant. She's also my best friend and I don't want to lose either one."

"If there's anything Dr. Karrington can do to help you, he will. He's a good man."

"That's nice to know," he said before changing the subject.

"Hell, I can't just sit around here twiddling my thumbs."

"Everything's being packed up for transport, so there's really nothing to do. Why don't you take a break? You're certainly entitled. Get out and enjoy yourself a little." Curt offered a fresh new outlook on the situation. "What would you like to do?"

"My work is also my hobby. It's all I've ever done and all I know how to do. What would you do?"

"The sun's back out. I might be inclined to take a drive down the coast. Perhaps Ms. Bennett would like to join you."

"I don't know. She was pretty upset."

Curt handed him the phone. "There's one way to find out."

Eddie keyed in Maggie's number. There was no answer. He left a brief voice message. "What the hell, maybe I will take that drive."

* * *

As Eddie drove along the coast, he reflected on the events and the impact of his decision, he couldn't seem to get Maggie out of his mind. He found a secluded beachside restaurant and lounge where he spent hours sipping margaritas and gazing out over the gulf. Then, at 6 PM, his phone rang. "Grisham."

"It's Curt."

"What's up?"

"A slight change in plans. Karrington would like to meet with you tonight if possible."

"Tonight? What time?"

"Nine o'clock at the private airfield."

"I'm a good two hours away."

"I know, but tomorrow's out, an urgent matter he needs to

attend to. Can you make it?"

"Yeah, I guess, but what about Maggie?"

"Bring her along. She's at a beauty shop in the Lakeview Shopping mall right now but should be finishing up soon."

"I'll give her a call."

"We'll see you at the airport, then."

"Yeah, bye." He immediately dialed Maggie's cell phone number, but after fifteen minutes, there was still no response. She was obviously avoiding him. He sat in his twelve-year-old Chevy pick-up truck quietly contemplating for several minutes. Then, he popped in a CD, cranked the volume and pressed the ignition switch to start the engine. He was headed straight for Maggie's house.

Though he knew the address and general area that she lived in, he had never been there before. Until now, he never had a reason. She lived alone in a very small home on a tree-lined street just on the out skirts of Mobile. Like so many other parts of town, the once peaceful neighborhood had been transformed into another gang ridden crime infested community, but it was home and she was safe there. Most of the people in her neighborhood, including the gang members, liked her and accepted her as a permanent fixture.

It was almost 8 PM and the sun had begun to fade as Eddie approached her subdivision. It seemed that everyone on the block was noticing the unfamiliar vehicle and watchful eyes studied him with extreme curiosity as he slowed down near Maggie's house.

"My God, Maggie," he said to himself. He simply couldn't imagine why anyone, particularly a girl like Maggie, would choose to live in such a neighborhood. She earned a good salary and could certainly afford better. The squeaky breaks of his rickety truck signaled his arrival. Just then, his cell phone began to ring.

"Hello."

"Keep driving," Maggie urged emphatically. She had recognized the familiar brakes and was staring out at him from her window.

"What?"

"You heard me, DRIVE!" He then noticed a large group of rugged individuals assembling on the sidewalk.

"I'm going." He revved the engine and pulled away. "Nice neighborhood."

"What were you thinking?" she began barking. He made a futile attempt to reply but was sharply interrupted. "Do you have any idea how dangerous this neighborhood is? Those kids get their kicks beating guys like you up."

"Guys like me?"

"If I wanted to talk, I would have answered your page? I didn't, did I? Secret projects, secret meetings and now you show up here. Something just isn't right, and I don't mind telling you, I don't like it, not one bit."

"You have never paid me a visit before, but today of all days, out of the blue, you show up at my doorstep. That's just a little too weird." She finally paused to give him a chance to respond. Instead, he was silent. "Well?"

The resentment was obvious in the tone of his voice. "LOOK, this hasn't exactly been a picnic for me either. Yeah, I guess I have been acting a little strange lately. Who wouldn't? And yeah, coming here was evidently a mistake, but I didn't know that until this very moment. Why am I here? Because, Karrington wants to meet tonight and I thought maybe you'd like to go along, but since you wouldn't answer my calls, I figured I'd come by and invite you in person. Pretty stupid, huh? Sorry I bothered you, but you won't have to worry about that anymore, I'm leaving the country!" He clicked the phone off.

Maggie was shamed into silence. She hadn't really stopped to consider Eddie's perspective. This was their first confrontation and neither had handled it very well.

Eddie hadn't driven far when his cellular phone rang again. "Yeah?" he answered in a solemn, but receptive manner.

"I'm sorry," Maggie's voice pleaded softly. "I owe you an apology and I'm sorry." Both were quiet for a moment. "Eddie, are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you?" he said as his voice softened. "This whole thing is my fault. I got us into this mess, and it's got me, I guess both of us, a little on tilt. I'm the one that should be apologizing."

"In that case, let's just forget the apologies." She paused to change the subject. "How much time do I have?"

"I don't know. How much do you need?"

"Can you give me an hour?"

Eddie looked at the digital clock on the dash displaying 8:15. "I'll call you right back."

"I'll be here."

Eddie retrieved a preprogrammed number. "Curt?"

"I've been expecting to hear from you. That was a rough neighborhood."

"You knew about that?"

"Of course, we're not going to let anything happen to you."

"Had I known that; I might have been a little bolder."

"Better to be safe than sorry."

"Right. Anyway, Maggie says she can join us tonight, but needs a little time, about an hour."

"Hold on for a second." About twenty seconds of music piped through the line while he waited. "I hate to do it, Eddie, but Karrington would still like you to meet at nine. He's on a tight schedule."

"Damn it. You guys are sure making this tough. After all I've gone through to get Maggie to agree, now I'm supposed to tell her she can't go. That's going to go over great, just great."

Another voice entered the conversation on a third line. "Eddie, it's Dan."

"More good news?"

"Sorry about the schedule. I'll have just enough time to meet with you at the airport and then I've got to fly right out. Again, I find myself apologizing."

"What the hell. She might understand. Nine o'clock, then?"

"I'll see you at nine."

Eddie called Maggie back. She answered cheerfully, "Hello."

"Just me," he softly replied to begin his explanation. "You're not going to believe this, but..."

She cut him off rather quickly. "Eddie, I know that you've put forth more than your share of effort trying to organize this meeting, but I've been thinking. It's late, I am exhausted, and I wouldn't want to impose anyway. Please extend my apologies to Dr. Karrington. Tell him we'll get together after we arrive."

Eddie was dumbfounded. He held the receiver away from his face and shook his head with a sigh of relief. "You're probably right. Why rush into an evening when we could..." He suddenly realized exactly what she had said. "Wait a minute? Did you say, after WE arrive?"

"Yes, I did."

"You're goin' then."

"Of course, I'm going. You wouldn't last a minute without me."

"You've got that right and just wouldn't be the same."

"I've always trusted your instincts before, there's no reason to start doubting now. Will you be at the office in the morning?"

"I suppose."

"I'll see you there."

"You won't regret it, Mag."

"Oh, I probably will, but we're a team, right?"

"A good one too. Good night, Maggie."

He headed to the airfield with his mind at ease. Now, he could concentrate more clearly on what Karrington was sure to expound on, the secrecy surrounding the project. His imagination was soaring through a variety of intriguing possibilities, but they paled in comparison to the facts he would soon be confronted with.

* * *

When Eddie arrived, a silver Cadillac parked at the roadside pulled in behind him, then passed. Curt signaled Eddie to follow and then turned on to a gravel road that led to a large electronic gate. Curt punched in a code to gain access. Eddie could see the running lights of the private jet as it taxied to the site. There were two other vehicles positioned nearby, but they remained at a distance.

The hatchway opened and the steps were lowered. The pilot spoke with a loud voice to be heard over the engines that were still churning. "Dr. Grisham, please climb aboard." Curt offered an encouraging wink as the pilot sealed the door to provide instantaneous silence.

"Eddie," Dr. Karrington greeted him as he entered. "I'm glad you could make it." Dan had a knack for making people feel

comfortable. "How about a drink? Scotch all right?"

"On the rocks with a splash, if you wouldn't mind."

He directed the attractive female attendant with a nod, then his tone of voice changed as he began a brief apology. "Sorry about the last-minute changes. I was hoping to enjoy a nice quiet dinner to welcome you properly. It's been quite an ordeal, hasn't it?"

"You could say that, but I think everything's going to work out. Maggie's agreed to join me."

"That's wonderful," Dan exclaimed as the attendant handed Eddie his drink. "To Ms. Bennett then." He held up his glass and Eddie met his with the sound of clanging crystal. "I look forward to welcoming her aboard. Let Curt know when she's ready, he'll make all the necessary arrangements."

"We'll know tomorrow," he replied as he thumbed the condensation that had collected on his glass.

"As you know, I was also hoping to discuss some of the details regarding the project. Unfortunately, that too will have to wait." Eddie's heart sank as he realized that what he had been waiting so patiently to hear was once again placed on a back burner. "It's too crucial to rush through and rather complicated. Instead of confusing you with a brief explanation, I think it would be better if we covered those aspects after you arrive at the facility. It wouldn't be fair to dump it on you halfheartedly."

"I thought that's why we were getting together." Eddie said with earnest dismay.

"You know the story. My ass fell in a well and I've got to get it out, but after all that has transpired, I didn't want you to doubt my sincerity. Mobile wasn't that far out of the way. Once we explain the situation, I'm sure you will you'll fully understand my reluctance. Top priority upon arrival, I promise."

"Well, I'm not in much of a position to argue, am I? But the suspense is killing me."

"I understand and I'll make it up to you. As much as I truly hate to cut our visit short, I do have a grueling schedule to keep. If you need anything at all, let Curt know."

"Thanks, but I won't need anything."

The two shook hands in a fond friendly fashion. "I guess we'll see you in Syria."

"I guess. Good-bye, Dan."

Eddie stepped down the steps and the jet immediately began to taxi away in a thunderous roar. "Wow, he doesn't waste time. Does he?"

"Not if he has a good reason," Curt replied, "and if he's in that big of a hurry, you can bet it's important. Nothing's changed though. You're still our number one priority. What else can we do for you this evening?"

Eddie thought about his response. "There is one thing. I'd appreciate it if you're men would stay away from the office tomorrow morning. Maggie's going to meet me there and I don't want to add to the confusion."

"That might be a problem then. The move is almost complete. It'll be empty by morning."

"You're kidding?" Curt shrugged. "I guess you're not."

"Why don't you get there early and catch her before she goes in? Invite her to breakfast or something. At least that would prevent her from seeing the new decor."

"Maybe I'd better."

"And," Curt offered as he tossed his keys, "take the Cadillac. It's a real nice ride."

"Do you think it would be all right?"

"You just don't get it, Eddie. If you asked for a Ferrari, we would get you a Ferrari."

"No shit?"

"No shit. Oh, and by the way, your house is empty too. Just check in to a hotel, a luxury suite of course. Once you've decided where you want to stay, we'll provide you with a full wardrobe and take care of all the details."

"What about phone calls?"

"Any calls or messages will be intercepted and automatically forwarded to your cell."

"Sounds like you've got everything covered."

"We do. Have a good night, Eddie."

"You too, Curt. Thanks." Curt winked and then pushed the car door closed behind him.

Curt waited until Eddie was well out of sight and then signaled to the other two cars waiting in the darkness. A bronze Mercedes quickly pulled up and the driver got out to meet him. "Sorry, Larry. Grisham took the Cadillac." He stepped toward the driver's seat.

"What am I supposed to drive?" Curt smiled arrogantly. "You've got to be kidding?"

"Seniority, Larr. You don't think I'm going to drive that piece of shit, do ya?" Larry was now wearing a despondent frown. "It's only for one night. Find a place to store it in the morning and we'll get you another car," he added with fluttering eyes as he slipped into the leather seat and began rolling up the windows. "Have a nice night."

Larry was laughing and shaking his head, but as Curt drove away, he mouthed his farewell, 'Asshole.'

* * *

CHAPTER 4

BREAKFAST AT THE RITZ

It was raining steadily at 7:40 AM, but like clockwork, Maggie arrived minutes later. She was shaking the rain from her umbrella when Eddie pulled up and honked the horn. She squinted to see who was driving the unfamiliar car. Though it was odd that Eddie would arrive before her, particularly in such a lavish automobile, she resigned to the fact that stranger things had been happening lately.

"Get in," he invited as he reached across to open the door. She pulled the door closed and brushed her hands through her hair. "You're awful early. What's up?"

"You might say we've got the day off."

"And the new wheels?" she prodded nonchalantly.

"One of the many benefits we've acquired."

"And where are we off to?"

"I thought we'd grab some breakfast."

"Breakfast? Now I have heard everything. When did you start eating breakfast?"

"I eat breakfast...sometimes."

"In ten years, I've never known you eat breakfast."

"I brought coffee and donuts in just last week."

"Like I said, I've never known you eat BREAKFAST."

"All right then, you name it. Anything you want, anywhere you want."

"Okay, big shot," she tested. "The Ritz, Top of the Tower."

"Top of the Tower it is," Eddie replied without hesitation and then leaned toward her. "Where is the Ritz?"

"You really do need to get out more. Make a U-turn. We'll have to backtrack a few miles."

"Sounds expensive?"

"It is."

"Good," he replied with an arrogant flair.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Are you kidding? I feel GREAT." He glanced over and gave her a huge smile.

"Mm hmm," she replied, snidely pulling away. She'd never seen his spirits so high. "I was joking about the Ritz."

Eddie smiled again as he informed, "I'm not."

"Who's buying?" she chuckled. "I couldn't even get pencils on your credit-card."

"Things have changed a little."

"I hope for the better."

* * *

After being seated, Maggie asked the first of her many questions. "Where are we going to be working anyway?"

Eddie glanced around, then replied with eyebrows raised, "Syria."

"Syria?" she blurted. "Please tell me there's a city in Hawaii called Syria?" Eddie frowned. "Surely, you don't mean that austere country in the Middle East."

"Well," he hesitated with a cringe.

"Oh God," she indulged, making obvious assumptions. "We're going to be working for Syria?"

"Shhhh," he urged in a whisper. "Not FOR Syria, IN Syria. It's not what you think?"

"Of all the places on earth, why Syria?"

"I don't know why, but these guys are professionals. They don't do anything without a reason."

"What's it like?"

"Well, I've only seen a few parts of the interior and the rest from the air, but..." He searched for words to offer an adequate description. He lifted his hands in the air and frowned at his own inability. "It's UN-BELIEVABLE!" Maggie was puzzled by his reply. She simply couldn't imagine what might have mystified him so.

"Good morning," came the voice of their approaching waiter.

"Morning," Eddie politely muttered. The very tall and rather handsome young man handed them each a menu.

"Coffee, sir?" Eddie nodded without looking up and placed his cup to the side.

The waiter had just finished filling Eddie's cup when

Maggie looked up and sounded out. "Oh my God!" The unanticipated shock sent Eddie into a silent state of astonishment. "Tony Martossi."

"Maggie!" the waiter returned with overwhelming glee. Eddie's blank puzzling stare focused on the latest development. "I don't believe it." Eddie raised his eyebrows and transferred his glare to Maggie with extreme curiosity. "Well," he beckoned with open arms, "lay one on me." He squatted down to accommodate as Maggie stood to greet him. They embraced and exchanged a series of hugs.

Eddie leaned back, crossed his legs and propped his elbow on the table. His middle finger was nervously fidgeting between his lips as the private conversation began, one that seemed destined to exclude him.

"How have you been?" Tony asked with sparkling eyes. Eddie took a sip from his cup.

"Great, just wonderful, and you?"

"I'm doing good." The small talk continued. "God, I haven't seen you in... How long has it been?"

"At least eleven or twelve years." Eddie began adding, subtracting and guessing. "How's your dad, the cat's meow?"

"Cat's meow?" he laughed. "You just weren't around when the old lion roared. He's doing well though. You ought to stop by sometime. He'd be thrilled to see you."

'Not anytime soon,' she thought to herself, which prompted her mood to change drastically. "Oh no, Eddie." She shook her head in shameful disgust. "I've been so rude." Eddie stood, reveling in her daunting blunder. "Tony, I'd like you to meet my boss...and very good friend," she added for good measure, "Eddie Grisham. Eddie, this is Tony."

"An old friend, I take it?"

"Mr. Grisham," he said with tremendous respect. "I owe you an apology. I didn't mean to shun you, but she kind of caught me off guard."

"It caught me by surprise too. I'm so sorry, Eddie."

"Oh, for cryin' out loud, nobody owes me an apology. It was actually rather entertaining."

"I'll tell you what," Tony offered, "I'll fix y'all up with one of the Gino's specialties and it's on me."

"No way, Tony," Maggie defended.

"Come on, it's the least I can do."

"Thanks for the offer, but Maggie's right." Eddie's opportunity to splurge was in jeopardy. "This place is way too expensive."

"I'll let you in on a little secret. I make between six and seven hundred bucks a night at this joint. Believe me, I can afford it." He leaned forward and winked. "Besides, I get a pretty good discount too. I'll be right back."

"I didn't know waiters made that kind of money?" Eddie whispered.

"Neither did I."

"I still don't like it though."

"Why?"

"Hell," Eddie chuckled. "I finally get a chance to blow some serious cash and some kid comes along to pull the rug right out from underneath me. That isn't fair."

She laughingly consoled, "If you've got your heart set on it, we'll go shopping after breakfast. There's a great little antique shop right down the street."

"That'll work," he said, but before the subject was changed entirely, Eddie reverted. "By the way, who's the kid anyway?"

"I used to baby sit that little brat, the horniest little kid you ever saw."

"Anotnio?" Eddie laughed. "That's a sign of poor upbringing."

"You've got that right. His dad was a Pentecostal preacher."

"A preacher's kid?"

"Yeah, but one of the sweetest, meekest men I've ever known. He helped me out when my mom and dad got killed. I was about eighteen. His wife died about a year later, so we sort of adopted each other for a while. We got through it and I learned a whole lot about God. He's good people."

"Do you think he ever outgrew that horny stage?" he asked with a chuckle, but just as he completed the question, Eddie's phone rang.

Maggie was already poised to answer and did so under her breath. "I certainly hope so."

"Yeah, Curt. Okay. Okay. Yeah, that's fine. Talk to you later." He hung up and informed Maggie. "It's all set."

"What's set?" Tony asked as he set two huge plates in front of them.

"The arrangements for our trip," Eddie innocently answered.

"Oh. When are you leaving, Maggie?"

She looked to Eddie for help. "When are we leaving?"

"Our plane leaves around noon."

"Noon, when?" Maggie challenged.

"Tomorrow," he flaunted with arrogance. "And get a load of this, a private jet...first-class all the way."

"Wow!" Tony noted.

Maggie was much more pessimistically disturbed. "Tomorrow?"

she contested with apprehension. "I'm supposed to leave tomorrow?" In anticipation of her reaction, Eddie began to nod. "There is no way. That's just not possible."

Tony was even more confused, but as the tension in Maggie's voice began to increase, he quickly excused himself. "I'll be around if you need me."

"Thanks, Tony," she refrained to utter politely before continuing the debate. Eddie's flamboyant smile only seemed to intensify her frustration. "Well maybe you can pack an overnight suitcase and be on your way, but not me. I've got at least a weeks-worth of packing to do, maybe more."

"Maggie..."

"I've got items that go into storage, paperwork, accounts to close..."

"Maggie."

"I'm sorry, Eddie, but I can't leave tomorrow, no way," she finalized emphatically.

"Maggie," he said more vivaciously. "Everything will be taken care of for you."

"Not everything," she continued to argue.

"Oh yeah, everything."

"Do you really think it's that simple?"

Eddie shook his head. "You don't understand."

"I don't understand?" she aggressively apprized. "You don't understand."

"Listen," he said in a soft calming voice, "our office is empty. They moved the entire lab and everything in my house in one day." She glared at him in unequivocal silence. "This is the big league, Mag. They'll pack and transport everything."

"Eddie," she began assuming, "we're not doing anything

illegal, are we?"

Eddie laughed. "Of course not."

The Maître De approached the table. "Ms. Bennett?"

"Yes, I'm Maggie Bennett."

"This just arrived for you." He handed her an envelope.

She looked at Eddie who threw his hands up in defense, then began reading.

DEAR MS. BENNETT:

WELCOME ABOARD!

JUST WANTED TO ASSURE YOU THAT WE WILL DO EVERYTHING WE CAN TO MAKE YOUR TRANSITION AND STAY WITH US AS PLEASANT AS POSSIBLE.

ALL YOUR BELONGINGS WILL BE TRANSPORTED WITH THE UTMOST IN CARE. TO ENSURE THAT YOU HAVE EVERYTHING YOU MAY NEED, PLEASE FIND YOUR PERSONAL CREDITCARD ENCLOSED AND FEEL FREE TO USE IT AT YOUR LEISURE.

FOND REGARDS,

DANIEL KARRINGTON

Maggie skeptically peered into the envelope. The shiny gold card served to support Eddie's claim.

"What is it, Mag?"

"A telegram from Dr. Karrington. It looks like you're off the hook."

"Thank God."

"Okay," she surrendered in a reluctant tone. "We'll take it one day at a time and see what happens." She looked at the telegram again and read an additional note.

P.S.

WE HAVE ARRANGED FOR YOU AND DR. GRISHAM TO STAY AT THE RITZ TONIGHT. I TRUST THE ACCOMMODATIONS WILL MEET WITH YOUR APPROVAL.

"Well, what do you know? It looks like we'll be staying here tonight." She handed the message to Eddie.

"Nothing but the best."

Maggie looked at her watch. "Well, I guess I should go home and pack."

"Why? We have credit cards. We can get whatever we need right here in town. Let's enjoy the good life for a day. There's nothing else to do, so we'll go on that shopping spree."

"I don't know," she said with a look of reluctance.

"The telegram said at your leisure, didn't it? Besides, I've already saved the company two million dollars."

"How's that?"

"Never mind, I'll explain later."

She giggled. "It would be kind of fun."

"Finish your breakfast, then we'll hit the stores."

They did just that. Then, at 11:00 AM the following morning, they were boarding the corporate jet. Curt Crushock, three other agents and a small flight crew were on board with them. Eddie reclined with a cocktail and Maggie closed her eyes to meditate in silent prayer.

* * *

CHAPTER 5

THE PATIENT'S HISTORY

The cartel, now consisting of six scientists, had gathered in the conference room early that morning. The venerating moment had finally arrived, and it was an exhilarating time for all, but particularly for Eddie who felt a little like a restless virgin on his wedding night. He was about to become the first man to share in their life-long secret.

Dan's opening statement was very informal. "Though I had intended to have this conversation much sooner and in a slightly different atmosphere, it's only fitting to reveal the nature of our work in the presence of the entire cartel."

"We're a lot like a harem, all married to this project. One secret, above and beyond any other, bonds us together. It is imperative that you understand, and I can't possibly stress the point enough, until such time that the project has been completed or until you're laid to rest, whichever comes first, you guard this secret with the utmost confidentiality."

Eddie raised the thumbs of his folded hands and acknowledged, but the suspense was eating away at him. He softly rested the tumbler on the table with trembling hands and offered Dan his complete undivided attention.

"In January of 1966, I was contacted by a gentleman much in

the same manner as we contacted you. We met in complete secrecy. At that time, Cryonics was nothing more than wishful thinking in the minds of a few men, I just happened to be one of them. Fortunately, this individual was an incredible visionary with an uncanny ability to culminate visions into reality. He knew absolutely nothing about the science, but was unequivocally certain of one thing, his death was imminent and modern medicine couldn't provide a means to save him."

"I simply introduced him to Cryonics and informed him of the potential based on the information available at that time, but he was extremely motivated. He was on the brink of developing what he expected to be his greatest achievement and his fear was that his predecessors would manipulate that vision. Cryonics offered him an unlikely, but possible means of one day returning to repair any damage that the inevitable insubordination may cause. That's just the way he looked at it. Since there were virtually no risks involved, he had absolutely nothing to lose."

"If we are successful, we won't be reviving just any ordinary individual. Our patient is the one and only, Victor Dazzle." Eddie gasped. The men watched his reaction intently and remained silent to enable Eddie to grasp the reality.

"Oh - my - God," he blurted as he attempted to absorb the shock. "The rumors were true."

Dan continued. "You simply cannot imagine how good it feels to share this deep dark secret of ours." He took another resonant breath and added, "Perhaps now, you can understand the reasons for the extensive confidentiality."

"Of course, since there is no precedent for these rather unique and extraordinary circumstances, very careful precautions have been taken to ensure that his rights are well protected. Our legal staff is well prepared to support any claims and to defend against anyone who might contest his entitlement."

"Since so many things have changed in forty years, we're relatively certain that, based on modern criteria as it applies to the situation, he will more than likely elect to re-evaluate his initiative. But he did have one very specific concern."

"Very few people are aware of his original plans for the VEDSOL Center in San Antonio. His intent was to develop the site as a modern Utopia. He envisioned a thriving self-sustaining community, a prototype futuristic city for the world to observe, study and learn from. VEDSOL was never intended to be a capitalistic venture. Since he wouldn't be around to see it through, he kept his illness a secret in hopes of setting in motion an irreversible course that could not be deviated from."

Eddie was mesmerized. "There was so much opposition to the venture that he suspected his predecessors would defy his wishes and develop the site as another tourist attraction. As you know, that is precisely what happened. In accordance with his request, we were not permitted to intervene on his behalf. Ultimately, that was his primary objective when he agreed to the Cryonic endeavor."

"Not only did he have the clout to initiate the project in complete secrecy, he also provided a means of obtaining the necessary financial resources. At the time, we had no way of knowing how significant those resources would prove to be."

"I had about eight weeks to put the team together and make all the arrangements. Vic established the terms and was extremely animate about the confidentiality. We all agreed. His brother knew that he was ill, but only his wife was aware of just how serious his medical condition truly was. Not even his wife knew of his plans for Cryonic suspension."

"He appointed me as his primary physician, which enabled us to monitor his progress right up until the final moment. Aside from easing the pain and keeping him as comfortable as possible, we did nothing to interfere with the natural process. There were no life support systems to prolong the inevitable. That's just the way he wanted it."

"We were standing by to guarantee the most expeditious and best possible conditions for cryonic transfer. The procedure was flawless. The body was immediately placed in a portable cocoon and transported to our laboratory just outside of Dallas. It was preserved there until 1976, but due to the seismic activity in that region, we relocated to an observatory in New Mexico. Then, since the potential for governmental interference was so great, we began construction of this complex. In 1997, we transferred

here."

"Vic knew exactly what he was doing too. He had given very careful thought to every detail. We orchestrated a mock cremation and made sure a quick funeral was kept very private. Only his immediate family was present for the ceremony, which was held in a chapel at the hospital. To eliminate any possibility of discovering the truth, his supposed ashes were mingled amongst those of other family members in the family tomb at Texas Memorial Estates. The entire service had been conducted prior to any announcement of his death. Desecration of the site is prohibited, but even if it was breeched, his remains would be virtually impossible to identify."

"Several close friends knew that he was exploring cryonics and some unsubstantiated rumors did surface, but absolutely no one was actually aware of his preservation. The public had accepted the fact that Victor Dazzle was dead and buried. If we are unable to rejuvenate him, that's the way he wants to be remembered."

"Our dilemma is this." Dan's face seemed to take on a look of concern as he continued. "We either bring him back or go to our graves with that secret. Of course, if we were to succeed," he added with an enthusiastic chuckle, "well, we can only imagine what it would be like to let that cat out of the bag."

"Now then, the funding. To ensure that we had every possible chance of success, Vic set up a foundation and arranged to have a subtle percentage of profits from each of the existing companies funneled through a series of corporate entities. The combined total proved to be substantial, but in order to maintain complete isolation and generate additional income, we eventually expanded to set up an intricate network of companies, thus creating a source of essentially limitless funds."

"Even in the unlikely event he was to lose a court battle to regain control of the Dazzle Empire, the private financial resources we have accumulated will more than adequately finance any venture he chooses to pursue."

"Of course, we can only imagine the impact that a man of Vic Dazzle's stature might have on the world today. The rejuvenation of any man would be considered an astounding feat,

but Vic Dazzle's credibility remains unchallenged and his legacy has developed into one of the most illustrious empires in the world. He will be a very powerful influence."

"Not even Vic could have envisioned the tremendous growth of Dazzle, as it exists today. Dazzle's spirit is still very much alive in the minds and hearts of people all over the world. Dazzle products, television, films, books, telecommunications, satellite network and theme parks are world leaders in their respective industries. The fact of the matter is; people all over the world are living out his dreams and visions in nearly every aspect of their lives."

The room was silent, the attention focused on Eddie who was still clearly dumbfounded. They were anxious to hear his response, but it took a few minutes for him to collect his thoughts and generate one. He ran his fingers through his hair and rubbed his eyes, then cleared his throat and responded in a staggering stutter. "Holy shit."

Dan was eager to continue. "Most technological advancements in nearly every field of science are byproducts of our research, an indirect result of his insight. Since we don't solicit or receive credit for our discoveries, most have been credited to a variety of other organizations in lower levels of our network, but critical technology developed through our efforts has virtually changed the face of modern science. Though it certainly wasn't his intent, Vic Dazzle is indirectly responsible for most of it. Unfortunately, the world is completely unaware of his indirect contributions and that fact alone places us in a very precarious position."

"We're a lot like the disciples of Christ. If we raise him from the dead, we have an incredible revelation and all the astonishing facts can be presented to the world. If we don't, Vic Dazzle remains dead and buried along with the credit he deserves for everything we've accomplished on his behalf."

"Of course, we've taken measures to ensure that the rest of us will be well taken care of too. If we were to walk away today, we'd all be very wealthy men, but that simply isn't our objective and there's much more at stake than monetary acclaim."

Dan had expressed the heartfelt emotions of his colleagues

and there was nothing else for anyone to add. An electronic wind seemed to sweep through Eddie's body as he floated on a sea of enlightened understanding. His work suddenly took on new meaning.

Wally's familiar voice barked out a witty proclamation to break through the wall of frigid ice that had just begun to melt. "Pretty fuckin' wild, huh?" Eddie lifted his head and flaunted his amazement at the inquisitive Dr. McCarty. "Now you know. So, are ya ready to go to work or what?"

Eddie couldn't seem to shake the chill or shell-shocked appearance but did manage to muster a chastened reply. "Yeah, I guess, I mean...I think so. Wow."

"Well then, hotshot," Wally prompted. "Why don't we go to school? You have got some classes to teach." He was first to stand, hoping to inspire the others, but paused at Eddie's chair and leaned over to whisper. "I hope you've got a good sense of humor, kid. Your gonna need it, 'cause most of the time, I'm an asshole."

"Well," Eddie admonished determined as he began to regain his composure, "it's nice to know that we'll at least start out in complete agreement." Wally patted him lightly and began to walk away. "And just so you know, I can be a bit of a prick myself."

"Well, then," his voice echoed from the hall, "we ought to get along just fine."

The rest of the men laughed among themselves at Eddie's amusing acceptance. "I suppose it's time for you guys to meet Billy," Eddie invited. He was anxious to get started but was still having difficulty trying to fathom all the incredible details.

"Billy?" Dr. Archer asked, "Who the hell is Billy?"

"I think that's the chimp," Charlie informed. "They call him Billy."

"Well, isn't that special?" Wally responded. "A monkey named Billy. Jeez Louise."

Dan remained seated. "I'll be down shortly," he offered as the muffled voices faded down the hall. He leaned back in his chair, twirling an ink pen on the conference table. "Jesus Christ," he said aloud. It seemed ironic that he would call out the name of the only man who could possibly help them.

* * *

BILLY

The group quickly assembled at Eddie's laboratory, three levels above the basement. Maggie stood in front of her console ready to greet them.

"First, I'd like you all to meet Maggie. You couldn't ask for a better partner, a real wizard when it comes to computers." He winked at his nervous friend. "Maggie, you remember Dan." She acknowledged with a nod of the head. He continued with a pointing finger. "This is Dr. Brome, Dr. Winters, Dr. Archer and my personal favorite, Dr. McCarty."

"Just call me Wally, babe," he humorously bounced off Eddie's introduction. "And don't you be giving me that 'I want you look' either."

Wally's unexpected teasing caught her by surprise, but she was quick to recover. "Dr. McCarty, I thought you were married."

"Nah, that's just a nasty rumor my wife started." Maggie responded with an unsettled grin. The others were shaking their heads in disgust. "You'll just have to get used to the fact, these guys are insanely jealous of me."

"I can see that," she replied to appease, then seized her opportunity escape. "If you'll excuse me, I'm still getting organized." As she walked away, Wally dipped his head and peeked out over the top of his bifocals to boldly observe her voluptuous feminine features.

"Not bad."

"A-n-d," Eddie sharply interrupted to regain his attention, "if you'll kindly step over here." He reached down and opened

the door to an elaborate glass cage. Out shuffled a small three-year old chimp that affectionately approached Eddie and embraced his leg. "This little guy," Eddie grunted as he picked him up, "is Billy."

"As you apparently know, he had a serious heart condition which proved to be fatal. About eleven months ago, we introduced him to Cryonic preservation. Two months ago, I removed the faulty heart and replaced it with a healthy one." Eddie looked at Wally and boasted with a smirk, "Even I can perform heart surgery on a dead monkey. Two weeks later, we successfully rejuvenated him. Aside from some minor complications, he's doing quite well."

"What kind of complications?" Dr. Brome asked.

"Temporary intermittent periods of confusion, as if slipping into some form of momentary trance. We haven't determined the exact cause yet."

"What else?" Dan indulged.

"Apparently, the immune system has been affected. The symptoms are much like those of a patient with AIDS. It's as if he had developed a rare strain of the virus. We can treat the symptoms, but the cause is still a mystery."

Dr. Winters, the DNA specialist, responded favorably. "The side effects should be relatively easy to isolate. When we understand more about your process, we can analyze and possibly eliminate the source of the complications. As you know, we never experienced success with SDI. I'm more than a little curious."

"Dr. Winters," Eddie respectfully replied. "I know that you originally developed the concept, but since your published research was so limited, I was forced to develop my own unorthodox version. It wasn't until I initiated the process from the inside out, so to speak, that I experienced any success. I utilize the natural energy of solar particles to develop a minute electronic pulse, which initiates a controlled metabolic reaction within the body. You might call it a solar microwave."

"I'll be damned," Wally barked with a hand slap on the wall. "We were usin' a conventional oven. He was nuc'in' the son

of a bitch."

Dan was quick to intervene. "That explains the satellite feed, but why the voltage regulator?"

"Wow, you guys don't miss a trick. Well, the satellite link provides access to the ideal level of energy, but the system has some drawbacks. For one thing, it's very slow. In order to complete an entire cycle, you'd have to maintain a constant solar signal for an entire twelve-hour cycle. An uninterrupted solar source for such a lengthy period is an extremely rare occurrence and impossible to predict. One minor flare up and you're screwed. The micro-voltage regulator provides a backup signal."

"It was designed to provide an equal flow of electromagnetic energy. The level of intensity is identical, but solar particles are impossible to duplicate. The greater the demand for an artificial signal, the more extensive the side effects."

"Even under the best of conditions, I've only been able to maintain a consecutive signal for about four hours. The ideal atmospheric conditions might very well exist, but it's almost impossible to forecast."

"How long would it take to establish the satellite link?" Dan asked.

"The program has already been developed, so it's really only a matter of transferring data and adjusting the coordinates. A day, maybe two."

Dan took charge to give Eddie his first indication of just how efficient this team was. "Charlie, get Peter Avery down here. Pete's a top-notch programmer," he informed. "Wally, you contact meteorology and astrophysics, see if they can't establish some projections for possible windows. Stan, you and Bernie get started on these side effects, and let's kick around some ideas to reduce that rejuvenation cycle. Eddie," he redirected. "What are you going to need?"

"Well..." he hesitated. "...Maggie designed the program."

"You've got it. Access to level six won't be a problem and that's where you'll be working." Everyone made a hasty exit to begin work. "By the way, Eddie, you might want to start planning your next experiment according to specific classifications and in well-defined phases. We delegate assignments based on fields of expertise. Remember, you've got an entire research staff at your disposal, utilize it." He gave a cordial thumbs up and offered a huge enthusiastic smile.

After Eddie was alone with Billy, he spoke with enthusiasm, but in a soft, exaggerated British dialect, "Billy, me boy. I do believe we are fixin' to kick some major ass here." He kicked his knee out, pulled his arm in with a clinched fist. "Yeah!"

* * *

CHAPTER 6

A BANANA FOR BILLY

Peter Avery arrived at Eddie's lab shortly after 1:00 PM and began interfacing with the corporate computer network. Maggie entered the room with a case full of compact disks and sat down next to him at the console. "Hi. I'm Maggie."

"I'm Pete," he replied in a squeaky voice and without as much as a glance.

"We're establishing a new satellite link, right?"

"Uh huh. I'll have a path set up in about five minutes. Have you ever worked with the NASA network?"

"NASA?"

Peter replied with arrogance, "Uh huh. Almost all satellite technology eventually filters through NASA and their system is easy for me to hack into. They could never trace me down." He still hadn't looked up. He just kept pounding away rapidly on the keyboard.

Maggie observed and took mental notes but didn't interrupt. Peter was the type of person most would perceive as the

stereotype computer nerd. His long dark, un-groomed hair was very straight and hung down over his thick rimmed glasses. Frequent brisk shakes of the head served as a rather obnoxious method of keeping it out of his eyes. Thick wiry eyebrows moved up and down in sync with his abstinent actions. What he lacked in personality, he made up for with proficiency.

A silver headband with a miniature computer screen protruding to the side and just above eye level provided constant reference to the mainframe. "Feed me your CD's. I'll get you out on the dance floor. Do you like to dance?" He laughed at his own dry sense of humor. He stuck his hand out to receive the first disk.

Maggie didn't care much for his pompous attitude but wasn't about to ruffle any feathers. She began handing him the disks in proper sequence, one by one. She was impressed with his speed and continued to note his procedures. Computer programming was her specialty and she was determined to be equally proficient. To relieve the mild tension, she attempted to spark a casual conversation. "So, Peter, how long have you been with the project?"

"Seven or eight years." He then stopped and to stress the imposition, added, "I could pull it up if you need it?"

"No, that's okay. I was just curious."

Peter retrieved a piece of bubble gum and started chomping. "Want some? Sugar free."

"No thanks, trying to quit."

It took a moment for her reply to register. "Oh, I get it. That's funny. Next disk."

She let out a grunting sigh at his lack of humor and handed him another circular disk. "Coffee?"

"Huh uh," he murmured while blowing a small bubble that quickly popped. "I'm trying to quit." He extended his hand for another disk, but this time snapped his fingers for service and that insolent little gesture sealed the envelope as far as she was concerned.

With a disconcerting eye focused in his direction, she stacked the remaining diskettes in order and slightly out of reach. She resisted the overwhelming urge to throw them and dismissed herself with a sarcastic comment. "This is way over my head. I'll see if I can't find a report to type up or something." Maggie retreated to the opposite end of the laboratory and clicked on another computer to monitor his procedure.

After a few minutes of observing, she propelled the rolling chair backwards toward a condiment counter and began replenishing an empty cup of coffee. That's when her peripheral vision caught site of a motionless chimp. She froze in place to study him very closely. Billy was seated on the floor of his cage with his head leaning back and awkwardly to the side. His eyes were locked in an empty gaze.

"Billy?" She set her cup down, got up and moved toward the cage. "Billy," she hollered. She entered the cage, waved a hand in front of his face and then carefully reached to check for a pulse. A mild shake did nothing to stimulate a reaction and the penlight was soon shining in his eyes generated no response. She followed up with a more vocalized shriek, "Billy!"

She rushed to a nearby phone but was unfamiliar with the procedures and channels of communication. In frustration, she began dialing a series of random combinations until finally, she made a connection.

"This is Maggie Bennett. Maggie...Bennett." By now, Peter was making his way back to determine the reason for all the commotion. "I work with Dr. Grisham, Edward Grisham. My God," she exclaimed as she slammed the receiver down. "Doesn't anyone know what's going on around here?"

"Problem?"

"It's Billy," she apprized in obvious panic.

Peter glanced around the room, knowing full well that they were alone. "Who=s Billy?"

"Well, that answers my question."

Peter then noticed the open cage and the dormant chimp and pointed as he made the connection. "Billy?"

"Listen! This is an emergency. I need to get a hold of Dr. Grisham and I need to get a hold of him NOW. You got that?" Peter was at least clever enough to recognize the sense of urgency. He seated himself at her computer terminal and began typing. "What are you doing?" The screen turned bright red and series of numbers began flashing.

"Calm down, lady. This is an emergency code. It sends an alert to all priority personnel." Within seconds, Wally was rushing through the door.

"What the hell is goin' on, Pete?" With a nod of the head and puzzled look, he pointed with an open hand.

Maggie was relieved to at least see someone she recognized. She grabbed Wally's arm and pulled him toward the cage. "It's Billy. I just found him. His vital signs are all good, but no reactions or response at all."

"This has happened before?"

"Periods of disorientation, but never anything quite this severe and he usually snaps right out of it." By now, Stan and Charlie were arriving. After another thirty seconds, Eddie entered the room with Dr. Karrington.

"What is it, Mag?" he asked calmly, but with obvious concern.

"I don't know, Eddie, another one of those spells, but this time it's bad."

"Charlie, grab a stretcher and let's get him downstairs," Dan instructed.

Eddie was now examining the chimp. "Can you arrange for an MRI?"

"Stan?"

"I'm on it and I'll have O-R-1 standing by, just in case."

They laid Billy on the stretcher and rushed him down the hall. Half of the group entered one elevator, while Dan, Wally, Eddie and Maggie entered another with Billy. In the rapid confusion, Maggie was on the verge of entering the restricted area, but with all attention intently focused on Billy, no one seemed to notice. The rest of the team met them at level zero and immediately began rushing the chimp down the futuristic corridor.

Wally was the first to realize that Maggie had inadvertently gained access. Since her focus was on Billy, she hadn't yet noticed the strange surroundings. Wally displayed genuine concern as he handled the situation with honorable regard for her emotions. Eddie noted Wally's compassion as he softly began coaxing Maggie back to the elevator.

"Maggie, I know that you and Eddie are accustomed to handling Billy, but you're gonna have to let us take care of him right now. We'll give that little fella the best care in the world. I promise." She resisted. "C'mon, Maggie."

"No," she insisted indignantly. "Let me go. Eddie," she cried out as she tried to shake loose. "Eddie."

"It'll be all right," Wally tried to reassure. "You're just going to have to trust us."

She continued to struggle. "Eddie," she called out one last time to her only confidant. Eddie wasn't quite sure what to do or say, so he said nothing and could only hope that Maggie was able to read the understanding in his eyes. She slowly began a reluctant surrender.

Firmly, but with the gentle sensitivity of a loving father, Wally held her and spoke softly, "Listen to me, Maggie. Billy's in the best of hands." He winked and smiled at Eddie. "I'll keep you informed, but right now, we need to get you back upstairs. Try to relax."

As she began to concede, she was noticing the unusual décor, which only compounded her confusion. Wally attempted to expedite her removal and corral her into the elevator, but she

couldn't resist looking over his shoulder. The closing door finally sealed off her view. Maggie backed against the wall. "What kind of place is that?"

He avoided the question. As soon as the elevator door closed, it seemed to reopen at yet another unfamiliar level. "Listen, sweetheart. I know this whole experience has been strange enough without this little escapade adding to it. Go to the meditation room, down the hall and on the right. Wait for me there. As soon as we know something, I'll come up and fill you in. Right now, we have to concentrate on Billy."

He prompted her exit with a light pat on the back as she sluggishly shuffled out of the elevator. Wally took a deep breath and said to himself, "I knew this was a bad idea."

When he stepped from the elevator in the basement, he went directly to a phone and dialed an extension. "Listen, babe. You remember that new girl I told you about, Grisham's assistant, she's on her way to the meditation room. Do me a big favor and drop in on her, will ya? She could use a friend right now, kind of a bad hair day. Yeah, the poor kid. Thanks, babe. I'll be up a little later."

Wally rushed to CCU and opened the door only to be met by a flying bottle that smashed against the wall above him. He ducked, shielding his head with his arms as broken glass sprayed over him. "What the fuck?" he shouted, then slowly lifted his head and peeked out under his arms to find his colleagues scattered around the room hiding under tables and behind chairs. He finally traced the chimps screeching voice to the top of a cabinet where Billy had perched himself.

"Careful, Wally," Dan yelled, as a glass container broke on the chair he was hiding behind. "The monkey woke up and went on a rampage."

"Hey, you little shit," Wally scolded sternly. The startled chimp froze in place and looked at him with sad curious eyes. Wally approached the cabinet very slowly. "Okay now, that's just about enough of that crap. It's time to settle down," he said in a soft voice. He turned his head slightly and asked under his breath, "Where's the kid?"

"I think he's in the bathroom," Charlie announced.

"You're shittin' me?"

"When ya gotta go...ya gotta go...I guess."

"Okay, Ponchovia, play time's over. Get that nappy little ass of yours down off of my cabinet. I mean it, now," he timidly reprimanded with his arms gently stretching toward him. "And if you're a good little buddy, Uncle Wally's gonna give you a great big beautiful banana." Billy leaned forward to investigate Wally and began nervously fingering his glasses.

"Wally, I wouldn't do that if I were you," Dan warned. "And you damn well better have a banana."

"Oh, for cryin' out loud, the poor thing's just scared. You've just gotta know how to handle 'em, that's all. C'mon, Billy boy, come to Uncle Wally." All at once, Billy leaped with a loud screech onto Wally's chest. The unsuspecting doctor yelped in a gasp as he was sent sprawling backward onto the floor providing a soft cushion for the pouncing chimp. Wally grunted as the frightened chimp took another bold leap from his belly to retreat into the arms of Eddie, who had just entered the room.

"Billy, you're all right," Eddie said gleefully. As he lifted the quivering chimp, he began a quick survey of the extensive disarray and bit at his lower lip. The relieved men began to emerge from various hiding places around the room. "What happened here?"

Eddie was a welcome sight for everyone, except Wally who sat up with a twisted pair of glasses dangling from one ear. With his best effort to retain his obnoxious composure, he sarcastically questioned. "You couldn't wait to take to piss?" Wally continued his valiant attempt to ridicule. "An emergency, for God's sake, and you've gotta go wee-wee." His face seemed to transform into a sad blank look of surprise as he became aware of an even more embarrassing bit of information. "Oh my God," he added with a humiliating disposition. "I think I shit my pants."

Dan was the first to release a faint chuckle. Charlie followed suit, which started a chain reaction that rapidly

developed into a roar of laughter. Even Eddie was caught up in it. Soon, tears of laughter were even rolling down Wally's cheeks. He tried desperately to lift himself from the floor, but the harder he tried, the more they laughed.

The men were drying their tear-filled eyes as the frivolity began to fizzle. Eddie reached out to offer a helping hand, but Wally flashed him an upside-down middle finger and asked, "Can you hear that, kid?" Eddie shook his head to reply. "Well then, let me turn it up for ya," he said as he rotated his wrist. The group broke out in secondary laughter. "All this m el e for a fuckin' monkey," he exclaimed. Then, Wally appended the comment with profound dignity as he shuffled toward the door, "I'll be in my office."

"I've got to hand it to you, Eddie," Dan proclaimed. "You've only been here one day and already we've had more excitement than we've had in ten years. Welcome to the Delightful World of Dazzle."

Wally extended his hand as if to shake. Eddie reached for it, but Wally snapped it away with a huge smile and comically gestured with a pointing finger. "Don't hand me that shit."

Eddie politely waited until Wally left the room then completed his sentence under his breath, "You old fart."

"I heard that," Wally's muffled voice again rang out from the hallway.

"I'll bet he did too." Dan placed his arm on Eddie's shoulder, and they started following down the hall. "He's quite a character."

"He sure is, but I don't know what we'd do without him." He quickly changed the subject. "I'll have Bernie meet you at your lab. He'll help you set up some tests. I want to put an end to these side effects as soon as possible."

"Me too. Sorry about the mess."

He placed his hand on Eddie's shoulder as he added, "The bad news is, no janitor down here. That's your mess to clean up."

"Great."

* * *

INTRO - KATE McCARTY

Maggie had located the exclusive meditation lounge. Though she knew Billy was in good hands, she couldn't help but feel disheartened. She was accustomed to being responsible for him and was suddenly being shunned. It seemed that in Eddie's new world, her involvement would be extremely limited. Their former relationship was in jeopardy.

To occupy her time, she began familiarizing herself with the very large octagon shaped meditation room. It was well designed to serve its purpose, to create a relaxing atmosphere. Much like an elaborate recording studio, the walls were covered with quilted carpet woven with a variety of soft colors to provide an attractive and acoustically perfect setting. Columns of recessed speakers were mounted from floor to ceiling at each angle of the eight walls. A huge open-hearth fireplace was centered in the room and one lone corridor led to five private audio/visual rooms.

Pleasant symphonic music was playing as she began exploring the seemingly limitless Mini CD collection and nervously tampered with the state-of-the-art control board. She programmed several selections and increased the volume. The mellow sounds of 'Bread' began playing. *'I found her diary underneath a tree and started reading about me...'*

Eight electronic recliners were literally scattered around the room. Each had its own corresponding sound system with an individual control panel. An array of fabrics covered each to accommodate almost any preference. Maggie selected the one with a leather finish, which offered a sense of rugged comfort. She lowered herself into the cushioned saddle and then opened a panel containing a row of tiny joysticks.

While customizing the contour, she accidentally discovered a switch that enabled her to reposition the entire chair, which was mounted on a motorized chassis. She giggled as she began 'driving' the chair randomly around the immediate area. She

reclined into a horizontal position and gazed at the soft white lights glistening in the cathedral ceiling. With the flip of another switch, she began customizing the overhead lighting scheme to create the illusion of a soft summer evening. She closed her eyes, locked the chair's movement into a slow swirling motion.

Wally's wife poked her head in and then quietly entered the room. Kate was the cheerful happy go lucky type, a proud spouse content with life. She was a young sixty-seven years of age and slightly overweight. She wore stylish free form bifocals and her pale red hair was pinned into a bun with a wide streak of gray on the upper left-hand side.

Kate studied Maggie's unique approach to meditation and thought about how she would make her introduction, then elected to mimic the spiraling technique in another chair. As the music faded to begin another selection, Kate spoke. "God, this is great isn't it?"

Maggie's startled eyes popped open. Though embarrassed to discover that she wasn't alone, she was relieved to discover that it was at least the voice of another female. She parked the chair and sat up to find Kate whirling around just a few feet away. Kate let her chair continue to revolve while Maggie spoke with humble apprehension. "Pardon me, I didn't know anyone else was here."

"Don't mind me, honey. I'm just taking a breather, but if you'd rather be alone, I could..."

"No, that's quite all right. I could use the company. I'm kind of new here."

"This spin cycle of yours ain't bad, but whew, I'm starting to get dizzy." Kate stopped her chair and adjusted it to begin a conversation. "You must be the young lady working with Dr. Grisham?"

"That's refreshing. You're the first person I've met that's even heard of us. I was beginning to think that everything moves fast around here, except communication."

"It just takes a little time to adjust. It's like going to

live on a space station, kind of exciting and sort of strange. It's really quite nice here, once you get used to it."

"I don't know if I will ever get used to this place. What do you do?"

Kate leaned over and boastfully whispered, "I sleep with one the scientists."

"Oh, you're married?"

"Nah, that's just a nasty rumor my husband's been spreading." Maggie chuckled, at the familiar phrase. "I'm Kate McCarty."

"You're Wally's wife. Hi, I'm Maggie."

"I take it you've met my Wally?"

"Um hmm."

"Well, the grumpy old coot's all mine."

"Admittedly, I don't know him very well, but he's been very kind to me. I like him."

"You must have him confused with someone else, dear," she defended. "I'm referring to Dr. Wallace McCarty, an old fat man with a bushy mustache, thick glasses and a bad attitude."

"He jokes around a lot, but you can just tell he's got a good heart."

"Well, well, well...You must rank pretty high, young lady. Wally doesn't take to most people too easy. You're a pretty girl, though. He might have made an exception in your case. Are you single?"

"Very," she declared with a heavy sigh.

"Aw-oh. I hate to break it to ya, honey, but I've got more bad news. This is no place to meet a man. It's pretty slim-pickins around here."

"Actually, I don't have much time to date anyway. Besides, I have a rather special working relationship with Dr. Grisham." Kate looked at her as if she had just announced their marriage plans. "Oh, don't get me wrong. It's nothing romantic or anything like that, just kind of special."

"Mm hmm."

"What?" Maggie prodded at her insightful gesture.

"First it bites ya like a nagging mosquito, then it swallows ya up like a gray whale. If I was a betting woman, I'd wager that you're about half ate up already."

Maggie was astounded by this little old lady's astute insight and surprised by her willingness to be so forward with a stranger. "How could you possibly reach such a conclusion? You don't even know me."

"Honey...I am you. Been there, done that, bought that farm and sold it," she stated with absolute assurance. "You're lookin' at the Queen of Quaint Tenacity, girl, a bona-fide expert in the field. I worked with my Wally for five VERY long years before I finally got him to even look in my direction. It took even longer for him to admit it."

Maggie was amazed at her presumptuous candor. "And you're saying that I have some sort of hidden desire locked away in my subconscious mind."

"Honey, if it was so well hidden, it wouldn't be so obvious, would it?"

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it?" Kate questioned impudently with the finesse of a snake charmer. "Facts are facts, sweetie. You're a lovely vivacious young lady in the prime of your life, yet with all the options available, you have chosen to live in the middle of a Syrian desert, thousands of miles from friends and family. Sorry, but you're not going to convince the queen that it's just because you love your work?"

Maggie was speechless. Kate was right on the money. She

could still deny it to anyone else, but no longer to herself and certainly not Kate McCarty. There was an overwhelming sense of relief as the inalienable secret began to surface. It seemed that Maggie had unearthed a new friend.

"Let's suppose, just suppose mind you and for the sake of argument, that what you're saying is true. Don't you think Eddie...I mean Dr. Grisham...would have picked up on such vibrations by now?"

"Let me tell you something about men, sweetie. There is one thing that has never ceased to amaze me and that's how a man can be so incredibly intelligent when it comes to his work, but so blind when it comes to everything else in life, women in particular."

Kate started laughing as she proceeded to tell her own tale. Unbeknownst to them, Wally had entered the room just in time to eavesdrop. "One day back in '68, when I finally decided to get Wally's attention, I left my purse at work, so I'd have a reason to come back later that night. I knew he was working late, so I got all dressed up in one of my sexiest outfits, put on my best jewelry, perfume, had my hair done, the whole bit. I was lookin' good too," she emphasized with a clarifying motion of her hand.

"Anyway, I showed up and pranced around the lab to make sure he got a good eyeful, even mentioned that I had a date to make him jealous. Let me tell you, honey, I could have been the mailman as far as he was concerned. There was just no getting through to the guy." She paused and shook her head as she reflected. "He never even noticed me."

"Did so," Wally abruptly intruded. Maggie peeked around Kate's chair. Kate just frowned. "I wasn't about to let you know it though, I had a reputation to consider. She looked damn good too."

"Wally McArty, you deceitful old...You never told me that."

"You never asked," he apprized with unruly eyes. "Hells bells, wife, you were goin' out on a date. It pissed me off, but I couldn't let on. That, she'd of used that one against me for sure." He bent down and kissed Kate on the top of her head.

"Yep, I was checkin' her out all right, turned me on too."

"Then how come it took you so long to ask me out?"

"I wasn't good enough for ya and knew it. Still ain't," he humbly proclaimed. Maggie sat back to absorb the conversation and admire their candor.

"Anyway, I gave up on him for a while. It took another two years before we went out on a real date and that was a complete disaster."

"Sure was," Wally reiterated with a husky chortle. "I was really going to impress her, took her sailin'."

"Oh, he impressed me all right. The boy had never been sailing in his life, didn't know the first thing about it, almost got us both killed."

Wally cringed behind Kate's chair and then spoke with great confidence. "I was doin' just fine until I put that damn sail up."

Maggie laughed. "But you kept dating?"

"Hell no! It took another six months to muster enough courage to ask her out again, but that's when I knew she was mine. I figured, any woman who would go out with me again after everything we had been through, might just be foolish enough to marry me."

"We got hitched about five months later," Kate bragged with a wink. "It took a little longer than I planned, but it was worth it."

"That's quite a story."

"Aint it though? Married the second-best woman I ever knew."

"The second best?"

"Honey," Kate surrendered. "I never could compete with his mama."

"She came damn close once."

"So..." Maggie leaned forward and asked nervously, "How's Billy?"

"Oh yeah, that's what I came up here to tell ya. The little fucker woke up and went berserk on us, tried to kill me."

"Wally," Kate scolded. "Watch your language."

"Par-don-wa, my vehement love. The monkey made a remarkable recovery."

"He's okay, then?"

"Thanks for the concern," he interjected. "Yeah, Maggie, he's fine. Eddie already took him back to your lab. Why don't you head on down and check up on him."

She jumped up to make a hasty exit but paused to express her appreciation. "Thanks a lot, Wally."

"No problem, kid."

"And it was very nice meeting you, Kate. I hope we can get together again sometime."

"Let's do that," Kate offered. Then, just as Maggie was stepping through the door, she added, "Wait a minute." Maggie stopped. "Where are my manners? How about dinner, dear? Tonight, at our place."

"Tonight?"

"If that's all right with you, Wally?"

"Sure, why not? Kate's one hell of a cook."

"Perhaps your associate would like to come along. What's his name again?" she urged with a devious smile.

"Dr. Grisham."

"Yes, Dr. Grisham." She looked up at Wally, who had been wittingly placed on the spot. "Any problem with that?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Nah, I guess that'd be all right, but the damn monkey stays home."

Kate winked at Maggie who responded casually, "I'd love to, but I'll have to check with Eddie. How do I reach you?"

"Wally will give you directions. We'll expect you around seven."

"I'll be there. Thanks, again."

"You're more than welcome." She waited for Maggie to leave. "She's a lovely girl, don't ya think, Wall." Kate reached up and grasped his hand.

"Yeah, I kind of like her."

"She likes you too. I hope you don't mind me inviting her friend along."

"Nah, he's a good kid. Besides, it'll give me a chance to pick his brain a little."

"Oh, Wally. Can't you just enjoy an evening without discussing that silly project of yours?"

"I Gotta take care of business, babe."

"Well, maybe Maggie and I can take care of a little business of our own."

To him, the reference was meaningless. "I'd better get back." He pulled her hand up and sloppily kissed it.

She pulled it away and gestured. "I hate it when you do that. Now, go on. Get out of here."

"All right, already. See ya at the house." He lipped a series of kisses at her.

"Later," she moaned with a wave of her hand as if to 'shoo'

him like a disturbing nuisance.

* * *

BACK TO THE LAB

Eddie and Dr. Winters were each focused in on a multi-view microscope as Maggie passed quietly through the laboratory, careful to avoid interrupting.

"There's an obvious break down in the white cell structure." Bernie stated. "I've never seen anything quite like it. It's almost as though they have been granulated."

"Precisely, but the breakdown isn't present in tissue subjected to pure SDI. We only see the effects after converting to the backup system." Eddie pulled away from the microscope and leaned forward on the counter. "Unfortunately, it's unavoidable. Once you initiate the incubation, you can't just shut it down and wait until you get the solar signal back." At that moment, he noticed that Maggie and smiled.

"How ya doin', kiddo?" he asked benevolently. A halfhearted nod provided some indication. "Billy's fine. We're running some tests now. Go on in, I'll be there in a minute."

Maggie paused to observe the man and consider the wisdom of Kate McCarty. Bernie quickly continued their discussion. "We'll start a series of experiments in the morning to see if we can't find another means of replicating the secondary source or some other way of diverting the signal."

"What about radiation?" Eddie asked inquisitively.

"We've done some testing in that area, but nothing in conjunction with SDI."

"Do we even have access to plutonium?"

Bernie responded without hesitation, "We can get nuclear missiles if we need 'em. We'll kick it around in the morning."

"Good enough."

"It's almost five, no point in starting tonight. We'll set up some tests in the morning."

"Thanks for the help." As Bernie made his exit, Eddie proceeded to join Maggie at the rear of the lab.

Maggie and Billy were involved in a playful game of hide and seek. He leaned against the wall and watched them for few minutes. When Maggie finally noticed him, she asked casually, "What's the word on our little buddy here?"

"It's still a mystery. How's he doing?"

"I think he's wore out, but other than that, he seems fine."

He walked up, knelt next to her, but focused on the chimp. "And how about you? How are you doin'?"

"Oh, I'm fine, I guess. Different place and different procedures, it's just going to take some getting used."

"I know what you mean."

"Are you up for a home cooked meal?"

"That's a new one. I didn't even know you cooked."

"Well, it just so happens that I'm a very good cook, but I met Wally's wife today. She invited us over for dinner."

"Oh, God. An evening with an asshole doesn't sound all that inviting. What's she like?"

"She's great, Eddie, I like her. I think you will too." Eddie groaned. "Oh c'mon, Wally's not so bad and you know he likes you."

"That's not a very comforting thought, but," he paused to reconsider. "I am kind of curious about the old guy and it has been a long time since I've had a home cooked meal. Hell, there's nothing else to do around here."

"That's what you think. Wait until you see the Meditation

Room. I took a little ride there today."

"A ride?"

"Never mind. You'll see what I mean one of these days."

"Nothing surprises me anymore. Did you get all settled in?"

"What's to settle? Do you know they took everything from my house and put it all back in place, exactly like they found it? It even has the same layout."

"Yeah, mine too. This really is a phenomenal place."

"Speaking of phenomenal places, what was that place where they took Billy? I've never seen anything like that before."

"All I can tell you is, it's just another fascinating part of the project. I'm not supposed to discuss it, of course, but I don't understand most of it anyway."

That fact that she couldn't be directly involved was obviously troubling her. Eddie placed a hand delicately upon her shoulder and spoke with a great deal of uncharacteristic compassion, "There's nothing I'd like more than to share all the details, but for the time being, I just can't."

She cleared her throat and swallowed the temptation to shed tears. "Thanks, Eddie, that helps a little." She turned away to prevent him from seeing through and began removing the long white coat. "Dinner's at seven."

"Seven's good. I guess I'll meet you at Wally's, huh?"

She was clearly disappointed by his unwillingness to offer an escort. She turned to the cage and scratched her hand against Billy's through the glass. "See ya later, Mr. Miracle."

"Ah, you can call me Eddie," he jokingly replied in a desperate attempt to recover from his awkward blundering.

"I was talking to Billy."

"Oh," he acknowledged with an abashing grin. She rolled her

eyes in humorous disgust and walked away.

* * *

CHAPTER 7

A CASHLESS SYSTEM COMES TO LIGHT

Eddie arrived at the McCarty's apartment promptly at seven and rang the bell. Kate answered. "Dr. Grisham, I presume?" she said as if quoting from the famous novel. "Please, come in."

"Thank you, Mrs. McCarty."

"This is a pretty small town, doctor, call me Kate."

"I like that, please call me Eddie. I should have brought some wine or something..."

"Nonsense, the company makes sure you've got everything you need. Make yourself at home. The Wall will be out in a minute. Cocktail?"

"Just a glass of tea or something would be great." As she retreated to the kitchen he asked, "I gather you met my associate."

"Yes, I did. A wonderful girl," Kate wasted no time initiating her dexterous scheme to entice a burgeoning romance,

"don't you think?"

"Oh yeah, Maggie's great. She's been with me for a long time."

"Do you like pork?"

"You bet. I'm a real sucker for any kind of home cooking."

"Does Maggie cook?"

"I don't know, says she does."

"And you've known her how long?"

"About ten years," he said disgracefully. "You'd think a guy would have some idea, huh?"

"You'd think," she said to provoke a little penitence. "You'll have to give her a trial run sometime."

"Maybe I will."

"Evening boy," Wally's pungent voice filled the room. He stopped and assumed a karate stance. "You didn't bring that fuckin' monkey, did ya?"

"Wally," Kate censured from inside the kitchen.

Wally ducked down with a cringe as if something might be thrown in his direction. "Old crab ass, I don't know why I keep her around."

Eddie stood to greet him with a handshake. "Your safe, from the monkey at least."

"Where's your buddy?"

"My buddy?"

"Maggie, dipshit."

"I don't know." He looked at his watch. "She's not usually late."

"You mean, you didn't bring her with ya?"

"Uh, no."

"You're too smooth, boy."

"She's probably lost in our labyrinth jungle," Kate casually surmised, then promptly called out to her husband, "Scotch, dear?"

"Duh, wife." A healthy belch followed to initiate his next comment. "She'll find her way. How about you, kid, adjusting?"

"I'm starting to." He glanced around the contemporary room with its various shades of pastel colors. "This is a real nice place you have here."

He leaned forward and whispered, "Her fuckin' idea. If it was up to me, I'd have a cabin in the woods." Kate reentered the room. "Oh yeah, I love what she's done with the place."

"You can go to hell for lying," she pestered. "My husband has an outdoor heart, but an indoor butt." The doorbell rang. "That's got to be Maggie."

"Maggie, I'm so glad you could make it and my, don't you look stunning," she added with intentional emphasis, winking to compliment the strategy. Maggie had worn her hair up and accented her natural beauty with a slight hint of makeup. A tight blue dress cut high above the knee flaunted a petite well-shaped figure.

"Well, thank you, Kate," she acknowledged with a humble grin. Wally stood and though Eddie was unaccustomed to the formality, felt obliged to follow suit. He was noticeably overwhelmed by her striking appearance.

"Hi," Eddie managed to conjure. In his bewilderment, he offered an inept compliment. "You look very nice, Mag."

"Are you blind, boy? She looks pretty fucking gorgeous if you ask me!"

"What did I tell you about your language?" Kate reprimanded with a hard slap on his shoulder and a shaking finger.

"Damn, wife, I said she looked good, didn't I?" He ignorantly redirected the question to Eddie. "Didn't I?"

"In your own subtle way, I guess you did." Even Eddie was unsettled by his own reaction. "You do, Maggie, you look great."

It was very unusual to have prompted any type of reaction from Eddie. "Maybe I should dress up more often. A girl could get used to a reception like that."

"Don't count on it, honey, those are men you're talking about. Go on, take what little load you have off your feet."

"I'd rather help in the kitchen, if you don't mind."

"Suit yourself, sweetie."

"Excuse us, won't you?" Maggie subtly directed to Eddie.

"Yeah, sure, uh huh," Eddie mumbled. Wally shook his hand as if it had just been burned, then motioned with his lips and squinting his eyes. 'Whew!' Eddie nervously nodded in agreement. She looked fantastic, but he had never seen her in that light before and was beginning to wonder why not.

It didn't take long for Kate to commend her. "Good goin', girl."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Nothing, dear, nothing at all." They both latched on to the same pompous smile.

"Shop?" Wally asked to initiate conversation.

"Nah, I hate shopping."

"Jeez, kid. Where's your head? Do you want to talk a little shop?"

"Oh, sure, Wally. What's on your mind?"

Wally got up and signaled with a nod. "Grab your drink." Eddie followed him out onto a balcony.

"You've got a lot of nice plants."

"Not me, pal. The wife is on this horticulture kick, even talks to the damn things. I'm pretty sure they listen too." They both leaned on the railing from the fifth-floor apartment and looked out over a large moonlit lake surrounded by plush landscaping. "It's something, ain't it? Our own miniature paradise right smack dab in the middle of nowhere."

"Yeah, it sure is."

"So, tell me, kid. Do you really think we can pull this thing off?"

"I don't see any reason why not. We've got some wrinkles to iron out, but I know the process works."

"Well, I've put a lifetime into this rat race of ours and I'd sure like to cross that finish line before I meet my maker. I'm gettin' too damned old for this shit."

Dinner was soon on the table and Maggie began a quick search. She stood at the balcony doorway and politely waited for the appropriate moment to impose.

"If we don't fuck it up, it'll be a dream come true. This is the World Series of science and the whole thing is like one of Dazzle's fairytales."

Maggie noted the reference to Dazzle but failed to make any connection. "Are you ready to eat?"

"Little lady, when it comes to food, that's one thing you can always count on." He slapped Eddie on the back. "C'mon, kid."

Maggie was standing at the doorway and the light from within seemed to create an aura around her. Finally, with a shy schoolboy smile, he followed her inside.

Kate began the seating assignments. "Eddie, why don't you sit here?" Wally flashed his wife an evil eye as she offered Eddie his usual seat. "And Maggie, over here." It was all part of Kate's crafty plan, and Wally's anticipated objection was quickly halted by a pointing finger. "And you can plant that fat butt of yours right there."

Reluctantly, Wally followed his wife's peculiar lead and was quick to lighten up by grabbing the cheeks of his buttocks with both hands. "Fat?" he said in an attempt to re-establish his equanimity. "You're talkin' about one finely tuned muscle right there, baby." They all chuckled and settled into their seats. "Well, it is."

"That's enough, Wally. Zip the lip and or take a trip." Wally dropped a napkin on his lap and reached for the potatoes.

"Would it be all right if I asked the blessing?" Maggie's unexpected request sparked an awkward moment of silence, which could have been construed as prayer. Wally frowned as he let the mouthwatering spoonful drop back into the bowl.

Kate spoke quickly to relieve any tension. "I think that would be splendid, dear."

Eddie's agnostic eyes gradually fluttered closed and Kate politely bowed her head. Wally lowered his too but kept one eye ardently trained on the meal spread out before him.

"Our dear heavenly father, we are joined together in your presence with a welcome reprieve, new friends. We pray that our venture in this new world will be directed by your divine guidance. Please nourish our bodies and strengthen our hearts with this wonderful meal and your beautiful spirit. May your will be done through us. We give thanks in the precious name of Jesus. Amen."

"Thank you, dear, that was lovely," Kate complimented, then directed a sly remark to Wally, "I think we ought to do it more often."

Wally countered her attack. "I think, if this meal's gonna do all that, we ought to start woffin' it down." He plopped a spoonful of mashed potatoes onto his plate, then offered the

bowl to Eddie. "Here, boy. Nourish your soul."

Eddie laughed at Wally's brazen candor. His perspective on a variety of subjects, particularly how he perceived his associate, seemed to be heading in a new direction. A window was opening in his heart that he hadn't looked through in a very long time and though he tried to resist an urge, he was staring a lot.

Maggie was flattered by Eddie's awkward behavior and Kate recognized all the signs, so they worked as a team to ease any apprehension. Wally's focus was on food, so his typical mannerisms served to do the same.

The dinner was topped off with dessert, Irish coffee and casual conversation. There was constant reference to and substantial emphasis on the rising tension in the Middle East. As the conversation drifted to the subject of a well-established global economy, Maggie asked an intriguing question. "What do you think about the new cashless system they're testing in Australia?"

"What about it, Mag?" Eddie incited.

"It's kind of scary isn't it?"

"Scary?" Wally contributed. "Hell, it's long overdue. People have been using plastic for years, but if you lose the damn thing or it gets stolen, you're screwed. You can't lose a microchip."

Eddie was quick to agree. "It makes perfect sense. They've been using computer chips for the animal I.D. program for years. It's a good system. Everything anyone would need to know in an emergency is right there; identification, health records, finances, everything." Eddie was inadvertently justifying Maggie's concern.

"Let's say that you're an American visiting Japan and you want to buy one of those new portable TV phones. They scan your chip and the entire transaction is automatically processed."

"Yeah," Wally added, "it eliminates all the hassles. The rate of exchange, credit checks and the transfer of funds, the

whole thing is automatic."

"And what if you're out of the country and you get sick or have an accident? Obtaining critical information takes valuable time, but if all that information was instantly available, it would save a lot of lives. Everything on a microchip can be converted to any language. It eliminates confusion and you don't have to carry a briefcase full of papers around."

Wally jumped back in. "And it'd cut down on crime too. If no one is carrying cash, there'll be a lot less thieves and muggers out there. Even if they stole something, they couldn't resell it. I think it'll solve a lot of problems."

Maggie sat quietly before offering her viewpoint. "There are a few other considerations though."

Eddie was first to coax an elaboration. "Like what? It's the perfect system."

"Maybe it's just a little too perfect."

"I don't get ya," Wally exclaimed.

"The only way a system like that will work is if the whole world adheres to it. Every nation who wants to deal in the global market and any person who wishes to buy or sell a product or service must conform, right?"

"Yeah," Eddie agreed to the seemingly obvious.

"And where are they going to put this chip?"

"It'll be on your hand or in your forehead where it's easily accessible, but you won't even be able to see it."

"That's not my point."

"What is your point, Maggie?" Eddie asked bluntly.

"My point is; that's exactly what the bible says will happen."

Her unusual insight caught everyone's attention and sparked

more silence. Kate joined in. "I'm certainly no authority on the good book, but what are you referring to, dear?"

"Doesn't that sound a lot like the 'Mark of the Beast'?"

"Mark of the beast?" Wally challenged.

"The bible says that the beast will cause all people to receive a mark in their right hand or forehead. Without it, no one can buy or sell goods. I may be wrong, but it sounds to me like you just described an intricate version of that very system."

"Woe," Eddie said before silencing himself. The topic of religion wasn't one of his favorite subjects.

"It also says that anyone who willingly receives that mark, will suffer the wrath of God. Since it would mean sacrificing eternal life, Christians will refuse to accept the microchip. I'm not going to get one," she profoundly declared. The lack of response seemed to indicate that she may have overstepped her boundaries, but she felt that her point needed to be expressed.

Kate broke the silence. "I'm going to have to dig that book back out and do some studying. It's so easy to get away from. I remember back in the early eighties though. A lot of people thought President Reagan might be the Antichrist because they found 666 in his name, six letters in each given name, Ronald Wilson Reagan. Remember that, Wally." He just shrugged. "Some even suspected Henry Kissinger, mostly because he was Jewish and rather powerful."

"I haven't been to church in over twenty years and I'm pretty ignorant when it comes to that kind of stuff, but that is an interesting perspective," Wally admitted.

Eddie yawned and looked at his watch, hoping to escape a religious debate. "Well, it is getting kind of late."

Maggie displayed a look of unrest. "I hope that my biblical perspective didn't impose on your evening."

"Nonsense, dear, it was quite enlightening. We all need a gentle reminder now and then. I had a splendid evening."

"That goes for me too," Wally injected. He then looked over at Eddie who was slow in getting up from his seat. "You all right, boy? You've been acting a little goofy all night."

He stammered a bit and then answered, "I'm fine, just a little tired I guess and pretty full." He patted at his belly.

Kate helped him through. "Wally, for Pete's sake. New place, new people, new job...It's a wonder either of 'em are still awake."

"Can I help with the dishes, Kate?" Maggie offered.

"No. It's such a beautiful night. Why don't you two take a walk down by the lake and get yourselves some fresh air." She winked at Maggie and smiled brightly.

Eddie pulled nervously at his belt and tucked in his shirt. "You know, it would be kind of nice to get out for a while. What do you think, Mag? Are you up for a walk?"

Maggie was shocked, but quick to reply, "Sure, a little fresh air might be just what we need."

Wally and Kate escorted them to the door. "You two get plenty of sleep tonight. We've got a busy day ahead of us tomorrow."

"We will. See you in the morning, Wally and thanks for an excellent dinner, Kate."

"We'll do it again, then. Good night."

"Thanks." Maggie smiled at Kate and offered a quaint wave.

"You're up to something, wife," Wally suspiciously inquired as the door closed. "If I didn't know any better, I'd swear you were playin' just a wee bit of the ole' cupid role there." He plopped down in his easy chair and reached for the remote control.

"Now, Wally. You ought to know better."

"I know better all right. You just be careful where you're firin' them arrows of yours. You're liable to hit somethin'."

"Just you never mind."

"Never mind, my ass." He peered out over his glasses at the huge television screen hanging on the wall, dipped his chin and let out a long echoing belch. "Ah, there's no place like home, Toto."

"You are so disgusting." She retreated to the kitchen. "Do you know that?"

"Yep." He put on a cocky smile and stretched back in his chair. "Disgusting," he said with a smile.

* * *

A WALK IN THE GARDEN

Just like high school kids on their first date, Maggie and Eddie curiously entered the plush garden, each experiencing emotions they were unfamiliar with. They were both sensing some sort of reciprocation but had no idea what the other might be thinking and to what extent they were thinking it. The only solution to their dilemma was communication and that simply wasn't forte either were accustomed to. Maggie knew that if there was to be any chance of culminating a deeper relationship, she would have to take that first step.

Occasionally, Eddie would post a crooked smile in Maggie's general direction. She sensed that he was trying but enjoyed observing his awkward demeanor. They strayed from the paved walkway and ventured down a path to the lake's edge. Maggie stopped and seated herself on a wooden bench. Eddie's forward progress was halted by the shoreline. He placed his hands in his pockets and stared upward.

Maggie finally broke the ice. "It's incredible isn't it?"

"Hmm?"

"Infinite space, filled with more than we can imagine, an endless array of unsolved mysteries. That's the beauty of it,

don't you think?"

"You find beauty in mystery?"

"Don't you?"

"I suppose, but for me it's unlocking the secrets and solving the mysteries. It's like a relentless quest to understand how, why and when. Now, to me, that's beautiful."

"Can you ever really quench a thirst like that?"

"Probably not, finding one answer usually leads to another ten questions." Without removing his hands from his pockets, he strolled up to the bench and seated himself at the opposite end of the bench, then leaned back and gazed upward.

Maggie twisted her body toward him and began to infer with sincere interest. "Eddie, I know you can't talk about the project, but I've got a pretty good idea what's going on, they obviously intend to rejuvenate a person."

Eddie turned towards her, but kept his eyes trained upward. He bit at his lower lip in a half grin. "Do you realize what this could mean?"

"I know what it means to me, but I'd like to know what it means to you."

"It a chance to unlock one of the greatest mysteries known to man and dispel the myths of man's greatest fear. Can you imagine?"

"I have," she answered nervously. His illustration sent a shivering chill down her spine. "But, until this very moment, I guess I never really believed it was possible."

"Oh yeah, it is v-e-r-y possible."

By the light of the moon, Eddie couldn't see how pale Maggie's face had become and what he had mistaken for a sparkle in her eye was a glazed stare generated by consternation. The first in a long series of questions began entering her mind. 'What about the soul?' She looked to the sky in silent prayer.

It was a quiet walk home and seemed intent on accompanying her. It was far from romance, but from Maggie's perspective, they were at least moving in the general direction.

By the time they had arrived at Maggie's apartment, Eddie had concluded that something was bothering her. The circumstances were such that his emotions had aroused the possibility that there was a chance, however slight, that their friendship might have the potential to develop into something more. He touched her tenderly on the shoulder to express some vague display of affection. Maggie noted his warm gesture and squeezed his hand to return the lethargic signal.

"Thanks, Eddie, it was nice meeting you." The astute message left Eddie stupefied. "Good night," she said buoyantly, then closed the door behind her.

"Night, Mag." 'Nice meeting you,' he thought, 'What the hell was that supposed to mean?' What she must have been insinuating induced a lofty smile that slowly transformed into a cocky grin. "Nice meeting you too," he said out loud. He began whistling as he strolled casually to his new home in nearby corridor.

* * *

Maggie entered the dark apartment, flipped on the stereo and entered the bedroom. She unzipped the back of her dress, turned on a bedside lamp and sat on the edge to remove the uncomfortable high-heeled shoes. She then noticed that even her Bible had been placed on the nightstand where she had been keeping it for years.

It had originally belonged to her father and was left to her when he passed away. The very old book bore very visible scars from years of incessant reference and in its new location, hadn't yet had the opportunity to collect the usual dust. It was a fond reminder of the God-Fearing parents who had introduced her to Christianity as a young child. They were killed in a tragic automobile accident when she was eighteen.

She reached for the bible and innocently began thumbing through and reflecting on personal notes scribbled in the

margins. Suddenly, one note seemed to reach out to her. In the book of Revelation, next to chapter thirteen referring to the Antichrist, her father had written, **'This guy is no ordinary man'**. His words began to sink deep into her soul and her heartbeat quickened. **'This is an extra-ordinary man who will have a unique way of capturing everyone's attention. He's much more than a typical politician or some influential businessman. He'll probably rise to power in Europe and something about him will enable him to catch the entire world completely off guard.'**

Ironically, every question she asked herself only seemed to lead to another question and that kept her reading well into the night. She began highlighting various scriptures and compiling a substantial list of relevant notes, all which would prove to have an incredible impact on her perspective of Cryonic research. It was 4 AM, when she finally faded off to sleep.

* * *

CHAPTER 8

NOT SO BRIGHT AND EARLY

The next morning, Maggie slowly opened one eye, unsure as to just what time it was. Her dress was still on, but radically rearranged. The tablet of notes and her bible were still at the foot of the bed. She rolled to get a clear view of the clock. It was well after 9:00 am and she was late.

The phone began to ring. She wrestled with a still sleeping arm that refused to cooperate and cleared her throat to answer in a raspy voice, "Hello."

"Are you all right?"

"Of course, I'm all right."

"Well, it's after nine and I was getting a little worried."

"I'm fine. I guess I just slept in."

"As long as everything's okay. We'll see you in a few then."

"I'll be right down. Don't forget Billy's formula."

"I didn't forget. Hurry up, we've got a lot of work to do."

"Okay, okay. Bye," she said as she rubbed her eyes. She stepped out of her dress and left it lying on the floor, then finished undressing as she staggered toward the shower. The bathroom extension speakers echoed music from the stereo that was still spinning discs in the living room. She increased the volume to enjoy a Cheryl Crowe song from 1993, 'Run, Baby, Run'. It seemed appropriate to start the day, which had all the makings of a very long one.

* * *

Wally, Eddie, Dan and Charlie were viewing a projection screen displaying highly magnified images of blood samples taken from Billy at various stages of post-rejuvenation.

"It seems to me," Charlie began, "it's not so much an abnormality in the T-cells that we are dealing with and the genetic structure isn't necessarily being altered, it's more like select B-cells are being targeted."

'No kidding,' Eddie thought to himself, then replied, "What I don't understand is why...why only some of the T-cells are infected and why only certain B-cells are attacked."

Dan Karrington voiced his opinion. "You're right, Eddie, it's a peculiar anomaly. Let's get a blood sample up to R & D. I'd like them to begin testing as soon as possible."

"Where do you want me to set up?"

Dan smiled. "Lab six has already been prepared. When do you want to start?"

"Yesterday."

"What do you think, Wally?"

"How about right after lunch? I find that it's a hell of a lot easier to work on a full stomach."

"I should have known, fuel first. Okay, around one then. It'll take a while to adjust the settings anyway. Do you have an animal lined up for the next experiment?"

"Of course."

"Anything but a fuckin' monkey," Wally pleaded.

"Sorry, Wall."

"I just hope this one has some manners."

"Don't count on it," Dan joked. "I'll start making the arrangements. When do you think we can initiate the process?"

"If all goes well, I don't see any reason why we couldn't start first thing Wednesday morning."

"Excellent, but that means we've got a couple long days ahead of us, so let's get started." They each grabbed their clipboards and began to make hasty exits.

"Dan," Eddie summoned. "Got a minute?"

"What's on your mind?"

"Will that experiment be conducted in the basement?"

"Yeah, problem?"

"It's Maggie."

"Where is she this morning?"

"I think the transition caught up with her. I let her sleep in. She'll be here any minute."

"I'm surprised you didn't sleep in."

"Are you kidding? I couldn't sleep a wink. Listen, I know the policies concerning the basement, but we're going to need a computer expert working with us. I can read it and I can analyze it, but I can't program it fast enough."

"That's top-level clearance. I suppose I could authorize Peter for limited access."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm sure he's very good, but I don't know the man and he doesn't know the program. It'll take time to decipher. That's more unnecessary delays."

"He's the best we've got."

"I'm not so sure of that. Has he ever been granted access to the basement?"

"No, but he's been with us a long time."

"Listen, Dan. I know I can trust Maggie and I'm used to working with her. When it comes to programming, she's the best I've ever seen. I'd feel more comfortable with her."

"I don't know, Eddie."

"She already got a pretty good glimpse yesterday. We could override the mainframe and limit access to Lab six. Of course, you could set the parameters."

"There's still a risk" He hesitated and palmed his chin. "And I can almost guarantee that ole' Wally would blow a fuse."

"He might, but I think I can handle Wally."

"You think so, huh?"

"Yeah. He seems to like Maggie and she has a good idea what's going on too. If possible, I'd like her in there."

Maggie entered the room just as they were concluding their conversation. "Good morning," she announced enthusiastically.

"Good morning, Ms. Bennett," Dan returned with a smile. He turned toward Eddie, winked and nodded in agreement. "Okay, she's in. We'll take it slow at first and see how it goes."

"Morning, Maggie." Eddie was genuinely pleased to see her and couldn't wait to share the good news.

"Eddie has something to discuss with you and when we get some free time, I'd like to sit down with both of you. I guess you already know it, but this guy thinks a great deal of you and since I think a lot of him, welcome to the team." He smiled to Eddie as the door closed behind him.

"What was that all about?"

"Well, we talked a little last night about the project. For the most part, you know where we're going with this thing and of course, that along with everything else remains completely confidential. You know that, right?" she nodded.

"There's a time factor involved and we're going to start experimenting on another chimp. I want you programming the computer."

"No problem."

"No, you don't understand. We're going to be working in the basement, where we took Billy yesterday."

"Oh, is that what they call it? "

"Yeah. Anyway, all the major testing will take place there. Only certain people are allowed access and there are a few rules that you'll be subjected to. For you to work there, you're required to make a commitment. I still can't tell you everything, but it's pretty heavy stuff."

"Eddie, there's a whole lot around here that I don't understand, but I'm only here for one reason, because I believe in you. So, if you want me, all you have to do is ask."

"Okay, I'm asking, but you need to understand. If you join the team, that means you agree to achieve success or die trying, whichever comes first." She was clearly confused by the extraordinary requirement and demonstrated the fact with squinting eyes. "This is a forty-year-old project that could very well take a lifetime to complete. I was willing to make that commitment, but I can't and won't make that decision for you. You are the best and this would give you a chance to prove it, but it has to be your call."

"What's the big deal? If it doesn't work, we freeze him back down and try again with another subject, right?"

Eddie wasn't prepared for that question. "Let's see, how do I put this? I suppose it's safe to say that our project isn't necessarily the research we are involved in, it's more like the purpose of that research." He thought about his statement for a moment. "Let me rephrase that. The project is not experimentation with a subject, the subject is the reason we are experimenting."

"What are you talking about?"

"This particular patient is the reason we're here. Of course, I can't say who it is, but that's really the key."

"That doesn't exactly clear up the mystery, but at least I'll be involved," she emphasized.

"Great." He popped up out of the seat, grabbed a phone and punched in a few numbers. "Dan, we're ready to go to work. Yeah, we'll head on down." He hung up and put his thumb in the air as a signal. "Let's go."

He collected some notes and grabbed his laptop. Maggie retrieved a satchel of diskettes and they proceeded to the express elevator. Eddie flaunted his capabilities by placing his palm over the glass plate. The doors whisked opened.

"Very impressive," she mocked.

"It was intended to be." He had a huge grin on his face. He was clearly pleased that she had agreed to join him.

"This is the basement," he said as he glanced at a diagram to familiarize himself with the floor plan, Maggie began to take in the overwhelming surroundings of her new prodigious workplace. "It looks like we're right down here." He started down the corridor. She was still enthralled by the awesome grandeur. "This it is." He placed his hand on an access plate to gain entry to the new lab.

"Wow! Check this out," he said as he entered the lab. "What a layout." His declaration attracted her attention, but just as

she prepared to follow, the metal door slid shut to separate them. She jumped back with a gasp. She casually leaned against the wall to wait patiently.

Eddie was so intrigued, that he hadn't yet realized he was alone. "This is unbelievable. I knew we were moving up, but...wow! I guess this would be your neck of the woods here." He laid his hand on an elaborate computer console and waited for a reply. "What do you think?" he beckoned. When there was no reply, he finally began to look around. "Maggie? Hey, where are you?" He rushed back and opened the door to find her standing with arms folded, peering at her fingernails and humorously biting at her jaw. "What are you doing out there?"

"Did ya miss me?" she hinted gleefully. "You might occasionally ask yourself, 'Am I missing anything?'"

"Sorry, Mag, I thought you were right behind me." She looked back at him with a sarcastic stare. "I did."

"Um hmm." She was basking in his futile attempt at vindicating. "Wow, this is some kind of lab we've got here." She walked toward the control panel and set the satchel on the counter, then focused on the huge glass enclosure directly in front of it. She peered in at the frigid chimp that had already been placed in a Cryonic chamber ready for incubation. "What's this?"

Eddie walked over to join her and began to inform. "That would be the subject of our next little experiment. We're going to start SDI on that guy Wednesday."

"Wednesday?" she blurted. "You're kidding?"

"That shouldn't be a problem, now that you're here."

She was impressed by his faith in her ability, but a little discouraged by the tremendous workload she had in store. "Well, then, I guess I'd better get started." She sat down, switched on the computer and began to analyze the system. "Eddie, this is a pretty sophisticated program. It might take a while to get in."

"Oh," He shuffled through some documents and began to read. "Try this: one, seven, eight, six, three, V-E-D, eight, zero,

zero, five." The computer went through a rapid loading sequence and then displayed a message requesting data input.

"That's all I needed. I can take it from here." She made a mental note of the only letters used in the code but paid little attention as she began the lengthy loading process. Eddie sat at another nearby console sorting through files on his laptop and transferring relevant data.

Before they had made any real progress, Wally walked in. He took one brief look at Maggie and then proceeded to charge past her without a word. The same man, who had recently demonstrated so much compassion, had no difficulty displaying his dismay at her presence. "What the fuck?" he blared at Eddie.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What-the-fuck?" he raved again with his left arm extended and forefinger rigidly pointing. "You think you can just waltz in here and do whatever the hell you want. Don't ya?"

Maggie was flabbergasted. Her big green eyes were shocked wide open, and a sad face was turning pale. Eddie, on the other hand, had no problem defending his position. He casually sat back in his chair, refusing to acknowledge Wally's rude interrogation. Finally, he looked up at the angry scientist and casually offered a harsh disdainful response, "Fuck off."

Wally leaned way over Eddie's desk, rested his hands on each side of the computer and peered at him with a cold angry glare. "What did you say, son?"

After a moment of pure silence, and with a surge of adrenaline flowing vigorously, Maggie acquired a burst of inner strength to speak out in a quivering voice, "He said, FUCK OFF."

The bold reiteration sent both men into astounded awe. They propped up their eyebrows and turned in unison to stare in stunned silence. Maggie's eyes were twitching nervously, but she managed to maintain a jittery, but impudent composure. Such austere language coming from the 'Princess of Naivete' was far beyond comprehension.

The awkward moment was further intensified by the arrival

of Dr. Karrington. All three turned and directed their frustrated faces at him. It didn't require a clairvoyant mind to sense the obvious tension, but he smiled brightly and waved, then spoke casually, "How's it going?"

Eddie was first to begin chuckling. Wally cleared his throat and tried to resist the urge, but his big belly was soon shaking in audible laughter too. Maggie couldn't restrain either and soon all four of them were laughing.

"I'd have to say it was going rather well," Eddie began. "You see, Wally was just inquiring as to our most recent acquisition."

"Oh." Dan had a good notion as to the nature of that inquiry. "Wally, is there anything you'd care to discuss?"

Wally reached up, rubbed the back of his neck. "Um, no, Dan, nothing I can't think of offhand."

"Eddie?"

"No, sir."

He only had to look at Maggie. "Nope, me either."

"Everything's fine then?" No one said a word. "O-ki-do-ki," he said to finalize. "I'll be in my office."

As the door closed behind him, Wally reinitiated the conversation. "So..." he said in the same previous tone. "You two up for dinner tonight?"

Maggie wasn't about to pursue the issue. "Thank you for the humble invitation, Wally," she said calmly. "Unfortunately, it looks as though we'll be working late tonight."

"You've still got to eat don't ya? Hell, we gotta eat."

"I promise, but it'll more than likely be a sack lunch down here."

He walked over to Maggie and kissed her on top of the head. "You're somethin' else, girl. I can't help but love ya."

She reached up and patted his arm. "I know you do, Wally."

It was a futile attempt to be sarcastic, but before he realized what he had said, Eddie had inadvertently blurted, "I love her too. Now, can we please get some work done around here?"

Even Wally was intrigued by the profound proclamation, but there was no witty response. And, though it hadn't exactly been stated in the manner she had hoped to one day hear the magic words, Maggie perceived his slip of the tongue as another in a series of steps in the right direction. She couldn't conceal the smile that his trivial phrase had generated.

Very little conversation took place afterwards, which is probably why they managed to get more work done than usual. By early evening, they were well ahead of schedule.

* * *

CHAPTER 9

THE RETURN OF SID

The body of the 60-pound chimp was enclosed in its cylinder-shaped cocoon, similar in design but much larger than the type of incubator one might find when treating patients at high risk of infection. Numerous electrodes, attached during Cryonic preservation, were strategically located wired into an access panel at the foot of the chamber.

As Eddie continued to update solar activity data, Wally entered the chamber and prepared for surgery. Maggie was running a systems analysis and confirming the accuracy of all entries.

Four hours prior to the completion of the incubation process, Dr. McCarty would transplant a new heart. As with Dazzle, the organ had been cloned to provide an identical match. If they were to encounter a problem or if the organ were rejected for any reason, a second and even a third vital component was on hand. This experiment would be the first time that the surgical procedure would be attempted during the incubation process.

Wally was showing his true colors as an expert in the field, his work was meticulous. He prepared for the operation as if conducting the surgery on Vic Dazzle himself.

At 1:40 PM on Tuesday, the team met for a preliminary discussion. This time, Maggie was present. Eddie had the floor and everyone's undivided attention. "Since the forecast calls for atmospheric conditions to be most favorable just after midnight, we'll activate the program at 12:17. Of course, you can never be certain about the solar signal. I guess that brings us to you, Bernie. What is the status on the artificial backup?"

Dr. Winters removed his wire-rimmed glasses. "Basically, we've revamped the entire system. It will provide a better simulation, but it's still experimental. We have managed to establish an extensive network of alternate satellite routes and there will always be instant access to the most favorable signal. Even if we experience some interference, we should be able to bypass it."

"That's great, Bernie. Stan, what about the breakdown in the B-cells?"

"We're still working on that, but I think we can combat the effects by virtue of a reinforced T-cell transfusion. Since the transplant will take place prior to rejuvenation, we're skeptical about flooding the system. We don't want any adverse conditions affecting the new heart. We'll monitor the system and limit transfusions to relatively small doses."

"Okay," Eddie said as he took a deep breath and pointed to Wally.

"Don't you worry about ole' Wally. You just fire up that microwave oven of yours. I'll take care of business on my end."

"Dan, anything to add?"

"Gentlemen," he began to signal that his comments wouldn't make sense to Maggie, "we've got to make this thing work."

* * *

MAGGIE'S ACCEPTANCE TO THE TEAM

As everyone was departing the conference room, Dan spoke again. "Eddie, Maggie." Maggie remained in her seat and Eddie

sat down across from her. "Look, I'm sorry I didn't get back with you earlier. As you know, it's been rather chaotic around here, more so than usual. I'd like to begin by saying how glad I am that the both of you have chosen to join us. I hope that our extenuating circumstances haven't posed too much undue stress and I sincerely apologize for the awkward position that you were placed in. At the very least, I hope you are relatively comfortable in your new homes."

"I've said it before and I'm going to repeat myself one more time, anything at all we can do to make your stay more pleasant, please don't hesitate to ask. As for the tremendous work you have done so far, I am most impressed. You've instilled new hope in our project."

He directed his next directly comment to Maggie. "Young lady, you have entered a new phase of the project. Clearly, the decision to include you was the correct one. Without going into detail, I'm certain that you have at least a partial understanding of the significance of our work. As I'm sure you have surmised, it is our intent to revive a human being." She was gradually being accepted into the fraternal order.

"Unfortunately, we are at the mercy of circumstances over which we have no control. Time is of the essence, which means we'll have some long hours and a lot of hard work ahead of us, but there's no doubt you can handle the load."

"Eddie, you're teaching us old dogs some new tricks and we're having fun. It's a pleasure to have you both on board. Oh, I took the liberty of scheduling a little breather for you two after the experiment, a couple of hotel suites in Paris. It's beautiful this time of year."

Maggie recognized the opportunity as a chance to develop their relationship but was certain that Eddie would turn down the invitation, but Eddie spoke out with enthusiasm. "I've never been to Paris. That might be kind of nice."

Again, Maggie was pleasantly surprised, but covered it well enough. "Okay, sure, if we have time that is. We might want to wait and see how the experiment goes first."

Eddie almost seemed disappointed. "Absolutely. You never

know, we might just get on a roll here." Neither knew it at the time, but they were on a very similar wavelength.

"That's fine," Dan agreed, "but keep in mind though, all work and no play means Jack and Jill are fetching way to much water." Dan got up to leave the room. "We'll see you two later."

"High five," Eddie said with a vote of confidence and a 'partial' grin. She halfheartedly accommodated his gesture. "What's the matter, Mag? You don't seem too thrilled. This is great, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Eddie, of course it is. It's just that there's something else that's kind of been on my mind lately."

"We're set, right?" She nodded. "And the program is functioning properly."

"Oh yeah, everything's fine on that end."

"Well, talk to me then. What's bothering you?" He pulled his chair closer.

"Oh, it's probably nothing, just one of those nagging thoughts in the back of my mind that I can't seem to get it out of my head."

Considering the words spoken earlier, he thought it might be best to clear the air. "Something I've said or done?" he asked with a bashful smile. She shook her head decisively to say, 'no'. "Is it Wally? I'll kick his butt if you want me to."

"No, Eddie." She laughed. "That's not it either."

"What is it?"

"It's just that I look at things with a slightly different perspective. It's strange, almost preternatural and you'd probably think I was just being paranoid, but..."

"Maggie?"

"Well, call it intuition if you want, but last night I started thinking..."

As soon as she began to explain, Stan's voice sounded through a nearby intercom speaker. "Ms. Bennett, could you join me in lab two, please?"

She dropped her head in defeat. "Look, once we get this experiment rolling, there ought to be plenty of slow time in between. We can talk about it later, okay?"

"Like I said, it's probably nothing. Just forget it."

"We'll talk about it later," he encouraged.

"It would be nice to get it out of my system and you are the only person I know around here, so I guess you're elected."

"That's more like it...teammate."

"Who'd of thunk it?"

"Me."

Maggie pressed the intercom button. "I'll be right there, Stan."

The entire crew worked at a feverish pace throughout the day and finally retired for the evening just after 8 PM. Wednesday would be an even longer day.

* * *

SID'S EXPERIMENT

Eddie reentered the testing lab Wednesday afternoon to find all, but Dr. Karrington buzzing from station to station. Wally was in an electronically iodized sterilization room inspecting instruments for his intricate operation. The statistics and all monitored aspects of the experiment were now projected on twelve large screens near the ceiling over the control board. Three large digital count down clocks were mounted over them and were indicated in the upper left-hand corner of each individual computer screen.

"Maggie," Stan beckoned. "Am I glad to see you. I need to

make a few adjustments to the artificial impulse program. I could sure use your help."

"That's why I'm here." She seated herself and began tapping at the keys. "Okay, what have ya got?" He started reading off a long series of complicated data while Maggie fed the information.

Eddie watched her work. Whatever was bothering her certainly didn't seem to be affecting her work. He then glanced around at the caliber of scientific excellence that surrounded him and the superior technology at his disposal. He savored the moment.

At 9:15 PM, about three hours before they would begin the incubation process, Dan arrived. "No pep talk today, boys. You know what's at stake. Since we're anticipating rejuvenation, we should probably remain at our stations throughout the incubation phase. If that stage is successful, we will begin five hour shifts with a half hour overlap for the recovery period on Thursday."

"Stan, you and I will take the first shift from two until seven." Stan nodded in agreement. "Since Wally, Charlie and Bernie will be working so closely, you'll make up the second shift. Plan to return around 6:30. There's no question that Maggie and Eddie should be working together, so I'd like you to come back in for the third shift at 11:00. We'll all meet back here at 4:00 AM for the final recovery phase. Everybody okay with that?" The room was very quiet except for the sounds of their machines echoing throughout the lab. "We've waited a long time for this. Let's do it."

Almost immediately, the team settled back into their routines. Dan walked up behind Eddie and rested his arm on the console, peering over his shoulder. "How's it looking?"

"Everything looks good, Dan. This team is phenomenal. Vic is going to be pleased." 'Oops,' he thought to himself with an obvious cringe, but it was too late. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth in dismay. Maggie heard the name, but still made no link to Dazzle.

"Don't worry," Dan whispered. "We were going to fill her in

after the experiment anyway. She's part of the team now and you were right," he added for Maggie's ears. "She is very good." He patted Eddie's back lightly and left his side to attend to Maggie. "How's it going over here?"

"Pretty well actually, even the solar window has expanded. The forecast is ten times better than with Billy's incubation."

"Billy, that reminds me. Maybe you could come up with a name for this guy."

Maggie chuckled and pounded out some keys on the computer. Three large roman letters appeared on the screen. "How do you feel about SID?"

"A step ahead of me I see. Sid, huh? I like it. Sid it is."

At 12:07, a faint alarm rang out and a red light on each console began to flash as the first clock reached the ten-minute mark. Wally stepped into the decontamination room and began dressing in his insulated titanium suit. A green light signaled completion of that process and he entered the incubation chamber.

He securely attached an overhead cable to his suit and entered the chamber to begin a thorough inspection of the cocoon. Once in position, Stan began reading off items on an extensive checklist. Wally's informal method of confirmation provided some amusing entertainment for the group.

"Seal one."

"It's cool."

"Seal two."

"Tighter than an Eskimo's twat."

"Seal three."

"Even tighter."

"Seal four."

"Bingo."

"Monitor Cables, secure?"

"Fu--ckin'---A."

"Transformer, on?"

"Duh."

"Internal monitor, on?"

"Ditto the duh." He began performing a unique rendition of the twist, which in the large gold suit was something to behold.

"Wally despises formalities, but don't let him fool you. He's the best," Dan inferred.

The usually reserved Bernie Winters offered up his opinion. "Embarrassing is what he is."

"I heard that, Bernie, you jive time, jiffy pop, poop butt, beady eyed buzzard, you. Ha! Take that, you swine." Muffled laughter rang out from beneath the hood of his suit. "That's it, kids. Crank up the stereo, it's time to rock-n'-roll." He positioned his arms and played his version of an air guitar.

"Thirty seconds," Dan began a verbal countdown. "Twenty, Ten...-Five...-Four...-Three...-Two..." The incubation clock began counting and everyone went into action as if they were doing something, but the work had already been performed. The sophisticated computer was now in control. They could only observe and make menial adjustments.

Suddenly, just minutes into the process, Maggie's gasp caught everyone's attention. "Oh, my God. "

"What is it, Mag?"

"We've got a solar flare up in quadrant two."

"Already," Eddie barked. "Damn it! Direction?"

"Multiple and it's major."

"How much time do we have?"

"Expected to intersect our signal in, forty-five seconds."

"Alternate routes?" he directed to Stan.

"I'm checking." He hesitated as he explored the options.
"We can't bounce around this one, it's too big."

Eddie's mind quickly began to function like a computer searching for a solution. "Okay, Charlie. Get the backup ready," he ordered as he contemplated an extreme alternative. He glared at the console in a cold inner debate. Then, he turned toward Dan and to everyone's surprise, announced, "Let's shut it down."

"What?"

"Look. We know the potential side effects caused by the artificial energy, but we don't know what might happen if we interrupt and compensate. It's too early to risk that backup system. I think it's a safe bet."

"Fifteen seconds until intersect," Maggie informed.

"I've got a plan," he tried to convincingly reassure, but it was Dan's call to make. "I think it'll work."

An emergency shut down was never even discussed and it was a high-risk consideration. The incubation clock continued to click off seconds.

"Five...-Four..."

"Dan," Eddie urged.

"All right," Dan blurted, then he hit the emergency switch himself. "Shit!"

Eddie immediately went into action. "Maggie, what's the estimated time of delay?"

"Twelve minutes and thirty-eight seconds, plus or minus."

"Twelve minutes," he said to himself but aloud, then began a series of calculations on his computer. "Okay. All right. Okay." He stood up. "Show us your stuff, girl. I need to reprogram the formula to allow for an across the board increase. We're going seven - nine - five point four to nine - six - eight point nine, but we've got less than twelve minutes. Can you pull it off?"

"I can try."

"Go."

As Maggie initiated her relentless efforts, Eddie prepared to face the confused group. He nervously defended his actions. "9-6-8 is what we originally calculated to be the optimum level. We've never tested at a level higher than 8-4-6 and it will require some significant changes, but I still think it's feasible, it might even be better. Under the circumstances, our options are limited. If Maggie can reprogram the system, we'll have a better chance at a clear window. The worst-case scenario...we start over."

Shrugging shoulders and raised eyebrows halfheartedly accepted Eddie's harsh speculation. Their concern stemmed primarily from the unlikelihood that Maggie could accomplish her task in the required time frame.

"What else do we need?" Dan asked to demonstrate his support.

"Charlie, can you calculate a corresponding adjustment for the same energy level on the backup unit?"

"No problem. I'll have it ready."

"Stay with it, Mag," Eddie encouraged. It didn't take long to realize that all other eyes were intensely focused on him. Wally stood at the window, staring out at him from the isolation chamber with arms folded, clearly expressing a lack of confidence.

"Look, I know these are extreme measures, but theoretically, it should work." He looked apologetically at Wally. "It's going to cut down on the allotted time for the

surgical procedure though."

"You're callin' the shots, and I think this maybe a long one, but I've got faith in ya, Fritz. You just get that oven fired back up. I'll take care of my end. Let me know when you've got a time frame."

"Stan, can you start on that?" Dr. Archer went into action. Eddie then directed his attention to the illustrious administrator. "Are you okay with this?"

"I don't like it any more than you do, but we're with you. If we're forced to scrap, we scrap. It won't be the first time. I just hope it's the last."

The pressure was now on Maggie. They watched the clock as her fingers vigorously pounded away on the keyboard.

"Stan," Eddie requested. "What's the atmospheric status?"

"We're clear as a bell. If we can get back online, we've got an open window."

"Finally, some good news."

Dan provided a disconsolate status report. "One minute and thirty seconds."

Maggie abruptly broke the silence. "It's done!"

"Damn, you're good. Is there time to run a systems analysis?"

"I said it was done!"

"Hot damn!" Wally bellowed. "How much time have we got?"

"Thirty-eight seconds to spare," Eddie advised.

"Well, I'll be," Dan replied in utter amazement. "Okay, Sid, we're back on in fifteen seconds. Five...-Four..."

"Who the hell is Sid?" Wally inquired with bemused curiosity.

"Three...-Two...-Go." Dan shook his fist in victory. The crew began a brief celebration. Maggie fell back in her chair. "Maggie," Dan exclaimed with an air of passion. "That was absolutely incredible, a marvelous piece of work."

"Atta girl, Mag," Wally's voice muffled through his helmet.

"Way to go, Maggie," shouted another.

Eddie finally made his way to her chair wearing a painted-on smile. He leaned over, grabbed her head with both hands and kissed her hard on the forehead.

"Nothing to it," she brazenly boasted.

"I just hope you don't have to perform your magic too often," Dan farcically added. "Let's not get too carried away. That's only one obstacle in the first leg of a very long race."

The computer again took over and most of the tension had been relieved. Confidence began to pique. Maggie had proved herself and Eddie's credibility was soaring to a new level.

It was an odd time to consider the prospect, but Eddie couldn't seem to escape the overwhelming attraction that was absorbing his mind. Though the thoughts of a relationship with Maggie intrigued him, it frightened him even more. Love was another region of life's expanse that Eddie was very unfamiliar with.

His work was far too important to allow himself to be distracted. A relationship would only scar his ability to commit completely to the project. There just wasn't room in his life for that kind of additional pressure. The inner battle to avoid such feelings was subconsciously developing his primary source of motivation. The overwhelming apprehension prompted a quick dismissal of such whimsical thoughts

* * *

WAKING UP SID

As the clock wound down to the four-hour mark, the team

began preparing for the next important phase.

"Raise the shield," Dan instructed.

With a loud wisp of gas, the seal of the long cylinder-shaped glass that enclosed the chimp was released. Wally guided the shell to the side as it was hydraulically winched from the table. He then released the pressure on a small Cryonic storage unit and carefully removed the new heart, then placed it on a stand over the chimp's chest. A faint beep signaled the start of the allotted time for the surgical procedure.

He delicately inserted the head of a laser scalpel into the chest cavity and began slicing through the surrounding tissue. The team watched the intricate procedure on closed circuit monitors. In less than twenty minutes, he had removed the faulty organ.

Wally cradled the new heart in his gifted hands and lowered the limp component into position. With the precision of an artist, he began 'welding' the heart into place. "How much time?" he asked without deviating.

Dan glanced at the clock and spoke into his headset. "You've got about thirty-eight minutes, Wall."

He was soon clipping the final stitch. "That's it," Wally announced as he inserted a video probe to explore the interior. "Everything looks good."

"You are amazing, Wally," Eddie bragged.

"Duh," Wally buoyantly returned.

"Well, if everything goes according to plan, we should have a live animal in about thirty minutes or so."

Charlie began dressing in his climate-controlled apparel and prepared to join Wally inside. Wally was examining the lifeless body. "Hi there, what is it again...Sid?" he asked as if the chimp could hear. He raised the eyelids. "I'll bet you never expected to see my beautiful face, did ya? Well, Sid-a-roony, like it or not, you're goin' to."

The chimp's body temperature began to rise more rapidly as they approached the final minutes. "When the temperature reaches thirty-four degrees, we'll start flushing the vitrification fluids. We'll hold the temperature at two until that process is complete. That will take about ten minutes. Then, as we begin the final transfusion, we'll start increasing the temperature more rapidly. As we approach seventy-eight degrees, the post rejuvenation anesthesia will be administered automatically. He'll be sedated when he wakes up, but he will wake up."

"He'd better," Charlie appended with obvious enthusiasm.

Dan was perched at the closest observation window. "Let's bring him back."

Eddie smiled at Dan's gesture of good faith. It was a proud moment for him as he confirmed the commencement of the procedure, "Beginning digital CPR in five, four, three, two, one."

"Resuscitation...initializing," Stan announced. "All systems are a go."

"Don't expect much but keep a close eye on monitor four. The first signs will show up as minuscule brainwave activity and we should see it there first."

Everyone remained silent, as the new heart was mildly stimulated. The chest cavity began to rise in conjunction with the corresponding respirator. Wally kept one hand on the chimp's wrist while the other held the base of a very sensitive stethoscope over its heart.

"What was that?" Stan bellowed with extreme eagerness. "I thought I saw something."

"You sure did, Stan," Charlie confirmed. "We have brainwave activity and it is increasing rapidly."

"Very good," Eddie injected. "That's a lot quicker than Billy's initial response time."

"How about the heart, Wally?" Dan indulged.

"Well, it's still not pumping on its own...Whoops. Wait a minute. Yep, I've got something now. Anything on the monitor?"

"Yes, sir," Charlie confirmed again. "It's weak, but we have an independent heartbeat."

"It's still early. Give it a minute," Eddie advised.

"All levels are increasing across the board," Bernie informed. "We should have a regular heartbeat."

"We do," Wally said with a bold smile through his mask.

"He's breathing on his own, too," Charlie added. "Terminating CPR...now."

Almost as soon as Charlie spoke, a twitch of the finger on the right hand signaled the first physical response and a slow series of physical movements followed. Then, as if waking from a very deep sleep, Sid's watery eyes began peering out through a small slit as the eyelids slowly attempted to lift. Wally pulled one open and shined a small light on the pupil. "The reaction is weak, mostly due to the drugs, but the pupil is dilating."

The chimp's head moved slightly as it attempted to manufacture its first utterance in its new life but could only invoke a mild whimper. "Ain't that a sweet sound?" Wally nudged Charlie hard to express his excitement. "Don't worry, squirt, you'll be screeching like ole Billy in no time."

Maggie managed to pull her attention away from the screen and stood to watch as she anxiously announced to the team. "All vital signs are stable."

Eddie leaned back in his seat with his elbows resting on the arms of the chair. His hands were folded with the forefingers pressing hard together and resting on the slope of his chin, as if pointing to the proud smile he was wearing. He shared in their excitement but was recalling the emotional experience of his first success and wanted them to enjoy their moment as much as he had enjoyed his.

He looked over at Maggie, who obviously shared his sentiments. She was biting at her lip. Until now, he and Maggie

were the only two who had ever witnessed death defeated. For the five men, a lifelong dream was becoming a vivid reality.

Dan clamped his teeth together in an exalted grin and folded his hand into a tightly clinched fist. Then, with a deep sigh, the teary-eyed administrator murmured, "I'll be damned." He looked back at Eddie and repeated himself. "I'll be damned." He placed his hands on his hips and continued to nod as the team began to celebrate.

The chimp's eyes were still weary, but open and seemed to be watching with genuine curiosity as Charlie and Wally exchanged 'high fives' with a celebration dance around the chamber. Wally approached the window and through a small microphone mounted inside his helmet, proclaimed, "I had to see it to believe it, but sure as the world, I just saw it."

Wally slowly began to applaud the achievement with his gloved hands. Charlie and Stan soon joined in. Bernie stood at his station to reciprocate. Though she deserved more credit than she was giving, Maggie's hands were clapping, too. Eddie humbly acknowledged their tribute with a blushing face.

A new more expedient version of SDI would require substantial revisions and they still had a long way to go before they would risk using the process as a means of reviving their client, but there was finally light at the end of a very long tunnel. It was no longer a question of 'If,' it was now simply a matter of 'When'.

* * *

CHAPTER 10

EDDIE'S ENLIGHTENMENT

As Sid's recovery period began, they restlessly attempted to relax between shifts, but sleep was difficult for anyone to achieve. At 3 PM, Eddie was knocking at Maggie's door. Dressed in an old quilted bathrobe that was discolored and faded, she responded to his puzzling stare by pulling the antique robe tightly around her. "My mother made it for me when I went away to school. It may be old, but it's comfortable."

"Okay," he laughed. "You don't have to explain anything to me. Did I wake ya?"

"Fat chance. C'mon in."

"This is nice, Mag. Who's your decorator?" he spoofed.

"I did it all myself."

"That wouldn't have surprised. So, what's up?" He intended the question to be rhetorical, until he noticed the pile of books and pages of notes scattered across the floor "Woe, what's all this?"

"All this is what I've been wanting to talk to you about."

"Oh," he exclaimed as he perused one of the books. "The Bible, Revelation. We're gonna talk religion, huh?"

"No, it's much more entailed than that. Don't worry, Eddie, I'm not going to make you pray or anything like that, but I have been doing a little research."

He picked up a book entitled 'Death and Dying' and began thumbing through it. "Hmm, on what?"

"On one aspect that everyone else has neglected to consider."

"Which is?"

"Well, for some strange reason, I started applying certain aspects of science to biblical theology. In the process, I made some rather interesting discoveries."

"Like what?"

She sat next to him on the floor, crossed her legs Indian style and reached for her bible. "I was raised on the teachings of this book. My parents got me into it. I was never into any specific organized religion, but I've read it many times over and I believe every word of it. For the most part, religions are based on interpretations of scripture, but the bible is supported by some substantial scientific principles."

"No offence, but how are you going to mathematically support a concept that is based entirely on faith. **'The substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.'** Hebrews, if I remember right. I've read a little bit of it too."

"I'm impressed."

"Don't be, that's about all I remember."

"Do you believe in it?"

"Well, I believe in what it stands for."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Do I believe in God?" he reiterated in a debatable tone. "I can't discard the possibility that some sort of 'higher power' might exist."

"Do you believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and that he died on the cross, then rose from the dead?"

"Okay, that's where I start getting a little fuzzy on the whole religious perspective," he shunned. "Let's face it. God in the flesh, good and evil, heaven and hell, and all that other malarkey...Those are some big pills to swallow. Logic and rationale must play a role in here somewhere. At best, we could be part of some experiment being performed by an advanced alien life form or something along those lines, but even that would take some major convincing. A spiritual contest between good and evil? I'm a scientist for Christ's sake," he declared, then humorously added, "No pun intended."

"Fair enough. Logically and rationally then and from a scientific perspective, try a few of these facts on for size. I'll ask a question and you provide a logical explanation, okay?" He was recalling his promise to talk and had every intention of accommodating but wasn't quite prepared for this type of topic.

"Of all historical events in the history of mankind, don't you find it just a wee bit ironic that all infinite time is measured by the birth and death of the one man, the one man who had coincidentally professed to be the Son of God?" He looked puzzled and didn't reply. "The bible says that Jesus Christ and God are one in the same, the Spirit of God in the body of a man. God himself would be the only individual worthy of that an honor. There is certain logic to that, don't you think?"

"Maybe there is, and your point is well taken, it even

stimulates some interest, but hardly validates any conclusion, particularly since the calendar was structured by the Catholic Church during a period when Christ was considered a dominant figure."

"He still is," she nonchalantly informed. "But with all the catastrophic events that took place in that era, it seems like more than an ironic coincidence that this particular person was chosen as the pendulum of measurement for infinite time." Eddie offered a faint nod to concur. "Are you familiar with an Astrophysicist by the name of Jeremiah Kane?"

"I've heard of him."

"In one article he stated that," she began to read from a page of notes. "**Our physical laws have shown their reliability in every dimension, while anything put together by man is susceptible to and usually has a number of errors.** Based on that consensus, he set out to disprove the bible mathematically. The Book of Isaiah was written some three thousand years ago, but in that book, God looks upon 'The orb of the earth'. Modern Europe wasn't even aware that earth had a globular shape until the days of Christopher Columbus."

"He also states that there are approximately 2500 biblical prophecies and that over 2000 of them have been fulfilled. The mathematical odds of 2000 predictions coming to pass without error BY CHANCE is less than one in 10 to the 2000th power. That's equivalent to about every molecule in the universe and a profound indication of probability when you consider that science concedes to the second law of thermodynamics. The chance of that law reversing itself is only one in 10 to the 80th power."

Eddie interrupted in a surmising manor, "Water would get hotter without heat." She was certain that she had at least managed to stimulate his interest as he followed up with another question. "What else have you got?"

"Did you know that Christ's crucifixion was forecast in physiological detail hundreds of years before his death?"

"No, I didn't, but I would assume that there's got to be a certain degree of potential for coincidence."

"There would be, if it weren't for the fact that the prediction was made hundreds of years before that method of execution had even been contrived. I don't know what the mathematical odds are, but that would have to be a long shot."

"Look, Maggie, you obviously believe it and you're entitled to your beliefs. That's all that really matters. It shouldn't matter what I think."

"Maybe not, but for the sake of argument, would you allow me to express a scientific concern based on my beliefs?"

"Is that what you're asking?" She bit at her lip. "And this is a scientific matter?" She nodded.

"I've got to talk to someone, Eddie."

"Do you know something?" he began to confess. "In the ten years that we've worked together, I don't recall you asking me for much of anything. How could I possibly say no." He leaned back, extended his arms over the back of the couch and smiled to assure her. "I'm all yours, Mag." She avoided the urge to consider his bold statement from a personal perspective and moved to sit beside him on the couch.

He could see her enthusiasm begin to intensify as she prepared to expound. Had he known where it would lead, he might not have been so willing.

"We both know that our research will most likely lead to the successful rejuvenation of a human being. And I understand that you consider every facet of your work from a scientific standpoint." She paused for a moment and then began to explain, "What about the spiritual perspective? Why hasn't anyone ever taken that into consideration?"

"Considering the odds, if 2000 prophecies have already been fulfilled, it seems relatively safe to assume that the remaining prophecies will be fulfilled as well. With that in mind, I kind of went off on a philosophical tangent and started asking some intriguing questions in hopes of finding a logical scientific solution. Since science couldn't provide the answers, I found myself referring to the bible, which only served to generate

more questions and intensify my curiosity."

"According to the bible, mankind has a living soul. Obviously, that is virtually impossible to prove, but even modern science won't dispute it. Aside from rare occasions depicted in the bible when divine intervention was associated, there has never been a documented case of rejuvenation. Ours will be the first. The bible seems to indicate, and most religions contend, that when a person dies their soul leaves the body. If that's the case, where does it go?" Eddie began to consider the question scientifically.

"Regardless of where it goes, if we successfully rejuvenate a human being, is the soul going to return when we wake him up? My fear is that it won't."

"It seems to me, the only way we could possibly answer that question is to do it," Eddie said with conviction, hoping to allay her fears. "That's what we do, solve mysteries. I admit that I've never given it much thought, but you can't discard the significance of a scientific achievement of that magnitude."

"Once we revive this guy," he continued, "we enter a new dimension of understanding. Biologically, we know that he will be the same man he once was and since we don't know what the soul is or if it actually exists, we have to ask ourselves another question; 'Could man survive without one?' Would the lack of a soul yield negative results or positive? It might just turn out to be an improvement. What's the worst thing that can happen?"

"Do you really want to know?" she urged convincingly. He shrugged his shoulders. "If I'm right, a man with no soul sets the stage for a scenario that pretty much scares me to death. You've read the bible, right?"

"Some."

"Are you familiar with the biblical predictions of the Antichrist?"

"666, Mark of the Beast, Revelation and all that, yeah, a little."

"Many believe, and there's plenty of evidence to support the fact, that we are living in the 'last days'. In the scheme of prophecy, if the Antichrist is real and truly exists, he will have to make his appearance on this planet relatively soon. Virtually all the necessary criteria required to prompt his arrival has already been established. The timing would be just about perfect."

"Based on the biblical description, I find it extremely difficult to envision any ordinary man with political, commercial or military influence filling that slot. The Antichrist is going to be one very extraordinary individual. Some world religions are actually going to perceive him as their Messiah and he'll have much the same impact as Jesus Christ did in his era, but in a contemporary fashion and on a worldwide scale."

"The prophecies are rather explicit too. We know that the Antichrist is a man, but it portrays him as a person with phenomenal powers and the ability to perform miracles. People are going to worship this guy. Can you imagine anyone in the world today attaining that kind of worldwide influence? I can't."

She began pacing back and forth like a prosecuting attorney stating a case. "Stick with me, Eddie. One other aspect makes this man unique. The bible doesn't say when, where or how, but it does say that this 'man' will die and that his fatal wound will be healed. Though it might sound odd, it seems to me that just by rejuvenating our patient, we could very well be fulfilling that peculiar feature."

"Wait a minute, Maggie. Hold it right there. Surely, you're not trying to convince me that our patient could turn out to be this mythical Antichrist. Are you?"

"Well, that's pretty much the direction I was initially headed."

"Initially?"

"What I mean is, all the pieces seem to fit except one. The bible says the man will have died 'by the sword', which means that he was or will eventually be assassinated somewhere along

the line. Since our subject died of natural causes, that basically nullifies that aspect of the consideration." Eddie breathed a sigh of relief. "He did die of natural causes, didn't he?" she asked for confirmation. Eddie rolled his eyes as if her statement didn't warrant a rebuttal.

"Anyway, the bible doesn't tell us who the man is, but it does elaborate as to his spiritual identity. The Antichrist is Satan, the devil himself, parading around in the body of a man. He shows up as an 'Angel of Light', a man of peace and with all the answers to all sorts of problems. This isn't some man possessed by a demon, we're talking about the very essence of all evil."

Eddie shook his head in ambivalent awe of the religious connotation and seemed flabbergasted by her ridiculous hypothesis, but at the same time, he was captivated by her presentation. "Since Satan is best described as the Master of Deception, the biggest and best liar ever, most will perceive him as, and he will convince them that he is, some sort of a god. He will appear to be so righteous that even some of the most devout bible believing Christians will be misled. That's not an easy thing to do."

"We're already a one world economy and one huge interdependent global marketplace. The League of Nations is gearing up for a world leader and with the right person at the helm, it could do wonders for world peace, but if a man with an evil heart has that kind of power...Oh, I dread the thought!"

"The other night at dinner we talked a little about the computerized cashless system. That's an ideal mechanism for the 'Mark of the Beast' and since the true believers will refuse to adhere to the system, that little imbroglio alone could easily initiate the relentless persecution of Christians. That's also predicted."

"Can you imagine what life would be like for those who refuse to participate? You can't get paid unless you have the microchip, which means you can't work. If you don't work, you don't have an income and can't buy food for your family. If your kids were to get hurt or sick and needed medical attention, you couldn't obtain it. You couldn't buy a car or get a license to drive one and couldn't buy gas to put in it. The rest of the

world isn't going to stand by and let the Believers foul up their perfect little system, and there simply aren't enough jails to imprison that many people. You talk about T-F-P."

"Everyone will eventually be faced with an extremely difficult decision. Do I sacrifice my life according to my faith or give in to a system that might very well rob me of eternal life? What about you, Eddie? Knowing that, would you receive the mark?"

"Woe, Nelly," Eddie stated emphatically to defend his position. "I hear what you're saying and it's one hell of a theory, but I'm still not convinced that this God of yours is real and that's a tough one to prove. Even if He is, I can't believe that an omnipotent God of Love is going to sentence most of the world to burn in hell because they elected to adhere to an economical system. That just doesn't make sense. The whole 'good go to heaven and bad go to hell thing' doesn't make sense."

"Take me for example," he said proudly. "I consider myself a good honest person, but am I going to hell because I don't buy-in to the philosophy of some ancient book? Let's face it, Maggie; the will to survive is the most fundamentally compelling element of human nature, it's instinctive. I'd have to take the chip."

"Oh, Eddie, I wish we had time to delve into it all the evidence, because it does make perfect sense. There's a very logical purpose for mankind's existence and it's really quite simple." Eddie rolled his eyes again but beckoned her to continue with a raised arm. "Maybe, when we have more time, I'll explain it all, but my point is this, if we rejuvenate this man and he has no soul, there will be a spiritual void. That would mean that there is a chance that we could be creating a preemptive window of opportunity for Satan to fill that void. Since nobody is expecting him to show up by means of a scientific experiment, rejuvenation provides him a socially acceptable means of achieving incarnation."

"You know what it's going to be like when the first person is rejuvenated. It will be an international media circus and the person becomes world famous overnight. Of course, if there is a soul and it does return to the body OR if the soul never existed

to begin with, it's no big deal. If I'm wrong, I'm just wrong. But if there IS a soul...AND it doesn't return to the body when we revive it...AND it does turn out to be Satan filling that spiritual void, the world is going to be in for one incredibly rude awakening."

Eddie was more confused than anything else and still very cynical but listening. Just when he thought she was finished, she tossed out a little more bait to entice him. "Everyone is going to want to know where he went after he died and if my theory is wrong, it'll be nothing more than a scientific discovery, but if I'm right, it will be Satan who is answering the question and I seriously doubt that he would be answering truthfully, but you can bet it would be convincing. Unfortunately, no one would know the difference until he showed his true colors, but by then, it will be too late."

Eddie felt a chill race through his bones. He had certainly never considered such an outrageous hypothesis and doubted whether anyone else ever had either, but Maggie was referring to any man. Eddie, on the other hand, was beginning to consider the same potential, but with a slightly enhanced perspective.

He got up and slowly moved to an open window, wondering how Maggie would react if she knew whose body they intended to revive. With his little twist, her conjecture seemed considerably more precarious. "That's one very bizarre theory you've conjured up, Maggie. It sure does make a person think."

"It obviously has me thinking," she added. "And there's more. Our scenario would also eliminate a provision that churches have been preaching for years. Having to have been born within a certain time frame and all the other mortal restrictions no longer apply. Now, the Antichrist could make his entrance at his own convenience. It's an ideal situation for him, especially since people these days are so receptive to technological achievements."

"How in the world did you come up with this anyway?"

"I don't know, Eddie, I just started asking questions. The sad truth is, it really doesn't even matter if I'm right. Sooner or later, regardless of how he gets here, the Antichrist is coming. If it's by virtue of our experiment and that happens to

be the Will of God, we couldn't prevent it even if we wanted to, but when we wake this guy up, I'm going to be watching him like a hawk."

Eddie remained placid. "Well?" she hesitantly beckoned. "What do you think?" She began to assume that she had gone overboard. "I hope you're not angry with me."

"Oh no, Mag, not at all. I'm intrigued. I just don't know what to say."

"I don't suppose that I really expected you to. I know it must sound kind of crazy."

"Maybe, but you have got me thinking." Eddie remained silent and continued to ponder. If it hadn't been for their patient's prestigious stature, he might have been more inclined to shun the hypothesis, but his enhanced version of the concept seemed to justify further consideration, particularly since he was envisioning the devil masquerading as the illustrious Vic Dazzle.

He recalled how Dan had described the Dazzle Empire, the world leader in so many categories. He visualized Satan returning to gain control of one of the most influential organizations in the world. It was easy to see how an individual with those credentials could easily manipulate the powerful institution.

The one flaw in Maggie's theoretical scenario continued to surface in his mind, the cause of death. Dazzle certainly had plenty of powerful overzealous adversaries who adamantly opposed his plans for VEDSOL. Suddenly, it didn't seem so inconceivable that one of them could have developed a method of prompting the condition that led to his death. As farfetched as the consideration might have been, it appeared to have at least some merit.

'The fatal wound that was healed'...'Death by the sword'. Perhaps, if he could confirm that Vic died of natural causes, he could at least put some of her fears to rest. He wondered if the cartel had ever explored the prospect of foul play.

Even if Dazzle hadn't been murdered, the potential still

existed for him to fulfill the prophecy. Who is to say that he couldn't be killed after rejuvenation and revived a second time? The resources and technology would certainly be at his disposal. As ludicrous as the whole fantastic scheme seemed, he was finding it very difficult to eschew the thoughts.

"And the blasphemy thing," Maggie embarked again to break the silence. "The predictions say that the Antichrist will have the ability to blasphemy God. I think it would be very easy to do, if I were the first person to return from the dead. A few simple lies that no one could contest, and I'm in there. How could anyone argue my perspective?" Again, Eddie provided a faint nod in response. Whether he liked it or not, he was being forced to consider the possibility.

She sat up and leaned over the back of the couch and with tears wallowing in her eyes longing for some sort of reassurance. She asked softly, "Eddie, do you think we could we be laying the foundation for the inauguration of the Antichrist and the Last Days?"

He returned to the couch and quietly nestled into one corner of it, then instinctively reached out his arms. She moved toward him and sank into his chest clinging tightly to his shirt. With her head at the base of his neck, teardrops began trickling down her cheeks. His weary eyes wandered aimlessly upward. Maggie calmly added, "I guess there is one thing good about it."

"What's that?"

"The arrival of the Antichrist means that we are one step closer to the return of Jesus Christ."

"Yeah, I suppose," he said softly to conclude their conversation. He took an afghan that was draped over the couch and covered her, then rested his cheek on her head and softly caressed her hair.

Everything around them and between them had changed. Eddie had entered yet another unexplored dimension, one that required spiritual considerations. The realm of his work and the perplexities of his emotions had now subjugated some sort of spiritual edification. The enormous stress of an exhilarating

week seemed to engulf them and by 6 PM, they were both fast asleep.

* * *

CHAPTER 11

ONE STEP CLOSER TO SOMETHING

Eddie's short nap was quickly interrupted by the faint tone of the alarm beeping on his watch. Maggie continued to sleep with her head resting on his chest. He yawned and peeked around her to confirm the time. It was 9:30, just one-and-one-half hours before their recovery shift. "Hey," he nudged her. "Yo, sunshine." She slowly began to open her eyes. "Wake up."

"Oh my gosh," she grunted as she stretched. "What time is it?"

"It's time to go to work, if you still want to that is."

"Of course, I do. We can't very well quit now, can we? How does coffee sound?" she asked as she lifted herself from the couch and began shuffling across the floor.

"I'd love some."

"Me too, cream and sugar if you don't mind," she said to inform that he would be providing the service.

"Don't bother, I'll make it. I never did like your coffee

anyway."

"You love my coffee," her scratchy voice rang out from behind the door.

He responded softly and mumbled mostly to himself as he headed for the kitchen. "So, I've got to make the goddamn coffee." He stopped in his tracks, looked up toward the heavens. "Oops, sorry about that, chief. One of those nasty habits I'm gonna have to break." He winked at whoever might have been listening.

He had just concluded his own unorthodox method of brewing and had begun to pour the last cup through a strainer when Maggie entered the room. She sat at the counter opposite the kitchen and leaned forward to peer at the extensive aftermath of what must have been a gallant escapade. She could only imagine and was clearly amused by visions of the antics involved to create such a muddle. He just smiled inquisitively.

"Here you go, Eddie's special blend." He was doing his best to hide a guilty conscience behind a humble grin. With a pleasant enthusiastic demeanor, he proudly placed a mug of his unique brew in front of her.

"Cream and sugar?" she requested.

"Oh yeah, cream...cream..." He stood back, clasped his hands together and began inviting clues with expressive eye gestures. "Let's see now."

"Try the fridge."

He opened the door, located a carton and set it on the counter. "There you go, cream."

"And sugar?"

"Yeah, sugar, coming right up. Where would I be if I were sugar?" he asked comically as he began waving his index finger in a circular fashion with an eye trained on her for guidance. She nodded her head as he pointed in the direction of a container at the end of the counter. "Ah yes, sugar." He placed the container in front of her and retrieved a spoon, then

reached for his own cup. Maggie watched with extreme curiosity as Eddie's eye squinted to battle the taste that he expected to be utterly disgusting.

"That good, huh?"

"Actually," he said before taking another sip, "it's not bad, not bad at all."

"Yeah, right," she needled and then took her first sip. "I don't believe it. This is good."

"Was there ever any doubt?"

"A tad."

"If there's one thing I know, by golly, it's coffee."

"Oh yeah, then what was all that banging for?"

"I had to crush the beans, didn't I?"

"Isn't the grinder working?" She reached for the battery-operated gadget and flipped the switch.

"Grinder?" he ignorantly replied. "Oh, never use 'em. It sacrifices the integrity of the bean and destroys the delicate bouquet, an old family recipe," he boasted with a smirk.

"The integrity of the bean," she pestered. "Well, that's one messy recipe your family came up with. You'll have to share it with me sometime."

"Maybe," he chuckled. "So, how are you feeling this morning?"

"Pretty good, now that I got that off my chest. You?"

"I'm all right, but you throw a wicked curve ball though."

"You ought to see my fast ball." She took another sip. "Now what?"

"Well, as intriguing as it may be, it's going to be

difficult to substantiate, at least from a scientific perspective. We'll just have to take it one day at a time. We're going through with the project regardless. We have to."

"I knew that before I said anything and nothing changes, except maybe my perspective. You are guided by scientific intellect. I'm intrigued by it too but guided by faith. Like the good book says though, 'Fear of God is the beginning of understanding' and you just got your first dose of it."

"Does that mean I've got another dose coming?"

"Don't worry, I'll be gentle."

He thought for a moment. "I'll listen as long as I think you've got something to say. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough, but that could mean spending a great deal of time together."

"Would that be such a bad thing?" he bashfully hinted.

Maggie was pleased to see the welcome change and implied her endorsement with a seductive smile. "Not at all. Hey, you'd better get a move on."

"Shit." He winked at her, took another sip of coffee and started for the door. "See you in the lab."

"Hel---lo. Aren't you forgetting something?" she asked, slyly lifting her hand in a wave as a fond reminder. "I don't have the magic touch, remember? I don't go anywhere without you."

"Oh yeah, sorry. I'll shower and meet you at the elevator in thirty minutes."

* * *

SID'S RECOVERY

It was 10:45 PM and Wally was in the isolation booth with Sid. "Good morning," Eddie said enthusiastically to announce his arrival.

"Good morning," Bernie returned with a chipper voice. "Sleep well?"

"Surely you jest," Maggie jokingly replied.

"It is kind of difficult to sleep on occasions like this, isn't it?"

Eddie was referring to the conversation with Maggie. "You could say that. Morning, Wall, how's it going?"

"Jim fuckin' Dandy," he grunted. Maggie shook her head in humorous disgust. "I'll be out in a few. So, what did ya bring me to eat?"

"Ah oh," Maggie confessed to Eddie with a look of panic. "I was supposed to bring him some lunch."

"Don't worry about it," Bernie said. "I never got around to eating. Give him mine."

Wally came walking out of the decontamination chamber and walked straight towards Maggie with his hand out. "What have we got?" She extended Bernie's plastic container. He opened it and sniffed at the contents. "You made this?" he asked with doubtful eyes. Maggie smiled innocently. He took a small bite. "Bull shit! You didn't make this."

"I didn't?"

"Hell no." He spit the wad of food into a trashcan. "This is some of Bernie's God forsaken health food and it tastes like crap." Bernie lifted his hands in defeat. "Damn it, Bernie. Why can't you just eat the same junk food as everybody else? With him, it's got to be 'el nature-1'. What is this anyway, poop butt on a bun?"

"It's a sour cream guacamole sandwich and it just so happens that I like them."

"You would," he declared as he tossed the sandwich back into the container. "Maggie, do you realize that I could starve to death on the count of this."

"Awwwwwwwe," Bernie sarcastically sympathized.

"Screw you, Vasco! As for you, young lady, I'm gonna give you one more chance to make up for this little mishap. Tomorrow, if you bring me something really special...and I mean delicious...I'll forget that this entire incident ever took place." He pointed sternly and stressed with a humorous facial gesture. "But don't fuck it up."

"Okay, Wally, I promise," she giggled. "Sorry."

"All right then," Eddie begrudgingly intervened. "Now that we've got the important issues settled, can we get back to work?"

Wally placed a finger under his chin and pressed his lips together, then batting his eyes and in a sissy like feminine dialect. "Is he always such a crab ass when he wakes up?" Maggie laughed. Wally looked at the clock and informed the small group. "As usual, I'm way ahead of schedule. I'm out of here."

"Good riddance," Bernie belted.

"See you later, Wally," Eddie chuckled.

"See ya, boys, and a fond farewell to you my love." He lipped a series of tiny kisses as he tiptoed his way out of the lab.

"Bye, silly," she countered with a blushing smile. "He's something else."

"There isn't another like him anywhere," Bernie added. "Well, everything looks good. We've been kicking around some ideas. After this experiment, we're going to run some more tests, but I think we can improve the process and expedite the incubation period. We might even be able to reduce the incubation cycle to a few hours."

"That sounds fantastic," Eddie replied with intrigue. "It'd sure minimize the risks."

"If it can be done, we'll do it."

Maggie was at her post monitoring the perpetual readout while the two men continued their conversation. Suddenly, a faint alarm sounded. "What is it, Mag?"

"Just a slight increase in the heart rate."

"If you'd like me to hang around awhile..." Bernie offered.

"No, but that emergency code might come in handy."

"It sure does. It rings on every strategic phone throughout the restricted areas and at each of our residences. It also flashes a signal on all computer screens on the priority network. It's an efficient system."

The phone rang. "This is Bernie." He listened for a moment. "Okay," he said in a muffled chuckle. "Okay, I'll do that right now." He was clearly amused as he hung up. "That was Dan. He wanted me to give you the emergency code before I leave. I swear, sometimes I think that man is psychic."

"It's really very simple," he explained. "Press CTRL - ALT - Zero and it'll send an immediate alert. To cancel, just press the tab key twice. That's pretty much it. I guess you're on your own for a few hours. Bye, guys."

"It's just you and me again," he said.

"And Sid, of course."

"Kind of like old days."

"Yeah, like a week or so."

Dan showed up just after midnight. "Hello there, and how are you two doing?"

"Fine, just fine. Yourself?" Eddie replied.

"I could be better."

"I could always be better," Eddie informed.

"Yeah," Maggie added. "It's been kind of hard to sleep."

"I know exactly what you mean." He approached the window of the isolation room and stared in. "How's our little buddy doing?"

"Sid's doing good, but I was curious about one thing. I assume you have documented the chimp's behavioral habits prior to expiration."

"Of course."

"How long had he been down?"

"About ten and a half years. Based on previous testing, we don't expect any memory loss, if that's what you are referring to. Have you experienced any with your subjects?"

"We only have one to gauge by, but absolutely none. The only concern has been the effects of the artificial signal, but if we can reduce the incubation period, we might just eliminate those."

"I hope so. We're getting a lot of heat from the Syrian government. They are pushing to search the facility."

"Can they do that?" Maggie asked.

"They can and probably will, but even if they do, they won't have access to anything we don't want them to see and wouldn't know what to look for anyway. Level three has already been converted to a disease control unit just in case and that will appear to be the heart of our operation. Our greatest threat is still the potential for war and that is increasing daily."

"If this test is successful, we may not need a lot of time," Eddie advised to instill some confidence.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm optimistic, but we've got to be certain. I won't rush into it, unless we have to." He reached into his shirt pocket, retrieved a pack of cigarettes and lit one.

"I didn't know you smoked," Maggie shockingly declared.

"I don't," he murmured as he strode way.

"See you around four, Dan," Eddie said calmly. The door slid closed behind him.

"He seems awfully nervous."

"He's under a lot of pressure." Eddie hesitated as he analyzed his own situation. "Look how much is riding on us. It's the difference between life and death, only the other way around. I can only imagine what's going through his head."

The next few days brought one encouraging success after another. The chimpanzee by all medical standards would soon be back to normal. All efforts would now be concentrated on preparations for Vic Dazzle's long-awaited rejuvenation.

* * *

CHAPTER 12

MAGGIE JOINS THE TEAM

Eight days after Sid's rejuvenation, Dan requested another private meeting with Eddie and Maggie. "I hope we haven't worn you two out. It's been a very grueling couple of weeks, but I must say unequivocally, this has been one of the most productive periods in our history and you two seem to fit right in. I am elated that you elected to join our little consortium."

"I appreciate the sentiment, Dan, but I'm thrilled to be a part of it. I should be thanking you."

Even with so many concerns looming in her mind, Maggie was quick to concur. "I'm inclined to agree with Eddie."

"With all that's transpired, we haven't been in a position to fill Maggie in on all the details." Eddie sensed the direction Dan was headed and with Maggie's recent hypothesis weighing heavy, was leery of her reaction. Eddie made several facial expressions to dissuade him from elaborating.

Dan heeded the warning and alluded to a safe haven. "Maybe, now would be a good time to take that little vacation." He watched to see what Eddie's reaction would be. "And Eddie can fill you in on all the details himself."

"I'd be glad to," Eddie offered.

"A few days of R & R sounds divine."

"And it will be five-star accommodations. That's just the way we do things around here."

"Imagine that, Maggie Bennett traveling first-class."

"Don't forget, I'll be there too."

"How could I possibly forget you Eddie?"

"All right, then," Dan finalized. "I'll set it up and let you know your itinerary. When would you like to leave?"

"I don't know, Dan. I've got a little more research to do. I'm not sure yet when I can get away." Eddie was quick to inject.

Why he would put it off, she didn't understand. The critical stage of their experiment was over, and their workload had been drastically reduced. Nothing that she was aware of required immediate attention, but she reluctantly agreed. "Whenever, Eddie. It's up to you."

"Let's put it on hold for now."

Even Dan was confused. "What-ever you want to do."

"Thanks, Dan. We'll see you a little later," he said with his eyes sending a message.

"I'll be around."

* * *

BLOOD TESTS

It was very early, about 5:15 AM, when Eddie arrived at Dan's office. He had a hand-written note to slip under the door but was quite surprised to find the door cracked open and a light burning within. He gradually inched it open to espy Dan

with his head collapsed between sprawled arms on the desk. A momentary chill ran through him.

Eddie was trembling as he made his way behind the desk to examine more closely. "Dan?" he whispered, hoping to wake a sleeping colleague. "Dan?" his voice began to crescendo with increasing concern. He reached out and softly placed his hand on Dan's neck to check for a pulse.

The physical contact sent Dan springing from a deep sleep. Like a schoolboy caught in a classroom napping session, Dan attempted to recover gracefully. Eddie managed to remain unnoticed.

Dan wrestled with the twisted frames of his glasses, then placed them high on his forehead to rub the sleep from his weary eyes and began fumbling through a maze of papers to locate his watch. He held it close...then at a distance but was obviously having difficulty focusing. He rubbed his eyes again, then lowered the glasses into place and strained through the bifocals. He shook his head in disbelief at the time.

In a situation like this, there's no ideal time to make your presence known. "Dan?" Eddie boldly mustered with a clearing of the throat.

Dan calmly turned in his chair, lowered his head to peer out over his bifocals. "Oh, so you're the culprit? I thought I was dreaming. Do you know what time it is?"

"About five thirty, I'd guess."

"About that. Well, you look fresh enough. Been up long?"

"Actually, I never got to sleep. Looks like you were working late too."

"Does it show?"

"A little. Sorry for the intrusion. I was just going to drop you a note, but then I saw you lying there and when you didn't answer, I thought maybe you were..."

"What, you thought I was Dead?" Dan laughed. "Even if I

was, these knuckleheads would probably just freeze me down and wake me up again anyway. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing urgent. We can talk later."

"Nonsense, I'm wide awake now," he emphasized. "Sit down."

"You haven't even had a cup of coffee yet," Eddie suggested

"That's not a bad idea. We'll go up to M-R and have a cup."

"M-R?"

"The meditation room, you haven't been yet?" Eddie shook his head. "Great for the soul." He punched a few commands into the computer. "It's been a while, but if I do this right, we should have us a fresh pot waiting for us when we get there." Eddie got up and headed for the door. "Not that way."

"Huh?"

"Follow me," he motioned with a cynical smile. "I know a little short cut." Dan guided Eddie to the corner of his office and retrieved a key that was hanging around his neck. He then swung a picture of Dazzle to the side, inserted the key and punched in a series of commands on a digital pad. "Hold on." The small pie shaped corner of the room swiveled 90 degrees and promptly began to ascend. Dan proudly offered a simple explanation. "We've pretty much got our own little Dazzle World around here."

"I see that," Eddie said with a quizzical smile.

The elevator stopped and swiveled again to provide immediate access to the meditation room. The soft lights illuminated automatically as they approached small refreshment bar where a computer-controlled coffeemaker had just completed its brew cycle. "Now, that's what I call service. Cream and sugar?"

"Black is fine."

"Go ahead, make yourself comfortable." He pointed to the huge recliners.

Like a child with a new toy, Eddie relaxed into a quilted cotton chair and began to experiment with the panel of the controls. Just as Dan was approaching with the coffee, he flipped a switch that began motorizing the chair blindly in a reverse direction. Dan had to react quickly to get out of its path and avoid spilling the hot brew. "Woe, Mario. Do you want to drink this stuff or wear it?" Eddie managed to stop and rotate the chair.

"Sorry about that." Eddie reached for his cup. "Thanks."

"Now then, what has you up so early this morning?"

"It's a little awkward. May I speak freely?"

"Of course. It's an open forum. Shoot."

"Something's been bothering me, one of those things I just can't shake."

"Go on."

"Well, we know the cause of Dazzle's death, but I'm curious. Were there ever any tests conducted to determine what caused the collapse?"

"What do you mean? "

"Was anything unusual that may have prompted the condition?"

"We did a rather extensive battery of tests, but there was nothing unusual about the circumstances. It was a relatively common condition back then. Blood clots would develop, and the circulatory system would break down. We just didn't have the technology to treat the condition. I thought we covered this."

"We did, to an extent and don't get me wrong, I'm sure that tests were run, but only those that were available at the time. Back then, technology was rather limited."

"What kind of tests?"

"Toxins, for example."

"Poison?" Dan was clearly confused by the ridiculous suggestion. "The answer is, no, nothing indicated a need for such testing," he declared as his tongue began working the inside of his jaw. "Am I to understand that you have some reason to believe that we should have?"

"Unfortunately, not a very good one. I'm sure it wasn't deemed necessary at the time and it may not be necessary now, but I'd like to run some additional tests, just to be certain."

"I don't understand."

"At the moment, it doesn't really amount to a whole lot more than a hunch, but I'd just feel better if it were clarified."

"I don't mean to sound overly argumentative, but I have to be honest with you. What you are suggesting sounds more than a bit ludicrous."

"Hear me out, Dan. First, it's a relatively simple process and it should only take a fair Toxicologist a few days at the most to make a valid determination. Secondly, I'm probably wrong. Matter of fact, I sincerely hope that I am, but as long as it doesn't interfere with the project, it might be well worth exploring."

"If there is a chance, any chance at all, that I'm right and we start pumping blood containing some sort of hidden toxins back into that man..." Knowing that he had made his point clear, he allowed Dr. Karrington to draw his own conclusion without delving into the details that sparked the concern.

"Other than a slightly accelerated process, there was nothing abnormal about his condition. If there were, I think Wally would have caught it."

"Granted, at that time, an undetectable means of achieving such results would have been extremely difficult to produce and administer, but not necessarily impossible. What was considered impossible in the sixties was the concept of Cryonic suspension."

"Listen, Eddie, I understand what you're trying to say, but I can't justify that kind of research on a hunch. I can't even imagine how you might have come up with this ridiculous notion."

"I know, and I may very well be on some wild goose chase, so as not to alarm anyone, I'm volunteering my own time on this."

Dan was clearly disgusted with the entire proposition. "Well, if it's something you've just got to get out of your system, I'll authorize the tests, but for now, we keep it under our hats. There's certainly no point in stirring up the others." Dan's head drooped. "I don't even want to think about it, but if for some God forsaken reason, you do manage to find something I want to know about it pronto."

Eddie sat quietly for a moment considering his motivation. It was a long shot and he knew it. The information wouldn't necessarily prove or disprove Maggie's theory, but if Dazzle had indeed been poisoned, the fact would serve to fulfill that one lingering detail; **'one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed.'** (Revelation 13:3).

"I'm sorry, Dan. My intentions were to prevent a potential problem, not create one." Dan nodded.

Dan lifted his dejected face and began to speak softly and with a very genuine sense of concern. "The thought that bothers me more than anything else, what if you're right?" He remained seated but extended his hand. "Thanks." Eddie smiled in humble acceptance.

Dan retrieved the chain from around his neck with a single key dangling from it. "This key will give you access to our archive computer. It's in the back of my lab and not connected to the network, so no one will be able to trace your steps." He wrote down some commands. "That code will get you into the lab and the other one will get you into the files. If you have any problems, give me a call."

"I will." Eddie set his mug down on the arm of the chair and quietly headed toward the door. Dan reclined with his half-filled cup resting on his belly. Eddie understood. He had been

there once or twice himself.

* * *

CHAPTER 13

EDDIE'S SEARCH FOR ANSWERS

Eddie had no problem accessing Dan's lab and locating the computer, which had been covered with a vinyl drop cloth. He lifted the key chain from around his neck and inserted it to power up the unit. The large system was very slow, an obsolete dinosaur by today's standards.

As Eddie explored the records, he discovered several interesting facts that he was unaware of. Prior to Dazzle's death, he had contributed an extensive supply of blood, which was preserved for replenishment and future transfusions if necessary.

In February of 1980, they were using a technique called Vitirfication, a process hadn't been made available to the rest of the scientific community until 1992. It consisted of a 15% glycerol solution that was used to replace the blood in Dazzle's body. It permitted freezing, even at liquid nitrogen

temperatures, without crystallization, which would damage mechanical tissue and cells.

The blood was stored in a vault located one level below the basement, which housed a cryonic refrigeration unit. A vast amount had also been reproduced with a blood bank cloning system.

He continued researching the wide array of directories and files. As the hours dragged, his mind seemed to wander into cavities of exasperating thought concerning the one aspect of the Antichrist concept that could not be scientifically defined or logically evaluated, he considered the soul. 'If it did exist, what was it, exactly? Was it a religious myth or the essence of an actual substance that distinguished human life from every other living creature?'

He thought of the infinite realm of all that remained unexplained. 'Why is it? Twins are born bearing an identical DNA structure. From virtually every scientific perspective, they are identical. Yet, they each exhibit distinctly different, often opposite, personality traits and phenotype characteristic features, particularly of the moral nature? Could it be the soul that determined those qualities?'

While contemplating the spiritual issue, he stumbled upon a very interesting entry. "**UNEXPLAINABLE WEIGHT LOSS**" was the heading of a brief section containing two rather vague paragraphs. It simply read:

Prior to expiration, as the heart rate and respiration began to decrease at a rapid rate, the patient was transferred onto a uniquely designed stretcher, which was equipped with three strategically located extremely accurate, weight scales mounted on an equally accurate fourth. They were designed to depict and isolate any weight transformation during the freezing process. Scale one was located under the patient's head with a second at his mid-section and a third under the lower extremities. The fourth would measure changes in the subject's total weight.

A weight loss totaling seven grams occurred precisely forty-nine seconds after clinical death and had inexplicably escaped the body. It was measured by scale one and confirmed by

scale four. The miniscule weight loss, presumed to be a concentrated gaseous substance, was apparently relinquished from a region near the Pineal Gland in the cranial cavity. It seemed to pose little or no threat to the nature of our objective and was deemed an insignificant occurrence. All details concerning the unexplained phenomenon are so noted.

Had the notation been discovered under different circumstances or prior to Maggie's input, he might have been inclined to dismiss the thought entirely. At this juncture, however, it sent a wave of possibilities soaring through his head. The numbers associated to the weight loss caught his attention. It seemed to suggest the foundation for a formula. A total of seven grams, the biblical number for perfection, multiplied by the same number equaled the total number of seconds required to achieve the loss of weight. 'A rather odd bit of irony,' he thought to himself, 'and where the hell did it go?'

Eddie began to formulate a crude hypothesis. 'If the soul consisted of minute energy, it would also contain matter, elements which would have to a certain degree substance. Therefore, the energy would account for a measurable amount of actual weight. If that were the case, the weight loss could theoretically have been attributed to the departure of the spiritual entity.' Though it was a fascinating thought and did offer a conceivable explanation, it still seemed extremely improbable. Since the phenomenon was classified as unexplained, it invited the imagination to postulate, but there were certainly no grounds for drawing any conclusion and it only served to stimulate another series of perplexing thoughts.

As a scientist, he was prompted to consider most theories from a purely rational and logical perspective. As a man, he was struggling to resist what his emotions were prompting him to consider. He was getting lost inside the limitless boundaries of irrational thought, which forced him to search his heart. Since the heart is merely a synonym for the soul, what then was he searching?

* * *

THE BLOOD SAMPLES

To initiate lab testing, he would need several blood samples, but the only specimens he was aware of were contained in the basement's central lab and he was leery about removing any from the well-documented supply.

The tests would be conducted in the Toxicology Department of the general lab at ground level where the more tedious time-consuming tasks were performed. The staff upstairs consisted of experts in their field who were hired to follow instructions without asking a lot of questions.

Eddie shut the computer down, placed the key around his neck and returned to his lab promptly at 11:00 AM. Dan met him there shortly after he arrived. "Well, did you find anything useful?"

"Not really. I've scheduled testing to begin tomorrow, but I'm going to need a sample and I don't want to throw up any red flags."

"Good point. You may have to retrieve it from our vault in the basement. How much time do you think you would need?"

"I don't know, fifteen or twenty minutes I'd guess."

"I'll call a team meeting for 7:00 but notify everyone else verbally that it was changed to 6:30. That will give you half an hour."

"Okay, but this is all new to me. Where is this vault and how do I get in?"

"That key I gave you will get you into the vault. Use the corner elevator in my office and take it to Basement-2." He wrote down some directions and more commands. "That's the only thing down there."

"Thanks, Dan," he said, referring mostly to his cooperation.

The day seemed to drag out and Eddie watched the clock tick slowly toward the designated time. He was nervous about sneaking around, but anxious to get the samples.

At 5:30, Maggie poked her head through the door. "I'm heading home to freshen up for the meeting. See you there?"

Eddie nervously shuffled papers, hoping to avoid any mention of the scheduled time. "Yeah, um hmm, but I've still got some work left to do." She disregarded his peculiar reply and left the room. Then, Wally made a bold entrance.

"Hey, hotshot, we've got a meeting you know."

"I know, I know," Eddie replied in an aggressive tone. The deceitfulness was making him irritable. "I'll be there."

"Okay," Wally defended. "Mama wants to cook tonight. Feel like a nice dinner?"

"I don't know."

"What? Do you have plans to go out on the town or somethin'?"

"Mag and I might get together."

"Oh yeah? Well, if you want to get together with Maggie, you'll have to come to dinner. She's gonna be there."

"Oh, she is, huh? I've still got some things to do. You know how it is."

"Okay, if you make it, you make it. If you don't, you explain it to my old lady."

"I'll try."

"Well, c'mon, let's go," he said, looking at his watch.

"Go where?"

"The meeting, dipshit," he declared in a blatant attempt to restate the obvious.

Eddie looked at the clock. It was 6:10. "You go on ahead. I'll be along in a minute. I've got one thing to do first."

"Like what?"

Wally's persistence prompted another stammering session. "Like, I've got to take a dump. You want to give me a hand?"

Wally stared at Eddie with a look of exaggerated concern. "You aren't queer, are ya kid?"

"No, are you?"

"Hell no," he barked.

"Then, I'll take care of my business and see you at the meeting."

Wally slowly removed his foot to allow the door to close behind him. "You're acting mighty strange, boy, mighty strange."

Eddie grabbed his chin and exhaled deeply, then collected a few necessary items and rushed for the door. Certain that the level was now clear, he headed straight for Dan's office. He peeked around the corner to be sure that Wally had entered the elevator, then proceeded at a quickened pace down the hall.

Just as he passed in front of the elevator, the doors whisked open. Eddie froze in a guilty stance to find Wally leaning against the rear wall with arms folded and it didn't take long for him to break the awkward silence either. In a stern suspicious tone, the curious doctor spoke informally. "What the hell are you up to, son?"

"This looks bad, doesn't it?" he began with a crooked smile.

"Sure does."

"But..."

"But what? Your toilet's out of order?"

"Actually, I wasn't really on my way to the bathroom."

"No shit," Wally declared. Eddie lowered his head as Wally stepped forward and glanced down the hall. "The only thing down

there is Dan's laboratory. What are doin', Eddie?"

"Dan didn't want anyone to know just yet, but I'm working on a new angle." Wally just glared with obvious doubt. "Honest, Wally. I'm not doing anything wrong. Dan approved it and even arranged it."

"Don't fuck with me, kid. Do you expect me to believe that Dan confided in you? Bull shit!"

"I can prove it."

"That's not gonna be easy, son." Wally stared at the small Cryonic cylinder Eddie was carrying, one typically used to transport tissue samples or small organs. Eddie didn't even try to hide it.

"I can prove it without having to say a word, but it's important that no one else knows about this, not yet anyway. You're concerned and I understand that, but Dan can clear everything up for you."

"All right then, let's go see Dan."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. I can't right now, but look, Dan called a meeting for 6:30, right?" Wally didn't even nod. "Well, when you get there, Dan will tell everyone that he inadvertently forgot to mention the change to me. After the meeting, we'll sit down with Dan and I'll explain everything, okay?" Wally wasn't convinced and his face showed it. "Please, Wally, just go to the meeting and pretend you don't know anything. Trust me on this."

"Damn it, Eddie."

"You're going to be late and I'm not going to get my work done in time. Please, Wally, just go." Wally lowered his head and slammed his hand on the button. "I'll see you at seven." Wally maintained a vicious cold stare as the door closed to separate them.

It was now 6:20. Eddie rushed to Dan's office and approached the corner of the room to prompt the elevator. He swung the picture frame to locate the keyhole. Eddie searched

his pockets, but in his haste, had left the codes behind. In a slight panic, he inserted the key again and the room began to rotate, but in a different direction and did not descend. "What the hell?"

Now in front of him was a narrow set of steel stairs leading down a poorly lit hallway. Eddie followed them nervously to the bottom, where he found the stainless-steel vault door. The elevator door was directly across from it.

The odd door had no visible handles, latches or hinges and there was no metal access plate, only one keyhole next to the elevator. There didn't seem to be any other means of access. He retreated to the main elevator, inserted the 'magic' key and turned it counterclockwise. The elevator door remained closed, but a loud hissing noise echoed from behind him.

He hunched his head between his shoulders and slowly turned to find a steamy fog escaping from the seal around the door. The huge solid structure began to slide outward and slowly swing to the left. A faint type of light seemed to emit from some form of natural energy contained within the walls and ceiling. He raised the collar on his white coat and tucked his hands under each armpit to keep them warm. There was an amazing collection of obsolete equipment scattered around the room.

At the rear of the vault was another door characteristic of a modern walk in freezer. He grasped the latch. The interior was lined with recessed drawers stacked from ceiling to floor and from front to rear. The temperature in the isle was well below freezing, but the temperature beyond the walls was maintained at liquid nitrogen levels.

Eddie pulled open several drawers, each containing ten rows of two-liter cylinders of preserved blood. He opened another, and then another, amazed by the amount they had managed to accumulate. He finally located one with small titanium vials containing dated blood samples. With a set of steel prongs, he carefully removed four that had been labeled with various pre-death dates, placed them in his transport cylinder and proceeded to make a hasty exit.

He shook the chill from his body and turned the key back to its vertical position. The vault door sealed tightly. Another

turn, this time in a clockwise direction, and the elevator doors whisked open.

He stepped from the elevator and rushed to his laboratory. He placed three of the samples in cryonic storage and the other in an incubation chamber. It was already 6:52.

Wally was fidgety and nervously fingering his watch throughout the meeting, but what Eddie assured, Dan had confirmed.

"Well, I guess that's it. I'll fill Eddie in later," Dan stated to conclude the meeting. Wally remained seated. "Wall, is something bothering you? You seem a little distant." Wally responded with an aloof wave.

"Come on Wally, I've known you too long. What's up?"

Before Wally could speak, the door opened and in walked Eddie. "Sorry I'm late," he said before realizing it was just the three of them. "Woe, maybe I'm early."

"Could you give us a few minutes, Eddie?" Dan asked.

"Sure."

"No," Wally boldly intervened. "Why don't you join us?"

Eddie raised his eyebrows to Dan. "All right."

"Wally?" Dan enticed.

"It was the damndest thing. I'm on my way to this bogus meeting of yours, when I bump into the little private dick here. He was on his way to your lab, workin' on somethin' for you, he said. So, I say to myself...What the hell is goin' on? Then, I said to him, What the hell is goin' on? Now, I'm asking you."

"Oh."

"I got busted, Dan. Wally thought I was sneaking around, and I was too," he said for Wally's benefit, "but not like you thought I was. He could be a big help, Dan, and besides, I'm just not cut out for this undercover stuff anyway."

Dan ran his fingers through his hair and took a deep breath, "I probably shouldn't have tried to conceal it to begin with and that kind of put you on the spot, Eddie. Sorry."

"Dan," Wally inquired with earnest concern. "What is goin' on?"

"I'll leave you two alone," Eddie injected with a humble grin. "Maybe dinner's not such a good idea."

"Did you get the samples?" Eddie confirmed with a nod. "Good."

"I'll be in my lab, Wally." Eddie left and Dan proceeded to fill Wally in on all the details.

Eddie was afraid that Wally might consider the request for testing a direct challenge. "He's going to hate me for this one, I know it," he said aloud as he entered the lab.

"Who?" Maggie asked with timid curiosity.

"Who what?" he said, surprised by her presence.

"Who's going to hate you?"

"Nobody, just blabbering. What are you doing here so late?"

"I could ask you the same question, but you'd just say you were finishing up something that didn't really concern me anyway, so I won't bother."

"Did I miss anything at the meeting?"

"You weren't there, so you had to have missed something, don't ya think?" She paused and leaned on her console. "Actually, you didn't miss much. We didn't address anything we hadn't already been discussed. Personally, I thought it was a waste of time and that's very unusual for these guys."

"Hmm."

"Don't you think that's a little peculiar?"

"Mag, I wasn't even there. How I am I supposed to know?"

"And you were the only one who didn't get the message."

"I just talked with Dan. Everything's fine. It's not a problem, okay?" He seemed very agitated.

"My God, Eddie. What's eating you? Maybe I should ask, 'What's not?'" He took a deep breath hoping she might read between the lines. She did but continued with a change of subjects. "Are you going to join us for dinner at Kate's?"

"I don't think so."

"Would you rather grab a drink?" she said with wishful thinking.

"If it's all the same to you, I think I'll just pass tonight."

"Okay, Eddie," she surrendered to his resistance. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Good night." As soon as she left, he plopped back in his chair and started rubbing the stress from his tired eyes.

Eddie had just begun to relax when the door flew right back open. It just didn't seem like this day was destined to give him an opportunity. "Oh shit!" he said aloud in preparation.

Wally wasted no time getting down to the usual witty criticism. "So, hotshot, I hear you've got a new field of expertise, mine!"

"That's right, Wally. I know more about toxins today than you knew in '66." Eddie quickly refrained from the debate with the waving of his white handkerchief. "Please, not tonight."

What Eddie needed right now was a friend. "Beer in the blood stream?"

"What?"

"Beer, son. Let's go have a beer."

Wally was smiling to let him know that he was there to help. "A cold beer sounds pretty good right now."

"C'mon." Wally held the door and placed his arm on Eddie's shoulder as they left the lab. "Maggie called Kate and canceled for some reason or another and I canceled for the both of us. We can grab a burger in the lounge."

"Oh man, she's going to be pissed."

"Nah, it ain't the first time I've canceled on my old lady and it probably won't be the last. Besides, I'll have some good leftovers tomorrow."

"Actually, I was referring to Maggie."

"Oh." As the elevator door opened, Wally extended his arm for Eddie to lead the way out.

The Oasis Bar & Grill at ground level was a popular gathering place. It provided a relaxing social atmosphere where the huge staff could mingle and unwind.

A small group greeted Wally with a rousing, "Wall."

"Woe," Eddie whispered.

"Go with it, kid," Wally quietly replied. "Evenin' everybody."

"What's shakin', Wally?" One man yelled out from a nearby table.

"There ain't nothin' shakin' but the leaves on the trees and they wouldn't be shakin' if it weren't for the breeze," he said to prompt a laugh from his audience. Then, Wally lifted his hands in a royal wave and began an introduction. "Everybody, this is Dr. Grisham. Eddie, this is everybody." The room of nearly fifty responded. Though most were well-aware of the new arrival and his high-ranking stature, few had had an opportunity to meet him.

"We even brew our own beer here and it's pretty damn tasty."

"I'll try one."

Wally raised two fingers to the bartender. "I suppose I owe you an apology, but you must know by now, that's something I just don't do. So, let's say I did and move on."

"Fair enough, but what do you think?"

"To be honest with ya, I can't even imagine how you came up with the idea, but it just might explain a few things. When does the testing start?"

"Tomorrow. It shouldn't take more than a few days, but if they find something..."

"Yeah, I know, kid, but don't let it eat at ya." The beers arrived and they sat back to permit access. "We should be doin' more of this and a whole lot less of that. Here's to ya, pal." He lifted his mug and swallowed a huge gulp.

Eddie was raising his for a sip when a familiar face caught his attention. Maggie was making an entrance. She had changed clothes, put on some make up and was looking particularly attractive. She made a quick survey of the crowded room but overlooked the two of them who were seated in the rear. Eddie was just about to stand and wave when a handsome stranger approached her. Before he knew it and much to his surprise, she had joined the young man at his table.

Wally began another conversation as Eddie jockeyed his chair and strained for a better view. "Did you hear what I said?"

Eddie glanced at him, then back at Maggie. "No, I guess not."

Wally turned and elevated himself to determine the source of the distraction. "Oh."

"What?"

"She's givin' ya the cold shoulder, kid. What'd ya do?"

"I blew off dinner, then turned her down for a drink after work. Now, here I am."

"Yep, that's a pisser all right."

"Maybe I should go over." Eddie started to stand.

"Woe there, Don Juan. I know you didn't ask and it's none of my business, but it seems to me a little advice is in order here. If you go runnin' over there, I can almost guarantee that she'll make ya feel like a complete idiot. Being a foot tall is no fun, pal. I've been that short before."

"What, I should do nothing?"

"Yeah." He turned around to observe. "Look at her, sittin' with that young buck. She's trying to make ya jealous, boy. If a woman thinks that'll work, she'll use it against ya every time. You aren't, are ya?"

"Am I what?"

"Jealous."

"I don't know, maybe a little, I guess."

"There ya go, but it's not like you're flirting with some girl or anything and she didn't exactly come rushin' right over to see you, did she?"

"No, but I have been a little edgy since this whole toxicology mess started. I think I should go over."

Wally drew back and surrendered with arms folded across his chest. "Do what you've got to do, Little Boy Blue. Just remember, I'm an 'I told ya so' son-of-a-bitch, brother." She was laughing and apparently enjoying herself, something he'd rarely seen her do. "It's all part of the game, pal. If you're going to play, get on a level playing field. Women love that shit. They like to be kept guessing. The girl's fond of ya, kid, even I can see that. Have another beer and relax."

For the first time in a very long time and at least temporarily, his work was being placed on a back burner. The situation with Maggie was taking precedence and oddly enough, Wally was instigating it. With an air of confidence, Eddie boldly stated, "You're right." He took another swig. "Besides, what's he got that I haven't got?"

"Don't ask foolish questions, boy." Wally smiled as he licked the foam from his mustache, then he watched Eddie chug half a mug in one big gulp. "Wow, you've got it worse than I thought."

"I've got what?"

"Drink up, kid."

* * *

CHAPTER 14

DEATH BY THE SWORD?

It was back to work and strictly business for the next two days. Eddie never mentioned the situation at the lounge. Neither did Maggie. Aside from the business at hand, they didn't discuss much of anything, which created a rather uncomfortable atmosphere.

Maggie would catch Eddie occasionally staring and was flattered by the mysterious form of attention but was still unaware of his extracurricular activities and spiritual struggle.

As they were wrapping up for the day, the phone rang. It was somewhat odd that he would rush to answer, but since nothing of any great significance was on the docket, she didn't read much into it.

"Heard anything yet?" Wally asked.

"Somebody's dragging their feet."

"Relax, kid, it's only been two days. Soups on tonight, you and Maggie...a little dinner...might be a good thing."

Eddie looked at his lovely associate. "We sure could use an ice breaker," he said.

"If this keeps up, you're going to need your own personal Zamboni machine."

"What time?"

"Whenever."

"Hold on." He covered the receiver and spoke softly with an air of uncertainty in his voice. "Maggie?" She looked up at him and smiled at his child like demeanor. "It's Wally."

"What does he want?"

"He wants to know if we're free for dinner tonight?"

"He wants to know if WE are free?" she said emphasizing the key word. Eddie nodded his head with a guilty grin. "Tonight?" Again, he nodded. "Tell him that I am," she replied to infer that she wasn't speaking for him.

"Okay," he said softly. "Eight all right with you?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

"Okay, Wally, I guess we'll see you around eight. Thanks." He hung up and spoke again. "I need to unwind a little."

"You've got that right," she mumbled under her breath.

"Huh?"

"Nothing. I haven't seen Kate lately and she sure is a good cook."

"Yes, she is. Look, there's nothing going on that you need to worry about. Why don't you go ahead, I'll just..."

"Wrap up some loose ends, right?" she concluded for him. She rolled her eyes as she shut down her computer. It was 5:30.

A few minutes after she left, the phone rang again.

"Grisham," he answered, assuming it was Wally. "Yeah, what have you got for me?" Eddie's face melted into a pale shade of gray. "No, I don't want to put it off. I'll be right up." He hung up and spoke out in a loud dejected sigh, "F-U-C-K."

* * *

He entered the toxicology department only to be greeted by the man he had seen flirting with Maggie in the lounge. The young man was anxious to make an impression on the new boss and proudly extended his hand. "I'm Dr. Taylor." Eddie resisted the urge to ignore the gesture and halfheartedly shook it.

Eddie's emotions were mixed as he began their business and initiated a formal attempt to infer superiority. "I'm Grisham, it's late and I'm tired, so if you don't mind."

Lance complied with an equal lack of enthusiasm. "Okay, right over here then." He led Eddie to an image from an enhanced video microscope and pointed at the ten-foot screen. "There's your problem."

"That's a virus. You dragged me up here to show me a virus?"

"Oh, it's a virus all right, but that's why it took us so long to find it. What I think you'll find interesting about this strain is how it was induced. It's not your typical infection."

"What do you mean?"

"You see," he stated as he pointed with an electronic device. "This virus has been chemically generated. You're looking at a man-made infection, sir. I've never seen anything quite like it. Where did the samples come from?"

Eddie avoided the question. "The cells look normal though."

"In almost every respect, they are. That's its cloaking device. Some level of various pesticide traces, typically measured in parts per billion or even parts per trillion, are found in a variety of animals and to some degree in humans. This substance is derived from a chemical-compound composed primarily of a pesticide called D-D-T. It was used extensively

by the military back in the sixties."

"But, even if a person was exposed to unusually high levels, we might expect to find traces at a level of three or four parts per billion. The levels in the samples you gave us were more in the range of three parts per million. This person was subjected to a substantial dosage, probably in small quantities, over a long period of time."

"The chemical apparently targets the steroid based hormones produced in the Hypothalamus Gland. The infected hormones then merged with the T-cells to create what appears to be a typical viral infection, but that initiated a slow force-feeding attack of the red cells. That results in a microscopic bloating." He punched in another command and a second slide materialized.

"Even at this stage of infection, the infected cells are almost five times larger than normal. Since the cells are still duplicating at a normal rate, the increased size ultimately begins to hinder the flow of blood. Over an extended period, the decreasing flow would eventually create substantial clotting. Inevitably, the affects will eventually lead to an acute circulatory collapse."

Eddie sat with his elbows resting on a console with his hands restlessly rubbing one another. His full attention remained focused on the screen. "Have you determined how it was introduced?"

"That would require a comprehensive examination, but the large quantities suggest that it was more than likely ingested orally. Based on the stage of progression, I'd venture to say that your patient has a very serious condition."

"Can you give me a time frame for the technological potential?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"You said that D-D-T has been around since the sixties. Could someone that long ago have developed a formula to create a virus like this?"

"Actually, that would make a lot more sense than someone

attempting to develop something like that today. It's too easy for modern science to trace. In those days, they were still exploring its potential, but since it was researched exclusively by the military, it's hard to say. I suppose that a creative chemist with access to the appropriate chemical compounds could have enhanced its use." He paused before making his suggestion. "If you like, I can pass the information along to Medical Archives. They might be able to shed some light on a potential time frame."

"Forget it. It's not that important. Is there any recourse?"

"Sure, now that we've isolated the toxin, but this is an obsolete chemical. No one today has ever worked with it. It'll take some time to develop an antidote."

"We don't have a lot of time. We need some answers now."

"We'll start first thing in the morning."

"And one other thing."

"Yes, sir."

"From here on out, this gets top priority and all details are to remain confidential. You'll have Dr. Karrington's personal authorization first thing in the morning, but you report directly to me. We'll set up to monitor your progress by computer. Any problem with overtime on this?"

"Whatever it takes, doctor. That's our job."

"I want a report on my desk by noon tomorrow."

"Yes, sir." Eddie got up and started for the door. "Excuse me, Dr. Grisham."

"Yes?"

Lance swallowed as he explored unknown territory. "I met Ms. Bennett the other day and I was wondering, is she involved or anything?"

Eddie resisted the urge to express his true feelings.
"Maggie's personal life is none of my concern. Anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Then let's focus on the business at hand, shall we?"

"Sorry I asked."

In a matter of days, Dr. Lance Taylor had become an asset and an annoying adversary. So much was happening so fast, that he was finding it increasingly difficult to adjust to the constant influx of uncontrollable variables.

He went straight back to the lab and began an in-depth study of the toxin. To prevent being interrupted, the ringer had been switched over to a flash indicator and though it had flashed several times, went unnoticed. It was well past 4:00 AM when he finally retired for the night.

As he was leaving the lab, he walked past Maggie's desk and was suddenly reminded of their dinner engagement. His hand began to rub the disappointment from his forehead. "Damn it."

He sat down at her desk to write a letter of apology, but while searching her desk drawer for a pen, came across a greeting card. Curiosity got the best of him and he began to read it.

Dear Maggie,

So far, meeting you has been the highlight of my adventure at this facility. I enjoyed our evening and look forward to many more.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY,

Lance

"Oh my God," he blurted with consequential penitence. "I forgot her birthday." He wasn't sure what disturbed him more, finding Lance's note or his own contrition. He slowly placed the card back in the drawer, retrieved a pen and began to write. 'Maggie, I am so sorry.' He quickly crumpled the paper and

tossed it in an empty wastepaper can. After an extended hesitation, he made another attempt; 'Mag, Happy Birthday! I...' He just couldn't seem to find the proper words. He dropped the paper into the trashcan, shut off the lights and spoke softly to the shadows. "I really am sorry."

* * *

At 10:30 the next morning, Maggie peered out over her computer terminal to greet her tardy associate. "Well, well, well. Did we forget to set our alarm?"

He replied rather harshly, "Back off, will ya?"

If anything, she was expecting a humble apology. She was stunned by his abrupt behavior and followed him with her eyes as he shuffled past, then leaned to observe through his office window. He sat there for the longest time with his face in his hands.

The lack of sleep, she recognized, but the contemptuous attitude was something new. Since she was still unaware of his secret endeavors, she had assumed that his derisive demeanor was due to their personal dilemma. 'Why should he be so upset?' she thought. After all, it was he, who hadn't bothered to show up for dinner. It was odd, though. Just a few days ago, he seemed to be on top of the world. Now, was as though he were carrying it.

She concluded that he needed a friend and was about to fulfill her obligation, when Wally scampered through the door. "Did that lazy boss of your finally show up?"

"Wait a minute, Wally," she attempted to rescue.

Wally looked at him through the window. Even he could recognize the despair. He spoke to Maggie who was now standing next to him at the door. "What's eatin' him?"

"I don't know, Wally. He blew off dinner last night and blew up at me this morning." Wally reached to open the door. "No, Wally," she argued in a whisper.

"I know what I'm doin'," he said with an arrogant smirk,

then rapped lightly on the door. Assuming it was Maggie, Eddie waved her away without raising his head. "Don't worry," he assured Maggie, "I'll be gentle." With that, he burst through the door. "Just who the hell do you think you're shooing, boy? And what's with the 'tude?"

With his elbows planted on the desk and chin now resting on his palms, Eddie conceded with a frown. "What do you want?"

"What do you mean, what do I want?" Wally began with a poor rendition of 'Who's on first?'

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What do you mean, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Damn it, Wally, I've been up all night. Don't mess with me this morning."

"Got the results, huh?" Eddie nodded. "Poison?"

"Yeah, he was poisoned all right."

"I'll be damned."

"Dazzle died by the sword," Eddie's subconscious thoughts had prompted him to define it.

Wally overlooked the paraphrasing. "How about them apples?"

"I'll prepare a report and will call an emergency meeting this afternoon. We're going to need everyone working on this one. The whole project is on hold."

"Awe," he said with lame expression on his face. Eddie squinted his eyes to express his resentment. "Don't flatter yourself, kid. This isn't exactly our first setback. Matter of fact, it's more like par for the course. We've been through worse than this a thousand times. You're a virgin and maybe the first is the toughest, but you know what they say, 'It ain't broke unless ya can't fix it' and now days, we can fix damn near anything."

"We were so close," he emphasized with pinching fingers.

"Welcome to the club, clown, and consider this little hurdle your official initiation. Now, quit moping. It's not like you screwed up or anything. Matter of fact, you probably saved our ass. You did good, kid, real-good and I'm proud of ya."

"You know what we're up against. We're going to lose a lot of valuable time on this one."

"That goes with the territory, son, but when your team's down three runs in the bottom of the ninth with the bases loaded, all ya have to do is let Charlie bat. Now, if you were pitchin' fastballs, there's a chance you'd strike him out, but you're throwin' some wicked fuckin' curves. He'll complain about it, but I guarantee ya, he'll figure out a way to hit that son-of-bitch right out of the park. The guy cloned a heart for Christ's sake. Mark my words, when you need it most, he'll hit a grand slam 95% of the time, but don't ever tell him I said that." Wally headed for the door.

"Sorry about dinner last night."

"You don't have to apologize to me, kid." His voice was low and filled with genuine concern. "You might want to talk with that little girl out there though. She didn't say a word all night, thinks you stood her up. You did too, dizzy dick. If you care about her, you'd better get on the stick and straighten that mess out before things too far out of hand."

"Hey, it's none of my business and I've probably said to much, so if I was out of line," he said solemnly, then boldly accentuated, "sue me!"

"If anybody's been out of line, it's me. Thanks, Wally."

As Wally past Maggie's desk, he whispered, "Cut him some slack, Maggie. He could use a little right now." His comment only added to her confusion.

Eddie's voice was soon ringing out over the intercom. "Got a minute?"

She was enthusiastic, expecting an explanation. "I'll be right there."

She was greeted by a calm weary voice instead. "Get a hold of Dan and ask him to schedule an emergency meeting."

"Emergency?" She was waiting for more details. "Is that it?"

He looked up at her with the same look of dejection he recalled seeing on Dan's face. "That's it."

She began to seat herself across from his desk. "Eddie, if you'd like to talk..."

He looked at her with a partial smile, the best he could muster. "Maggie, I've got so much to say, I wouldn't even know where to begin. Give me a little time, will ya?"

She got up as quickly as she sat down. "Okay, but I'm here if you need me...anytime, day or night." She backed away slowly. "You know that."

He concluded with a back to business comment, "Set it up for three o'clock and ask Dan to give me a call." She quietly closed the door behind her.

* * *

THE CARTEL GETS THE BAD NEWS

At one o'clock, the message alarms were signaling throughout the basement. **"MEETING - CONFERENCE ROOM - 3 PM - URGENT."**

Another moment in the spotlight had arrived but wasn't at all what he had intended it to be. Just when it seemed that they might achieve success, Eddie would have to slam the door shut. He dreaded the thought.

At 1:45, Maggie was knocking on Eddie's door. He signaled her to enter.

"This package just arrived for you." Maggie noted that it was from her new friend in Toxicology.

"It's about fucking time!" Eddie barked.

Maggie was offended by his impudent response. "What's about time?"

"This damn report. It was supposed to be on my desk by noon."

"What report?"

"This one," he reiterated, shaking it in the air. "It's almost two o'clock. This guy is useless."

Maggie quickly began piecing together what she perceived to be the missing pieces to the puzzle. She assumed that jealousy was the reason for his poor attitude, so the negative response sparked a spirited rebuttal. "Who's useless?" she defended with boisterous disgust.

"This Dr. Teelor."

"You mean, Taylor," she sternly corrected.

"Whatever."

"Dr. Taylor happens to be one of the top Toxicologists in his field and he also happens to be a very nice man. Furthermore..." Eddie sat back, folded his arms across his chest in a fashion that he knew would press the right button. "Eddie," she growled.

"I don't care. There's no excuse for insubordination," he emphasized.

She gritted her teeth. "Insubordination?"

"The guy deliberately delayed his report. The man let his personal feelings get in the way of his work."

Maggie's eyes began to water. "Look! I know how important your work is and it's important to me too," she murmured in a plea. "But it's refreshing to find someone around here who is open to discussing other things in life besides work."

His disparaging remarks were spoken in haste, but the damage had already been done. He leaned forward to conclude the discussion. "You're absolutely right, Maggie. I won't even try to deny it." He paused in humble refrain. "You might be right about a lot of things."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" she blurted with tears welling.

"Let's not do this," he advised to avoid the question and more heartache. "Everything will make a lot more sense after the meeting."

"And what's this big meeting all about anyway? We haven't been working on anything that warrants any emergency meeting."

"You're right again, Maggie. WE haven't, but I have. The funny thing is, you're probably the only one who is capable of understanding the significance of it."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"I'll cover some of it at the meeting. The rest, we can talk about later, okay?"

She shook her head, sighed in frustration, pivoted sharply and stomped off murmuring. "Sometimes you are the most confusing, hard-headed, self-centered..."

"And a few other things too," he whispered into the air.

When she returned to her desk, she inadvertently knocked an ink pen to the floor and when she bent down to retrieve it, noticed the crinkled paper in what should have been an empty trashcan. She opened-up the crumpled notes and began to read his attempt at words, 'I'm sorry' and 'Happy Birthday'. "Well, how about that," she said with a twisted smile. "At least I know you tried."

* * *

CHAPTER 15

COINCIDENCE OR EVIDENCE?

Eddie's got the floor," Dan announced. "Please give him your full attention."

"Houston, we've got a problem," Eddie began in a melancholy manner. "I've been doing a little independent research for the past few days. Dan was the only one who knew about it and to prevent undue concern, we kept it to ourselves. I apologize for that."

"Unfortunately," he began, looking directly at Maggie to provide an excuse for his recent behavior, "my concerns were recently confirmed. I've just discovered that our patient had been the victim of a chemically induced virus." The men began to chatter amongst themselves. Maggie was listening intently.

"Would you guys shut the fuck up and let the man speak for Christ's sake?" Wally commanded, then smiled with arrogance and prodded Eddie to continue.

"A chemical compound derived from a pesticide called D-D-T had been administered to our patient over an extended period, most likely several months. It infected the steroidal hormones and acted as an undetectable cell altering mechanism. The

synthetic virus targeted select hormones, which were secreted into the blood stream and attacked the red blood cells causing them to increase in size. The effects eventually lead to acute circulatory collapse."

"Blood samples were provided to Toxicology three days ago. I have copies of the results for everyone. Gentlemen," He began retrieving the report from a folder, "our patient didn't die of natural causes." Eddie resisted the urge to look Maggie in the eye and began sliding copies of the report across the table to each member of the team.

"You're saying he was murdered." Dr. Archer inferred placidly. Eddie nodded with assurance. "You're absolutely certain?"

"Okay, so somebody killed the guy," Wally satirically added to escalate the conversation. "Now what, call in homicide?"

"Dan?" Eddie redirected.

"Obviously, there's far too much water under that bridge. We simply must forge ahead. It doesn't really change our objective, only our strategy. It does, however, complicate the process."

"Taylor's staff is already working on an antidote." Eddie gritted his teeth at the mere mention of the name. "We'll be setting up a direct computer link to monitor his progress. First, we'll have to develop a method of eliminating any traces remaining in the body, then a means of filtering the tainted supply. We'll also have to be certain the virus didn't affect any of the organs or the nervous system. My guess is that Vitrification probably inhibited the effects, but an absolving solution will still have to be administered. Of course, that will mean raising the body temperature, which will most likely compound the decomposition factor."

"Unless," Charlie added.

"Unless what?" Eddie encouraged with faint enthusiasm. Wally winked at Eddie to reaffirm his claim, 'Charlie and the Grand Slam.'

"I was just thinking." He hesitated in deep thought.

"What, Charlie? You're thinking what?"

"It should be relatively easy to treat the blood supply, but I'm more concerned about increasing the body temperature."

"For cryin' out loud, Charlie. Quit beatin' around the bush," Wally impatiently blurted.

He calmly obliged. "Maybe we could kill two birds with one stone, remove the toxins and rejuvenate all in one process." An air of intrigue filtered through the room as they considered the possibility. "It would simply be a matter of taking the necessary precautions."

"Why not?" Stan indulged. "It would be far less dangerous than increasing the temperature just to cleanse the system."

"That's an interesting concept, Charlie," Dan concluded. "Bernie, your thoughts?"

"It makes sense to me."

"Wally?"

"Sounds like a plan."

"What about you, Eddie?"

"That might be the way to go, but if we're going attempt to absolve during rejuvenation, we'd better be damn sure about the antidote. This Taylor, how good is he?"

"You should know by now, if I didn't have complete confidence in Lance Taylor, he wouldn't be here."

Eddie could read the 'I told you so' thoughts in Maggie's eyes all too clearly. "I guess that's how we'll proceed then."

Dan directed his new instructions to Maggie. "Will you need any assistance establishing a computer link with Toxicology?"

"I wouldn't think so. I'll get started this afternoon."

"I hate to say it," Dan added, "but it looks like more long days ahead."

Wally chuckled sarcastically. "So, what's new?"

"Dan," Eddie requested for his own selfish reasons, "I'd like to work directly with Taylor."

"Sorry, that's Charlie's field. Besides, we'll still be working on preparations for the rejuvenation and that's where you'll need to be."

Eddie appeared dejected and demonstrated his reluctant agreement with a soft nod. He quickly apologized for the impropriety. "You're right, sorry."

"I understand," he said to encourage him. "By the way, I'd love to hear how you arrived at your theory." Eddie shuddered at the thought of trying to explain that one. "Can you imagine the mess we would have had on our hands? Vic's not even alive yet and you've already saved his life." The team quickly began to disburse.

A chill raced through Eddie's bones as he considered his motivation. It was true that he may have saved a life, but if Maggie was right, whose soul will he have saved? The spiritual aspects were affecting his objective manner of thinking.

Maggie noted one very interesting point. It was the first time she had heard their patient referred to by name. By virtue of his discovery, Eddie had also provided the missing ingredient to Maggie's prophetic formula. Theoretically, their patient now met all the necessary criteria and the 'fatal wound' was about to be healed.

What Eddie had failed to realize, was the powerful impact his discovery had on Maggie. She strolled down the corridor, recalling scriptures as best she could. Revelation, the 2nd verse of the 13th chapter read; **'and I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast. And they worshiped the dragon, which gave power unto the beast: And they worshiped the beast, saying, who is like unto the beast? Who is able to make**

war with him?'

'And there was given unto him a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies; and power was given unto him to continue forty-two months. And he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blasphemy his name, and his tabernacle, and them that dwell in heaven. And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given to him over all kindred, and tongues, and nations. And all that dwell upon earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the lamb slain from the foundation of the world.'

Eddie had the distinct advantage of an enhanced perspective. 'Could Cryonic rejuvenation, mankind's greatest achievement, actually serve as a prelude to the Last Days?' Until recently, he would never have considered such an illogical premise.

One of the prophetic scriptures remained prevalent in his mind and appeared to be his only source of salvation. Revelation 13:16 - 19; **'And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their forehead: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.'**

'Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: For it is the number of a man; And his number is six hundred threescore and six.'

That nefarious number was trapped in his mind. 'If the bible was written for all mankind, the 'understanding' wasn't intended for some elite group of theological experts to decipher.' Perhaps, he could disqualify Dazzle as a candidate based on the inability to associate that number to his name.

When he returned to his lab, he sat down at his computer and typed in the name, Victor Elias Dazzle.

Eddie decided to explore the possibility with the same relatively fundamental method Kate had mentioned concerning Ronald Wilson Reagan. The former president, based on the number of letters in each of his names, was once rumored to have fit the description. Though it seemed almost too simple, it did

provide an inviting challenge.

Victor had six letters, so did Dazzle, but the middle name only had five. '6-5-6,' he concluded with a sigh of relief. He was surprised by how close his simple approach came and for some reason, was compelled to pursue the prospect and began to research the Greek translation.

He typed in another command. The computer provided him with a complete profile and history:

The name, Elias, stems from the Greek translation of the Hebrew name, Elijah.

Ironically, Elijah contained six letters. Consequently, the translation had provided a reasonably acceptable means of associating 6-6-6 to Victor Elias Dazzle, but it certainly didn't provide overwhelming evidence. He read on:

The name, Elijah, is derived from the original Hebrew language and is interpreted to mean, Jehovah is God. The name, Jehovah, was replaced in the King James Version of the Holy Bible with the interpretive term, Lord. The ASV renders the name, Jehovah, throughout.

Eddie was flabbergasted by what he read next:

When the vowel points were added to the Hebrew consonantal text, the Masoretes (Jewish Scribes) inserted the vowels for Antonia. The sacred name, Jehovah, is derived from the verb "to be", which was implied, 'to be eternal'.

A chill raced through his body as he interpreted the translation, 'To be like God.' This alarming fact had dramatic significance, particularly since Eddie was associating the correlation to a man who would soon be in an opportune position to assume the role of the biblical Antichrist.

He recalled another scripture that Maggie had mentioned, something about Satan's objective, and began searching through the electronic scriptures. "Isaiah, Isaiah, Isaiah something," he gasped as he located it. "That's it." Isaiah 14; verses 13 & 14 read:

'For thou (Satan) hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most high.'

Satan's goal is precisely what Dazzle's middle name translated to mean. These findings were much more than a simple matter of ironic coincidence. He reached for the telephone and punched in an extension.

"Toxicology."

"This is Dr. Grisham. I'd like to speak with Ms. Bennett please."

"One moment, Dr. Grisham." There was a brief period of silence while he waited.

"Hello."

"Maggie, it's Eddie."

"No, sir. This is Kathy. Ms. Bennett isn't here."

"Where is she?"

"I believe she went to lunch."

"Let me speak to Dr. Taylor then."

"Actually, I believe they left together."

"What?" Eddie barked.

"May I take a message for her?"

"No," he replied much more calmly, "no message." He slowly lowered the receiver into his lap. "To hell with it." At this point, she was the only person with whom he could conceivably share the information, but his enthusiasm was curbed as quickly as his erupting emotions. He now had an archrival in one Lance Taylor.

* * *

WALLY'S TURN TO LEARN THE TRUTH

Eddie arrived at the lab to find Wally hovering over their patient in his extravagant protective suit. He switched on a microphone. "Wally."

Wally jumped back with enlarged eyes peering angrily through the mask. "For Christ's sake," he yelled, as he focused on Eddie. "Turn the fuckin' volume down, will ya? I'm old, but I ain't deaf."

Eddie lowered the volume. "Sorry, Wally. How's it goin'?"

"It was goin' just fine til you showed up. What time is it anyway?"

"Around two. Hungry?"

"You buyin'?"

"Sure."

"Then I'm hungry." He quickly made his way to the decontamination chamber and as he stepped out, proudly tugged at his pants. "I think I'm losing weight."

"I think you're wearing bigger pants," Eddie wittingly returned. "What do you say we sneak out of here for a while."

"Do I detect a touch of dismay in that voice?"

"Probably."

"What's up, kid?"

"What's not, might be an easier question to answer."

"Spit it out, sour puss."

"Man, I don't even know where to begin."

"It's Maggie, huh?" he asked assuredly as they began walking.

"She's only part of the problem and now there's this big handsome smooth-talking stud in the picture. I never knew I had a jealous bone in my body. Now, it's like my whole skeleton is."

"Wow, I knew ya had some on your shoes, but I didn't know you were up to your ass in it. You're whipped, boy."

"Yeah, I guess I am, but how could I have worked with her all those years and never have seen it. Why is it surfacing here and now? It just doesn't make any sense."

"Never does, never has and probably never will. I don't think it's supposed to. Don't go wasting time trying to figure it out either. You've got no control over it."

"What do I do about it?"

"Have ya tried telling her that, Dipshit?"

"I've got so many things in my head right now that I can't even think straight, much less talk straight."

"I know what you mean."

"No, I don't think you do. That's the other part of the problem. I'm dealing with something else I don't understand."

"The poison?"

"That's not it."

"What then?"

"It's this 'no soul' concept."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"Dazzle, man, I'm talking about Dazzle."

"What about him?"

"What if we revive this guy and he doesn't have a soul?"

Wally rolled his eyes. The last thing he expected was a philosophical discussion. "C'mon, Eddie, think about what you're suggesting. We don't even know if the soul exists."

"That's right," he emphasized, "we don't know and that's the kicker. What if it does?"

"Okay, for the sake of argument, let's say it does exist. If we wake this guy up and he doesn't have one, so what?"

"Have you ever really thought about it?"

"I gather you have."

"I've thought about it a lot lately. Do you want to know what I think?"

"Not really, but since your so hell bent on the subject, I doubt if I have much of a choice anyway."

"You used to go to church, right?" Wally nodded. "Well, do you believe all that biblical crap, the good and evil thing, God and Satan and all that?"

Like a typical salesman, Wally responded in a manner that might avoid the question. "What'd you do, get religion or something?" Wally leaned back against the wall and folded his arms behind his head.

"As a scientist, if you were confronted by odds of one in ten to the 2000th power, wouldn't you be inclined to at least consider the possibilities?" Wally shrugged his shoulders. "Did you know that there are like twenty-five hundred bible prophecies and more than two thousand have been fulfilled?" Wally turned his palms up and shrugged as if to say, 'So what?' "That's the mathematical the odds."

"Okay, so you got an A-plus on your Sunday School lessons. I still don't see the connection."

Eddie knew what he was up against and that his argument had to be convincing. "Well, I'm no expert on the bible, but..."

"Is this going to take long?"

"It might."

"Shit, I'm hungry."

"Order in a pizza if you have to, but I'd like you to hear me out on this one."

"Hold that thought," he said with a smile as he reached for the phone.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm ordering us a pizza."

"You can do that?"

"Sure, what do you want on yours?" he said to infer that he planned on eating an entire pie himself.

Eddie chuckled. "Pepperoni with extra cheese."

"Mike, I'd like two of those 16-inch-deep dish pizzas of yours, one pepperoni with extra cheese and one with the works. Send it down to level eight, Lab four. Thanks, bud." He patted his belly and spoke to it, "Rest easy my friend, the Calvary's comin'. Well, we just as well get comfortable," he said as they headed for the lab.

Wally stretched out on a couch in Eddie's office. Eddie grabbed a chair and sat down across from him. "What I'm about to say is going to sound a little crazy at first, but I wouldn't pester you if I wasn't duly concerned."

"All right, kid, shoot."

Eddie began delivering his detailed theoretical scenario.

Though Wally would ask pertinent questions in hopes of finding a flaw in the rationale, Eddie was able to defend his position and Wally was beginning to take an interest in what he had to say.

After more than an hour, Eddie was concluding.
"Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing anything for sure until we revive him. If it's all true, the Antichrist is coming regardless, but we just might be delivering him."

"Do you really believe that we're opening some sort of spiritual portal and the devil is going to travel through it?"

"No, I'm just saying, what if?"

"And you expect me to say what?"

"I don't know that there's anything you can say, but I wanted you to know just in case. If Dazzle turns out to be the Antichrist, we could be in for some serious T-F-P."

"Then what, go out and save the world from evil?"

"I don't know," he admitted after a long hesitation.
"Maybe."

"Eddie, you're a good man and a damn good scientist, but an evangelist, you're not. Take some advice, son. Keep this hypothetical revelation under your hat. If you go preachin' that kind of theological crap around here, you're liable to get locked out or locked up. Nobody's gonna let anything interfere with their work, and that includes me."

"Don't misunderstand me. This is personal, just between us. I know what we've got to do and there's no doubt in my mind that we're going to do it."

"Damn," Wally attempted to humorously acquaint. "You make it sound like an old Frankenstein movie."

"If Dazzle turns out to be the Antichrist, he'll make Frankenstein look like a puppy dog."

* * *

CHAPTER 16

THE OTHER SIDE OF A VERY FINE LINE

Having planted the seed of thought in Wally's mind, Eddie left the lab and headed straight for Maggie's apartment. He was anxious to share his most recent findings. He knocked softly, but there was a long delay before she answered.

"Eddie," she began with lucid surprise in her voice. "What are you doing here?"

"I just happened to be in the neighborhood," he said with a humble grin. "I was hoping I could take you up on that 'anytime, day or night' offer. Can we talk?"

She was quick to recognize his sincerity but was now faced with a very uncomfortable dilemma. She searched for an excuse but lying to her friend wasn't something that came easily. She finally managed to formulate a lame one. "Gee, Eddie. I was just about to jump in the shower."

Eddie glanced down at her evening attire. She was already dressed for dinner and a light scent of her favorite perfume lingered in the air. The truth quickly began to surface. "Actually, I sort of made plans for the evening," she ultimately confessed. "Can I call you later?"

Eddie made a feeble effort to glance through the opening, but Maggie took a cold frigid stance. Her reluctance seemed to confirm his suspicions. She wasn't alone and he had a pretty-good idea who was inside. Eddie somberly yielded. "I guess I should have called first. You go ahead and have a good time." He placed a hand on her arm and squeezed. "You deserve it." Though disappointment was written all over his face, he winked to demonstrate that he wouldn't interfere.

She wrestled with a sense of loyalty and commitment. "Eddie." He turned back toward her. "I'll call you later, I promise." Eddie pressed his lips into a grim smile and slowly walked away.

A wave of shameful chagrin began pelting her heart. She had managed to stir Eddie's emotions, but the game had gotten out of hand.

Eddie found himself on the elevator browsing the floor selection. He needed some time to himself but didn't necessarily relish the thought of being home alone. He selected the ground floor and headed for the Oasis.

A friendly female voice greeted her only customer at the bar. "What's your pleasure, Dr. Grisham?"

"Do I know you?"

"Not yet," she said, extending her hand. "My name's Liz, but everyone calls me Ruby. Of course, everyone knows who you are."

"They do, huh?" She smiled to confirm. "How about a beer, Liz?" he intentionally avoided the nickname.

"I like that. Light or dark, draft or bottle?"

"Which one's the strongest?"

"We've got an import from Japan called Black Leopard, guaranteed to put a buzz on your butt. Oops, sorry," she blushed.

"Don't be. Lay one on me."

"You've got it." She retrieved a bottle from the cooler.
"Bad day, huh?"

"Does it show?" Eddie slumped into a 'cry in your beer' kind of position with his hands pushing his face into a mound of wrinkles.

"Nor really, it's just that when someone orders a Leopard, there's usually a good reason."

"I've got to admit, I've had better days." Liz moved to the center of the bar and began washing some glasses. She was a very attractive sandy blonde and her hair was worn loosely in a bun. Tight fitting faded blue jeans and a lax white blouse gracefully enhanced her figure. The package was topped off with a bright smile that never seemed to fade.

"Here's one you've probably never heard before," he chuckled. "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

"Thank you," she said with a gleam. "But it's not really such a bad place."

"You're obviously an American. It seems like a long way to travel just to tend bar."

"I suppose it would be, if I were commissioned as a bartender."

"You're not?"

"Nah, just my turn in the barrel. It's supposed to be a form of social activity, a good way to meet people and all that."

"Oh, I hope I didn't offend you or anything. I figured...well, they've got everything else around here..."

"Actually, they have an excellent food and beverage staff. This is a just mystery bartender kind of thing."

"I guess it's my lucky day then, that you'd be working I mean."

"If you consider that lucky."

"I do. What department do you work in?"

"Toxicology," she answered proudly.

"No kidding? I've been doing some work with your department lately."

"Don't I know it? The whole department is jumping."

"Is it that bad?"

"Not really. We're usually stuck working on menial research. At least, we've got a real challenge for a change."

"I'm sure it is. I guess you've met my associate then?"

"Oh yes, Ms. Bennett has become a regular fixture. She's good too."

"She knows her stuff all right."

"She and Dr. Taylor have been spending a lot of time together," Liz stated in a tone that seemed to express disapproval.

"Yeah, I met Dr. Taylor last Thursday."

"So, I heard," she grinned. "I gathered that you two didn't exactly hit it off."

"That was my fault. I didn't give him much reason to appreciate me, but I didn't particularly care much for him either."

"You're not alone."

"Oh? Don't you get along with him?"

"We get along fine, now. Once he finally realized he wasn't

getting in my pants, we came to a mutual understanding. Lance has a somewhat of a reputation with the ladies."

He felt a silent rage building as he thought about what she had imparted. "Should I be worried?"

"About Maggie? Nah, she seems to have a good head on her shoulders. When he realizes he's getting nowhere, he'll back-off."

"I don't know. Maggie seems to like him."

"He is a very likeable guy, at first. Then again, she hasn't had much of a chance to get to know him either. Besides, his wife keeps a pretty short leash on him."

The astounding news forced Eddie to spray a sip of beer onto the bar. "The guy's married?" He grabbed a napkin and began wiping his chin.

Liz giggled as she grabbed a rag and began cleaning up the results of his disconcert. "He's a jerk, but most guys like him usually are. He's awful good at what he does though. So, I guess the company lets most of his escapades slide."

"Is he really that good?"

"The best I've ever worked with," she declared. "As for Maggie, I'm not so sure that Lance is her problem." She rested her arms on the bar and began rocking back and forth to the music. "Of course, it's just an observation and none of my business, but I was given the distinct impression that she's trying to make someone a little jealous."

"Is that so?" She nodded. "Well, what do you know?" He smiled with an air of pride. "Thanks, Liz. I guess I owe you one," he said without admitting to anything.

"Maybe I should have kept my big mouth shut. Another beer, doc?"

"No thanks. I think I've had just enough." She winked at him to express that she understood. "By the way, Ruby, what's the tipping policy around here?"

"That's another one of the many perks. Nobody pays for anything, I get overtime for the hours and the company tacks on a forty percent gratuity for everything I serve, kind of like a bonus."

"You can't beat that. We'll have to get together sometime," Eddie offered as he got up from his seat.

"Don't be surprised if I take you up on that," she hinted, then tested the waters with a first name basis. "Have a nice evening, Eddie."

"I believe I will. Good night, Liz." He pointed to a group of people and said with a huge smile, "You folks have a nice evening too." As he reached the elevator door, he turned back towards the bar. Liz lifted her hand and waved with a warm smile. He returned the gesture and stepped into the elevator.

* * *

THE WALLS COME TUMBLING DOWN

Eddie entered his apartment to find the red message light flashing in the darkness. It was 8:15 and more than an hour had passed since he had left Maggie's apartment. He pressed a button to confirm the source and just as he was about to play it back, the doorbell rang.

"Hi," Maggie said softly with an element of uncertainty. Her hands were rubbing nervously. "Is it okay if I come in?"

He stammered a reply, "Sure, of course, come on in." He hesitated before expounding. "I thought you had plans for the evening?"

"I guess you didn't get my message."

"No, I just walked in the door."

"Maybe it's better that you didn't." She started to reach for the erase button. Eddie softly touched her wrist, then reached across to begin playing the recording.

"Hi, Eddie. Guess who?"

As the message began to play, Maggie strolled over to the fireplace and laid her head in her arms on the mantle. Eddie reached for the remote control to ignite the flames.

"You're my best friend, Eddie. When I needed you to listen, you were there for me." She began sniffing at obvious tears. **"Tonight, you needed me, and I wasn't there for you. I just wanted you to know how sorry I am."**

Eddie swallowed dry air and lowered his shaking head with gentle understanding. **"I've been pretty foolish too. I really didn't know that a man could be so deceitful."** She struggled to laugh. **"I'm not alone though. There's a Mrs. Taylor too. Pretty funny, huh?"**

"If you still needed a friend, I'm available and I could sure use one right now. I'd like to come by for a while. I'll be over in about half an hour." A soft beep signaled the conclusion.

Eddie dimmed the only light and joined her at the fireplace. He folded his arms in a similar fashion on the opposite end of the mantle and laid his head on its side looking at her. She turned her tear-filled eyes toward him.

"A rough night?" he asked. She blinked her eyes and attempted to smile. "You want to talk about it?" She shook her head to decline. Then Eddie asked, "Did you mean what you said?"

"Which part?"

"That I'm your best friend?"

"Of course, you are, but you already know that." Her vision was now trained on a crystal trinket directly in front of her. "You've been my best friend for a long time." She picked up the crystal statue and began twirling it in her hands, watching the firelight bounce from the faceted surface. "You know me better than you'd ever admit." She turned back toward him. "And I think I know you pretty well too."

The firelight was dancing off the tears on her face and

sparkling in her eyes. Eddie couldn't help noticing how sweet and innocent she appeared at that moment. "You probably know me better than I know myself," he said.

"Probably," she agreed with a faint chuckle. Eddie focused on his distorted reflection in a commemorative plaque. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," he replied nonchalantly.

"It's kind of personal." He scrunched his eyebrows and began biting at his lip. "There's one thing about you that I've never understood."

"Which is?" he nervously inquired.

"You probably won't answer and don't have to, but I'm going to ask it anyway."

"Go ahead."

"We've known each other almost eleven years now and during all that time, I've never known you to go out on one single date. How come?"

It took a while, but he softly reprimanded with a question of his own. "What kind of question is that?"

"It's just that I've never seen you express interest in a relationship with anyone."

"So?"

"It's just that you never once made a pass at me. How come?"

"God." He pushed away from the mantle and backed slowly toward a tall back chair. Maggie kept her vision focused on the crystal, but their moment of truth had arrived, and he prepared to face it.

"Maggie," he boldly admitted. "I've always thought you were the most attractive woman I've ever known." She turned back to face him with a glare that teetered on shocking awe. "I suppose

that if I had any self-confidence at all when it came to women, I might have made some sort of advance, but that's something I lost a long time ago."

Maggie slowly walked to the matching chair and snuggled into a comfortable ball. His wall of stone began to crumble. If they were to have any chance at a future, he'd have to share his past.

"It was the summer of '93. I was doing summer grad work at Northwestern. Debbie had one of the leading roles in a school play and she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. I went way out on a limb to meet her, even got myself invited to a private cast party."

"It took almost a month, but I finally convinced her to go out with me." Eddie sent a warm smile into the fire. "For the next three months, we spent about as much time together as two people could. Before I knew it, the summer was over."

"I had been accepted to M.I.T., a once in a lifetime opportunity. So, I did what I thought any man in love was supposed to do and asked her to marry me." Eddie chuckled. "She looked me right in the eye and said, no. It was all rather pathetic."

"I went on to school and she moved back to Seattle. I wrote letters, she didn't. You didn't have to be Einstein to figure that one out. She found herself a rich guy and I never saw her again. What I thought was too good to be true, turned out to be just that."

"On one hand, I felt that I had experienced more love in a few months than most men could experience in a lifetime," he murmured in an artificial chuckle, "but I also had to experience the pain of losing it. So, rather than running the risk of finding love and losing it again, it seemed easier to just resist the temptation. I haven't taken a chance since."

Maggie slipped her shoes off and remained silent as Eddie explained himself further. "Then of course, you came along, another lady way out of my league. All the tantalizing fantasies seemed to end with the same vision of inevitable disaster. I couldn't see one without the other, so I left it alone. Besides,

I liked what we had and wasn't about to cross that line and risk losing a friendship like ours. They're just hard to come by. That's just the way it was for me."

In a small broken voice, she reiterated one of his words, "Was?" He looked up at her with a puzzling stare. "You said, 'That's the way it was.' Has something changed?"

"Maybe," he halfheartedly confessed. "I don't know, Maggie. Lately, it seems like everything in my life has changed."

As she prepared to speak, tears began to flow and reflected the flickering firelight as they trickled down her cheeks. "I think anything worth having has a certain element of risk. Sometimes, you've just got to take a chance of getting hurt in order to find true happiness. If you don't, you risk not living a fulfilling life. A life without love is a life that's incomplete, don't you think?" she wavered.

"Maybe, but I've learned to live alone and be content and at least I'm not miserable. There are a lot of married people who are."

"I'm content too, but I'd rather be happy." She struggled to retain her composure as the words began to formulate. "I think I'm in love with you, Eddie. I have been for a long time," she apprehensively confessed, then breathed a sigh of relief. "There, I said it."

Another extended period of silence followed Maggie's declaration. Her heart was racing with nervous anticipation and his with restless abandon. They were both eager to make this breakthrough, but just as Eddie was about to respond, the phone began ringing. Eddie slowly made his way to answer it.

He cleared his throat. "Grisham. Oh, Liz. What's up?" He looked over at Maggie. "That's very kind of you, but I'm sort of involved with a special lady at the moment." Maggie peeked around the back of the chair.

Eddie smiled at her and winked as he concluded his conversation. "Thanks a lot. No, you made my day. Sure, you too. Good night." Eddie casually strolled over to Maggie's chair. "I must be a pretty popular guy, two proposals in one night."

Maggie was grinning from ear to ear. "What do you say, do you want to go steady?"

"Oh Eddie."

"You've got to take chance, right?" He shrugged his shoulders. "They put a bottle of champagne in my fridge. Want some?"

"That sounds wonderful," Maggie replied like an enthusiastic schoolgirl on a prom date. While Eddie searched for some glasses, Maggie retreated to the restroom to restore her face. It gave Eddie an opportunity to create a more romantic setting. He fetched a comforter and some pillows from the bedroom and spread the thick soft blanket out across the floor in front of the fireplace. The wine was chilling in a plastic container.

Eddie sat up as Maggie reentered the dimly lit living room. The firelight reflected off sequences that lined her dress and danced on the walls and ceiling. Symphonic music played softly in the background. Their time had finally come, and Maggie was about to hold the man she loved in a way she had only dreamed of. She knelt on the comforter across from him and pressed her forearms together between her legs.

Eddie pressed his rigid jaw into an awkward smile and handed her a partial glass of wine, as if to make a statement that he was content with or without the consumption. She understood and raised her glass in appreciation. Finally, the only words that came to mind finally reached his lips. "You are so beautiful."

She reached her glass out to lightly toast his. "Ditto, doctor." With smiles competing to express their heart's desire, they sipped their wine. In anticipation of a kiss, Eddie moistened his lips, but nervously refrained with another sip. Maggie unfolded her legs, slipped her heels out from under and rested her upper body on her extended arm. Eddie leaned back against the chair, extending both legs toward the fire.

"More wine?" Maggie asked to help relieve the tension.

"Maybe that'd help. I guess I'm a little nervous. I just

don't...I..." Before he could complete the obvious, Maggie leaned to kiss him lightly on the corner of the mouth. "...I... think..." She repeated the gesture. He slowly reached out to softly caress her cheek. Maggie closed her eyes and lightly pressed her face to his touch and leaned closer. Eddie's wandering eyes traced every millimeter of her beauty.

They shared their first night of a new life and an unbridled romance had begun. Though the urge to give themselves completely could never have been greater, they refrained from succumbing to the desire and an exciting unsung passion would remain alive in their relationship until the appropriate time.

* * *

ANOTHER MORNING AFTER

Eddie was first to awaken from the peaceful slumber. It had been quite some time since he had slept alongside a woman. Maggie's head was still cushioned on the bicep of his right arm with her right hand resting on his chest. Her auburn hair was draped across her face. He carefully swept the soft strands to one side. She was still fully clothed, but the colorful comforter had been wrestled to the side and her skirt had gathered to provide a full view of what it was intended to conceal.

He lifted his head and glanced down briefly, then with a blushing smile nervously shook his head. He puckered his lips as he evaluated the embarrassing situation. The awkward position prevented him from reaching with his free hand, so in an effort to do what a gentleman should and without disturbing her, he carefully lifted his left leg up and over her body in an attempt to reach the excess blanket that had collected on the other side. He became amused with the challenge and silently chuckled as he tried to pinch at the blanket's silky edge with his toes.

It didn't take long for his persistent activity to rouse Maggie who began peeking through partially open eyes to determine the cause of the excessive commotion. She observed for a moment with intense curiosity before finally realizing her predicament.

Maggie watched as Eddie's mouth stretched into a variety of

interesting shapes to assist his straining efforts. Soon enough though, he was flaunting a proud smile as he pulled the blanket to within reach of his free hand and gently covered her exposed body.

Maggie was overwhelmed by his honorable deed but refrained from smiling too audaciously and snuggled even closer. Eddie's little exploit had secretly served to enhance her highest esteem. They quickly fell back to sleep.

* * *

Maggie awoke at 10:15 to find herself alone but could hear the shower running. She wasn't sure why he had let her sleep in but didn't cherish the thought of being late for work again. She neatly folded the bedspread and placed it on a nearby chair. Before leaving his apartment, she thought it would be fun to leave him a humorous message on his computer. She pressed a key and a bold message appeared: **RELAX - WE'VE GOT THE DAY OFF!**

She was impressed with his unusual display of wit and the fact that he knew exactly what to expect of her. She was thrilled with the prospect of having some free time and headed straight for the kitchen to prepare her version of a fresh pot of coffee.

Eddie emerged from the bedroom with a towel wrapped around his waist and another draped over his shoulder. His hair was still wet and uncombed. "Good morning, sunshine."

Seeing him in that light was another first and she liked what she saw. "Well, good morning. How did you sleep?"

"Better than I have in a long time, not a whole lot mind you, just better."

"And how did we manage to get the day off?"

"Oh, oh, oh," he bolstered with excitement in his voice. "Not only do we have this glorious day off, my queen, but I spoke with Dan this morning."

"And..." she egged on.

"And you and I are leaving for France."

"You're kidding?"

"Do I look like I'm kidding?"

"When?"

"Today!"

"Seriously?" He nodded with bold smile. "I can't believe it. We're actually going to Paris?"

"Yep, just you and me," he said romantically, "and an entourage of bodyguards."

"Bodyguards?" she challenged with a snicker.

"Hey, we're big time V-I-P's now. We get the royal red-carpet treatment, a private jet, limousines and lavish meals. We're going in style, lady. Everything's under control and they can do without us for a few days."

"That's great! What time do we leave?"

"That's the best part, no timetables," he bragged. "It's not like we have to schedule a flight. We can leave whenever we want. How about 'as soon as you can get ready'?"

"Believe me, I'm ready."

He leaned in and kissed her lightly on the lips. She grabbed a corner of the towel and dabbed at a trickle of water on his nose. "We've got a lot to talk about," he said, referring to the project.

"We sure do." Of course, her reply was in reference to their future as a couple.

* * *

CHAPTER 17

PARIS

There they were, dressed in semiformal attire, enjoying a fresh lobster dinner on the balcony of a plush restaurant overlooking the city lights. It was probably the most romantic setting any couple could possibly hope for. With a full moon, candlelight and the Eiffel Tower as their setting, the ambience seemed perfect. Maggie was sure that nothing on earth could dispel this beautiful moment. Unfortunately, the King of Nothing on Earth was sitting directly across from her.

"There's something I've been wanting to tell you." Eddie's expression appeared to be a prelude to what Maggie was hoping would lead to a romantic interlude.

"Yes, Eddie," she replied passionately.

Realizing that she was obviously expecting him to journey in a much different direction, he grinned and chuckled. "Believe me, there's all kinds of things I'd like to say, but I really wanted to talk a little bit about the project."

She dropped her head. "How apropos. Here we are in the most romantic city in the world and you want to talk business. Okay, Eddie," she invited. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry, Mag. I don't mean to spoil your evening and I wouldn't have brought it up if it weren't important."

"I'm sure it is, but I don't mind telling you that your timing stinks."

"I can't argue that, but you don't understand."

"Oh yes I do."

"Huh uh."

"Problem?" she asked with a look of surprise.

"Well, no, but there are some things that you need to know."

She was hoping for poetic flattery. Instead, she found herself preparing to discuss scientific probability. "All right, Eddie. What don't I know that's so important?"

"This may not seem like the right time or place, but I don't really know if there ever will be a right time."

"You're dancing," she educed.

"It's our patient."

"There is a problem, then?"

"Well, not scientifically speaking, but for you and me though, there may be reason for concern." She now had a blank stare. "What I mean is, I know you have wondered who our patient is?"

"Oh, of course I have," she declared receptively.

"This project was started more than forty years ago and that is another very long story. Anyway, it has all escalated to the point we're at today." He looked her in the eye and with carefully chosen words, continued, "At first, it didn't seem to matter much who the guy was, that is until I found out who he was. Then of course, you shared that little theory of yours. Now, I have an entirely different perspective."

"Well, who is it?"

"Get ready," he prepared her with a deep breath.

"More wine, sir?" The waiter seemed to have worse timing than Eddie.

"Leave the bottle and see that we aren't disturbed," Eddie requested, holding up a twenty as incentive. Maggie was amused by the assertive gesture. The waiter accepted the bribe and left.

Eddie delved right back in. "Do you remember that seminar we attended in Orlando, back in May of 2000?"

"Vaguely."

"Randall Miller was the speaker. He talked about rumors of a man being frozen down in the late sixties. Do you remember that?"

"Kind of, but that was a such long time ago."

"It didn't mean much to me at the time, but as fate would have it, the rumors were true."

"Our patient?" she asked to confirm.

"Yep! And his name is..." He paused to ensure that no one could overhear. With raised eyebrows and a cocky grin, he said, "...Vic Dazzle!"

Maggie gasped and lost the grip on her wine glass, which

shattered on her plate. She placed her hand over mouth to hide the huge opening and held it there. "Oh my God," she murmured through her fingers. "Oh my God."

"Yeah," he enlightened as he reached across to pick up the pieces of broken glass. "That's pretty much the standard reaction. Now, you'll be able to understand a lot of things now, like why I was so distant for a while."

"Oh my God, Eddie," she repeated as she lowered her hand and retrieved her napkin. She dabbed it at the corners of her mouth, then her forehead and finally at the wine from her glass which was now running over the edge of their table.

"Incredible, huh?"

She pondered for a moment trying to formulate an appropriate reply. Like Eddie, she was beginning to consider the potential ramifications. Eddie poured some more wine in another glass. She took a long slow sip. "Do you realize what this means?"

"Yeah, if we revive Vic Dazzle and prove your theory wrong in the process, it could be the best thing that ever happened," he proclaimed. "But if we revive him and your theory turns out to be correct, whew! I don't even want to think about it."

"That sums it up pretty well. Now, a lot of things are beginning to make sense."

"Like what?"

"The poison, 'Death by the sword'. You didn't stumble on that piece of information. You were looking for it."

"Well," he admitted, "you got me thinking, but I didn't really expect to find anything."

"But you did."

"Yeah, and the more research I did, the deeper it got. I found some other rather ironic facts that you might find interesting."

"Like what?"

"Like 6-6-6, I even found the number in his name."

"How did you manage that?" she asked with discerning doubt.

"It seems kind of silly to me. I mean, what do I know about establishing the number of a man? So, I used Kate's formula," he steadfastly claimed. "It seemed almost too elementary, but it did lead to some intriguing conclusions."

As Eddie went on to explain, he uncorked their second bottle of wine and before they had concluded a very lengthy conversation, had started on a third. It was well after midnight when they retired to their luxurious suites. Eddie had the bottle in hand.

Neither was accustomed to excessive drinking and both were feeling the effects, giggling like small children and stumbling most of the way to their adjoining rooms.

"Are you ready for bed?" Eddie asked with slurred words as they reached the door.

"Not really."

"Do you want to come over for a while?"

"Sure." Her replies remained simple.

"I feel good, I mean really good. Matter of fact, I've never felt better." Maggie watched and listened with comical intrigue. "Here I am, in the most beautiful city in the world, in one of the finest hotels in the world, with some of the best champagne in the world, and with the most beautiful woman in the world. I'd say I was doing pretty good."

"Yep."

He loosened his tie and wrestled it off over his head, then fell back into a large chair. "God you're beautiful."

"You're pretty cute too."

"Why don't you slip into something a little more comfortable?" he cleverly invited. "But not that nappy ass bathrobe, okay?"

Though it may have been the wine prompting her response, she was aroused by the prospect of exploring this romantic endeavor. "Don't go away. I'll be right back."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Eddie just sat there gleaming and watched her pass through the door, then helped himself to another huge swig. He placed the bottle carefully between his sprawled legs and then began sinking lower and lower into the chair. Soon, the wine had taken its toll and he fell fast asleep. The bottle toppled forward and began dribbling out onto the floor.

Maggie's grand entrance was all for nothing. She had paused at the door to give him a stunning vision of the long sheer negligee, which barely concealed the black lace teddy beneath. A lot of women would have been disappointed, she wasn't. If anything, she may have been somewhat relieved.

A heartfelt snicker quickly transformed into a laugh as she tried to rouse him. She just couldn't bring herself to leave him sleeping in that uncomfortable position, but the bed was too far away, and she wasn't strong enough to carry him. Then, she noticed that the lightweight chair was situated on an oval rug that was spread out on a polished marble floor. Her unusual plan was set into motion.

She neatly rolled the excess rug up behind the back legs of the chair, then carefully leaned the chair back and began sliding it toward the bed. Though she managed to accomplish that portion of the task without too much difficulty, she still had to get him into it.

After some more innovative thought, she carefully repositioned Eddie into a horizontal position with his legs over one arm of the chair and his head drooping back over the other. She tilted the chair back until it rested on the edge of the bed, then circled around and positioned herself between the legs of the chair. She bent down, gripped the lower set and in one swift motion, lifted with all her might. Eddie's body rolled

smoothly onto the bed.

After a brief reprieve, she pulled the bedspread across to cover him, then wiped her hands together as if shaking off some dust and collapsed in the chair. "Now we're even," she said, referring to the comforter incident in his apartment.

Then, much to her discontented surprise, Eddie sprang up with a huge grin on his face and informed, "That was the most incredible example of scientific ingenuity I have ever witnessed."

"Eddie Grisham," she scolded with an angry grimace. She grabbed a pillow and without warning sent it plopping into his face.

He fell back, laughing uncontrollably. "That was great, Mag, the way you slid me across the floor and rolled me onto the bed. I was impressed."

"You are such a jerk," she exclaimed as she dived at him with wailing fists. "You're going to pay for that one."

"I hope so." He restrained her with a tight hug. "Are ya mad at me?"

"Um hmm," she whimpered.

"Will you forgive me?"

"I don't know." He kissed her lightly on the cheek. "That's certainly not going to do the trick," she assured. He kissed her on the other cheek. "Nope." That was followed by another planted warmly on the tip of her nose. "You're getting warmer." Then, it was a soft tender kiss on the lips. "Well," He kissed her again. "All right," she surrendered with a hug.

"I just thought you ought to know the kind of man you're getting involved with."

"How will I ever I be able to trust you now?"

He kissed her again. "I'm an honest guy and I could never lie to the woman I love, not for very long," he admitted

proudly.

"I can't believe it."

"Believe what?"

"You actually said it."

"Said what?"

"You love me."

"I did?" he questioned himself. "Well, of course I did. I mean, I do," he confessed. Maggie was beaming. Then, he said the words again with genuine conviction. "I do, I love you, Maggie Bennett."

"That's nice, Eddie," she said to casually repudiate. The exuberant smile on her face expressed her true feelings. "Now, go to sleep," she instructed, then closed her eyes and snuggled up close to him.

"You don't want to fool around?" he nudged.

"No way, Hosea. You blew any chance of that," she said with a slap on his chest.

"Not even a little?"

"In your dreams."

"Now, that I'm accustomed to." They snuggled up together and were soon fast asleep.

* * *

Eddie slept in and woke up alone with his hangover at 11:00. He got up, put on a robe and shuffled lightly through the suite. "Yo," he bellowed ever so softly. There was no answer. He rubbed at his bloodshot eyes as he entered her room. On the table near her bed was a note.

Eddie,

What a wonderful night! Thanks for sharing.

I decided to do some shopping. Had to, we're in Paris. Thought I'd let you sleep. You probably needed it. I'll be back this afternoon. Enjoy the reading material.

I Love you,

Maggie

Eddie chuckled when he noticed the book she was referring to. A bible had been placed on her bed and was open to the Book of Romans. He wasn't too sure about taking that particular step, but he was in no shape to do much of anything else, so he tucked the book under his arm and retreated to his suite. He tossed it onto his bed and headed for the shower.

* * *

EDDIE'S DREAM

Feeling somewhat refreshed, he propped several pillows up and began thumbing through the book, hoping for divine guidance or, at the very least, some 'words of wisdom'. To entice a response, he offered up his version of a prayer. "If there's really something to all this spiritual inspiration, I could sure use some. Would you mind?"

After several minutes of sporadic searching, a verse caught his attention, Jeremiah 29:13. It read; **'And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.'** He glared up beyond his ceiling and responded to the message. "Isn't that what I'm doing? I mean, if Maggie's right, we're going to need all the help we can get. Since I don't really know you, I'm not too sure how to go about finding you and I'm not even sure I'd know you if I did." After a sense of being spiritually urged, he offered another witty reply, "Okay, okay, I'm reading."

Another passage, Joel 2:28, registered in his heart. **'And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions:'** "Well, I don't have any sons or daughters and I doubt

if I qualify as young, but I could sure use a vision here." He attempted to read on, but soon drifted off to sleep. He promptly ventured off into a very vivid dream.

Though it seemed like he'd just dozed off, several hours had passed before Eddie woke up. The dream seemed very real and left a lasting impression, but he could only recall insignificant fragments and was oblivious to the glimpse of futuristic events he had just experienced.

Eddie looked down at the open book and the passage he had highlighted. '**And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.**' He closed the book and set it on a nearby table. Though the physical body was exhausted, his troubled mind seemed refreshed.

* * *

Maggie had been gone all day and at 5 PM, to compensate for his blundering last night, Eddie had arranged for dinner to be served on their private terrace. A knock at the door only let him know who it wasn't. The attendant rolled in the dinner cart.

"En-tre-vu," Eddie bellowed in a futile attempt to speak the language and laughed at his own inadequacy. "Just put it out on the balcony."

"Oui m'sieur."

Then he heard a noise in Maggie's suite and rushed to the open door. He grabbed the door-jam and swung his body inside. "Hey there, sweet thing."

"Hey yourself," she replied gleefully.

"Where have you been?"

She laid a stack of papers on the table. "I went out to do some shopping but ended up at the library."

"The library? Paris has some of the world's finest art galleries and you end up at the library?"

"I couldn't help it. Curiosity killed 'Kitty the Cat'. I

did some checking up on Mr. Vic Dazzle. I wanted to know a little more history on our patient."

"Gee, Mag," he chuckled with a shake of the head. "I thought I was bad."

"I know," she said with a huge grin.

"Did you find anything?" She gave him an odd look that seemed to indicate that she had. "Hmmm. We can discuss it over dinner. I hope you're hungry."

"Famished."

"I ordered in."

"Well, isn't that special?"

"More like lazy," he admitted.

"And what did you do all day?"

"I read your book for a while and took a nap."

"My, you are getting lazy."

"I had one hell of a dream too."

"A daydream?" she comically remarked, then began to sing, "What a day for a daydream."

"I'm serious. It was the strangest thing. I almost never dream and this one seemed so real."

"What was it about?"

"I don't know. I'm pretty sure it was about God and the future, but I can't remember any of it." They seated themselves at the table and began sorting their dinner items.

"Give it some time, maybe it'll all come back to you."

"So, what's up with Dazzle?"

"Well, I found some pretty interesting info."

"Like what?" he asked as he took a bite.

"Keep in mind, I'm applying this information to a man that could conceivably be the Antichrist. If Dazzle's our man, he's going to have more clout than we thought." She grabbed her stack of papers and began to read. "This is from a biography and states that he created what came to be known as the Dazzle Device, a powerful means of compelling one's attention to a specific product that it particularly treasured. Its aim was the most vulnerable portion of the adult's psyche, their feelings for their children. The machine's voice was so pervasive and persuasive that it would first force the child and then its parents to pay it heed and money. The machine was designed to shatter the two most valuable things about childhood, its secrets and its silences. It forced virtually everyone, young and old, to share the same formative dreams."

"Woe."

"That's not all. One of his key employees wrote this; 'Dazzle was an artist and the strongest desire an artist knows is to create a world of his own where everything in it is just as he imagines it.' A Chicago schoolmaster wrote: 'Dazzle's world is not a child's world at all, because a child is a human preparing for the future. Dazzle's world is actually an adult's world, because adults are individuals relaxing into their childhood.'"

"Dazzle was first to launch a concept unprecedented in America or on any other continent, compensatory education for an entire generation of children and this is where it gets really good. He had his greatest impact between the years of 1940 and 1965, the baby boom years when one third of the U.S. population was under the age of fourteen. By 1980, the Dazzle Device had been revamped and improved to accommodate a worldwide market."

"The baby boomers absorbed it and introduced it to their children on the same premise. Every generation since has been subjected to both worlds, reality and that which Dazzle created for them. Pretty-much everyone alive is, at least to some extent, familiar with 'The Delightful World of Dazzle'? His spirit has been alive for seven decades. Imagine the influential

power a man with his credentials would have if he came back today."

Eddie stopped chewing. "Imagine the power of the Antichrist pretending to be that man. That's a scary thought." He started to speak again but refrained.

"C'mon, Eddie. What were you going to say?"

"Nothing really, just a weird thought."

"Tell me."

He patted his lips with his napkin, folded it on his plate, then rested his hands on the table and stretched backward. "It seems to me, on the outside chance that we are right about this, how are we going to handle the situation?"

"I'm not sure."

"If Dazzle turns out to be the Antichrist, he's not going to let us run around spreading the bad news and besides that, who's going to listen anyway? Who are we to question the integrity of the great Vic Dazzle?"

"You're right and it's going to be a lot more difficult to convince people after the fact."

"That's a good point, which pretty much brings us back to square one. We don't even know for sure if the sky is falling. The only way we'll ever know is to rejuvenate him, so we're stuck in the middle."

"I just hope we're wrong, Eddie." Though she elected not to share it, she had begun to consider some options. In her heart, the eternal obligation to her Lord and Savior far exceeded any worldly commitment to any mortal experiment.

Eddie elected to change the subject. "What do you say we paint the town?"

"I can be ready in an hour."

"I'll line up the limo," he said with a chuckle. "We just

as well enjoy it while we can."

"They can't fault us for that."

* * *

There they were parading around Paris in the back of a white stretch limousine. Even with all that there was to see and do, the two seemed content with casual conversation, the topic of which kept drifting back to their dilemma.

At this point, the extent of their involvement and the potential for disaster was far too intense to ignore. They were exploring the mind and learning a lot about life, enlightenment and each other. Their new bond also permitted Eddie to cross over that elusive spiritual border in his search for understanding.

"Maggie, I've been reading that bible of yours." She pressed her lips into a proud smile of approval. "Tell me something. Do you really believe in the theory of divine creation, 'In the beginning' and all that?"

"With God, anything is possible. In my opinion, though, what is so significant about the creation process described in Genesis is the value of its insignificance."

"Huh?"

"All that controversy is so ridiculous. Science and religion have been debating creation and arguing evolution for years. Even though Darwin's theory involved years of extensive research, all which was explained in a rather lengthy thesis and has a certain degree of undeniable scientific relevance, the fact remains that it's still a theory. The bible was written thousands of years ago and contains sixty-six books. It offers a profound spiritual edification that should be viewed in correlation with science."

"You even know how many books there are in the bible?"

"Thirty-nine in the old testament and twenty-seven in the new," she answered with an air of artificial arrogance.

"Wow, I'm impressed."

"There's a simple little formula. Thirty-nine and twenty-seven, if you multiply the THREE times the NINE, it equals TWENTY-SEVEN. Add them up and you get sixty-six. My dad taught me that one."

"That's pretty good."

"It gets better."

"Yeah?"

"Mm hmm. Specific numbers represent specific things. Like, the number seven. That's the number symbolizing perfection, multiples of seven and so on. For example: There are seven days in the week. It took six of God's days to create the world and on the seventh day, He rested. There are seven seals, seven candlesticks. It's used symbolically over and over. The numeral six generally represents evil. Almost anywhere you find a six, there's that association, like 666."

"Like the weight loss, seven grams in forty-nine seconds," He reminded her.

"Mm hmm. That could very well be. Forty is a number that symbolizes a challenge, periods of divine testing and things like that. It rained for forty days and forty nights, Christ was tempted for forty days and so on. There's a bunch of them. You just have to develop an understanding of their meaning."

"This is my own personal observation, but a fact that very few seem to consider. The book of Genesis has fifty very long, detailed chapters, but only one, about two pages of the entire bible, is devoted to the description of the creation process."

"You can't say much in two pages."

"That's exactly my point and I don't think it was intended to. In my opinion, what God is saying is, it's insignificant. Since mankind couldn't possibly comprehend the technology, don't worry about it. Give it about as much thought as I gave it reference. How he created the world and the details aren't important. Just know that in his infinite wisdom, he created

everything."

"Consider it in terms of a more scientific technological perspective. We know that time is infinite and if God has been around since the beginning of time, He's had a substantial head start on the rest of the universe when it comes to acquiring knowledge. Mankind, as intelligent as we may seem, is simply a collection of biological organisms that God, in one way or another, created. In some remote cavity in the recess of his mind, man may very well harbor the un-harnessed capacity to develop similar capabilities, but even if he had another billion years of evolution, he could never fathom infinite wisdom."

"The human brain is the most complex organ known to man. What could be more ironic than the very fact that we use our brains to study the perplexities of the brain? Perhaps, in time, man could eventually understand it, but God designed the component. When you consider that, it's not so difficult to envision the potential for God to create an entire universe and then some. In proportion to an infinite universe and God, one day could be a billion years or more. Whether he created it all by means of billions of years of evolution or one twenty-four-hour day is insignificant."

Eddie was poised with an intriguing glare and an attentive ear. He beckoned her to continue. "Modern Astronomy has been able to estimate the number of galaxies in our universe, somewhere around 155 Billion. They can even estimate the number of stars in each galaxy, yet the nearest star is over one trillion light years away. We know that black holes exist, and they've even located a few, but still have no clue as to what they are. Mankind may never know, but God created them, and they serve some very distinct purpose. Facts like that help put it into perspective."

"Okay, but," Eddie argued, "are we supposed to believe that man was formed from the clay of the earth, God breath air into him and he became of living being?"

"No," she corrected with an inveigling declaration. "First of all, you've got to get the wording right. It's very specific and what you're referring to is the creation of one particular, very significant man. Adam, he created with an exclusive purpose and 'into him God breathed the 'BREATH OF LIFE' and man became a

'LIVING SOUL'. God didn't breathe 'air' into his lungs. If that were necessary, he would have had to breathe life into all the other creatures."

"Adam was the first man God created in a very particular blood line, an exclusive genealogical chain. From that select family tree, Jesus Christ would eventually emerge and that is what makes it significant. The wording, 'breath of life' was very unequivocal. That specific phrasing is only used one other time in the bible and that was in reference to the great flood. Noah and his family weren't necessarily the only survivors, just the only remnants of that particular bloodline in whose nostrils God had breathed the 'breath of life'."

"You're saying that there were other survivors."

"I don't know that, but it seems reasonable to assume that there could have been. Remember the Legend of Atlantis?" Eddie skeptically nodded. "Well, there may be some truth to the legend."

"If the rain hadn't ceased for weeks, and fountains of water were spouting up from the surface, and all land appeared to be flooding, I don't doubt that the will to survive prompted people of various nations to take some kind of evasive action. You said it yourself. Survival is instinctive, that's human nature. Other nations from various parts of the world may have recognized the danger and took evasive measures to preserve life as they knew it. I certainly would have."

"However," she concluded with absolutism, "there was an element of significance that pertained to God's overall plan, the spiritual lineage that had to endure. The entire bible refers primarily to aspects of life as they pertain to that specific bloodline."

"That's an interesting analogy."

"As far as I am concerned, it is religion that makes it complicated. Instead of uniting in what they have in common, most tend to thrive on their differences of interpretation. Few seem to recognize that the biblical description of creation process in Genesis lacks one very important detail."

"And that is?"

"Though it's discussed throughout the bible, the opening statement fails to mention the creation of evil. The only reference to it is the existence of 'The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil'. Adam and Eve lived in a perfect harmonious part of the world, the Garden of Eden. It's quite clear that evil existed long before Adam, but it's the first time it is ever mentioned. There had to be a reason."

"Adam and Eve were permitted to eat all the fruits of the garden, anything and everything they wanted, except for the fruit of this one particular tree. Why? A God who knows everything including the future, wouldn't have put the temptation there in the first place unless he knew exactly what was going to transpire? It was all part of the master plan. Adam had to fail in order to set the stage for the eventual arrival of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the spirit of God in the flesh. That's the significance and it's all interrelated."

"I've got to admit, I never looked at it quite like that before. That still leaves a lot that's unexplained though. Take the dinosaurs, for example."

"Good point. Science has proven that they existed as early as 65 million years ago, but there's no mention of dinosaurs in the bible." Eddie was curious as to what her explanation for that phenomenon might be. "To date, the most popular theory for their mysterious extinction is still the meteorite theory. The effects of such a catastrophe provide an explicable means for their demise."

"I did some research on that at M.I.T.," Eddie recalled, "But what does that have to do with it?"

"Their existence is insignificant in relation to the spiritual lineage. The bible deals primarily with the present, by that I mean the age of mankind. Though the bible provides insight to the time before creation and the future, its emphasis is on God's chosen people."

"Let's suppose that God's existence has been one hundred trillion years, whatever the infinite beginning of time is. Somewhere along the line, he created heaven and the universe."

Everything was perfect, perhaps a little too perfect. In this elaborate universe, there were hordes of angels and evil was nonexistent. It was so perfect."

"It's kind of like a boxer who claims to be the best fighter in the world. If he's never challenged, he can't very well prove his claim. God wanted to demonstrate just how perfect His universe was. So, he conceived a plan to prove it. The only way he could do that was to create evil in its purest form and provide every opportunity for evil to conquer all that is good, including himself."

"So, he elected to create one exclusive angel with one unusual quality, the ability to rationalize and think for himself. That was Lucifer. Originally, he was the greatest of all the angels and was given full reign over all heaven. He was God's right-hand man, but at some point, thereafter, God took a fragment of himself - whatever that is - and gave heavenly birth to a son, Jesus who existed with him in heaven, even had authority over Lucifer. Lucifer became jealous and rebelled against God. All this took place in heaven before life as we know it was created."

"After the rebellion, Lucifer was cast out of heaven. To help keep things in perspective, consider that his punishment was this world. On an infinite scale, our world is rather insignificant. Since the creation process described in the bible as it pertained to mankind occurred after the dinosaur age, life on earth prior to that period would have been irrelevant. It may not have been a meteorite that ended that era." Eddie offered another one of his questioning glares.

"Remember, Lucifer wasn't dismissed from heaven, he was CAST out with extreme force, perhaps like that of a meteor traveling through space, let's say around 65 million years ago? The impact of Lucifer's arrival could have caused the same conditions as a meteorite traveling at 70 thousand miles per second. Nearly all life on earth died out and a new era began with Satan establishing his kingdom on earth."

"In relation to infinite time, the age of mankind is a fleeting moment and who knows how long eternity is. God created this world for an exclusive purpose, to prove to all heaven that not even the most powerful form of evil could succeed in

overthrowing God. What better way to prove that evil has no place in it?"

"Satan's quest is clearly spelled out. His purpose, using mankind, is to eventually develop the capabilities to wage a war against God. He has been given complete authority to rule over this world. In the midst, God planted the seed of His Holy Spirit, which started with Adam, and, though He has supreme power to intercede, this world...this planet...belongs to Satan."

"The weapons of mass destruction and technology that exists today exceed logic or any realm of understanding. The nuclear capabilities alone are enough to destroy the world thirty times over. Then, there are scores of chemical and biological weapons as well. Why so much? Because, that vast arsenal will one day be at Satan's disposal and he intends to use every available means in his attempt to overthrow God."

"Satan knows that he can't win, but he's going to give it his best shot and take every soul he can down with him in the process. After the final phase of God's plan, Satan and all that is evil will be sent to the wasteland of the universe for all eternity. Heaven will be all that it once was and more. Evil will never exist again."

"Mankind places too much emphasis on his own existence. In relation to the universe, mankind is to God less than animals are to man. We can love them, train them, study them and or discard them. The bible says that all the nations of the world are like dust on God's scales, yet we were created in his image and those who serve him in Satan's world will be rewarded in heaven. God could have created man with an exclusive purpose to serve him, but he didn't. He gave man a conscience and endowed him with an ability to choose between right and wrong, good and evil. It's all to provide a brief demonstration that the continuity of love cannot be conquered by the influence of evil."

"One of the signs of the 'Last Days' is that people of every nation will have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. Today, the Word is being preached in every country of the world. The stage is set, and every human being is faced with a choice. If there's a heaven, there's most likely a hell. Since heaven is

beyond our wildest imagination, it's safe to assume that hell is too. When you look at what mankind can imagine just in books and movies, it paints an awful ugly picture of what hell might be like."

"Believers make a choice to serve God in this world. Their reward is eternal life in heaven. Just try to imagine what heaven might be like." Eddie seemed to be making a silent effort. "I have a rather vivid imagination and I can picture my own individual universe, a world for me to create as I conceive it. As far-fetched as that may sound, it is well within the realm of my imagination, but heaven is beyond anything I could possibly imagine."

"Wow." Eddie shook his head. "I had no idea where you were going with that one."

Maggie's head dropped, "I'm sorry, Eddie. I got carried away. I didn't mean to ramble."

"I don't know." His head popped up, shook it again and smiled. "It is kind of funny. A year ago, I wouldn't even have listened, but knowing what I know now, I can't help but listen. I find it all rather fascinating."

"In God's view, with an infinite perspective, an experiment featuring the age of mankind is probably like a short Sunday School lesson."

"I suppose it is."

"Eddie," she began in a sweet soft tone. "if I were to die tomorrow, I know in my heart that I'm going to heaven and I don't particularly treasure the thought of spending eternity without you, but that's a personal choice that each person has to make for themselves. You'll have to make that choice someday but remember this quote; 'I am the resurrection and the life. Who-so-ever believeth in me shall not die but have everlasting life.'"

Eddie got very quiet. Though he found it all very intriguing, what she now seemed to be suggesting was entirely different. Her beliefs required a commitment, one he still wasn't ready to make. Until there was some sort of tangible

evidence, his logic and rationale prevented him from accepting the premise of the theological concept. Though he was finding it increasingly easier to believe in the potential for the Antichrist to exist, he just couldn't bring himself to believe in the Christ that the evil force was ordained to oppose.

"I overstepped my boundaries again, didn't I?"

"No, Maggie, not at all. I truly admire your ability to believe. I wish it was that easy for me. It's just not."

"I understand."

"Do you?" he asked, as if she couldn't possibly.

"Sure, it's easy to doubt if you think with your mind. Faith is spiritual and stems from the heart. It's a very personal experience, 'The substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen'. Your heart is the key. Until you open it up, you'll have a hard time comprehending. Once you do, you'll discover a whole new dimension of understanding."

"And if I don't?"

"Don't ask me to explain it, but I have a strong feeling you will."

"Faith, huh?"

"Something like that."

"So, where do we go from here?"

"Back to work, I suppose."

Not another word was spoken concerning Eddie's spiritual enlightenment. The rest of their trip was spent enjoying the sights and sounds. They were scheduled to leave at 3 PM on Friday. That would allow enough time for Maggie to make one final arrangement.

* * *

A LETTER TO A FRIEND

Maggie woke very early on the day of their departure. She wrote a long letter and then headed out with her shopping bag in hand.

Since they were under constant protective surveillance, Maggie didn't want to send up any red flags. After two hours of browsing in various little shops, she made a point of spending time sorting through a variety of post cards. She entered a small post office, confident that her actions had served to conceal her motives and after a short prayer, placed the small bundle in the overseas slot.

If the letter got through, at least someone she trusted would have the necessary insight to reach the same conclusions. The letter was mailed to her dear friend, Reverend Eugene Martossi.

* * *

CHAPTER 18

NOW OR NEVER

It was nearly midnight, when they arrived back in Syria. Dan was there to greet them at the airfield and accompanied them in the limo.

"So, tell me, how was the trip?"

"Fabulous, Dan," Eddie was quick to reply. "It made a new man out of me."

"I'm not a new woman, but I sure enjoyed myself. A person could get used to that lifestyle. I can't thank you enough."

"It was our pleasure. Without you two, we wouldn't be where we are today and we've stayed busy while you were gone, too."

"No problems, I trust."

"On the contrary, we've actually made some headway. We're planning to step up the schedule. We'll fill you in on all the

details in the morning." Dan was a little pretentious, but finally asked, " Maggie, do you have any questions?"

"No, Dan. Eddie was very thorough and covered just about everything. It was quite a shock though."

"I'm sure it was, but at this stage, it was imperative that you be apprized, and it only seemed appropriate that Eddie be the one to inform you. I just wanted to be sure that you were comfortable with the situation."

Eddie remained silent and listened closely as Maggie offered her response. "Working with Eddie has always been an interesting adventure. I wouldn't trade a moment of it."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. After seeing you two in action, it was clear that we had made the correct choice." He looked at his watch to signal the end of their reunion. "It's very late and you've had a long trip. I'm sure you'd like to freshen up and get some rest. Steve will take care of your things."

"I am exhausted."

Eddie agreed with a mild yawn. "Me too. The vacation wore me out. I'm looking forward to getting back to work."

"The same goes for me," Maggie added.

"Well, there's no hurry, so feel free to sleep in if you like. We'll see you in the lab sometime tomorrow. Good night."

"Good night, Dan," they said in unison.

Maggie smiled at Eddie with tired eyes. "Home, sweet home."

"I had a great time, Maggie, the best."

"Me too." She leaned to give him a kiss. "Say good night, Eddie."

"Good night, Eddie," he replied with a chuckle. He placed his arms around her waist and hugged her tightly. "I love you."

"I love you too." They embraced and parted with a lingering release of their fingers.

* * *

BACK IN THE LAB

"Looky what the cat dragged in," Wally announced as Maggie and Eddie made their entrance. "Welcome back to the real world."

"Hi, Wally. It's good to see you too," Eddie said with a comical cringe.

"Did ya miss me?" Maggie asked with a huge smile.

"But of course, my vivacious love bunny." He puckered to send his usual series of kisses.

"Jeezo-pete," Eddie decreed with disgust. "I can see that nothing has changed since we left."

"Oh contraire, dipshit," Wally declared with a raised finger. "Charlie's already designing a filtration unit for the plasma and redeveloping the vitrification solution to cleanse the toxins form Vic's system, Stan's working on a new solar particle storage unit and Bernie's figured out a way to reduce the time frame for SDI, even modified the backup system. On top of that, Billy's teaching Sid all kinds of new tricks, but nothing's really changed."

"That's incredible."

"You haven't seen anything yet. Did Dan tell ya we're movin' the date up?"

"Yeah but didn't say how soon."

"How does September grab ya?"

"September? That doesn't give us much time."

"That's plenty of time. We'll be ready."

* * *

FINAL PREPARATIONS

The team spent the next two months perfecting the revised system. The time frame for the rejuvenation process had been reduced to four hours. All equipment was being tested and retested on a regular basis. Careful attention was given to every detail and they were zeroing in on the actual date.

Even With their impeccable reputation for excellence and a history of tremendous achievements, the entire staff was performing their duties with meticulous care. This was not a simple matter of success or failure. A lifetime of efforts wasn't about to be left to chance. There would be no miscalculations.

Unfortunately, the latest news reports were fearfully focused on the escalating tension in the Middle East. Israel was once again at the center of the controversy. Troops and artillery units had begun saturating strategic locations along the borders of Syria, Iran, Iraq and Jordan. Control over the world's diminishing oil supply was at stake. Diplomacy was no longer a feasible means of achieving a peaceful solution. World War III seemed inevitable, a worst-case scenario for the cartel.

In an unprecedented effort to achieve peace in the hostile region, Israel had signed a peace treaty requiring them to relinquish control of the Gaza Strip, which had one significant drawback. If attacked, Israel would no longer be able to defend itself by means of conventional warfare. The small country was now more dependent than ever on their chief ally, the United States.

American troops had taken up positions with allied forces and the US Navy had ordered its fleet to the Mediterranean Sea. The force included eight carriers and an elite team of submarines with massive nuclear capabilities. It was the largest presence of concentrated international military forces in world history.

Israel had begun arming short- and long-range nuclear

weapons targeted to detour advancing troops. If attacked, Israel had sworn to utilize all resources at her disposal. In response, her enemies had made it quite clear that the use of nuclear weapons would be met with an equal retaliatory strike. What was thought to be improbable, the potential for a full-scale nuclear war, was rapidly culminating into vivid reality.

The League of Nations could no longer restrain its members. Leaders of each country began forming alliances based on speculations as to the potential outcome of such a war. The newly established European Super-Power, now consisting of ten European nations, had managed to remain neutral, but was being politically pressured to assume a role. China's vast army, nearly two billion troops with state-of-the-art weaponry, had remained primarily docile. However, the potential worldwide ramifications had compelled her to ready those forces for an offensive assault and were suddenly advancing from the East. Russia had also joined the massive conflict and was pressing to the South.

In the rapacious anticipation of the war, virtually every form of news media had congregated throughout the Middle East to provide exclusive coverage of the first battles that would inevitably be fought. Camera crews from every nation were situated in prime locations to provide spectacular live reports. The media itself had even become, and was being skillfully utilized, as an intricate aspect of military strategy. Propaganda flooded the airways, leaving the public radically confused by the artistic and contradictory rhetoric. With immense uncertainty, the frantic public prepared for the catastrophic effects of the international dissension. The world could only watch the saga evolve and wait.

Unfortunately, the team's research facility was located well within range of potential air strikes. The bleak future forced the scientists to accelerate their efforts in an unavoidable race against time. Their only hope was that, with the potential for such turmoil, a resurgence of Vic Dazzle and the positive influence of such an idealist might provide a means of detouring opposing forces. They envisioned the extraordinary man somehow recapturing his sphere of influence to change the deteriorating course of world events. If the cartel's scientific technology could unfurl before war broke out, there was a chance that Vic's rejuvenation could conceivably serve to save the

world.

With the outcome uncertain, the team prepared for what they had concluded would be their final experiment. Should they fail, arrangements had been made to vacate the facility and preserve the patient for rejuvenation in the distant future. Of course, that would most likely mean without the men who had dedicated their lives to that objective. It was now or never.

* * *

NOW OR NEVER

To limit the effects of any complications during the rejuvenation process and in order to guard against potential brain damage, the brain cavity would remain frozen until the final stages were initiated.

Eddie had also justified the need for another extravagant weight scale. If there were a weight increase in the Pineal Gland or any other portion of the brain, he wanted to know about it. Of course, an increase of seven grams would signify that the soul had managed to return.

It was two in the morning on Friday, September 25th, when computerized CPR slowly began to initiate the prelude to rejuvenation. If what they say is true and life is in the blood, life would soon reenter Victor Elias Dazzle.

The team was in place and confidence was high. Nanotechnology was no longer a concept. The research department had perfected a cell-sized unit that would be inserted into Vic's blood stream. The microscopic robot would transmit magnified video images of the organs, blood vessels and cells, and comb the brain to enhance the study of its function and activity.

Another unit had been designed to perform intricate surgical procedures from within the body. This incredible technology alone was enough to change the entire spectrum of scientific ingenuity, but since it had virtually unlimited potential for misuse, the technology would remain another of Dazzle's highly classified secrets.

After forty-four years, patience is nurtured into a rare art form and the cartel had learned to master that fervent quality. Even Eddie had received a crash course, but there was no doubt that all hearts were racing with enthusiasm as the long-awaited moment approached.

The rhapsodic atmosphere piqued like an infantry troop preparing to land on hostile shores, each man silently lost in his own thoughts with distinct uncertainty as to what lie ahead. It was now or never, and they weren't prepared to deal with the latter.

Maggie was in the control room. The doctors were comfortably situated on elevated platforms constantly monitoring all systems on their intricate panel. Large monitors provided spectacular telescopic images on overhead screens while others displayed an array of vital signs. Every aspect was being recorded on micro-video disks.

Dazzle's frigid body was now gradually being warmed to 34 degrees in preparation for proper circulation of fluid transfusions.

"We're approaching 32 degrees. Stand by," Stan nervously instructed.

Computer-controlled artificial respiration began to coincide with the rise in temperature. The heart was being stimulated to serve as a natural pump to generate circulation.

"Transfusion is ready," Eddie began. They watched their monitors closely as the temperature gradually increased. "Thirty-two point five...Thirty-three." Eddie's eyes shifted back and forth from his monitor to those mounted at the ceiling. As the temperature reached and held at 34 degrees, the solution containing the antitoxin began traveling through several clear tubes.

Everyone's eyes were intensely focused on the monitors. Eddie spoke, but with a dryness in his throat. "How's it looking, Charlie?"

"It looks good, all traces of the toxin have dissipated.

"We're halfway there. The blood transfusion will follow in twenty-two seconds."

As the body temperature continued to rise, Wally disconnected the Vitrification tubes and attached the transfusion lines. Once again, blood was beginning to flow through Vic Dazzle's veins.

"We're looking pretty good. Brainwave activity?" Eddie requested.

"Nothing yet," Archer replied.

"Nothing?" he attempted to clarify. He glanced at his cohort through the observation window. "Mag?"

"No malfunctions."

"I don't understand it." Eddie looked at Dan whose dejected face said it all. He was becoming concerned. They all were.

Silence again filled the room as Bernie gave his regular report. "Forty-two point eight."

Eddie began an information search. "Okay," he remarked. "Maybe that's it." Dan approached and stood at the base of his station but didn't speak. "That's got to be it, the extended period of suspension," he announced. "It's miniscule, but each experiment depicts a slight delay in correlation to it."

"Proportionately?"

"Yes, but aside from Sid, the longest period of suspension tested is less than ten years. Even at that rate, I'd expect some form of activity."

"There may have been some damage that we were unable to detect."

"Forty-four point two," Dr. Winters reported.

Wally provided some input. "We could increase the rate of CPR. That might stimulate some activity."

"No, our calculations are correct. Let's not resort to extreme measures just yet. We can re-suspend if necessary, but we've got to give it a chance."

"Fifty-five point eight...-Fifty-six...-Fifty-six point..."

"What was that?" Stan shouted with a gasp. "I thought I saw a glitch on screen four."

"Fifty-six point four and rising."

"Maggie," Dan instructed without shifting his eyes. "Load the emergency backup program."

She flipped a few switches, keyed in some commands and announced with disappointment, "Ready."

"Wait," Eddie shouted. "There it is. That's brain wave activity right there." Consistent, but very slight increases began to register. "Yeah!" Eddie clinched his fist and the team began a momentary celebration.

"All right, then," Dan proclaimed with a new conviction. "Let's bring him home!"

Eddie glanced down at his private monitor. Much to his amazement, a weight gain had occurred in a Pineal Body Gland. For now, that proved only one thing. There was an unexplained weight gain. He looked at the reading several times to confirm the fact, but it wasn't the seven grams he had expected. It was precisely six.

The temperature began to rise more rapidly, and the electronic CPR continued until Wally enlightened with a gleam of hope, "That one was his, boys and girls. We've got a heartbeat." A muffled cheer floated around the room. "Discontinuing CPR...now." After a brief delay to confirm, Wally finally announced proudly. "It's like a bass drum in a marching band, right in time and music to my fuckin' ears."

"That's it then. All we'll have to do now, is wake him up," Dr. Karrington gleefully apprized.

"I can't wait to meet him," Eddie boasted.

Maggie leaned back in her chair with an exhausting sigh. She was pleased too, but still had a discerning fear of the future. She removed the headset and rubbed her eyes with both hands. When she opened them, she found Eddie standing directly in front of her with his face pressed against the glass like a young schoolboy.

She pressed her lips into a vivacious grin as he raised his hands in victory. It was a simple way of letting him know how very proud of him she was. Eddie invited her to join him with a nod toward the control room entrance. She slowly began making her way to the door as he followed alongside to rendezvous with her there.

Dan was first to notice them and began signaling the others. The entire team was now watching their semi-private celebration. Eddie extended his arms and stuck his chest out as far as he could.

He wrapped his arms around her spun her into a yelping twirl. All other concerns, spiritual or otherwise, were temporarily set aside. He spoke with fond abandon. "You are absolutely the most amazing woman in the world and now I've got living proof."

She peered over his shoulder to find the others grouped together boasting curious smiles. Maggie humbly cleared her throat to advise Eddie. He slowly released his grip and backed away.

"Hey," Wally implored. "I'd like to get some of that action myself." He threw his rounded hips into a swirling spin. Maggie blushed profusely as the men approached to extend their gratitude.

Dan was last to express his appreciation but was wearing an exuberant smile. He hugged Eddie first, then gripped Maggie by the waist and lifted her high off the floor. Victor Elias Dazzle was back!

* * *

CHAPTER 19

WELCOME TO THE FUTURE

After a twenty-four-hour observation period, Vic was transferred to an area designed to depict that of a hospital room in the late sixties. He was expected to experience a period of complete disorientation and the setting was intended to lessen the initial shock.

At 11:00 AM on the morning of September 26th, the team met to witness the historic event. The group assembled behind a protective two-way mirror.

Dan stood at Vic's bedside and carefully administered a serum to initiate the recovery. The body began to stretch, and the eyes fluttered beneath their lids. Dazzle gripped the sheets and fought to gain control of his actions then became very relaxed. Slowly, his weary wandering eyes began to open.

"Vic? Can you hear me?" Dazzle very slowly trained his blurred vision on the source. "It's Dr. Karrington." The confusion quickly melted from his face and was replaced with a weak, but promising smile. "How do you feel?" Dazzle didn't speak. He simply nodded. "Just try to relax. I'm going to be

conducting a very brief examination, all right?" Dazzle blinked his eyes, as if to acknowledge.

Each of the questions asked had a very specific purpose. "Let's keep it very simple. I'll ask some yes or no questions and you can reply with a blink of the eyes, once for yes and two times for no." Vic blinked his eyes once to appease.

"Do you know your name?" Vic responded as if being asked a ridiculous question and then blinked once. Dan did his best to refrain from showing enthusiasm.

Suddenly, as Dan began another question, Dazzle cleared his throat. "I'm Vic Dazzle, you're Dan Karrington and I've got a few questions for you."

Dan was ecstatic and demonstrated his fervor with a huge smile towards the mirrored glass. The rest of the team looked on and began a secret celebration. "It's good to hear your voice. How do you feel?"

"A little weak, but for the most part, I feel pretty good. Where the hell am I?"

"You're in a private medical facility."

"How private?"

"Very private."

Vic seemed confused for a moment and strained to look more closely at the doctor who now stood at the foot of his bed. "Can you raise this contraption a little?" he begrudgingly requested.

"Sure, as long as you remain comfortable." Dazzle was expecting Dan to manually crank the bed into position and took note as Dan pressed a button. With a look of complete amazement, Dazzle stiffened in place, again training his bewildered eyes on Dan. "Automatic?"

Dazzle's memory appeared to be well intact, so Dan chose to respond to Vic's questions rather than ask them. "I think you'll find that there are a lot of new features to adapt to."

"Pardon me, doctor, but you're looking kind of rough. Is it me or have you developed a little gray hair?"

"Unfortunately, it's not you. My hair, what's left of it, is considerably grayer than you may recall."

Vic slowly began to piece the puzzle together. "You look considerably older too." The facts surrounding his circumstances began surfacing very rapidly. "I've been out for a while, haven't I?"

"You could say that. What else do you remember?"

Dan found it extremely difficult to respond when Dazzle addressed the issue point blank. "At first, I thought I was dreaming, but I remember now." Dan raised his eyebrows in anticipation. "If I died, you were going to freeze my body and then revive me some day, if you could." Vic sat quietly for a moment as he considered the possibility. "There doesn't seem to be any other explanation. Did I die, doctor?"

The look on Dan's face provided the answer. "Well, I'll be. You actually did it, didn't you?" Dazzle leaned forward to enable him to view himself in the mirror and then announced in a comprehensive voice, "I certainly haven't changed any. How long was I gone?" Dan hesitated to answer and glanced over at his astonished colleagues.

"He seems to remember everything," Dr. Archer exclaimed.

"Doctor?" Dazzle pursued with distinct authority. "Would you be kind enough to answer my question? How long?"

"Mr. Dazzle, you experienced clinical death on March 6, 1966."

"I couldn't recall the date for some reason, but that sounds about right. And the current date?"

"You have just been through a very traumatic experience. I don't think it would be wise..."

"Dr. Karrington, I have just learned that I have returned from the dead. I doubt that anything else could possibly be more

traumatic than that, the date please."

Dan glanced at the mirror. "It's September 26th, 2009."

Dazzle drifted into another realm of absorbing thought and an extended period of silence. "Would you mind repeating that?"

"The year is 2009."

"Let me do the math on that one," he said humorously. "That's almost forty-five years."

"Almost," Dan confirmed. "It might have been considerably longer, but we acquired two new members who helped expedite the process."

Dazzle promptly reacted with dismay. "As I recall, doctor, we were in complete agreement on that very critical issue. Even if it meant failure, you were not to divulge any aspect of this experiment under any circumstances." Dr. Karrington's face rapidly deteriorated from overwhelming joy to a disgraceful frown.

Vic almost immediately settled back into a very humble and understanding refrain. "How callous of me. Here I am, alive and well. I should be eternally grateful for your efforts. Instead, I infringe on the valuable contribution and your incredible success. I'm sure you had your reasons and we can't very well argue with success, now can we?" In a soft voice and with a sincere smile, he extended his hand. "Please, forgive me."

"That's not necessary." Dan began to relax.

"What now, doctor?"

"Since you are the first to have been rejuvenated, there is a lot that is yet to be determined."

Vic quickly became intrigued. "I am the first?"

"Yes, sir," Dan replied eagerly. "Congratulations."

Dazzle seemed astounded by the proclamation. "And no one is aware of this fact?"

"No, sir. We thought you'd like to make that announcement yourself."

Vic began to smile almost deviously. "Incredible," he stated boldly, then rapidly changed the subject to his former pet pea project. "What about VEDSOL?" They were all amazed by how Dazzle had managed to instinctively resume his keen business awareness and leadership role. It was as if he'd just awaken from a short nap.

"I had hoped to update you on business related issues later, but I recall how important that particular project was. Unfortunately, things progressed pretty much as you had anticipated. VEDSOL is theme park."

Dazzle shook his head and chuckled. "Such foolish little people. No sense of vision, none what-so-ever." He hesitated for a moment. "I'll bet it made money though." Dan nodded decisively to affirm. "Hmm, that much? Then business is good?"

"Yes, sir. The Dazzle companies have developed into a very diverse corporate empire."

"Empire? I like that word. How large is this empire?"

"Dazzle is now the largest multimedia entertainment company in the world. Today, there are twelve Dazzle World theme parks in ten nations with plans for three more by 2012. Your predecessors have managed to achieve remarkable success in the global market. For the most part, I think you will be pleased with most of what has been accomplished in your absence."

"We have an extensive program planned to introduce you to the contemporary state-of-affairs, but to be honest, we hadn't anticipated such a remarkable recovery. Once we've run a few tests, there's no reason why we couldn't expedite that phase. Ultimately, that will depend on your rate of improvement, but I'm more than optimistic. How are you feeling now?"

Vic rolled his shoulders and stretched. "I feel wonderful. Never felt better in my 'lives'." He laughed aloud. His tone changed drastically as he looked up with hopeful eyes. "Deborah?"

Dan lowered his head and spoke softly. "I'm very sorry, but your wife passed away in May 1995. She lived a very long healthy life though."

He seemed to handle the news rather well. "And Doyle? I assume he's gone as well."

"Yes, sir. Your brother died shortly after opening the VEDSOL Center."

Again, with a glimmer of hope in his voice, he asked. "My children?"

At last, Dan could offer some good news. "Valerie and her husband are alive and well. They currently reside in Dallas. Oh, and you're also a great great-great-great grandfather."

"How about that?" He folded his arms across his chest as he pursued the details.

"You're the only man alive who can lay claim to that honor."

"How old are they?"

"Let's see, now. I guess the youngest would be about fourteen."

Dazzle seemed disappointed. "I don't suppose I'll be bouncing any of them on my knee."

"No, but if I'm not mistaken, one of your great-great granddaughters is expecting, which means you will be a great-great-great-great grandfather very soon...if I counted right. We'll follow up on that for you."

"And Robert?"

"He and his wife are living in southern California. He wrote a book, incidentally, a biography on your life entitled 'The Razzle of Dazzle'. He had a tremendous amount of admiration for you and I think you would be quite proud."

He smiled, trying to envision what his son might be like

after so many years. It was an emotional consideration filled with apprehensive irony. "Bobby, quite a character, followed me around like a little puppy dog. I wish that I had been a better father."

"I wouldn't fret about that, Vic. According to him, you were the best father in the world."

"Well, doctor," he said to change the subject. "Where do we go from here?"

"If you feel up to it, there are six very anxious individuals waiting to see you. Can I bring them in?"

"Absolutely."

"These dedicated individuals put forth a lifetime of effort. First, I'd like to bring in Stanley Archer." The door swung open and the smiling doctor walked in.

Dazzle smiled back and extended his hand. "Dr. Archer, what a pleasure it is to see you again."

"Welcome back, sir."

"And you remember Charlie Brome."

"Of course."

"Hello, Mr. Dazzle."

"Dr. Brome."

"And," Dan continued with a grin, "you may remember the distinguished Wally McCarty."

Wally bounced in the room wearing a childish grin. "How could I possibly forget Wally? How are you my friend?"

"I'm old, fat and as grumpy as ever, but I've never felt better than I do at this moment. It sure is good to see you again, Vic." They shook hands heartily.

"Likewise."

"These next two individuals provided the key to our success. I'd like to introduce Edward Grisham and Maggie Bennett. Eddie and Maggie, meet Vic Dazzle."

Any wariness or trepidation seemed to escape, at least for the time being. They were both overwhelmed. Eddie was first to greet him. "This is quite a thrill for me, sir."

"Then you can imagine how I feel. Believe me, the pleasure is all mine."

Maggie was clearly more nervous. "Hello Mr. Dazzle," she managed to whisper in a shy voice and with a forced smile.

He warmly clasped his hands around hers and spoke with all the charm he was once famous for. "There's nothing like a beautiful woman to highlight an eventful day. It is especially nice to meet you, Ms. Bennett. I suppose that I owe you all a debt of gratitude."

He sat back, smiling. "Of all the dreams, and I've had some rather erratic visions, I never really expected this one to come true. This is one incredibly remarkable achievement. I can only imagine the future we have in store. You should all be extremely proud."

A reply seemed to be in order and Dan began provided one. "I think I can speak for everyone when I say that, it was your keen foresight and ability to recognize the potential that enabled us to achieve success. We may be the reason you are here, but you are the reason we were here to begin with. We're just one part of the Delightful World of Dazzle."

Vic fought the tears that were starting to well in his eyes. "And you thank me," he said as he wiped at his eyes with the corner of the sheet. "Please, if you don't mind, I think I'd like to rest for a while." He spoke again in an apparent attempt to conceal his emotions. "Please, forgive me."

The team was very understanding and quickly dismissed themselves. "If you need anything at all, just press this little red button or pick up the phone. It dials automatically. We'll be on call twenty-four hours a day." Vic shook his head to

acknowledge.

"We'll check back with you in a few hours. There are some books on the shelf, a remote-control unit for the television and an assortment of fresh fruit in the refrigerator. Make yourself at home." He placed his hand on Vic's shoulder and headed for the door. He stopped to close the drapes in front of the two-way mirror. "I'm so glad your back."

"If you are that thrilled, you can only imagine I feel."

"No, I don't think I can."

As soon as Dan exited the room, Vic began to explore the new surroundings. At first, he seemed pretentious about standing, but once on his feet, had no problem at all. Though they hadn't been used in forty-four years, the Cryonic state preserved his muscles in full working order. He approached a small mirror over a vanity and studied his facial features very closely, then pivoted his lower jaw as his hand traced the contour of his chin.

He then walked over to the shelf of books and ran his finger along the edge as he examined the collection. It included such titles as 'American History', 'World History - The Last One Hundred Years', 'A Dazzling World - The History of Dazzle' and Robert's book, 'The Razzle of Dazzle'. There was even a video of the 'The Lucky Leopard', Dazzle's first full length animated film. He looked at the TV set but seemed to shirk the temptation.

He opened the small refrigerator, but the contents didn't offer much of a selection. He retrieved an apple from the basket of fruit, held it up and for whatever reason, began to laugh as he twirled it in his hand.

Vic climbed back into bed and pulled the blanket up over his chest, fluffed two pillows up behind his back and turned on the TV, which had been preset to initialize the Dazzle Channel.

He took a bite of the apple and settled back to watch a contemporary version of a 'Kitty the Cat' cartoon. Kitty, the Dazzle trademark, was his first and most treasured character, still one of the most popular cartoon characters in the world,

but he seemed to shun that show and promptly began to explore the long list of channels.

What finally captured and held his attention was the Worldwide Network News channel. The leading story, another concerning the escalating tension in the Middle East. Israeli and Palestinian leaders were again threatening to abort the futile negotiations. Vic watched the reports with little if any reaction and was soon fast asleep with the TV feeding valuable information into his subconscious mind. Vic Dazzle was preparing to face the future.

* * *

CHAPTER 20

INCOGNITO

After three weeks of acclimatizing therapy, Vic Dazzle was in a rapid process of complete recovery. He even seemed to exhibit a heightened sense of awareness and had established an unquestionable air of distinct authority.

Vic had also adapted quickly to the use of the sophisticated computer system and spent long hours each day studying the many changes that had taken place in his absence. He was constantly analyzing the immense corporate structure of the Dazzle organization and the phenomenal advancements in technology.

Oddly enough, he wasn't surprised by such events as the demise of the iron curtain, science or space travel. It was almost as if he anticipated much of the progress. He was more intrigued and had even developed a fascination with the development of nuclear, chemical and biological weaponry.

With all the preliminary indications, the notions that

troubled Eddie and Maggie were rapidly deteriorating. If Dazzle's body were entertaining the soul of another, there was absolutely no evidence to substantiate the premise and there certainly weren't any traces of some underlying evil influence. In every perceivable respect, he appeared to be the same man. If there was a hidden agenda, it was masterfully disguised and since Dazzle had refrained from discussing post-death issues, his response was construed to mean that there was nothing to discuss.

Plans to publicly announce the achievement were now well under way. Vic, being the ultimate visionary, was quick to recognize the tremendous benefits of manipulating the secret. To ensure that he accomplished the ultimate in dramatic impact, Dazzle opted for an elaborate ceremony to invoke a more profound worldwide response and the concept quickly culminated into a fabulous world premier event.

The team was fascinated by Vic's intellectual and artistic insight. They were invited to share in the creative genius that had launched his illustrious career. Vic's plan would even provide a means of breaching world's most isolated economic and political boundaries. The razzle of Vic Dazzle was as eminent as ever.

* * *

INCOGNITO

On the morning of Wednesday, October 14th, Dan was peering out over his bifocals at an extensive series of charts when Dazzle approached the open door to his office.

"Busy?"

"Never too busy for you. Come on in. What can I do for you this morning?"

"I need a favor."

"A favor, huh? Care to elaborate?"

"Actually, it's slightly more than a favor."

"Slightly, as in...", he prodded respectfully.

"I'd like you to arrange for me to take a little trip. Call it an overdue vacation."

Dan cracked a half smile. "A vacation, as in rest and relaxation?"

"More like sightseeing."

"Sightseeing?" he questioned. "It's not that I don't appreciate what being cooped up in this facility must seem like at times and I know you'd like to see some of the changes that have taken place in the world, but do you really think that would be wise at this juncture?"

"Actually, it's this particular juncture that extends a rather unique opportunity for a man in my position."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"It's really very simple. In the sixties, I lived under the harsh scrutiny of an unforgiving public. I couldn't walk the streets without being hounded by the press or harassed by autograph seekers. I was stripped of my ability to experience the world like everyone else, but in a few weeks, the whole world is going to know that I'm back. I won't be able to walk down a dark alley without being recognized. If I'm ever going to experience life from that perspective, I've got to do it now."

"I see your point." Dan was understanding, but still attempted to allay his plans. "Unfortunately, it's just not the same world anymore. It's cruel and even dangerous. No one is safe on the streets anymore. We're just not in a position to take that risk."

"You worry too much, Dan. The only world I want to see is Dazzle World. If I'm not safe there, I'm not safe anywhere. Besides," he authoritatively informed. "It's not really up for debate."

"I see." Dan began rubbing his hands together nervously. "Well, if we were to consider the possibility." Vic leaned toward him with a stern convincing frown. Dan breathed a heavy

sigh and conceded with a smile. "Okay, okay, so you're going, BUT," he emphasized, "we've got to make the appropriate arrangements. We'll need proper security, a medical team, covert transportation..."

"Now, Dan."

"No," Dan stressed with a waving arm. "We're not going to argue about that." Vic shook his head in mild disgust. "Look, it's simply a matter of utilizing the personnel we already have on staff. No one would even know they're around, but they'd be on hand just in case." Vic was about to begin a rebuttal. "NO! That's the way it's got to be."

"Dan," he pleaded.

"You're just going to have to accept the fact. In my opinion, you shouldn't be going at all." His tone changed drastically from argumentative to one of understanding with a very sincere quality. "Keep in mind, we're still not out of the woods yet, just a late stage of a promising recovery. There'll be some other conditions too, but at least we have one edge, nobody knows you're alive. That should help to keep things relatively simple."

"All right, I see your point and I know that this puts you in a somewhat difficult position," he reluctantly agreed. "You're just doing your job and very well I might add, but this is something I've got to do. Give me a week."

"Three days!" Dan insisted with three shaking his fingers.

"Okay, five."

"Damn it, Vic," Dan halfheartedly pursued.

"C'mon, Dan, I'll need at least four."

"You were a much better patient three months ago," Dan said with a humorous confession as he shook his head in defeat.

"Three months ago, I was dead."

"Yeah, that's my point," he needled. "You're just full of

surprises, aren't you?"

"You haven't seen anything yet," Vic proclaimed. "We'll iron out the details over lunch, okay?"

"Okay," Dan barked to confirm, "but if this is any indication of what the future holds..."

Vic was chuckling as he left the room and Dan immediately reached for the phone to begin making the arrangements.

* * *

Dan had called a meeting with the security team who would be responsible for Vic's safety. Curt Crushock would be heading up the team. Dan began with a stern address. "You are some of the highest paid individuals in your field and you are about to start earning your salaries. You will undoubtedly have questions, questions that cannot be answered, so don't bother to ask. The explanation would require a lengthy lecture on the nature of our project."

"As you know, all aspects pertaining to our research have always been and will continue to remain confidential, only now it expands well beyond the usual boundaries. As of today, you five men will assume responsibility for protecting the very nucleus of that project. We have succeeded in achieving rejuvenation and that secret alone is worthy of protection, but this individual is from indispensable. Our patient will be traveling incognito and for the time being, his identity will remain confidential." As an example of their expert training, they offered little or no visible reaction.

"At the appropriate time, you will each be directed to inform your divisions. Until then, the five of you will accompany 'Mr. Smith' to all locations outside this facility. Curt, you will be his personal valet. The rest of you will remain at bay unless an emergency requires intervention."

"You'll each have a direct open line of communication to each other, but report directly to Curt who will report to me. Any questions?" They seemed content with their obligation. "You'll be on stand-by from this moment forward and be prepared to move out some time within the next few days. You'll be

notified. Thank you."

Now, Dan had to face his colleagues. Eddie and Maggie were working together at her terminal when the message began to flash on the screen. "Ah oh," Eddie murmured. "Something's up?"

"At least it's not urgent. That's a good sign."

"A complete recovery in less than three weeks and no complications. We're overdue for a crisis."

"Relax, Eddie. I've never known you to be so pessimistic."

"I don't know what it is, Maggie, something just isn't right."

* * *

The team assembled in the basement conference room. Dan entered the room accompanied by a cheery Vic Dazzle. "Hello everyone," Vic said with high spirits and that natural ability to make everyone around him feel quite at ease.

"Okay," Dan nervously began. "Here it is. Vic has decided to take a little trip. He wants to visit Dazzle World before we reintroduce him publicly." Obvious tension began to spread around the room. Dan raised his hands in defense. "Now, I've expressed my concerns and argued my case, but it's no use. Bottom line is, whether we like it or not, he's going."

Wally slowly leaned forward. "With all due respect, that's BULL SHIT!"

"Wally," Dan started to reprimand.

Vic leaned over and placed his hand softly on Dan's arm. "That's okay, Dan, I would have expected nothing less of the good doctor. I assure you though, I am going."

Wally still directed his argument to Dan. That, of course, was a grave mistake. "Our patient is only in his third week of recovery. We don't know if there will be any side effects or not, but we're still experimenting for Christ's sake. He needs to be monitored. Anything could happen and the best treatment we

can provide for him is right here. Our patient doesn't seem to realize that he's still in the fuckin' hospital."

Vic responded in a stern authoritative manner. "Apparently, Dr. McCarty has forgotten who runs the hospital. The chief administrator of this facility, that would be me, is taking a long overdue vacation and as for the patient in question, it's my professional opinion that he's never felt better in his life."

"I appreciate your concerns, Wally, I really do, but this isn't a request and I'm not going to waste time arguing. It's something I've just got to do, and I am going to do it. End of discussion!"

Wally had grown so accustomed to dealing with the aspects of his work from a scientific perspective and had failed to consider the overwhelming impact on an emotional basis. He suddenly felt selfishly and awkwardly ashamed. He puckered his lips with childish disgrace and refrained from any further discussion.

Eddie intervened. "Obviously, we're all going to be a bit skittish about such an endeavor, but I suppose we could monitor him with portable equipment."

"The equipment's already being arranged," Dan enlightened.

"Excuse me," Bernie indulged, "but if he were to suffer an attack of some sort, we'll have to have a means to respond. We certainly couldn't risk an examination by an outside medical team."

"We've got that base covered too. We'll have our own medical team standing by with an especially equipped ambulance. They'll intercept any distress calls and be in position to respond immediately. We're prepared to cover almost any situation without incident."

"I've got a funny feeling we'll be sorry," Wally shook his head to infer with a smile, "but if I were in his shoes, I'd want to go too. Who is going with him?"

"This one, I do alone."

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Wally sternly objected.

"You'll be there, Wally," Dan informed.

"Dan?" Vic protested.

"Sorry, Vic. That's another one of those unconditional terms." Vic shook his head in silent disapproval but didn't argue. "He will be traveling incognito, which will minimize the risks, and security will be responsible for his safety. You'll examine him at regular intervals, Wally, but it's his show."

"That's better," Wally said with an arrogant smile.

"Any other questions?" No one else was about to ask anything. "Then I guess you'd better pack your bags, Wally. Thanks everyone."

* * *

It took just two days to make all the necessary arrangements. The efficiency of the other departments had been skillfully demonstrated. Plans for an early departure to San Antonio had been scheduled for October 19th, a relatively slow period for the theme park industry.

Mr. Smith would stay the Calaveras Lake Hotel, a five-star Dazzle World Resort located within and surrounded by the Dazzle parks. An entire floor and another block of ten rooms would accommodate the extensive, but inconspicuous entourage. A renovated ambulance housing the necessary monitoring and communication equipment was already in place. Dazzle had even been outfitted with a bearded disguise to prevent even an outside chance of his being recognized.

Dazzle had been granted an unprecedented opportunity to take a journey, a spiritual expedition to experience his own dream as conceived in the minds of his predecessors and from the perspective of their guests. Years of incredible technological evolution had taken place since Dazzle World's inauguration, a cavalcade of contemporary attractions. Even though a comprehensive documentary had been placed at his disposal, he refused to view it. He wanted to experience it all for the first

time, just as any child might.

The firm's two private jets carrying key personnel landed at the San Antonio International Airport just after 6 PM. Though terrorist activity was at an all-time high, each group was whisked through customs without any of the usual red tape. Various members of the other teams arrived via Laredo, Corpus Christi and Houston. Several chartered aircraft shuttled the teams from each location to a secluded airfield on the outskirts of Floresville, a neighboring community a short drive from Dazzle World. They arrived independently and were met by correspondents who coordinated transfers to waiting vehicles and helicopters.

Vic and Curt arrived by car and though Vic appeared to be unimpressed as they approached the extravagant complex, he kept a keen perennial eye on every aspect of the plush surroundings. When they arrived at the Calaveras Lake Resort, Vic insisted on checking in to the hotel himself. He wanted the complete unequivocal experience.

A kind young man at the reception desk greeted him eagerly. "Good evening, sir, and welcome to Dazzle's Calaveras Lake Resort. My name is Jason. How may I help you?"

Vic was quite pleased with the very professional and personable presentation. He leaned his elbow comfortably on the counter. "My name is Timothy Smith. I have a reservation."

"Yes, sir. I have it right here, in from Des Moines, Iowa."

"It's my first visit to Dazzle World."

"We certainly hope it won't be your last, sir. I think you're going to find it to be a memorable experience and if there's anything we can do to ensure that your stay with us is a pleasant one, please don't hesitate to let us know."

The young man was surprised when Vic reached to shake his hand. "Thank you..." Vic looked down at his nametag and made a mental note. "...Jason. You have promising future and believe me, son, I know what I'm talking about."

Jason grinned politely at what he assumed to be the

murmurings of a kind old man and replied respectfully, "Thank you for the encouragement, sir."

Jason motioned for assistance and a bellhop arrived within a few seconds to assist with the luggage. "Jimmy, please escort Mr. Smith and Mr. Crushock to their suites. They're our very finest, gentlemen. The view is superb and I'm certain you'll find the accommodations most comfortable. Thank you for visiting with us and enjoy your stay."

The bellhop wasn't quite as personable. When the doors opened at the eighteenth floor, he wheeled the luggage rack out and down the wide corridor. While Curt entered an adjoining room, Jim entered Vic's and placed the luggage in a small closet then proceeded to begin his well-rehearsed tour of features. Vic circled the room, paying little attention to the bellhop. Being somewhat ignorant of the day's standards, he retrieved a one-dollar bill and handed it to an obviously disappointed bellhop. "Golly, Mr. Smith. Thanks," he replied with artificial enthusiasm.

"Not enough?" Vic tested.

The bellhop quickly responded in a manner that only served to supplement the insult. "No, sir. I mean, yes sir. I mean gratuities aren't a requirement anyway." He knew right away that he had made a mistake and Vic had his own way to correct it.

"All right then," Vic concluded with his arms folded across his chest. An evil eye invited him to leave promptly.

"Yes, sir." He closed his eyes in self-disgust and headed for Curt's room.

Curt opened the door just as he prepared to knock. "I'm fine, pal. Thanks." He extended a ten-dollar bill.

"Thank you very much, sir. If you need anything at all, call down and ask for Jimmy."

"Sure," Curt halfheartedly replied. He let out a yawn and knocked lightly on the door to Vic's room. "Mr. Smith?"

"Come in, Curt," he said, then immediately offered some

instructions. "See that the bell hop is dismissed immediately." Curt just looked at him with mysterious intrigue but made a note in his electronic Day Timer just the same. "What's on the agenda?"

Curt looked at his watch and announced. "Well, sir, Dr. McCarty should be here soon, then I suppose you're free to get some rest."

"If there's one thing I don't need, it's more rest." Another knock rumbled loudly at the door. Vic motioned to Curt who answered the door. Dr. McCarty was leaning against the wall with his medical bag in hand. "Speak of the devil."

"Devil, my ass," Wally mumbled, recalling Eddie's conversation. Vic puckered his lips into a grin. "C'mon, let's get this examination over with," he stated in a grumpy tone as he plopped his bag onto the table. Wally paused and glared at Curt as if to prompt some action. "You wanna excuse us, Mr. Crushock?"

"Sure thing, doc. I'll be next door if you need me."

"Yeah, like a hole in the head. Okay, 'Mr. Smith', quit grinin' and drop the linen."

"Is this really necessary?" Vic asked in disgust as he began to unbutton his shirt.

"Afraid so."

"For crying out loud, Wally. I feel like I'm wired for sound."

"You pretty much are. If we quit hearing them sounds, you've got real problems. Open up." Wally directed a tongue depressor towards his mouth. "Ah oh."

"What?" Vic managed to grumble around the stick.

"It looks awful dry in there."

"Dry?"

"So is mine. I think we ought to wet 'em down."

"Huh?" Vic blurted.

"I'm thinkin' beer." He turned back towards him to observe his reaction. Vic responded with a vocal smirk. "Well, do ya or don't ya want a beer?"

"I'd have to clear it with my physician, but it sounds pretty good to me. I haven't had a Falstaff in about..."

"Falstaff?" Wally laughed. "Hell's bells, man. Unless you happen to have a cooler full stashed away somewhere, you ain't likely to be drinking that shit anymore. Falstaff, hah."

"I'll meet ya back here in half an hour."

"All right, Wally." He walked over to the window, pulled open the drapes and placed his fists on his hips. He smiled proudly as he looked out over the incredible complex and spoke to his reflection in the window. "And it's all mine, every last little piece of it."

* * *

"Pretty elaborate layout 'eh?" Wally observed as they entered the main lounge.

"Not bad at all. Let's get a table near the band. I love music."

The room could easily accommodate close to two thousand guests, but less than fifty were scattered sparsely throughout. "Yo!" Wally waved to attract a passing waitress. "Two Bud Lights, frosted mugs and this is an emergency."

The waitress came over and set a small bowl of mixed nuts on their table. "Two Bud Lights, emergency delivery, coming right up."

"Hey," a man with the convention group rudely yelled out to the band. "Play some oldies, U-2, Michael Jackson, Queen."

"R-E-M," another requested.

"Oldies?" Vic inquired hoping to gain some insight. "People sure enjoy a different style of music today."

"Oh yeah, everything today is computerized sound. It's not like it was in the good old days."

"I gather they take requests."

"They'll play any song you want if you flash a little cash. Do you want me to request one in for you?"

"No, that's all right. I'd like to feel my own way around." Vic picked up his beer and strolled casually to the stage. "Pardon me, young man."

"Yes, sir?" the keyboard player replied. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, it may be a little out of the ordinary, but I was wondering if you might consider doing a song from the fifties, maybe something by 'Nat King Cole'?" Vic still had a magic way of influencing people. "I'd sincerely appreciate it."

The man acknowledged with an appreciative smile. "That's a pretty unusual request, but Berry certainly has the voice for it. We're do for a break. I'll pull it up on the computer and see if we can work something up for you."

"Thank you. I'll put in a good word for you with the owner." He laid a hundred-dollar-bill next to the performer's stool.

"Thank you, sir," the man replied eagerly. "Thank you very much. We'll definitely come up with something."

Vic returned to his seat and sat quietly for a moment. He was enjoying the irony of communicating with people who didn't know who he was and the power behind knowing that he could drastically influence the life of anyone with a word.

"What do ya think so far?"

"Not bad. I'm actually rather proud."

"You should be. It may not be everything you hoped for, but if it's got your name on it, you can bet there's something good about it, especially the beer." He guzzled down what remained in the glass. "Welp, that's it for me. If I drink more than one this late, I'll spend most of the night in the pisser. Besides, I need my beauty rest. How about you?"

"Not just yet. I've had forty-four years of beauty rest. I think I'll stay and listen to some music for a while."

"I can stick around if you want."

"No, Wally, you go ahead. I'll be fine and don't worry, I won't be long."

Wally glanced around the room to assure that the security personnel were in place. Curt was in plain view at the bar, Marty was at a nearby table and Larry sat across the room. "Okay, sleep well and enjoy the park tomorrow, but don't overdo it. I'll check in with you tomorrow night around nine."

Vic looked up and frowned. "Go away."

"All right, I'm goin'. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Wally."

As he headed for the exit, the band announced their next number. "We're going to start our next set with a request. This is a very old classic by a great singer named 'Nat King Cole'."

Wally paused as the band began to play their rendition of the hit song, 'Unforgettable'. 'How appropriate,' he thought.

* * *

CHAPTER 21

SNEAKY LITTLE DEVIL

Curt sat sipping a strong cup of hot coffee on his balcony. He thought it was odd that he hadn't heard from Mr. Smith who was scheduled for breakfast by then but chalked it up to a late sleeping session. At 8:45, he decided it was time to impose.

He dialed Vic's room, but after six rings, there was still no answer. He rapidly began developing a justifiable concern and was soon knocking at his door. Again, there was no response, so he pulled out a small electronic device and inserted it to unlock the door.

Vic was nowhere to be found. On the bathroom sink was a bloody tissue containing the transmitters Vic had scrapped from his skin and next to it, the various electrodes that were supposed to monitor his activity throughout the day. "S-H-I-T," he yelled as he retrieved his cellular phone. "Code red, boys."

Within seconds, Marty, Larry, Kathy and Dennis had joined him. "Who was supposed to be covering the hall?" Before anyone answered, he said, "Forget it, I don't want to know. I've activated the transmitter in his shoe. Switch your receivers to channel four. My guess is, he's still on the premises. Let's find him and I mean FAST, but no contact. Observe and inform

only. He probably knows that we're on to him by now. Let's go!"

"Does this guy think we're stupid or something?" Marty added.

Curt's hard glare answered the question. "Move out."

It didn't take long to track the signal to a small gift shop in the lobby. Curt approached casually and signaled the others with a finger pointing to a dressing room. Curt slowly opened the door. Inside were the shoes. He looked at the others with complete disgust and silently mouthed his comment. 'F-U-C-K.' He rushed to the checkout counter.

"Excuse me, Miss. Did you happen to notice a tall man in his sixties with a salt and pepper goatee browsing around recently?"

"Yeah, he was here, a very nice man. He bought some tennis shoes." She recognized his look of concern and attempted to comfort him. "He seemed fine though. I'm sure there's no cause for alarm."

"How long ago was he here?"

"About a half an hour or so."

"Thanks." Curt turned and spoke to the other three. "Believe it or not, the old guy dumped the shoes too. He's got a half hour on us. Marty, you and Dennis head over to the east gate. Larry, you and Kathy cover the VEDSOL Center, just in case. The parks open at ten. We've got a good chance of spotting him at one of the entrances. If we don't catch up with him there, it'll be like searching for a needle in a haystack."

Curt was now making the dreaded phone call to Wally. "This is Curt."

"I was just getting ready to contact you. We're drawing a blank on the monitors."

"He's not wearing them."

"What?"

"You heard me. Smith pulled a fast one this morning, no electrodes and no transmitter. He ditched the whole package."

"What about the shoes?"

"The shoes too."

"That sly son of a bitch. We should have used a nano-transmitter. Where are you?"

"We're in the process of covering the entrances now."

"When you find him, and I don't mean if, you call me pronto."

"Hold on, Wally." He cut away from the phone and then quickly returned. "That was Dennis. He just spotted Smith on the tram. I'm on my way."

"That's a relief. Keep close tabs on him, but no contact. If he's playing some game, let's see if we can figure out what it is."

"Yes, sir. Should I call Dan?"

"No, I'll spare you that embarrassment."

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault, Curt. Just stay with him and call me if anything changes."

"I will."

Wally finally picked up the phone and pressed the numbers. "It's Wally. I tried to tell you this was a bad idea, but noooooo."

"Spare me the dramatics," Dan replied. "Is he all right?"

"Oh yeah, he's fine and pretty fuckin' slick to."

"Wally, I haven't got time for this."

"The sneaky son-of-a-bitch pulled the slip on us."

"What?"

"That's right. He dumped the hardware and snuck out this morning."

"You're kidding?" he spouted.

"Does it sound like I'm kidding?"

"Sit tight. I'll send a team."

"No need, everything's under control. Curt has him under surveillance."

"We can't afford to take any chances. Bring him in," Dan ordered.

"Wait a minute, Dan. If we do that, we're just gonna piss him off. Let's let him think he's loose and keep an eye on him. Let's see where he goes and what he's up to. If there's a reason for his odd behavior, I think we ought to find out what it is. Trust me, we've got it covered. We can still take care of any emergency as planned. Maybe he just needed a little slack. Hell, the man's entitled to that."

"All right, I'll play along for a while, but I'm placing the emergency team standing by just in case and I'll be monitoring the surveillance transmissions."

"Good idea."

"Don't let this thing get screwed up, Wally."

"Have I ever let you down?"

"Oh, Jesus."

"Okay, bad example," Wally alluded comically in hopes of easing the tension. "Relax, Dan, everything's gonna be fine."

"Keep me posted."

"You've got it big guy. I'll check in later."

"Okay."

* * *

All too soon, the memorable day was over, and the only thing left to do now was face the music. Vic arrived back at his room at 11 PM. Cigar smoke filled the air. Vic kept his back to the intruder and sighed with relent as he closed the door. "Hi, Wally."

Wally responded with a slow stern clap of the hands to sarcastically acknowledge the illusive achievement. Vic turned to face him and surrendered with the raising of his arms. "Okay, I know it was wrong, but in defense, your honor, my first day back in the real world wasn't going to be spent under a microscope like a laboratory rat in some glorified experiment. I'm sorry and it won't happen again. I promise."

"You bet your ass it won't. That was a stupid thing to do," he calmly reprimanded, then chuckled aloud, "pretty fuckin' slick too. To be honest, I didn't know you had it in ya." Vic shook his head with a childish smirk. "Tell me..." He leaned forward as if he were preparing to scold and asked with an almost provocative grin, "Did you have a good time?"

Vic's face lit up with the excitement of a child receiving the approval of a parent. "It was great, Wally, absolutely incredible. I knew it was going to be bigger and better somehow, but the sights, the sounds and even the smell, it was fascinating. The only thing I didn't see is what makes it all tick. That's what I would liked to have seen." He stood and stared out the window.

As Wally began to speak, Vic turned to face him. "They do have underground tours you know, kind of like a backstage pass."

"Do you think we could arrange it?"

"Probably."

"It's kind of weird, though," he added with a twinkle in

his eye. "I can't help but feel a little guilty."

"You should."

"Not about that. I mean I know it was my project, but it's as though I'm not entitled or something. I had so little to do with the development. Yet, when it comes right down to it, I get the credit. I just don't feel worthy. Does that make any sense to you?"

"I guess it's all in how you look at it. Anything and everything with your name on it, in some way, shape or form, is an extension of your visions. If it weren't for your insight none of it would be here today. You wouldn't even be here."

"I'm part of a team that has accomplished what practical science said was impossible, but it was still your vision that created the foundation for our success. The same principal applies to Dazzle World and VEDSOL." Vic seemed to be listening intensely but remained silent.

"Traditionally, the founders of an organization pass on a legacy, but in every case, their predecessors assume control of what has been entrusted to them. That's the way it's always been. The only difference in your case, you get a second chance." Even Wally was absorbed in the reality of his illustration. "Who is more entitled than you? You're the heir to your own estate."

Vic turned back toward the window, but Wally was observed his reflection in the glass. Vic displayed an arrogant smile. His eyes widened with fascination.

"Enough of this small talk, let's get this damn examination over with so I can go to bed."

"Tomorrow," Vic said as he stripped off his shirt, "I'm going to visit VEDSOL."

Wally was hunched over his bag and rolled his eyes at the thought. He was well-aware of Vic's personal attachment to that project and suspected that he wasn't going to be pleased with its manipulation. He began contemplating a devious method of imposing.

"Funny thing, in all my years of dedicated service, I've never been to VEDSOL." Vic lifted his head to acknowledge but resisted the urge to respond. "Nope, never to VEDSOL."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yep, had one or two vacations in my day, but never to VEDSOL."

"Hmm," Vic murmured again as if to insight ignorance.

Wally shined his light at the retina. "I hear it's quite a place." He placed his hands on either side of the neck. While probing with poking fingers, he angled his head up and commented further, "Yeah, yeah, one of these days, I might get to go myself, one of these days."

"You should, Wally. I think everyone should."

Wally stepped behind him with a frustrated smirk. Then, he noticed a pitcher of ice-cold water. His frown converted into a smile as he dipped his stethoscope in the frigid water. He continued poking around while it chilled. "Exhale please," he instructed. "So, you're going to VEDSOL tomorrow, huh?" he asked as he placed the cold steel against his skin.

Vic jumped with a gasp. "Uh huh," he managed as, much to Wally's delight, a bone shivering chill ran down his spine. "Are we just about finished?"

"Oh, no," he answered as he snapped a rubber glove on to his right hand. "We're just getting started." Vic turned around sharply and pinched his lips together in a spiteful glare. "Drop 'em," he commanded with a cold stone face.

"I don't think so!" Vic argued profusely.

"I've got to do what I've got to do."

"All right, all right, all right, you win."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I said, you can go."

"Go where?" he replied ignominiously. Vic rolled his eyes and grabbed his robe. "Surely you aren't implying that I would sacrifice my integrity as a physician in an effort to gain favor with a patient." He began to remove the glove. "I'll tell ya what I'm gonna do though. You seem like a nice guy, so just this once, I'll by-pass this segment of the examination."

Vic sat up and began dressing. "Go away, Wally."

"Okay," he said with a sense of victory in his voice. "And by the way, thank you for the very kind invitation."

"Invitation, my ass, blackmail is what it is."

"Breakfast at eight?"

"Fine, now get out of here before I change my mind."

"Yes sir, Mr. Smith. Good night, sir."

"Go!" Vic concluded with a razor-sharp finish. "Go!"

"Gone," Wally proclaimed as he softly closed the door behind him.

* * *

Just after eight the next morning, Vic sat quietly sipping his cup of coffee at a table near the entrance to an outdoor café. It was a beautiful morning. The sun was dancing on the leaves of the surrounding trees swaying in a light breeze. The tranquil interlude was brought to an abrupt halt by the sight of a stereotype tourist bouncing gleefully toward the terrace. Vic found it amusing and chuckled at the sight.

The plump senior citizen was dressed in a multicolored Hawaiian-style shirt; bright red Bermuda shorts supported by striped suspenders, white knee-high socks, canvas tennis shoes and a straw hat. Sun visors, attached to his bifocals, were flipped up for clear vision and a camera bag dangled at his side.

Vic's amusement quickly transformed into embarrassment as the extravagant tourist began to look strangely familiar. Vic dipped low in his chair and covered his face with the palm of his hand as Wally approached his table. "Mornin'," Wally blurted with an arrogant smile.

Vic peered out at him through a crack between his fingers and began tapping his fingers on his face. Just then, their very polite waiter arrived. "Can I get you something to drink, sir?"

Vic lifted his finger and spoke to the waiter. "Give us just a minute, will you please?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Somethin' wrong?"

"Aside from your ridiculous attire and me being thoroughly embarrassed, no."

Wally looked down at his attire. "What?"

"I thought the idea was to remain inconspicuous."

"So."

"You don't think that get up is going to attract attention."

"It's like they say, there's more than two ways to skin a hog. You can either attract attention to who you are or attract attention to who you aren't."

"Meaning?"

"There ain't nobody gonna figure out who we are with me in this get up." He winked.

"We're safe, all right...embarrassed, but safe."

"Are we gonna eat or what?"

Vic shook his head and conceded to Wally's ludicrous philosophy. "Why not?"

Soon after breakfast, they were climbing aboard the monorail to VEDSOL. As the train began to depart, a father leaned to his nine-year-old son and said, "Here we go."

"Yeah," Wally repeated. "Here we go! If you give me a buck for every time we hear those words today, I'll be rich by the end of the day."

* * *

Vic and Wally spent the next few days exploring together. It was an enlightening experience for both. Vic was obviously disappointed by much of what he saw, but for the most part, seemed pleased with the development and willing to accept what he could not change. All in all, he enjoyed nearly every aspect of it.

When the time came on October 24th, he was ready to leave. A helicopter was waiting near the hotel. It lifted off and made several huge circles around the complex. Vic stared out the window with mixed emotions, then signaled the pilot with pointing finger. The aircraft made a wide banking turn and flew away from the fabulous resort.

Playtime was over. Now, Vic and his team would focus all their attention on one objective. Soon, the world would discover that the late great Vic Dazzle was back.

* * *

CHAPTER 22

IT'S A VERY SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL

While the rest of the team focused on Dazzle's vacation, Dan had been coordinating the details concerning the upcoming presentation, but this morning, when he arrived at his office, he found a very unusual message flashing on the computer screen. How it got there and where it came from was a complete mystery.

"Dr. Karrington, it is imperative that we speak. You will find the information most fascinating. However, I cannot stress enough the need for complete and utter confidentiality. Since that is something you are quite familiar with, it shouldn't be a problem."

Dan was somewhat alarmed by the directive and how the intruder had managed to breach their sophisticated security system. The strange occurrence prompted him to take immediate action.

He picked up his phone and to the person on the other end, directed, "Get Peter Avery on the line...FAST. Tell him it's urgent." Less than thirty seconds later his phone was ringing.

"Karrington," he answered. "Yeah, Peter. Drop whatever you're doing. I've got a message on my computer. I want you to put a trace on it." There was another pause. "Of course, I'm sure. I'm looking at it right now. This is supposed to be a secured network. I want to know how it's getting through, where it came from and who sent it, top priority. Let me know when you find something."

As Dan concluded his conversation with Mr. Avery, the original message was deleted and replaced with another:

"This transmission is impossible to trace. Mr. Avery will be unable to assist you."

Dan was even more disturbed. Not only had the intruder managed to bypass the secured channels, this message indicated that his private phone line had been tapped as well.

He typed in his first response, hoping to generate a reply, which would allow Peter ample time to trace it. "Might I at least know to whom I am replying?"

"Who, what, where and how are all questions that will be answered soon enough. As you can see, we're not the least bit concerned about Mr. Avery's investigation. This transmission is for your eyes only. What we need to discuss will require complete confidentiality. Once you agree to our terms, I'll explain the purpose of our mission."

Perhaps, I can only put your mind at ease by informing you that your Cryonic project is of no interest to us. On the contrary, we are actually in a position to assist you."

Dan took note of some significant details. The frequent use of the words 'our' and 'we' implied that the perpetrator was not acting alone. In addition, the intruders were privy to classified information. His thoughts were quickly interrupted by a phone call. "What did you find out?"

"Actually, not a whole lot. You are definitely receiving an

isolated signal, but..." He hesitated in his own confusion.
"...the transmission isn't being sent through ordinary network channels. This isn't an incoming signal."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is, it seems to be generating from within the facility and within our network."

"Are you telling me that it's coming from one of our own people?"

"Not exactly, sir, at least I don't think so. You see, it's an extremely unusual signal. The frequency is almost infinitesimal and virtually undetectable. I've never seen anything quite like it. At this point, I can only determine where the signal is being received and where it is being sent."

"I can only track it to the Koplax chip of the main frame. There, it is then being amplified to adapt to our system. Somehow, it's been carefully routed around the security system to be received at one exclusive terminal, yours. There is no way to determine where it came from. I can't explain it, doctor but there's one thing for certain, the person transmitting this signal has technology that we don't have."

"Can you read the messages?"

"No, sir. The signal is being scrambled everywhere else."

"Then, I'm the only one who can."

"Apparently."

"All right, Pete. Stay on it and let's keep a lid on it until we know a little more about what's going on. Thanks." He hung up and just as he was about to begin typing, another message appeared:

"Are you now prepared to agree to our terms?"

Dan typed his reply. "It seems as though you have left me with no choice. What do you want?"

"We'll discuss the details later. I think it would be more appropriate to answer your other questions (Who, how and where) first. We have programmed our transmission to provide audio-visual communication. With your permission, I'd like to activate that device at this time."

"By all means activate your program." Dan typed in his response, then folded his arms across his chest and took a deep breath.

A dark picture appeared on the screen. An individual sat with his fingers folded in bright yellow gloves and with his arms resting on a polished steel table. In the background was a very unusual metallic structure consisting of decorative arches, illuminated by faint back lighting. A loose-fitting burgundy garment with gold trim was draped over the man's husky frame. His head had a deformed oval shape with a somewhat rounded colorless face protruding forward. Tiny lime green eyes were set in abstruse concave shafts of a well-defined brow. Two flaps with slotted grooves near the upper back region of the head appeared to be the ears. Dan focused on the man's peculiar appearance or disguise, whichever it may have been.

"I hope you don't find my semblance too appalling."

Dan thought that a comical gesture might be best suited for the situation. "Appalling, no, but sufficing to say, had we met before, I'm certain that I would have recalled the occasion."

If there was an expression on the man's face, Dan couldn't detect it. "We've never met."

Casual conversation just didn't seem appropriate, so Dan elected to take a more aggressive stand. "You contacted me, so why don't you begin by telling me what you think I need to know?"

"My name is Kotoran, leader of Lavidion, capital of Toren."

"Lavidion? Toren?" Dan indulged with a smirk, assuming the individual referred to some obscure terrorist organization. "I'm not familiar with the regime."

"You weren't expected to be. Your skepticism and cynicism

were anticipated, but I ask that you approach the subject matter scientifically and keep an open mind."

"It's your ball game."

"This isn't the manner in which most would expect to perceive a close encounter with an alien world, but that is precisely what is transpiring."

Dan chuckled. "Let's back up a frame or two. You expect me to believe that you are a representative of some alien nation from outer space."

"Yes and no. We are, by any definition, from another universe, just not as most in your world would perceive it."

"I see, another world."

"That's correct, a world vastly advanced by comparison with your own. Life in our world has existed for nearly two million years."

"Two million years," Dan skeptically reiterated.

"As difficult as that may be for you to comprehend, it is an accurate statement. We have been exploring the depths of our universe for the past 800,000 years."

Dan found the thought of such an astounding consideration intriguing. As a scientist and for the sake of argument, he made a halfhearted effort to appease. "That's a long time."

"After numerous millenniums of extensive space travel, we detected what is to date our most amazing discovery, the boundaries of our universe. We eventually succeeded in breaching those confines, an achievement led to the discovery of your world. Even at your present stage of progress, is it not conceivable that after half a million years of technological development mankind could eventually achieve such capabilities?"

Dan took a moment to sincerely consider that possibility. "I have a hard time picturing next week's agenda, so it is rather difficult to imagine."

"Stretch your imagination, doctor. Envision mankind exploring the farthest reaches of what he presently perceives as an infinite universe. Imagine discovering that, in the scheme of infinity, your universe is incased by an outer shell. Imagine locating that barrier and after thousands of years, developing a means of penetrating that protective shield. Imagine discovering that what was once conceived as an infinite universe was really just a small fragment of debris in an even more infinite universe."

"If you can discern that concept, perhaps you can at least begin to understand where we are from. Who we are and how we got here... That's a bit more complicated."

Dan was stunned into silence. The far-fetched scenario was so convincingly presented, that he was forced to consider the prospect. Though he was consumed by skepticism, this individual had succeeded in establishing a certain level of credibility.

"To give you some indication as to the extent of our technology, consider that we have studied the evolution of life in your world since our arrival, almost fifty thousand years ago. Aside from one brief interval, our presence and involvement here has been limited primarily to observation and research."

"This extensive expedition has provided our scientific community with an opportunity to gain insight as to how life in our own world may have evolved. When we began our research, we discovered rather small groups of early Neanderthal man. We watched the primal creatures develop, evolve and progress. Our libraries of information are almost limitless. Your most sophisticated computer couldn't begin to analyze the data we have collected regarding mankind's evolution."

"In a relatively early stage of human development, we failed to influence man's social and technological structure. We contacted the most advanced human society in existence. The great pyramids of Egypt are a direct result of that elementary influence. Regretfully, though our efforts were motivated by good intentions, our impact on the social structure resulted in irreversible ramifications."

"Our technology was simply too far advanced, and we were unsuccessful in establishing a coherent level of intellect."

Mankind could not cope with or adhere to such technology. Though we have consistently and moderately influenced human development by an indirect means, we elected to discontinue and prohibited direct contact. This approach, though painstakingly slow, has proven to be quite successful."

"Of course, we do have a somewhat selfish motivation. As intended, most of what man ultimately accomplishes will serve to assist us on our mission."

"Which is?"

"A topic that, for the time being, will remain undisclosed."

"If I understand you correctly, the advancements we've achieved in our Cryonic research would, therefore, be an indirect result of alien influence."

"To an extent. Though we were unable to control the way man thinks, we could and did provide the elements to establish a foundation for his manner of thinking. That does apply to your research as well."

"There are powerfully influential entities consisting of negative and positive energy polarizing your solar system. Today, we understand those forces and have come to appreciate the significance of spirituality. Those two conflicting variables have tremendously profound effects on mankind. Unfortunately, much of the technology that was intended for specific constructive purposes has been manipulated by negative forces and misused for destructive military means. Of course, that was not our intent and such influence was beyond our control."

Dan began to delve curiously. "If you have such vast superior technology, I find it difficult to understand why you haven't countered such adversity. It seems to me that a captivating display of those capabilities by aliens from outer space would greatly influence mankind."

"Your point is well taken, and I suppose that an invasion from outer space would have a dramatic effect, but we are not from outer space, nor are we were capable of such a

demonstration."

"I don't understand," Dan stated with sarcastic overtones. "You say you are from another world, right?"

"Allow me to clarify using the illustration I alluded to earlier. It became necessary for us to adapt a provisional addendum to our laws of direct contact with your world. We wouldn't be contacting you now if it weren't deemed necessary, but an unforeseen event took place which has forced us to revise our laws in order to address the insoluble circumstances."

"About twelve years ago, one of your field expeditions conducting research in the jungles of Zaire happened upon a unique stone. The unusual rock was unearthed and transported to your facility. The massive structure now rests as a decorative centerpiece in your eccentric terrarium. You refer to it as the Cornerstone. Our universe exists within that mass."

Dan's jaw dropped open. "Am I to understand that you're from some microscopic universe that lives inside a rock in our basement?"

The man answered simply, but convincingly. "That is correct."

Dan had no other explanation for the oddities. "That would be a rather difficult concept to fathom."

"I'm sure it is, but it's quite true and not all that perplex. Even with nearly a million years of historical records, I doubt that I have any more insight as to what the future may hold than you do. We can, however, imagine how future generations in your world and in ours will be affected by the decisions we make in the weeks ahead. In any case, we can only hope for the very best with respect to that future."

"A seemingly innocent decision made by one small group of individuals in your world has had a devastating impact on ours. Our universe was literally uprooted, relocated and buried in an immense maze of structural steel. For twelve years now, our universe has been inadvertently imprisoned in your facility. The unforeseen circumstances forced us to halt our research and focus on a method of making direct contact with you. That has

been a rather lengthy process. Quite simply, we need your help."

"With one inadvertent swing of a hammer, one man could annihilate our entire universe. Though we have established outposts in numerous galaxies within our universe and at various locations on your planet, the billions who thrive within are at your mercy. Of course, we don't take unnecessary risks either. We have studied your behavior patterns quite closely. If we didn't think we could depend on you for assistance, we wouldn't be speaking with one another right now. However, one indisputable fact remains. Without human intervention, we have no means of restitution."

"Of all the potential scenarios we had envisioned, being trapped in your facility wasn't one of them. Since you are a scientist, you are one of very few individuals with enough intellectual insight to properly comprehend and evaluate the circumstances. The future of our world rests in your hands. Our only request is to be set free."

Dan's doubt prompted him to challenge the notion. "I am fascinated by the concept, but I am also very skeptical. Computer generated images are common everyday occurrences. As far as I know, this could be an elaborate hoax and you, nothing more than a computer-generated image yourself."

"I understand your concerns. Therefore, we have prepared an exhibit for your inspection. We would however implore terms like those bestowed upon your colleague, Dr. Grisham. We too will require confidentiality. In exchange for your efforts, we will provide access to our technology."

Dan was astounded by the reference to Dr. Grisham and the terms of their agreement. "You seem to know an awful lot about our operation."

"Our methods of surveillance are relatively simple. A microscopic probe was implanted on the foreheads of your key personnel. You have been equipped with a similar device. It was initially a means of exploring our new environment, but the probes also provide a means of transportation and communication." Dan began rubbing briskly and nervously at his forehead. "Don't worry, doctor, it's harmless."

"What kind of demonstration you have in mind?"

"We'd like you to relocate the cornerstone to laboratory E, which is equipped with a photon microscope capable of adequate magnification. We will guide your lens to a base station located in a crevasse just below the outer surface. Camouflaged doors will be opened for your inspection."

Dan was astonished by the intriguing possibilities. If the claims were genuine, he was being invited to peek into what must surely be another of the world's greatest discoveries. The thought of making such a breakthrough excited him, but there were a lot of unanswered questions and the lingering suspicion that there may be an ulterior motive. As perpetual waves of thoughts raced through his mind, he pursued the endeavor. "When would you like to begin the process?"

"Your staff is scheduled for dismissal in less than an hour. That will provide you with an opportunity to relocate the stone with little or no interruptions. As far as equipment, everything you'll need is readily available and we will guide you through the process."

"How will we communicate?"

"A wireless remote headset in the laboratory has been programmed to receive our transmissions."

"In that case, I'll plan to begin at 8:00 PM."

"That is acceptable. Your unwavering cooperation will not be forgotten."

Dan still wasn't convinced but was developing some spirited motivation. If it was a hoax, he wanted to put an end to it quickly. If it proved to be true, he would have to re-evaluate his objectives. No matter how he viewed the situation, something strange was taking place and any breach of security posed a definite threat. One way or another and before he shared it with another, he had to resolve the issue.

* * *

At the appointed time, he retrieved the designated headset

to begin receiving instructions. He was guided to a large equipment room where he cleared a path to a device that was parked near the rear. The robotic unit was designed to enable one man to lift and transport heavy awkward objects. It was mounted on a rover type wheelbase and was well suited for the task. He strapped himself in and maneuvered the device toward a large door that led to the extravagant terrarium. A bead of perspiration dripped off his forehead as he slowly traveled toward the cornerstone.

On so many occasions, he had sat on that very rock to ponder his work. This time, an eerie chill consumed him as he approached. The unique stone was mostly black in color with streaks of amber, blue and red. Moss had collected in most of the shallow crevices of its surface. The unusual shape also added to the stone's appeal. It was mostly oblong with several protruding 'legs' that branched off in seven different directions at the base. It was approximately four feet in height. Its depth was about the same with an overall length of seven feet.

Dan positioned the lift and carefully guided the arms to the base. The hydraulically controlled extensions slowly began pressing through the soft sand beneath. Dan squinted his eyes and strained to monitor the progress. A thought crossed his mind as he proceeded. 'Nowhere near this kind of care was taken when they originally transported the stone.' How they had managed to keep from destroying the tiny world to begin with was a mystery.

He commented aloud as he initiated the lift, "Okay, here we go." Another thought crossed his mind, 'I'm going to feel like a complete idiot if this all turned out to be some sort of twisted joke.'

The rock remained just six inches from the ground as he slowly began to follow the path back the exit. He was quite surprised to find that the gauge measuring the weight read only one thousand, six hundred and thirty-eight pounds. He was expecting a reading in the range of multiple tons. The information seemed to lend support to the micro-world hypothesis. He was relieved to reach the smooth surface of the laboratory floor.

It took more than an hour, but finally, the stone was

safely in place. Dan switched on the computer to test the system. A message quickly appeared on the screen:

THANK YOU, DOCTOR KARRINGTON. We've got a good start. We'll have everything ready for your inspection tomorrow at 10 AM. Good night.

* * *

VIC'S RETURN FROM DAZZLE WORLD

Vic was welcomed home with a private reception that took place in the basement conference room. For the first time, they genuinely celebrated their success. There were no formal declarations or speeches, no tributes or acknowledgments. There would be plenty of time for those formalities later. Dan popped the cork on the first bottle of champagne and the festivities began.

Though Dan was itching to enlighten Vic about his latest discovery, he would have to find the appropriate time. Dazzle would be standing before the rest of the world in just a few weeks and there would now be an additional log to fuel a fire.

The next day, as he led Vic to Lab E, Dan explained the strange occurrence. "You don't seem too surprised," the dejected doctor informed as Dazzle inspected the stone.

"Dan, I've had suspicions along those lines since I was a child. Of course, I anticipated slightly different circumstances, but I knew in my heart that extraterrestrials were real and probably living among us. The timing is ironic though, don't you think? Here I am living in the future, but I feel as though I am finally living in the era I was intended to. Does the prospect of an alien world surprise me? No. Does it alarm me? Yes. What do they want?"

"What they want is much the same as all mankind, to be free. They're here for the same reason we would be if we had achieved what they had. Our scientific endeavors would have led us there. I have to admit, I thought it was rather odd that the development coincides with everything else at this particular juncture, but it might just lead us to technology far beyond our own."

"Or they might just use it against us. Have you thought about that?"

"No, I don't think so. They have too much to gain and, based on the conversation I had with Kotoran, I just don't see it that way."

"I hope you are right, Dan, and perhaps I'm being a bit too cynical, but I have a feeling there's more to it than what they're telling us."

"How do you think we should handle it?"

"I think we should keep it under wraps until we know a lot more and at least until after November 6th. I don't want anything interfering with the presentation. For now, I want this rock locked away."

"You don't want to talk with them?" Dan inquired with extreme curiosity, knowing that if the alien probes were in place, the Torens were most likely listening in.

"Not until after the 6th," he declared. "Keep me informed, but don't do anything without my approval. Understood?"

Dan was reluctant to agree. This matter had much greater significance and potential consequences than Vic seemed to be giving credit for. This wasn't necessarily Vic's decision to make, but due to his obligations, Dan felt compelled to accede. "I don't share your concern, but if you believe that it's in our best interests, I'll comply with your wishes. Something like this is going to be difficult to place on a back burner though. These 'people' want out."

"That may be all they want, but I want to be certain of their intentions, don't you?"

"I suppose."

"There's more at stake here than a science project. We've got a whole world out there and their best interests might very well depend on how we handle this situation. If we're going to unleash an alien nation on this planet, we'd better have the

public on our side."

"I just want to do what's right."

"So, do I Dan. That's even more reason to be cautious. Trust me, in a few weeks everything is going to be different. Right now, we've got to get ready for Rome and I'm counting on you. If that's going to be a problem..."

Dan was intimidated by the challenge. "No, there's no problem. I'll take care of it."

Vic quickly alluded to another topic of great importance. "Have you scheduled a meeting with Valentine?"

"I have an appointment with him Monday morning, but he's not going to be an easy sale."

"You're right about that, but we need him on our side going in. After that, we can make whatever changes are necessary. One day at a time, Dan."

He wasn't sure of Vic's meaning, but concurred with a nod. The Cornerstone and its contents would be secured in Lab E and until Vic elected to disclose the discovery, it would remain a secret.

* * *

CHAPTER 23

MEETING YOUR PREDECESSOR

Dan and Vic arrived in for San Antonio on the morning of October 26 to meet privately with the CEO of Dazzle Enterprises. Until now, R. D. Valentine was only aware that there was a spectacular discovery on the horizon and nearly all the necessary arrangements had been made without official Dazzle authorization. It was creating quite a stir in the executive offices.

Dan waited patiently for more than an hour before being allowed to enter the CEO's office. "I'm a busy man, Karrington," the reigning Chairman made clear from the onset. The man didn't bother to shake hands and made very little eye contact. "State your business so I can get on with mine."

Though Dan was affronted by the man's contemptuous behavior, the inherent smile never faded. "Mr. Valentine, there is a great deal of controversy concerning the upcoming announcement."

"So?"

"I gather that you are more than a little curious as to the nature of that announcement."

The simple fact that Dan knew he was unaware of the details was enough to gain his full attention. Valentine was emphatically determined to find out just what this stranger's intentions were. "Dr. Karrington, I'm the Chairman of Dazzle Enterprises. Very little, if anything, takes place without my being aware of it."

"I'm sure that is quite true, in most cases, but in this particular instance, you don't know."

"And you do?" he stated with an obnoxious grin.

"Actually, I'm one of the few who does."

"Is that so?" he asked with a measurable degree of doubt still wearing his disdainful frown. Dan nodded. "Your name isn't familiar to me. Just what are you a doctor of?"

Dan's smile was now even more pronounced as he sought a means of avoiding the question. "Mr. Valentine, perhaps we should dispense with the formalities."

"That's a hell of an idea."

"The official announcement will be on Friday, November 6th at 8:00 PM." His knowledge of the confidential date instilled a sense of credibility. "Aside from myself and my associates, one other person needs to know what will be unveiled on that occasion. That person is you."

"What a concept, the man in charge is actually to be informed of what's going on in his own company. I want facts and figures, and I want them now," he yelled as he slammed his fist on the desk.

Dan remained calm under the circumstances and was trying to be empathetic. Valentine held the highest office in the illustrious company and was unaccustomed to being left in the dark, particularly about what was being promoted as the greatest achievement in Dazzle history. Little did he know that a huge rug was about to be pulled out from under him. "I'm not at

liberty to divulge that information."

"Then, by God, I want to talk to the man who is."

"That is precisely why I'm here. If you'd be kind enough to accompany me, there is helicopter waiting to take us to that very individual."

"Oh no! I'm not going anywhere. You bring his ass to me!"

"I'm sorry, sir, that just isn't possible. However, it is imperative that you meet with him."

"Who is he?"

"Again, I'm not at liberty to say, but I can assure you that all your questions will be answered at that time."

"On the word of some doctor I've never even heard of, I'm supposed to climb into a helicopter and fly off to God knows where."

"Actually, it's a rather quaint little hotel on the north side of town."

"Why should I?" Valentine pursued.

"You need answers and we are prepared to provide them."

"This is absurd," he declared as he stood and yanked his sports coat from a rack. "I'll tell you one Goddamn thing, doctor. This better be damn good." He charged toward the outer office and spoke harshly to the young secretary, "I'm leaving. I'll be back in..." He turned to Dr. Karrington for an answer.

"A couple of hours at the most," Dan politely offered.

"Call me if anything important comes up."

"But, sir, you have a meeting with Senator Gates?"

"Cancel it," he barked. "C'mon, doctor. Let's get this dog and pony show of yours over with." They marched out onto the lawn and climbed into the helicopter.

Fifteen minutes later, they were landing on the roof of the Cypress Tree Hotel. Two security officers met them there and escorted them to a private elevator. Though no words were spoken, Valentine made sure that his malcontent was obvious.

As the elevator doors opened, Dan invited Mr. Valentine to exit first with a casual extension of his arm. As they approached Vic's suite, one of the security guards raised a detection device and began scanning the visitor.

"What the hell is this?" Valentine complained with a cold, hard, stare to express his disapproval.

"Please, Mr. Valentine, make yourself comfortable," Dan said as they entered the suite. "Would you care for a drink?"

"Scotch...neat, make it a double."

As Dan poured the cocktail, he began to explain, "Cryonics."

"I beg your pardon."

"You asked me earlier what my field of study was."

"And that has what to do with anything?"

"Actually, quite a lot to do with everything. You see, I am the Chief Administrator for a Cryonic project that began over forty years ago."

"Very impressive, doctor."

"Please, Mr. Valentine, bear with me. I'll provide you with a preliminary explanation. You'll be introduced to your host in due time."

"Like I said," he reiterated with disgust, "this better be good."

"I'm sure you'll find this meeting most enlightening and well worth any inconvenience we may have caused you." Dan handed him his drink and sat in a chair next to him with one of his

own.

"Get on with it then."

A laser video viewing screen had been set up in advance. "I'm going to show you a very short film."

"For Christ's sake! Don't tell me we went through all this extravagant nonsense to watch a Goddamn film."

Dan had put up with just about as much of Mr. Valentine's obnoxious behavior as he could handle but refrained from expressing his negative point of view. "Watch the film. It's self-explanatory."

* * *

Valentine was obviously bewildered by what he had seen and in anticipation of what it implied, polished off what remained in his glass with one huge gulp. He now spoke in a much softer tone as he extended his empty glass.

"My pleasure," Dan obliged with a smile that bolstered some prominent arrogance of his own. "The original sixteen-millimeter film is being stored in a well secured vault. In terms of quality, I admit that it's not very impressive, but the content is quite profound. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Surely you aren't going to try and convince me that Vic Dazzle has been...resurrected?"

"Of course not," Dan replied with distinct certainty.

Valentine breathed a sigh of deep relief. Dan handed him his second drink and he quickly took another sip. "You had me worried there for a minute," he professed with vague chuckle.

"I thought, perhaps, someone with a little more credibility would be better suited for that task." Having made that final statement, he approached the door to an adjoining room and knocked lightly, then leaned casually against the wall in preparation to observe the melee.

Valentine rose slowly to his feet with his mouth open wide

as Vic entered the room. "Mr. Valentine," Dan began his formal introduction. "I'd like you to meet your predecessor, Vic Dazzle. Mr. Dazzle, R. D. Valentine."

"Hello," Vic said politely. Valentine was in awe of the spectacle that stood before him. "Quite a shocker, huh?" Valentine studied the man closely but could only manage a stunned version of a slight nod. "Sorry about the method of delivery, but we really weren't afforded too many options." Vic observed his reaction for a moment and then attempted to set his mind at ease. "Please, Mr. Valentine, have a seat and try to relax."

The bewildered man looked over at Dan seeking some sort of logical explanation. Dan just shrugged with a smile. Valentine slowly lowered himself back into the chair and took another stiff drink. He started to speak and then paused, looked down at the floor, then back up at Vic and repeated the awkward steps. "This is some sort of joke, right?"

Vic shook his head and proceeded to sit on a sofa to Valentine's right. "I'd be lying if I said that I wish it were." The scene offered an opportunity to observe a prime example of the dramatic reactions they could expect in the future. "As you can see, what we have here is a very delicate situation. Dan, would you be kind enough to freshen Mr. Valentine's drink please?"

"Certainly. Can I get you anything, Vic?"

"Absolute with a twist, please." He turned his attention back to the nervous man. "As you know, in a couple of weeks, we'll be making a formal public announcement. It seems only appropriate that you make the introduction."

"Me?" he quivered.

"Of course," Vic encouraged, "you are the CEO of Dazzle Enterprises. You are certainly entitled to the honor of presenting the greatest scientific achievement of all time. I understand that it's going to be quite an extravagant affair."

"I'm sure," he said softly beneath his breath, still struggling to grasp the reality.

"For obvious reasons, we'd like you to help keep our little secret until the announcement."

"Yeah, sure, but what about the press? They have ways of finding things out." He was finally starting to demonstrate at least some of the capabilities that had earned him the lucrative position.

"Do you mind if I call you Bob?"

"No, Bob's fine."

"Well, Bob," Vic casually informed with a wink. "We've managed to keep this project secret for over forty years. I see no reason why we can't keep it amongst ourselves for another ten days or so, do you?"

"I suppose not."

"We're very well organized, but we need someone in your position making sure that all details are carried out to the letter from within the company." Vic made certain as he spoke that there would never be any question as to who was in charge. "One of our agents will be arriving at your office this afternoon to install a secured phone line and an independent computer terminal. That will enable us to monitor your activity and communicate pertinent information. All you'll have to do is follow the guidelines as they are set forth."

Vic smiled and placed his hand on his shoulder to reassure him. "Don't worry, Bob, you're still the CEO and I see no need for that to change. You'll be conducting business as usual, but there are certain matters that we'll need you to attend to."

Valentine was obviously discouraged, but seemed to appreciate Vic's candor and the conditions of their arrangement were beginning to sink in. "I'll do what I can."

"I know you will. We just have to protect our interests." Again, he made his point without having to imply the consequences. "We're on the verge of turning the Delightful World of Dazzle upside down." Vic got up and walked towards the door he entered through. "I suppose that's it for now. It's been

a pleasure meeting you, Bob. We'll be in touch." He winked and disappeared through the opening.

"Good-bye," Valentine stammered quietly. He looked over at Dan. "That was the most incredible experience of my entire life." He quickly began to recall how rudely he had treated Dan and made an earnest attempt to reconcile. "Dr. Karrington, I owe you an apology. I had no idea. Of course, that's no excuse, but I am sorry."

Dan didn't exactly offer an acceptance of the apology, as humble as it may have been. "Tommy, will escort you back to your office."

Sensing Dan's lack of forgiveness, he acknowledged the instructions with a humble gesture. "Well, I guess you know how to reach me."

"By the way, until the formal announcement, Mr. Dazzle is to be referred to as Smith in all correspondence. His name should never be mentioned, not even in passing."

"Smith," he agreed. "Good-bye, doctor."

"Good-bye, Mr. Valentine."

After the distinguished man made his humble exit, Dan proceeded to join Vic in the next room. "What do you think?" Vic was quick to indulge.

"I don't know what to think."

"You don't like him, do you?"

"What makes you say that?"

"You didn't say a word the whole time. That's not like you."

"I just don't trust him."

"Me either," Vic admitted. "He's worked hard to get where he is, and he thinks we're going to take it away from him. That tends to make a man like him dangerous."

"Maybe."

"Just in case, let's assign a couple of agents to keep an eye on him and have security install surveillance equipment in his home and office."

Dan was shocked by the bold command. "Listening devices?"

"There's too much at stake, Dan. He's either with me or against me and just in case, I want to be prepared for the latter."

The dramatic change in disposition sent a distinct message and though Dan wasn't quite sure how to respond, he knew better than to argue the point. "Okay, Vic. I'll get someone right on it."

"You're a good man. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You'd think of something, I'm sure," he chuckled.

* * *

CHAPTER 24

THE ENCORE

Due to its wholesome reputation, the monopoly Dazzle maintained in the entertainment industry had never been challenged. When news was leaked of an exciting Dazzle discovery, it was simply viewed by most as another wave in an ocean of crowning achievements.

In a press release just eight days before the event, Valentine made it official. The announcement was very brief.

DAZZLE INTERNATIONAL TO SHOCK THE WORLD.

The most significant development in Dazzle history is to be unveiled at an internationally televised conference. The event will take place at the newly completed World-A-Torium adjoining DAZZLE WORLD of ITALY outside of Rome. The formal proceedings will begin precisely at 8:00 PM on Friday November 6, 2009.

A Dazzle promise, the world will truly be astonished.

The historical moment had finally arrived. The company had procured several secluded bungalows nestled on a hillside in a clandestine location just out of Milan. The location offered

comfort, convenience and security for the Dazzle entourage.

To entice unprecedented interest, large blocks of extensive prime time commercial slots had been purchased on all major television and radio networks to promote the event. Newspapers and magazines were flooded with ads as well. The Dazzle website also had a page dedicated to the event. To complicate the mass confusion surrounding the mysterious presentation, there was absolutely no indication as to the nature of the announcement.

The contemporary World-A-Torium complex was an international convention center constructed as part of Italy's Dazzle World Theme Park. A long line of traffic began filling the parking lot as the gates opened at 8 AM.

Television camera crews competed for strategic positions and reporters from virtually every form of media scampered for limited available seating. Nearly twelve thousand people filed inside while thousands more surrounded the outer perimeter.

As the hour approached, people in every nation clambered around televisions in their homes and offices. Even nightclubs that had promoted their location for viewing the telecast were packed to overflowing. Enormous viewing screens had also been installed to accommodate record crowds at each Dazzle Theme Park. Something extremely grand was on the horizon and the eager public raced to see just what type of sensational communiqué Dazzle had in store.

Curiosity was piquing and expectations were varied as rumors quickly began to surface. One newspaper's headline read, 'THE BIGGEST AND BEST KEPT SECRET. Today, with all that Dazzle Industries had achieved, what could possibly warrant such immense emphasis?' Since everyone knew the impeccable reputation of this phenomenal organization, no one would dream of challenging the Dazzle integrity. Every press conference the company held had always been deemed worthy of the media attention it received.

In hopes of getting a jump on the competition, frantic news teams had begun to speculate. It was the leading story on most network programs and panels of experts flooded the talk show circuit. The shrouding mystery served to enhance the impact and increase the size of their viewing audience. The public had been

primed for just about anything, so they thought.

A large crowd, consisting of thrill-seeking fans mingling with beloved Dazzle characters, had assembled outside the building, while others attempted to squirm their way through to get a closer look. The entire area was saturated with Dazzle security and uniformed police and agents of an elite inconspicuous team of a newly formed Dazzle Secret Service were strategically filtering throughout the auditorium.

Finally, at precisely eight o'clock, a spokesman from Dazzle World of Italy walked toward the microphone to provide a very brief introduction.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we would like thank you for joining us tonight at the fabulous Dazzle World-A-Torium. We are all curious as to what the Delightful World of Dazzle has in store. So, without further delay, I'd like to introduce the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Dazzle International..." As roaring applause began to echo, the newly elected officer appeared from behind a multicolored curtain. "...Mr. R. D. Valentine."

The over-anxious audience rose to their feet with an overwhelming cheer and a lengthy ovation. Valentine raised his arms to stifle the audience, but his gesture was met with a surge of extraordinary appreciation.

After nearly five minutes of vivacious applause, silence finally began to fill the theater. The unusually humble chairman cleared his throat in preparation to speak. He seemed to struggle with the words as he began, "Ladies and gentlemen, members of the press, Dazzle associates, affiliates, employees, honored guests and friends throughout the world..."

"In an effort to expedite the proceedings on this ostentatious occasion, I will dispense with the usual formalities and yet another boring speech." There was scattered applause in a humorous response to the declaration. He acknowledged with a chuckle of his own, then continued, "Instead, we shall begin by sharing a short film. The footage you are about to see was filmed in February of 1966. Until recently, we weren't aware of its existence. The brief untitled work was the last known film produced by and featuring the late

Victor Dazzle."

"It is important to note that the film has been duly authenticated. However, as you will soon see, its authenticity will be verified by its content. If you please, kindly direct your attention to the monitors." He raised his arm with an open palm to direct attention to a large screen being lowered behind him. As the lights slowly dimmed, he calmly stepped back and faded into the darkness. The same film he had viewed in Victor Dazzle's suite was about to begin.

Muffled murmurs quickly began to spread around the room. The introduction lacked details and any clear indication as to what one might expect. People in crowded taverns began sharing humorous assumptions as the mystery began to unfold. Bartenders increased the volume to accommodate their guests and attempted to hush less attentive customers.

A light drizzle began to sprinkle on those gathered outside, but the unusually large crowd remained silent and unencumbered by the weather.

World leaders of almost every nation had even adjusted their schedules to accommodate. The suspenseful event had captured the attention of the entire world.

The prima facie presentation seemed to generate a mystical attraction. The magical Razzle of Dazzle was more prevalent than ever.

* * *

THE FILM

The ancient film began with a countdown consistent with those of that era and opened with a wide-angle view spanning the grounds of the hospital where Vic had spent his last days. The camera focused on the sign, Dallas Memorial Hospital, and then zoomed in on a window of the sixth floor. There, with a warm inviting smile, Vic Dazzle stood waving.

The crowd responded with a respectful round of applause to acknowledge the deceased. The screen quickly faded to the next scene, which found Dazzle propped up in his hospital bed. The

date, February 11, 1966, appeared as a footnote at the bottom of the screen.

He introduced himself in the same manner as he had on so many programs in the past. "Hi there, I'm Vic Dazzle. Since I don't really expect anyone to see this film, I haven't expended a great deal of effort on its production. However, the fact that you are watching indicates that we are about to share in a very momentous occasion." He placed his hands at his sides and patted the mattress.

"It is apparent that this rather uncomfortable hospital bed will most likely be my death bed. According to the specialists, I have a terminal illness and my demise is near at hand."

"I feel a bit awkward discussing the subject, but I have come to accept what I cannot change and am prepared to move on. However, I have always been one who can't help clinging to his hopes and dreams. I dream of the impossible and envision a course of action to make such dreams come true."

"The Great Houdini planned to cheat death spiritually, but I never gave the concept much thought and as I recall, nothing ever became of the revelation. Until recently, I had never even considered that there might be a viable alternative. Then, about two months ago, I was introduced to a relatively new field of scientific research called Cryogenics, a process whereby a body is frozen and preserved in an animated state for indefinite periods and with the expectation that technological advancements will one day enable the person to be revived." He chuckled aloud.

"As absurd as that possibility may seem, even to me, there appears to be some validity to the potential of that claim. Therefore, since the only other alternative offers virtually no prospect, I have decided to offer myself as an experimental subject for what I would consider the ultimate challenge. When the time comes and I slip away into the arms of death, a team of doctors will attempt to preserve my body." The audience was beginning to consider what the film appeared to be suggesting and seemed silently mesmerized.

"At this time, I'd like to introduce the young man who will head up the experiment. Joining me now is Dr. Daniel

Karrington." A nervous man stepped into the picture and stood next to Vic. "This young man believes that science will one day achieve this seemingly insurmountable feat." He turned to Dan and added, "Though I certainly have my doubts, I have willingly agreed to participate." The screen again faded to black, then Dazzle's face quickly reappeared.

"Due to the nature of this experiment, it has been agreed and understood by all who are involved that until such time that rejuvenation is achieved, all details pertaining to this experiment will remain completely confidential. The experiment will be conducted in complete secrecy. If they fail, which is the most likely scenario, it is my desire to be remembered as depicted by the details made public upon expiration. Vic Dazzle will be considered dead and buried."

"Only if the doctor is successful will any of the aspects pertaining to this project be revealed. This film and all other pertinent documents will remain locked in a vault for safekeeping."

"The other members of Dr. Karrington's team are joining us now. Dr. Wallace P. McCarty," A relatively thin man entered the picture. "Dr. Stanley Archer, Dr. Bernard Winters and Dr. Charles Brome. I wish these five men the very best of luck. I think they're going to need it. I thank them now for their unwavering contribution, dedication and trustworthy efforts." They shook hands for the camera as the picture faded.

Before anyone had a chance to respond, Vic's picture appeared one last time and his voice proceeded to conclude the viewing. "Regardless of the outcome, I am prepared to face whatever lies ahead. If there is a God, I hope to meet him. Until we meet again..." The film ended with a sketched image of an enthusiastic Kitty the Cat character waving to the camera.

The crowd was in virtual awe of the presentation. They were having extreme difficulty embracing a concept that modern science had not yet accredited. The perception of achieving such an incredible feat seemed inconceivable. There was no response. The audience remained silent.

Amid the deafening silence, R. D. Valentine approached the podium. The crowd leaned forward in anticipation of a logical

explanation. He swallowed to clear his throat as he glared out over the auditorium with a blank expression. He shook his head, conceding to the overwhelming sensation that everyone seemed to share. With a distinct lack of fervor, he began another very brief introduction. "Ladies and gentlemen," He exhaled. "At this time, I'd like to introduce Dr. Daniel Karrington." His awkward actions seemed to lend legitimacy to the claim. He promptly stepped back and seated himself.

Since no formal itinerary had been provided, the unexpected introduction caught Dan off guard. He wasn't prepared to break the silence that was bestowed upon him and nervously approached the microphone.

To a confused and somewhat hostile audience, he reluctantly began, "Good evening. Um, you'll have to forgive me. I'm not known for my eloquence as a speaker." He stepped away and glanced back at the panel of Dazzle executives hoping someone would somehow rescue him. They were all still in apparent shock, so no one did. He attempted to regain his composure as he searched his mind for a speech and the fortitude to deliver it.

Realizing his predicament, Mr. Valentine finally approached the podium and handed him some cards prepared for the speech he should have been delivering. Dan glanced over the eloquent words with uncertainty then glanced back at his beloved colleagues who silently offered their encouragement with nods and reverent smiles.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in typical fashion and at a time when modern science wouldn't even consider the possibility, a man dared to dream. As you know, Vic Dazzle built his reputation on a remarkable ability to envision ideas and creatively develop concepts. He also had uncanny knack for seeing them through. All too often, Vic Dazzle's dreams had a way of coming true."

"In January of 1966, Vic Dazzle would conceive and cling to an extraordinary vision, a vision of life. With warranted uncertainty and nothing more than wishful thinking, he would embrace the very essence of that concept. Today, as a direct result of that visionary insight, I have been endowed with the very distinct privilege, indeed a sincere honor, to RE-introduce and present to you, that incredible man."

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome home the late and very great, Victor Dazzle." He drew attention to the backstage curtain with a panoramic wave of his arm.

The purest form of complete silence fell upon the vast crowd, many of whom had grown old with the artificial spirit of Vic Dazzle. They pressed forward on the edge of their seats. After a significant delay, Vic made a rather casual un-dramatic entrance from behind a huge curtain and walked composedly toward the podium.

Vic was well prepared for the response and with a warm smile gazed out through the silence with complete confidence. Slowly and skeptically, in awe of what surely must be a hoax, onlookers strained their squinting eyes to study the figure closely. Heads were shifting their focus from the stage to closeup videos being displayed on the monitors. Still, there was no collective response, but Dazzle continued to smile.

Finally, as if introducing himself to an audience of young children, he uttered his first words. "Hi there, I am Vic Dazzle."

Murmurs slowly began to circulate through the crowd. One stunned reporter asked another rhetorically with a blank stare, "What-the-hell?"

Dazzle, in the typically witty style that he was famous for, chuckled as he broke the frigid ice. "A funny thing happened on my way to the forum." Some in the crowd were becoming convinced that this man was really Victor Dazzle and reacted with diverse spatters of applause. Many others had concluded that, if it weren't, it was certainly an incredible and very convincing likeness. Even if it was some sort of bionic clone, "it" slowly began to entice a warm and very receptive ovation. Though uncertainty seemed to flare at various moments during the acclamation, it was shared by unfeigned acknowledgment.

Moisture began to well in the eyes of the overwhelmed Dazzle as the crowd sporadically began to stand to its feet and loud cheers began to echo through the auditorium. Tears that would touch people in all nations began to trickle down each cheek. He attempted to regain his composure and address the

crowd, but humbly failed. Dazzle removed a red silk handkerchief from his suit coat and dabbed it at his misty eyes.

After wiping his eyes for the fourth time, he began to speak softly. "If I had only known then what I know now." The crowd, now on the edge of their seats, leaned forward in anticipation. "I had nothing to lose and took a chance, a one-in-a-billion longshot. I stand before you today recalling events of March 6, 1966 as if it were yesterday. By all definitions known to man, I died that day. Today, I am alive...I'm well...and I'm home." The crowd responded with another rousing ovation. "And," he tempted as the audience refrained. "Oh, do I have some fascinating stories to share with you."

"Before we get too carried away, there are a few extraordinary individuals that deserve to be recognized. The man to whom I give most credit for the astonishing achievement is Dr. Daniel Karrington. Doctor," he addressed with clapping hands that enticed another tremendous round of applause. Dan stood and waved.

"Dr. Bernard Winters." The applause continued. "Dr. Charles Brome. Dr. Wallace McCarty." As the profound recognition began to fade, he spoke with a sense of genuine appreciation as the introductions were redirected. "Finally, there are two more very special individuals who are most responsible for the breakthrough in technology that facilitated the rejuvenation. Please give a warm reception to Dr. Edward Grisham and Ms. Maggie Bennett." The humble couple stood and awkwardly acknowledged their reverent tribute.

"Now, as for the development of Dazzle Enterprises, I am astounded. Never in all my wildest dreams did I envision such vast growth and expansion. In nearly all respects, I can truly say that I am extremely proud of the accomplishments and the general direction of the organization. For the most part, my successors are to be commended."

There was, however, a distinct lack of enthusiasm in his voice. "I was disappointed to learn that some of the values I had come to cherish were sacrificed in the process. Unfortunately, those mistakes cannot be erased, but look around you," he directed in a proud voice. "Ninety-five percent isn't bad and I assure you, I intend to correct the other five." The

crowd responded with another cheerful ovation.

As the applause began to subside, the President of Dazzle World-Italy, Mr. Tino Corelli, joined Vic at the podium. He had been instructed to initiate the question and answer session. "Ladies and gentlemen. Questions, the order of which has been predetermined by names selected at random, will be restricted to the press. Our first question will be from Mr. Tadd Chaney of the ACB TV, Australia. Mr. Chaney."

"Mr. Dazzle, sir." The little-known reporter spoke softly in his distinct Australian dialect.

The young man was put at ease by a welcome interruption. "Please, call me Vic."

"Thank you, sir. My question is this; If you have returned from a grave, so to speak, I..." he gestured to refer to the entire audience. "Well, all us are rather curious...I mean, I'd certainly like to know...Where have you been for the last forty-four years?"

Vic was very patient with him, and the crowd chuckled at his reply. "Thank you for that very lengthy delivery of such a short question," he facetiously acknowledged as another young man handed him an informative card. "Tadd, is it?" The reporter smiled and politely nodded. Vic looked at the reporter, then straight into the lens of the camera.

As he began to explain, the hearts of at least three individuals, Maggie, Eddie and Wally, began to sink. "I am humbly venerated to proclaim that I have been where mankind has only dreamed of being. Though your question undoubtedly seeks a prompt simple reply, the answer is rather complicated. It would probably be easier to explain the process of evolution." Having planted the seed of curiosity, he continued, "Perhaps, it would have been more appropriate to phrase the question in the following manner, where haven't I been?"

"For I have been exploring our vast universe, discovering that it consists of a limitless series of infinite timelines all which originate and emanate from one central source. Within that sphere of independent timelines, a variety of extraneous worlds exist, most of which remain dormant awaiting the process of

creation. You see, after life in this world has ended, another life, new, quite different and very exciting begins in an utterly pristine spiritual dimension."

"There, the human spirit is endowed with the extraordinary ability to ingress into those other worlds at virtually any point in time on any given line. At the core of that vast expanse is the phenomenally remarkable nucleus of all creation, which has been depicted best by most religions that refer to it as heaven. It's a fabulous macrocosmic world far beyond the comprehension and imagination of any man. You ask where I've been, but my answer is, once you've been to heaven, you've been everywhere you've ever wanted to be."

An incredible hush fell over the ill prepared crowd and a cold chill raced through Maggie's body as she slumped back in her chair, stunned and pale. Eddie's warm reassuring hand reached for hers and gripped it firmly. The rest of the team was just as entranced by the startling enlightenment. Until now, there were absolutely no indications that Dazzle was privy to such enigmatic information.

Soon, an elderly and rather frail catholic priest stood and waved his hand in the center of the crowd. "Mr. Dazzle," he called out, "Mr. Dazzle." Though his faint voice only seemed to attract the attention of a few in the immediate vicinity, Dazzle noticed him immediately.

"Father," Vic directed respectfully into the microphone with a raised hand signaling security to refrain. "You wish to speak?"

"I do, sir," he floundered. "I have a question." Though most were unable to hear the man, Dazzle seemed to hear him quite clearly. The crowd quickly repressed to train their vision and ears on the priest.

"Your question, Father... 'If there's a heaven, is there a God?'"

"Indeed, sir, that is my question," he dauntlessly replied.

Immediately, all attention focused back on Dazzle who was about to shed light on one of life's most controversial issues.

According to Dazzle, the world was about to learn if God truly exists. A presumptuous smile returned to his face with a humble and very genuine sincerity in his eyes. Eddie and Maggie frigidly prepared for his answer.

Vic leaned an elbow on the podium and addressed the audience in a very casual manner. "It's no secret that as a child, I attended church regularly and like so many others, was brought up to believe in the premise presented by the Holy Bible. Though it is not my intent to condemn those who preach that message, it is my obligation to speak the truth."

"The answer to your question is, yes, there is a God." The entire audience seemed to sigh, some in relief and some in surprise. "There is only one God, the very essence of all creation and I am privileged to have sat in his presence." Another incredible hush fell over the crowd. "As astonishing as that may seem to those who have yet to take that journey, I assure you that it's not all that uncommon in the life beyond. God is an awesome creature, a being that possess extraordinary power. He is also quite humble and very gracious."

"The spirit of that God is also very real and flows through my veins like an insatiable fire, and it's the same spirit that many of you share. However, while your beliefs are based on limited faith or the lack thereof, my spirituality is predicated on an awesome experience and the portion I have been endowed with is much greater. To clarify though, if your question asks, 'Is the God I speak of, the same God of Abraham?' The answer is Yes, but if you're asking, 'Is Jesus of Nazareth the true Son of God, the anointed Christ, or was Jesus actually God in the flesh who walked upon earth, or was the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus one in the same?' I'm sorry to disappoint you, but the answer is...no." That remark spurred another chain reaction of murmurs, but Vic quickly alluded to silence them. "Please, please. If it's the truth you want, I am eager to share it."

"It's true that we were made much in the same image as God and though I've spoken freely with him on numerous occasions, never once did he speak of a son, nor did I ever see the fabled 'Christ' in heaven, much less find him sitting on a throne or at God's right hand. There were no disciples of Jesus at God's feet. Therefore, as a devout bible believer, I was compelled to question his omnipotence about the infamous man."

"The New Testament contained a great deal of truth. The disciples of Jesus were convinced that he was who he claimed to be. Christianity was borne of those beliefs, which became the foundation for a belief system derived from the gospel according to those who chose to follow him. The miracles Jesus performed and the messages he delivered were genuine acts of a true prophet. He was endowed with a tremendous portion faith and knew all too well the power of it."

"Though he did state that with God all things are possible, Jesus prudently proclaimed on numerous occasions that by faith alone, not by faith in God, were people healed and mountains moved. Jesus taught a significant truth, one that even I would never dispute. As it is written, if someone believes in something with all their heart, all things are possible to them that believe. Whether they believe in God or not, faith is the true source of miraculous power."

"Jesus had developed so much faith and spiritual power that, by faith alone, he eventually came to believe that he truly was the Son of God. Unfortunately, after he had convinced himself, he succeeded in convincing many others as well."

"Generations upon generations thereafter were deceived by the stories told of his works. The greatest fallacy of all was that his cruel death on the cross was an act of mercy intended to save the world. That's simply not the case. The God I came to know would never have allowed his only son to be subjected to such a grave decadent injustice. The truth is, Jesus broke God's first and most prudent commandment, 'Thou shalt have no other God's before me'. Jesus did not endure the pain and suffering of crucifixion because he was the Son of God. He was punished for believing that he was."

"And Jesus never rose from the grave either. Those who believed they saw Jesus after he supposedly arose from the dead had an abundance of faith in the substance of what they had hoped for. They only saw what they wanted to see. The delusion imposed on God's people has gone on far too long. It is time for the world to learn the truth."

Another surge of murmurs was again quickly silenced. "Don't be alarmed, my friends. I haven't come to accuse anyone of

wrongdoing, as Jesus so often did. I've been sent to amend the injustice that has been done unto you. If Jesus had experienced resurrection, he would have stood before the people publicly, just as I stand before you now, not before a few and in secrecy."

"It wasn't science that prompted my return, it was the Will of God. Technology was merely an instrument. I have been commissioned to offer up the truth and put a stop to the erroneous doctrines established by false religions. This world has been subjected to spiritual turmoil long enough. The time has come for peace and understanding. I have been sent to deliver them."

Initially, his profound declaration sparked only a very mild response from the audience, but it quickly escalated into another rousing ovation. It seemed to offer a shocking and rational elucidation. People all over the world were now hinging on his prophetic words.

"I am not the only man who has been in God's presence. Elijah shared this honor, so did Moses. I am, however, the only one alive today who, by his guiding hand, has witnessed the secrets of the universe, its creation and inevitable future."

"And, we are not alone. God has created universe upon universe, and I'll expound on that later. The problems we face in this world represent a mere fraction of his concerns, yet life in this world is more significant than any other. 'Why doesn't he show himself?' you may ask. The answer is quite simple. In all his glory, since the essence of God is so overwhelming, you couldn't fathom him if he did, but I assure you that his will is done in this world, 'Not by might, not by power, but by MY spirit.'" That familiar passage, which seemed to imply that Dazzle was the spirit, took on new meaning and enticed another fleeting response.

"Jesus had a mission of peace, but he failed miserably. Though he started out on the right path, as so many do, he was eventually afflicted by spiritual greed. If you will permit me, I intend to complete that assignment for him."

One reporter leaned toward another and said, "The Jews are going to have a field day with this one."

"Is there a hell?" another voice shouted out from the crowd.

"I never saw it and God certainly never mentioned it, but if there is, I would venture to assume that you are living in it."

That cunning statement prompted a barrage of questions that rapidly began bombarding from all parts of the hall. Mr. Corelli quickly came to Dazzle's rescue.

"Please, ladies and gentlemen, please. Mr. Dazzle will not respond to any further questions unless they are prompted in the orderly fashion set forth prior to the conference. Quiet please." The restless crowd quickly settled into another quiet maze of muffled murmurs. "Thank you. Our next question will be posed by Mr. Kroll of the European Common Market Magazine, Mr. Kroll."

Dazzle again stepped up to the platform and initiated the conversation. "Mr. Kroll, I believe it was your article that I read in yesterday's edition concerning the ecological effects of global the warming, an interesting perspective."

"Thank you, sir. Can I assume, that you agree with the analysis?"

"Absolutely not." Dazzle's clever reply sparked a humorous response from the gallery of reporters.

"I'd be very interested in hearing your views on the subject."

Dazzle leaned forward and arrogantly informed, "Oh, you can count on it. What's your question, Mr. Kroll?"

The veteran reporter politely ensued, "My question is a bit more 'down to earth', so to speak. Do you intend to return and function as the CEO of the Dazzle organization and if so, what changes will you make?"

"Yes, there will be some changes. The company will be restructured as deemed necessary to sufficiently accommodate the

purpose for which I have been commissioned. However, I am extremely pleased with most of what this company has achieved in my absence. I think it sets a fine example, one that I would encourage other businesses to follow. Though I will issue appropriate guidelines that I expect to be followed, I do not intend to assume an executive role."

He stopped and again rested his elbow on the podium then lifted a finger in the air. "I'll let you in on a little secret though, I've recently invested heavily in Dazzle stock. It's just a hunch, mind you, but I think it's going to go up a few points." The crowd applauded his cunning ability to creatively plug an incentive to invest. In response to that statement, several people in the audience pulled out their cell phones and began placing calls to their stockbrokers. "Next question please."

The Dazzle spokesman stepped forward to announce the next individual selected to ask a question, but before the eager gentleman could be announced, another frail individual stood and introduced himself. In an apparent attempt to test the validity of Dazzle's claim, he addressed Vic in his native Hebrew language.

Dazzle expressed his dismay at the challenge and shook his head as he prepared to respond. "I'll answer Mr. Goldstein's question. Being of Jewish decent, he has just expressed some doubt as to my credibility. Since the Israelites lay claim to being God's chosen people, he is curious as to know if I will defend their position. Sorry, rabi, I cannot."

"You see, the Jewish people were initially given a unique opportunity to serve as God's representatives in this world, but as Jesus did, they failed miserably. They turned away from God on numerous occasions. Though they would like to believe otherwise, in their hearts they know the truth. I'm sorry to disappoint you and your people, Mr. Goldstein, but the Jews no longer retain that title. Today, anyone who believes in him is considered one of God's chosen people. No individual nation shall ever be entitled to that honor again." The man lowered his head in humble disgrace and quietly sat back down.

"Mr. Merrick of the Worldwide News Network," the spokesman recognized. "Your question please."

"Mr. Dazzle, I have two questions." Vic nodded his approval. "This is truly a remarkable revelation, sir. You're the first man to return from the dead and claim to have been with God. I mean no disrespect and not that there is reason to doubt your claim, but can you possibly provide us with some sort of evidence to substantiate it? What I mean by that, sir, Jesus supposedly performed miracles and challenged nonbelievers to judge him by his works."

"I think that is a very fair question, Mr. Merrick, and I would hope that the public will also judge me accordingly. However, I'm not here to miraculously heal the sick or to preach intriguing parables. I'm only here to deliver a simple message. If you're expecting me to turn water into wine, I think you'll be disappointed."

His comical note sent a wave of laughter through the auditorium. "If the miraculous gestures performed by Jesus proved anything at all, it was that such miracles are meaningless. They serve no true purpose. Such selfless acts served only to inspire faith in the man who performs the miracle, not God. I'm here to help every nation and intend to heal the whole world."

"There are global matters, which are of grave concern to every nation on the planet. Global warming, for example, though man has acknowledged the problem, the extent of the damage and possible solutions remain a mystery. Modern science has little more than a theoretic approach. I will introduce technology and strategic methods to resolve such issues. These are the type of miracles you can expect from me."

"I look forward to your input, sir. My second question deals with the state-of-affairs in the Middle East, the pending situation and potential for war." Vic nodded in a convincing fashion. "You have stated that you were sent to restore peace. Do you intend to propose a peaceful solution?"

"Another fine question, Mr. Merrick. My answer to that is, absolutely." Vic directed his attention to the television camera and spoke as if speaking directly to the leaders of each country. "I've seen the inevitable future and witnessed the war that will have taken place. I've viewed the devastation, death

and destruction that consumed the land and watched fire devour flesh as fear saturated the heart of every man, woman and child. The degree of immense suffering that lies ahead would bring the strongest of men to his knees. This is the grim future that awaits the world if it is not prevented."

With a sadness expressed on his face, he spoke with artistic influence, "I can only ask why...for what purpose...to achieve what goal? What nation, for any reason, would make such a sacrifice? I know the answers and so do you. The differences between most countries stem from economical greed and age-old religious conflicts that began thousands of years ago."

"For generations, what is known as the holy land was thought to belong to individual nations, each believing that their God so proclaimed it. The truth of the matter is, all land is holy, and it all belongs to God. He just permits us to use it. Governments are prepared fight a war for bragging rights to a manmade temple, a monetary symbol, that means absolutely nothing to God."

"The body itself is the only true temple, yet nations would sacrifice these in the name of God to gain possession of a worthless monument. In the eyes of God, this cannot be permitted. If you are prepared to face the truth, I will share this wisdom with the leaders of every nation. Together, this world can and will achieve peace."

His astounding views brought the house to its feet in an explosive standing ovation. The overwhelming response sent an unavoidable message to all world leaders. Before any military action was taken by any nation, they would have no choice but to meet with this divine messenger of God. Vic Dazzle instantaneously became the world's only real hope for peace. In the minds of many, he was already being perceived as the long-awaited Messiah.

"God does work in mysterious ways. As I alluded to earlier, there is one other interesting fact the world needs to be apprised of. Though it seems rather ironic that such an event should occur in conjunction with my arrival, very reliable sources have informed me that a previously unknown entity is presently at work in this world. I am compelled to inform all nations of a far greater threat than any other immediate

concern."

"An alien nation has invaded our world and is most likely observing these proceedings as we speak." The additional incongruous twist sent the crowd into another frenzy of murmurs.

"Typically, when man considers infinite space and such improbable potential, he tends to look beyond the stars to distant galaxies. The most fascinating aspect of this novel discovery is that the world we have been made aware of is a microscopic universe that exists within our own, an invisible nation with vastly advanced technology."

The stifled crowd erupted into an enormous garble of controversy. Not only had the world been introduced to an astonishing revelation of spiritual awareness, they were now being subjected to the challenging concept of alien life.

Another mortifying hush fell over the crowd as he prepared to expound. "As difficult as that may be to comprehend, an exclusive division of our vast network has actually communicated with its representative. This contemporaneous breakthrough is so pristine and extraordinary that we haven't yet had an opportunity to explore all the specifics. Unfortunately, there really isn't a great deal of information to share with you, only to say there is overwhelming evidence to substantiate the claim."

"Man has actually discovered a new world and it's not one that I am familiar with. Our world has apparently been the object of considerable study for thousands of years. As profound as this phenomenal discovery may be, allow me to assure you, I will keep no secrets from you and will openly disclose all details concerning the erudition. We will explore this startling new finding together. As information is made available to us, it will also be made available to you." A world accustomed to being placed in the dark for reasons of national security, perceived the gesture as a refreshing approach to the lost art of rudimentary communication. Their acceptance of the abstract concept was clearly demonstrated with another intense acclamation.

As the roar of the crowd began to dissipate, Vic elected to conclude the conference. He raised his arms to silence the crowd

and spoke directly to the television camera. "I'd like to thank you all for the very warm reception. I can't possibly describe how good it feels to be home." The crowd burst into another expression of their appreciation.

A global community had accepted him for who he was and more importantly, for whom he had claimed to be. He elected to close with a few classic lines from the Kitty Cat Club oath. "Dazzle me with delightful friends who reach beyond the stars, Dazzle me with kindness that kindles ultimate peace, and Dazzle me with respect for who we are in the eyes of God. Good night."

He wore a huge smile as he stepped away from the microphone and began a long session of waves to the crowd. Prompted by musical accompaniment, the audience concluded the famous song. "Dazzle me with happiness in everything I see. Forever cling to all the things that Dazzle strives to be." Cheers and whistles echoed for an extended period. People in towns all over the world were celebrating. After nearly ten minutes of continuous acclaim, Dazzle finally made an exit behind the huge curtain.

It was in every respect a spectacular event; even more successful than even he had hoped. As difficult as it may have been to accept the grasp to concept of Cryonic rejuvenation, it was virtually impossible to repudiate. Living proof stood before them.

Since no one could conceivably renounce the spiritual edification, how then could anyone expect to challenge the profound declaration of advanced alien life? They couldn't. There was no way to prove or disprove any of his convincing arguments. The fact remained that one man with more credibility than any other was shedding light on life's greatest consequential mysteries. The stage had been set for him to pursue any endeavor he so desired.

Five helicopters were waiting to transport his entourage, which now included three new assistants and a new team of security personnel. The team followed blindly as Vic led the small parade down a secured corridor.

With a complete change of disposition, he began dictating instructions to his new assistant. "Mr. Costello, I expect to have transcripts of all significant media and political

reactions available to me within the hour. I'll need a list of every individual involved with the Israeli peace talks and the Middle East confrontation. Get me a detailed status report on all military activity in the region. We're going to concentrate on that situation first."

"And get Omar Rabib on the horn too. Let him know we'll be establishing our headquarters at the Bir Seri facility. Make sure he knows that we expect full cooperation and military protection if necessary. If he has a problem with that, let me know, I'll handle it myself."

He stopped abruptly and started looking around. "Where's Dan?" He signaled with a curling finger. Dan emerged through the small crowd to join him. They continued walking at a very brisk pace. "You'll be flying with the cartel to Vancouver. There will be a conference held on Friday, a scientific tribute followed by a question and answer session. I'd like you to head that up. James will provide you with a travel itinerary and topic outline. I don't want too many details released just yet."

"Curt's security team will be at your disposal. I won't be attending myself, but I'll keep in touch. We'll meet later next week at the facility. We still have a lot to talk about," he said in reference to the alien discovery. Dan tried to smile as Vic patted him on the shoulder. "James, they're all set, right?"

"Yes sir," the man reassured. "The first one is ours, Mr. Dazzle." He pointed to one of the helicopters. Vic started toward it. "Dr. Karrington, you and your associates take those two." He turned his attention to the new chief of security. "Rick, you ride with us. Crushock, take your team and escort Karrington's group. The rest of you will stay with us. Let's get a head start on the press. Go."

The confused look on their faces provided a vivid picture of just how baffled the cartel was. They were all clearly astonished by the sudden change in procedure. It was as though their scientific achievement had been instantly converted into a political campaign and their affiliation had taken a very dramatic turn. They were no longer engineers of a technological revolution. They were now members of an elite organization that supported the most popular and powerful man in the world.

Stan, Charlie and Bernie climbed aboard one aircraft. Dan, Wally, Maggie, and Eddie entered the other. As the helicopter lifted off, Wally spoke out with restless abandon. "What the hell is going on, Dan?"

"I wish I knew, Wally, I wish I knew."

Maggie squeezed Eddie's arm very tightly. Both had similar thoughts, but neither of them could speak. 'Could this be the beginning of what they feared most?' With virtually no indication whatsoever, Vic Dazzle had publicly claimed to be a messenger of God.

Whether true or false, his proclamations would undoubtedly change the way the world perceived any form of religion. If it was the truth, the world seemed prepared to embrace it. If it was a lie, it was positively masterful and there was absolutely no way for anyone to challenge it. And the microscopic universe, 'Where did that little tidbit come from and why wasn't anyone else informed?' Not even Dan was aware of the intent to address that issue. Vic hadn't even been apprised of all the facts.

The entire team suddenly found themselves trapped on Dazzle's latest innovative attraction, a breath-taking roller coaster ride into the unknown future.

* * *

CHAPTER 25

A UNION OF THE SPIRITS

Within days of the introduction, the League of Nations had called an emergency meeting to discuss the Dazzle revelation. Vic had retreated to the protective seclusion of the Syrian facility and could not be reached for comment or interviews.

Most of the medical staff had already been replaced with extensive security and a team of professional support personnel. The research complex had been converted into the elaborate headquarters for a network of political offices.

The cartel was now in Vancouver where scientists from all over the world had converged to attend their enlightening seminar. An extensive assortment of equipment utilized for the project, including the original preservation cocoon, had been removed from the basement vault and placed on display in an exhibition hall adjacent to the convention center. Dan and his team, which the press had nicknamed 'The Sensational Seven', would be on hand to greet their colleagues.

Maggie and Eddie were feeling a bit out of place. Since most of the attention was being given to the more prominent

members, the two managed to keep a low profile and were observing the procession of distinguished scientists who were parading around the hall. The extent of their involvement wouldn't be fully known until the formal presentation later that evening.

Surrounded by so many strangers, Maggie was startled by a familiar voice. "Hi little girl. Want some candy?" he jokingly enticed. Eddie gave the rude individual an evil glare, but the man smiled and winked to assure that the loathsome comment was nothing more than the harmless murmurings of an old friend. "It's your favorite, Starbursts."

Eddie watched with intrigue as Maggie turned with open arms to eagerly greet the elderly gentleman with a warm hug. She stood on her toes but could barely wrap her arms around the neck of the very tall man. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you."

"It's been far too long, Maggie Mae. I've missed you."

She backed away but held his hands tightly in hers. "You're a sight for sore eyes, Gene. You look great."

"And look at you, such a beautiful woman." His tone quickly changed to express his genuine concern. "And how are you doing?"

"I'm all right, all things considered," she halfheartedly admitted. She was quick to ensure that she didn't make the same mistake twice and grabbed Eddie by the arm. "Gene, this is my best friend and then some, Eddie Grisham." She pulled him even closer and snuggled up to his arm. "This is one of my oldest and dearest friends, Reverend Eugene Martossi."

Eddie recalled the name and was quick to make the connection. "Ah, Tony's dad."

"That's right."

"He's a fine young man."

"He spoke very highly of you as well." He promptly changed the subject. "Maggie told me a little about this revelation of yours."

Eddie was surprised to discover that Maggie had managed to disclose any details and Maggie wasn't going to give him an opportunity to pursue the matter. "How did you get in here anyway?"

"Sneaky, huh?" he chuckled. "You remember Ritchie Corman from church?"

"Sort of."

He pointed at a man conversing with Charlie Brome. "That's him over there. He's a very successful doctor now, doing DNA research at the university."

"What do you know?" she expressed with a smile.

"Anyway, he was invited to attend and talked him into bringing me along as his guest. He doesn't know why I'm here."

Eddie quickly indulged with sincere interest. "Why are you here?"

Maggie took a quick look around and then coaxed them both to a glass door leading to a small alcove between the buildings. She was confident that their temporary absence would go unnoticed. It wasn't.

The entire team had been placed under surveillance. There were two agents observing from a balcony and three others just inside. One of the men activated a small listening device.

Maggie began to explain. "While we were in Paris, I sent Gene a letter. He knows what we suspect."

"Oh."

"I have to admit," Gene informed. "Until the big announcement, I didn't really see the connection."

"Now, you do?" Eddie asked with surprise.

"Sure, I do. Most of what that man had to say worries me. If anyone else had reputed the bible in such a fashion, it would

have been considered blatant blasphemy."

"That maybe so, but much of what he said made a lot of sense too and to a lot of people."

"What he said," Maggie alluded, "made a little too much sense if you ask me. Most of it contradicts the bible and that fits the profile."

"I agree." Gene folded his arms across his chest. "He hasn't really done anything too drastic yet, but there are plenty of reasons to be suspicious."

"Before the announcement in Rome, there was absolutely no indication of his divine revelation. How come, Eddie? Why didn't he enlighten us before?"

"I know, a whole lot of things that don't make sense, but what we would be suggesting as an explanation for his actions would be considered a bit ludicrous, don't you think?" he nervously voiced his unprofessional opinion.

"That's the irony of it," Gene agreed. "It's like trying to prove that someone is guilty of a crime that hasn't been committed yet."

"And what if we're wrong? What if the bible is wrong?" he inferred with the barrage of questions. "What if everything he says is true?" Eddie had provided a prime example of what they were up against.

Maggie offered a more logical approach. "God doesn't make mistakes. If he is a genuine messenger of God, we won't be permitted to intervene, but there's every reason to believe that bible prophecy is being fulfilled right before our eyes. Everything this guy is supposed to be, Vic Dazzle is capable of becoming."

In Eddie's heart, which was beating rapidly, he knew it too. With a somber look of humble dejection, he conceded. "Okay, so what are we supposed to do?"

Maggie looked up at her religious mentor, hoping for some sort of inspiration. He looked back at her, then at Eddie with

similar look of uncertainty and replied with some conviction of his own, "Prayer is the best place I know to start."

Eddie frowned to indicate that prayer wasn't exactly his forte. "Don't worry Eddie, it's easy and it works."

Eddie wasn't sure what direction he was headed or why, but some unknown force, spiritual or otherwise, was compelling him to find the truth. '**The truth,**' he recalled from the scriptures, '**will set you free.**' But how does a man who spent his entire life pursuing scientific facts, accept a premise based primarily on faith?

Gene could see that Eddie was troubled and his kind-hearted nature seemed to be absorbed in a vast sea of understanding. He placed his hand softly on Eddie's shoulder and smiled. "I'm staying at a Holiday Inn just up the street. Why don't you stop by later?"

"Eddie?" Maggie encouraged with pleading eyes. "Would that be all right with you?"

Eddie wanted to say no but knew that the issue needed to be addressed in some manner. "I suppose that would be okay, but..." he was quick to add with conviction. "...I've got to warn you, Reverend, I'm not a religious man."

"I understand," he politely acknowledged, then added to assure him. "I'm no scientist either."

Maggie had permitted the Reverend to perform his diplomatic magic. She looked at Eddie with a reassuring smile as she answered for them, "It'll be late, probably around eleven, but we'll be there, Gene. We'd better get back inside."

In a van just outside the building, a familiar face was monitoring their activity. Curt Crushock was taking notes. Of course, there weren't enough clues to determine just what their conversation was concerning, but the encounter raised a red flag that seemed to warrant intensified surveillance.

Curt spoke into the microphone of his headset. "Bobby, get me a rundown on this Martossi. Double up on Grisham and Bennett too. I like those folks, but they're up to something and I want

to know what it is."

* * *

The seminar concluded with another lengthy question and answer session, which focused primarily on Eddie's extraordinary contributions. Eddie had become an instant celebrity. The original cartel had humbly credited him with most of their success. Though he was flattered by the compliments, he was quick to reciprocate and include Maggie in their unequivocal achievement.

Dr. Karrington closed the conference with a simple statement that seemed to sum it all up, perhaps too appropriately. "From the onset and in the end, it was the incredible insight and foresight of one man to whom we, the entire scientific community, owe a great debt of gratitude. Without the vision of Vic Dazzle, this phenomenal conquest would not have been possible. He alone is worthy of your praise. Thank you and good night."

The laudatory message left a lasting impression on the audience but sent a chilling wave of abhorrence through Maggie's heart. In lieu of admiration, the audience had been loosely instructed to praise the man. Eddie's congested thoughts were quickly interrupted by Maggie's lethargic whisper. "Let's get out of here."

They had concluded their farewells and were just about to make a hasty exit, when Wally approached in his tuxedo. "Hey! Where ya goin'?"

"Home," Eddie replied with a heavy sigh.

"Fat chance, farm boy. There's a big dinner party at the Mark V Hotel and everybody's gonna be there."

Maggie lowered her head and scrunched her shoulders. Eddie spoke for her. "I don't know, Wally, I'm not really into all that hoopla. Besides, we're exhausted. I thought we'd just have a quiet dinner and relax a bit."

"Bull shit, Bubba! You're the man of the hour. A lot of people want to meet you. You're not going to let them down, are

ya?"

"Well," Maggie considered in a concurring manner.

"Come on, guys. It's time to celebrate. Kate's gonna be there and she has really been lookin' forward to seeing you two."

"Kate's going to be there?" Maggie's face seemed to brighten.

"Yeah, so c'mon, at least make an appearance."

"Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt us to stop in for a little while." She looked passionately up at Eddie. "I'd sure like to see Kate."

Eddie looked at his watch. It was nearly 10:30. Not that it bothered him so much, but he expected it to be more disturbing to her. "I guess we could do that, but what about our reservations?"

"I'll make a call."

"Okay, Maggie, if that's what you want to do."

"That's more like it. You can ride over in the limo with me."

Eddie looked up and smiled humbly. "The way I see it, the work is over. It's time to party!" Wally emphasized the point with another of his comical dances.

"You two go on ahead," Maggie urged. "I'll meet you at the car."

"Limo, my dear, limo," Wally stressed.

She chuckled and then headed straight for the phone booths in the hotel lobby.

Wally had positioned himself comfortably in the rear seat and had just popped the cork on a bottle of champagne when Maggie rejoined them. He was smiling from ear to ear. "For you, my dear." He poured a glass. "A little for Eddie-poo and a lot

for Uncle Wally." He drank from the bottle. "Is this what life's all about or what?"

"Or what?" Maggie politely replied as she tapped her glass lightly against Eddie's to infer another subtle message entirely.

"Here's to you, Wally," Eddie proposed. "You've waited a long time for this jubilee. If anyone is entitled to celebrate, it's you."

Wally leaned across and rapped his bottle against their glasses. "You know somethin', Eddie. I couldn't agree more."

* * *

EUGENE'S ROOM

Eddie and Maggie didn't arrive at Eugene's hotel until almost 2 AM. Maggie hung up the house phone. "He's still awake and said to come on up."

Gene met them at the door and signaled with a shushing finger over his lips. Eddie and Maggie were confused by his actions but followed his lead.

"Sorry we're late, Gene," Maggie began with a hug. "We kind of got tied up with a post celebration party." As they spoke, Gene set a tablet in front of them with a message he had written:

I'm being followed and I think my room has been bugged too. Until we know what's going on, be careful what you say.

Maggie looked at Eddie with raised eyebrows and a look of concern. They agreed with a casual nod. "So, tell me, what's been going on back home?"

"Nothing ever changes in Mobile. Everything, including me, just seems to get older. We did have a new library wing added to the church building and attendance is up, but I'm getting older too, thinking about retirement."

"Bologna, you've got more energy than most guys half your

age."

"She's so sweet," he said to Eddie. "That's why I love her."

"Yeah," Eddie confessed, "me too."

"Enough about me, I want to hear more about your adventures. You've managed to raise the dead. That's quite an achievement. The last man to pull that off was Jesus Christ."

"If you don't mind, reverend," Eddie inferred. "I'm Cryonically crapped out. What do you say we go down and grab a cup of coffee?" He motioned with his head to invite them away from the potential eavesdropping.

"Coffee sounds good." They quickly left the room and entered a nearby elevator. Gene was quick to start the private conversation there. "What in the world is going on? There are at least two guys that have been following me ever since I left the seminar."

"I don't know. We always have our private security personnel on hand, but I don't know why they'd be following you," Maggie began to speculate. "As far as I know, no one else is aware of our suspicions. Even if they were, there wouldn't necessarily be any cause for alarm, unless..."

"Unless what?" Eddie indulged.

"Unless we're right. If Dazzle is who we think he is, and he suspects that we know something..."

"That would make perfect sense. If he really is the Antichrist, we have to start considering all the possibilities." Gene added.

"I don't even believe in most of that apocalyptic prophecy mumbo-jumbo, but Maggie's got me pretty well convinced," Eddie replied.

"I'd sure like to hear more about your theory."

"When we're able to speak more freely," Maggie concluded as

the door opened into the lobby.

Gene quickly began informing them as they stepped into the lobby. "See that guy over there by the gift shop in the blue sweater? He sticks around for a while and then another guy takes his place. Those are the only two I'm aware of."

"I don't recognize him, do you Maggie?"

"No, but then again, we only know a fraction of the people in this organization."

"I wonder if Curt's still in charge," Eddie thought out loud.

"Curt?" Gene asked to gain some insight.

"He was in charge of security at the facility in Syria."

"Syria?"

"Um hmm, that's where they set up shop."

"Well now, that's a mighty interesting coincidence. A number of theologians believe the Antichrist will come out of Syria."

"No shit?" Eddie unconsciously replied.

"Eddie!" Maggie scolded.

"Sorry, Gene."

"Don't worry, Eddie, I might even have used the term once or twice myself. Here's another ironic thought, a lot of other theological experts believe that he'll rise to power out of Europe. He did make his formal introduction in Rome. That's kind of eerie. Dazzle seems to have satisfied both considerations."

"Evidence just keeps adding up," Maggie noted. "He's already taken an active role in politics."

Gene rolled his shoulders back to relieve the tension. "There's no doubt in my mind. If I had to choose a candidate

right now, Vic Dazzle would get my vote."

"I hear what you're saying," Eddie diffidently confessed, "but we still don't know for certain."

They arrived at the restaurant and selected a table in the back and with a clear view of their immediate surroundings. Gene sat with his back to the entrance. Eddie and Maggie sat across where they could keep watch for familiar faces. "Eddie," Gene began, "I promised no sermons, but if nothing else, consider what I am about to say pertinent information."

"All this, including the arrival of the Antichrist, lays the groundwork for Christ's return. In preparation for that fabulous moment in time and to save souls that will have been lost, we're obligated to warn the world. Whether or not they'll listen is another matter."

"Oh-no-you-don't," Eddie argued with a smile. "You aren't going to lay that one on me."

"Eddie?" Maggie challenged.

"You make it sound like some kind of science-fiction movie, the world is doomed and we're the only ones who can save it."

"I like movies," she said astutely. "Besides, no one else has the perspective we have. Who else is even going to consider the possibility if we don't make them aware of it? The final choice is theirs to make, but if someone doesn't present all the facts, how are they going to make an educated decision?"

"Nope, huh uh, no, I'm no hero. I'm a scientist for crying out loud."

"You've got to admit though, it would make a pretty fantastic movie," she said with a convincing smile.

"C'mon, Mag," he pleaded. "Reverend, tell her this is crazy." Maggie and Gene both remained silent. "We aren't really going to try and save the world, are we?"

Maggie reached across the table to clutch Gene's hand and grabbed Eddie's under the table. "There's no one else but us. It

looks like we're the Three Musketeers."

"Batman, Batgirl and Robin," Gene added his analogy with a chuckle.

"More like the Three Freaking Stooges if you ask me." Eddie sighed. "I've got to be dreaming."

"I don't think so," Maggie accorded, "but sleep doesn't sound like a bad idea though. Why don't we go home and get some? Maybe when we wake up, this will all have been nothing more than a dream."

"No, it's a nightmare," Eddie concluded.

"Gene," Maggie said with a hug, "why don't you join us tomorrow evening for dinner, our treat."

"I'd love to. Now, you kids have got to be beat. Go home and get some rest."

"Rest? Fat chance!" Eddie took a moment to get serious before he made his exit. "But you be careful, Gene."

"I intend to."

Maggie smiled to reassure him as she leaned to give him a kiss on the cheek. Eddie shook hands in a manner that seemed to express a sense of heartfelt camaraderie. Then, as he took Maggie's hand in his, he spoke one last time to Gene. "Good night...Curly." Maggie slapped him hard on the back as punishment for his snide remark. Gene pressed his lips into a silent chuckle. As they were walking through the lobby, Eddie commented with another dramatic whine, "Damn it, Mag."

"What?"

"I can't help it. I like the guy."

"I could tell, and he likes you too."

Suddenly, Eddie stopped in his tracks and seemed to be staring off into space in a very peculiar train of thought. Maggie just looked at him with a confused frown. "What is it

Eddie?"

"Just thinking," he replied in whimsical manner.

"Yeah?" she enticed, hoping for inspirational insight.

There was a long period of silence while Eddie considered his thoughts more precisely. "This may not be the right time, or the right place and it certainly wouldn't be the most romantic proposal in the world, but..."

"What?" she blindly urged.

He stared at her long and hard before he mustered the courage, but the words finally reached his lips. "Will you marry me?" he blurted.

She gasped in utter flabbergasted shock. "What did you say?"

"Will - you - marry - me?" he carefully reiterated. A bright glow began to emit from her face and a soft matching smile appeared. "I know you could do a lot better and I certainly don't deserve a woman like you, but you mean more to me than anything else in the whole world. If you'll have me, Maggie, I'd like you to be my wife."

She scrunched her shoulders into a huge giggle and was grinning from ear to ear. "Nothing would make me happier." As soon as the words began rolling off her tongue, Eddie grabbed her by the hand and began dragging her back to the hotel. "What are you doing, Eddie? Where are we going?"

He wouldn't say a word, but they quickly stepped back into the elevator and were soon knocking at Gene's door again. Maggie was curiously, but silently, following Eddie's mysterious lead.

"Forget something?" Gene said with a look of surprise.

"Kind of," Eddie informed. "We need another favor."

"Of course, I'd be glad to do what I can. What did you have in mind?"

Eddie was nervous, but on a roll and wasn't about to balk now. "We want to get married." Gene was befuddled, but pleasantly surprised by the unexpected decree. He looked at Maggie for confirmation. Her bashful smile provided affirmation.

"I think that's wonderful, but," he alluded, "there are a lot of things to consider though."

"Not really, Reverend. I love her with all my heart, and I know that she loves me. We all have a pretty-good idea what the future has in store, so we want to spend the life we have left...together. Can't we do that?"

"Of course, you can. Did you have a date in mind?"

"Tonight! Right now!" Eddie blurted.

"Right now?" Maggie pursued with astonishment.

Eddie looked at her with sincere eyes and warmly held her hand. "Yeah, Maggie, right now, this very minute." He redirected his comments to Gene. "You're a preacher, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

"We don't need all that official wedding documentation to get married, do we?"

"In the eyes of the state, you do."

"What about in the eyes of God?" Eddie asked, much to Maggie's delight.

Maggie seemed to understand. "Could we, Gene?" she asked with a gleam in her eye. Eddie smiled and pulled her close. "Could we walk out of here husband and wife?"

"Well, you certainly seem to have your hearts set on it and I can't think two people more deserving of one another." He hesitated to consider the circumstances. "I suppose we could work out all the formalities later." Maggie was beaming with joy.

He retrieved his bible from a suitcase. "Before we get

started, and speaking purely as a friend, let me say this; I can't think of a more difficult period in world history to begin a relationship, but in the midst of overwhelming turmoil, you two stand before God as a perfect example of his eternal love. I wish you the very best of luck and all that love has to offer."

Eddie was deeply humbled by the devout consecration. "There's no place more appropriate to request a blessing from God than on your knees." Eddie and Maggie were joined by the reverend as they knelt together near the sliding-glass doors with a full moon shining through. "Let's pray." Maggie held on tight to Eddie's hand as they bowed their heads.

"Dear Heavenly Father, we come before you seeking your blessing on this union between two of your most cherished servants. United in body, heart and soul, they set out on their journey through life with one endeavor, to serve you Lord. We pray that you will be one with them and that they shall be one with you."

"As they prepare to face the unique and daring challenges that lie ahead, we pray that you will guide them, protect them and anoint them with your Holy Spirit. We ask these things in the precious name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."

Gene smiled with the caring of a loving father and proclaimed, "There are no official words, no formal decree. Eddie, do you love her?"

"More than life itself."

"Maggie, my very dear friend, do you love Eddie?"

"With all my heart."

"Then, with the power vested in me and with God as your witness, it is my distinct pleasure to pronounce that from this moment forward until death do you part, you are husband and wife." There was another long moment of silence as reality began to sink in. "Eddie," Gene prompted with smile. "This is usually when the husband kisses his lovely bride."

Eddie slowly lifted himself to his feet and assisted Maggie to hers. He pretended to lift an imaginary veil from her face,

then softly took her in his arms and kissed her as passionately as any man could. "This little ceremony was for us. Soon enough, you'll get the wedding you truly deserve complete with church bells, limousines and the most incredible reception you've ever seen, but this means more to me than any of that ever could. I love you, Maggie Grisham."

"We couldn't have planned a better wedding," she said.

Eddie thought for a moment. "Wait a minute. What about the rings?"

"I don't suppose that under the circumstances, we can afford to be too picky, so how about this." He reached for a small pair of scissors and clipped the gold bookmarker ribbon from his bible.

"It's perfect," Maggie declared, "absolutely perfect." Eddie began tying a segment around her finger.

As Maggie tied hers, Eddie sought one final confirmation. "This is official, right?" Gene affirmed with an embellishing nod. "And we're all clear to do the honeymoon thing?" Gene smiled and nodded again. "I just wanted to be sure. Can I borrow your phone?"

"Certainly."

He dialed a number. "This is Dr. Grisham. Yes, that's right, the Dazzle guy." He flaunted an exaggerated smile. "Is your bridle suite available. No, the accommodations have been just fine. It's just that up until a minute ago, I was single. Yes, that's right. Great. Please transfer my things and everything from Suite 2211. No, it's not Bennett anymore. You've got it. Thank you." He turned to his charming new bride. "There can't be a man in the world any happier than I am at this moment."

"Shall we?" Maggie offered with an extended arm.

"We shall indeed." He glanced back at Gene who had elected to remain silent. "Thank you, Gene," he said with a salute. "You're the best."

"You really are," Maggie concurred with a snicker. "You will attend the reception, won't you?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, but I believe I'll pass on that dinner tomorrow. I have a feeling you'll be busy. When you finally get situated, give me a call."

"You bet," Eddie assured.

Maggie walked over, wrapped her arms around him and squeezed him as tightly as she could. "Thanks for everything, Gene. I love you."

"I love you too, sugar. I'm very happy for you. He's a good man and you've landed yourself one heck of a wife, Eddie."

"A wife. Now, those are words I never thought I'd hear," Eddie humorously added.

"Me either," she boldly reiterated. "C'mon, honey-bun, let's go home."

The two of them spent the next five days locked away in a first-class suite of ultimate passion. Maggie spent what little free time they had teaching Eddie about his new spiritual connection and the tribulation that lie ahead.

Eddie had finally come to accept the fact that they had been appointed a unique conviction. They had an objective, a purpose in this world to fulfill that exceeded corporal obligations, but at least now had each other's love to see them through. For the first time in his life, in the face of overwhelming adversity, he understood the true meaning of happiness.

* * *

CHAPTER 26

CAPTURE OR RAPTURE?

It was a typical autumn day by most standards. Torrential rains pelted most of Texas, while mudslides were still threatening homes on the Pacific coast. Raging fires were destroying thousands of acres of a precious National Forest in Florida. The effects of the weather and mankind's scrupulous manipulation of it, was one aspect of life the world had been forced to accept. The planet was in geological turmoil, yet people all over the world were carrying on business as usual. There was nothing to indicate that anything unusual was on the horizon.

Suddenly, from out of virtually nowhere, tiny fragmental particles of light began streaking through the air and saturating the atmosphere. Like a mass of clearly visible energy, the strange sensation rapidly blanketed the entire planet and occupied every cubic inch of space.

People in every conceivable location began experiencing the peculiar cosmic metamorphosis. Indoors and out, above ground and below, the intensely illuminated particles danced in the air and mystically surged through every living being. A pulsating electrical sensation began invading every living soul in the

entire world.

Men and women from all walks of life began to respond with confusion and uncertain fascination. It sparked an insatiable sense of fear that was somehow culminated with a palliative feeling of tranquil serenity. Those viewing live television broadcasts observed the participants as they responded to the same phenomenon. Work in every field of study was brought to an abrupt halt, but before anyone had an opportunity to evaluate cabalistic sensation, the trails of streaking star-like particles began to fade. The entire experience only lasted seven seconds but had a devastating impact on the entire world.

Since it occurred so quickly, the strange phenomenon was initially attributed to some sort of industrial malfunction. There were as many initial responses as there were situations to respond to and people did so according.

The Military perceived it as an advanced technological attack and in the interest of national security, armed forces in virtually every nation were prompted to initiate Def Con Three status. Each country prepared for a retaliatory response, but to an unknown enemy.

The scientific community had a much different interpretation and approached the situation as an intergalactic cosmic phenomenon. Computer experts perceived the encounter as an overloading interface glitch in cyberspace.

Forty-nine seconds after the initial experience, an even more incredible event took place. At the exact same moment, millions of people all over the world simply vanished. There was no specific or apparent pattern, but it was as if select individuals were specifically targeted.

The major networks were quick to reorganize. Within minutes, normal programming was interrupted as news teams began to research, evaluate and report the mystifying situation. Logical conclusions were impossible to reach based on typical deductive reasoning, so they were left with an extensive assortment of unsubstantiated theories. Initial statements from the League of Nations were unsatisfactory and offered the public no peace of mind. The world was caught up in a mysterious guessing game, a list of questions for which there were no

answers.

Almost immediately, reports began pouring in of tragic circumstances. Nearly every airline company had reported plane crashes due to disappearing flight crews. Ships ran amuck at sea, as captains vanished from their helms. The phone lines were flooded with reports of train wrecks and massive automobile accidents. Dangerous overloads in many sensitive systems had occurred due to missing controllers. Mass confusion wreaked havoc on networks of communication. Specialists in every field were developing their own hypothesis. What had transpired and who was responsible remained a complete mystery. All ordinary activity ceased.

The so-called experts began to concentrate efforts on who was missing and what connection, if any, there may have been. The search was focused on some sort of common denominator. If they could establish that, perhaps they could begin to piece together portions of the fascinating puzzle. If faced with the truth, would they be willing to accept it?

* * *

AN EXPLANATION - ACCORDING TO DAZZLE

Though it came as no surprise, Dazzle had scheduled a press conference in response. The release simply read; "Dazzle to shed light on recent phenomenon". Since Vic Dazzle had professed acclimation to advanced knowledge, perhaps he could offer some valuable insight. This was, after all, beyond the realm of logic and rationale. The public was anxious to hear what he had to say.

The telecast aired at 1 PM. There was no introduction. The camera focused on Vic Dazzle who was deep within the confines of his fortified facility. In the background, a variety of scientists in traditional white coats were dissecting the extensive network of information. The viewing audience, which encompassed nearly eighty percent of the world's population, listened attentively.

"Good afternoon," he casually greeted. "I'm speaking to you from Dazzle Central, one of the most technologically advanced facilities in the world, where we have been monitoring all

aspects pertaining to the recent activity."

The camera focused back on a closeup of his reassuring face. "During the presentation in Rome, I touched briefly on the subject of an alien presence. At that time, we were still conducting research and had no reason to believe that the alien discovery posed any threat to mankind. That, of course, was until this morning."

He sat in a chair, crossed his legs and continued in a casual manner. "As you know, contact had been established by a group claiming to be citizens of an alien world from another universe. Of course, due to the rather unique circumstances surrounding the origin, we had elected to challenge the authenticity of that claim. We were in the process of investigating when our planet was pelted by the anomalous particles that filled our atmosphere."

"These beings are not from some distant galaxy and didn't arrived on this planet by means of some huge extravagant spaceship. Theirs was depicted as a microscopic world, a universe existing within the confines of an object on the surface of our planet which of course, lends divergent veracity to the concept of infinitesimal space."

"Imagine..." He began to create a visual perspective by shaping an imaginary world with his hands. "...a planet, a microscopic world, in a universe so small that its entire totality could be contained in a large ball that could easily rest upon this table. It's a fascinating concept to consider."

"A world that small would be virtually undetectable by means of even the most advanced technology available to man. Their advanced in capabilities enabled them to breach the confines of their own universe only to discover themselves in ours, a virtual land of giants. We're speaking of a world so delicate that its entire existence could easily be terminated by the incidental mishap of a child."

He clutched his hand and held his fist towards the camera. Then, he slowly opened it to express compassion. "Yet, they are another link in the chain of creation just as we are. They are exploring the same universe that we explore. Perhaps, after a hundred thousand years of exploration, we'll discover that our

universe exists as a stone in the garden of yet another extension of that same universe."

"We have recently learned one very disturbing fact. Their research and extensive resources were devoted to understanding and isolating the soul of human beings, the one element of life lacking in their world. To obtain spiritual understanding is their most sought-after objective and they have been on a mission to embellish that essence."

"The Torenal leader, Motar Kotoran, informed us that they had developed a means of transferring the human soul into particles, energy that could be contained."

"Based on the preliminary reports, I believe that what we experienced today was an execution of that stratagem. Though I don't condone their actions, I am compelled to empathize with their desire to acquire spiritual preeminence. Freedom of religion grants them the same rights as any other society, but it's the price we've been forced to pay that prompted our dilemma."

"Unfortunately, whether these acts were committed out of desperation or spiritual greed, the devastating damage cannot be undone. However, we may be comforted in these trying times by a sense of spiritual empathy as we recall the many men and women who throughout our great history gave their lives in a similar quest for freedom."

"There is an underlying need that we as humans can somehow appreciate, an overwhelming desire to achieve equality for all. Their race has clearly been in existence much longer than ours, but until now, they lacked one illusive ingredient that makes our lives so unique, the soul. Today, they have acquired an ability to relate on a spiritual plane, an unprecedented sense of understanding and appreciation of what mankind strives to achieve. As we delve into this unexplored dimension, I can only hope that we approach the issue in a fair and just manner."

His face displayed a look of genuine sincerity, as he expressed concern for both mankind and that of the alien nation. "By now, the Torens are well aware of the tremendously adverse effects of their actions and since I have been entrusted with the grave responsibility to mediate the matter, I will attempt

to resolve our differences in the most peaceful manner possible. We are a people instilled with an ability to forgive."

"However, and let this be emphatically understood, the people of this world stand united and will not fall victim to a dictatorship, nor will our ethical and moral fibers be influenced. We are a world that has sacrificed far too much to achieve the global freedom that we enjoy today. We will be relentless in our efforts to retain that freedom. Until we meet again. Good evening."

* * *

ALIEN RESPONSE

Shortly after the broadcast was concluded, a message was received on the isolated network at Dazzle's facility. The response was recorded and scheduled to air publicly on the Dazzle network at 10 PM that same evening. For the first time, the public would have an opportunity to look into the eyes of an alien.

Though the message was intended to be forceful and direct, it also had a refreshing flamboyant appeal that seemed to entice forgiveness. With a sense of sincerity gleaming in his tiny green eyes, the alien began his speech.

"Hello, I am Motar Kotoran, leader of the Torenal nation. I welcome this rare opportunity to address the citizens of your world. We are a peaceful nation but do tend to be very direct in our approach to diplomacy. Therefore, I would like to respond without delay to the issue of concern."

"The entities of those who have departed, that which human beings refer to as the spirits or souls, now reside within a massive cellular structure established in the galaxies of our universe where they shall forever remain. In time, fragments of those spirits shall be dispersed among the inhabitants of our world. Though many of you have questioned our methods and speak of retaliation, I implore you to keep one thought mind. To destroy our universe would only serve to purge the souls of those who were taken."

"In our world, death has merely been an unencumbered fact

of life. Upon expiration, life simply ceased. There has never been an extended level of spiritual consciousness. The sacrifice that you have made will serve a purpose far beyond that of human comprehension."

"Since the discovery of your world, we have studied the spiritual unification that defines man kind and makes your people so unique. The promise of heaven that humans embrace existed long before the creation of your world, but never in our universe. Today, with the souls of a few from your world, we begin the process of establishing our own heaven. For eternity, those souls will be the foundation of our spiritual future and serve as our gods. They will thrive in a dimension of pure transcendental consciousness and heightened awareness in a perpetual state of utopia, the pinnacle of life that each human being subconsciously strives to attain."

"We have not selfishly destroyed human lives, we have simply discarded their physical presence, which has enabled them to willingly share their spirits. Eventually, their spirits will link our world to yours for the balance of eternity."

"We invite you to join with us and unite in our effort to become one in a technological and spiritual bond that will serve to benefit both our worlds mutually in every respect. Your universe may very well represent the final segment of infinity, but we invite you to share in technology that will enable you to explore the boundaries of your universe. We, in turn, will begin our exploratory venture into the realm of spirituality. We have taken the first step and established a method of communication and though it may seem like a difficult step, it offers a new beginning. The next step is yours. Where we go from here is entirely up to you."

"In that fleeting moment, we could have terminated all human life as you know it, but clearly, based on the trivial number of individuals transported, that was not our intent. In time, once we have established a method of spiritual communication, they will confirm that."

"You'll also find that our selection process enabled us to secure only the very purest of hearts. Each member of this select group was determined to possess a charitable unbridled compassion for his fellow man, a deep commitment to

unconditional love in every sense of the word and an imagination fueled by the traits of righteousness. The souls of these men and women will combine to create a spiritual society free to influence the people of our world, as they deem appropriate. The chosen few will be our omnipotent eternal order."

"We could easily have conducted our experiments in complete secrecy and left the unusual phenomenon to the human imagination as another of Earth's many unsolved mysteries. By making our presence known, we have also made ourselves vulnerable. Though our size provides us with an extraordinary advantage, it also exposes our greatest weakness."

"It is our sincere hope that this intriguing quandary will serve to establish a mutually beneficial relationship to bond our worlds and guide us into the infinite future together. Your loss is not in vain and we shall forever be in your debt."

The screen faded to static and was replaced by a commentator who was obviously struggling to find words. "Well...there you have it...whatever 'it' is." He nervously shuffled through a stack of notes in front of him. There was a long pause before he continued. "Quite honestly, like most of our viewers, I find myself at a loss of words. I think that we've all lived with the lingering suspicion that other life in our universe may exist. Today, it appears that we have confirmed that suspicion."

"Having actually encountered an alien life form under the unusual circumstances surrounding the situation, I can't imagine any experience in a broadcaster's career that might help to express the emotions of a nation at a time like this."

"To help put things into perspective, joining us now is Dr. Daniel Karrington, the first man to have established contact with the Torens. Of course, his name has already come to light in the recent wave of scientific achievements in the field of Cryonics. Also rejoining us tonight is the world-renown Victor Dazzle. Gentlemen, welcome."

"Dr. Karrington," he invited to spark the debate, "this all seems incredibly fantastic. Are you convinced that our world has somehow been invaded by some sort of microscopic alien nation?"

Dan provided his answer with an optimistic smile. "Well, Tom. I'm not sure that I could answer your question in the manner it was posed. Yes, I have been a witness to enough convincing evidence to satisfy my pessimistic appetite as a scientist that a microscopic universe coexists with ours, but as for your reference to an invasion, I don't think that would be the proper classification. Their presence was established long before prehistoric man, so I suppose that our universe is as much theirs as it is ours."

"Mr. Dazzle," he redirected.

"I'm in agreement with Dr. Karrington. We simply live in a different dimension of the same world."

"Wouldn't you also agree that if an assault of the nature that we experienced were carried out by any other radical regime, it would have been considered an act of terrorism?"

"Perhaps, but most terrorist activity culminates from a religious or political viewpoint that promotes and encourages deplorably violent acts. Though society disagrees with such tactics and bitterly repudates such behavior, in this instance we are confronted with the entire population of beings, some one hundred billion strong."

He removed his ink pen from an inside pocket of his blazer and began to demonstrate the parallel. He held the tip close to his eyes as the camera zeroed in on the tip of his pen. "Just imagine," he began with the gifted voice of a storyteller, "100 billion people living in a world so small that it wouldn't even cover the head of this pen. The concept of infinity takes on new meaning and frankly, Tom, it boggles the mind."

"We're not talking about atoms, a cell structure or fragments of DNA. This is an entire civilization, a colony of self-sustaining beings. Aren't they entitled to equal rights as the Constitution outlines and guarantees?"

"That's an interesting perspective and certainly something for the League of Nations to consider, but what do we know about them, aside from what little they have told us in their transmission?"

"Dan, would you like to tackle that one?" he directed.

Dan leaned forward to rest his crossed arms on the table. "There's no question that the Torens know a great deal more about us than we know about them. They have probes that have been observing every aspect of our lives since the beginning of evolution. Today, they have unlimited access to even the most classified information of every nation. Reticence, as we know it, is obsolete by their standards."

"The Torens had been inadvertently held captive in our facility and since they had no practical means of transporting the huge rock, needed our assistance. That was the reason for their initial contact. We had uprooted their universe and hauled it to another continent, a distance that by their standards would be measured in trillions of light years. One innocent act of human creativity had inhibited thousands of years of research and nearly destroyed an entire universe. That's a pretty heavy burden."

"And where is this stone now?"

"Until recently, it had been safely stored in our facility." Dan enlightened to a limited degree. "But, under the circumstances, were compelled to return the stone to its original location. We did, however, install a device that would enable us to seal off the stone if an emergency should arise. That seal is now in place."

"I did have an opportunity to examine the stone as directed by the Torens under the Silo XK-4, a photon-based microscope with a magnification of 200 million. If you please," he directed.

As the pictures began to appear, Dan began his informative narration. "These first few photos of the surface provide various angles to give a broad view of what one might see with the naked eye."

"It's not until we magnify the region 1 million times, that we can even get a hint of artificial influence. This next view provides a perspective at a magnification of 10 million and you still cannot recognize the extraordinary imperfections as man-

made modifications."

Another more detailed photo appeared. "Then, at a magnification of about 100 million, we were directed to a specific location by a highly reflective laser beam which, as magnification continues to increase, leads us to what is clearly a set of reinforced protective doors in a crevasse slightly beneath the surface. Even with the limited access, we were able to achieve these astonishing photos of the interior when full magnification was reached."

As if looking into space through a telescope, the video showed recordings of a window into the microscopic universe. The interior was similar in many respects to our own universe. Tiny galaxies, stars, and nebula were clearly visible. As if looking down into a dark balloon, entire orbiting solar systems rotated through the expanse at rapid pace. A bright comet even traveled past. It was a rare and marvelous perspective that, until now, had been reserved for an elite group of supreme beings.

"Those tiny structural shadows are buildings that actually house the residents of a facility located on the surface of the stone." The pictures again faded into a smaller sub-screen as Dan's face reappeared. "As you can imagine, it was a truly fascinating experience."

"That inspection, along with numerous communications with Kotoran, convinced me. We are currently developing a probe in our Nanotechnology department that will enable us to obtain even more in-depth views of the interior. In addition to the obvious, a variety of other capabilities have been demonstrated that are virtually impossible to achieve even with man's most advanced modern technology. I certainly have no reason to suspect that this is some sort of elaborate hoax. But even if it were a deceitful plan conjured up by some deranged individual, I can't imagine what their motivation would be. If that is the case, someone has gone to a great deal of tremendous effort to perpetuate it."

"Mr. Dazzle, do you have anything to add?"

"Not really, Tom. I think my cohort provided an excellent analysis. We will be meeting with NATO leaders and the League of Nations to establish a unified position and we will maintain an

open line of communication with Motar Kotoran, but I'd like to think that we could arrive at a peaceful resolution, don't you?"

The reporter turned toward the camera as it zoomed for a closeup. "One can only hope. Of course, we will keep our viewers informed as information becomes available. We'll have an update at eleven on what has come to be known as 'Soul Possession'."

* * *

After the interview, Vic and Dan were driven by limousine to the airport. Though the urgency of the situation certainly warranted concern, Vic didn't seem to be worried. Dan found that to be rather disturbing. "What are we going to do, Vic?"

"There's not much we can do. We certainly can't bring those people back and who's to say that they're not better off. I don't really think that anyone wants to start a war with a microscopic nation over a situation we can't possibly understand." Dan just turned toward the window and stared out in silent thought. "It's a matter of survival. They simply want a fragment of life's most precious asset, spiritual affinity. I certainly can't fault them for that," he said to prompt a response.

"Spirituality wasn't part of their genetic structure. Maybe there's a reason for that," Dan attempted to dispute.

"God has commissioned us to spread the truth to all corners of the world, we're just covering all the bases." Dan shook his head in silent agreement. Vic reached over and placed his hand softly on Dan's shoulder. "Don't worry, Dan. Everything's going to be fine."

"God, I hope so." Vic winked to reassure him, almost as if the supreme reference was to him. The world, and everything in it, was changing fast.

* * *

CHAPTER 27

MAGGIE'S MISSING TOO!

"Wally!" Eddie yelled frantically into the receiver.

"Eddie?"

"Yeah! What the hell is going on?"

"Calm down, kid. What's the matter?"

"Don't tell me to calm down. It's Maggie, she's gone!"

"Gone where?" he asked nervously in anticipation of what he feared most.

"The Torens took her."

"Are you sure, Eddie?"

"Well, one second I was holding her in my arms, then a split-second later, just like that, I wasn't. So yeah, I'm relatively sure."

"Well..." he said, then hesitated, "...she does meet all the criteria."

"I don't buy it, Wally."

"Look, son, I know it's going to be difficult to accept, but I've talked to Dan. This alien thing is real, and Maggie isn't the only one missing."

"Right now, I don't give a damn about anyone else. This is Maggie we're talking about."

"I know, son. Where are you?"

"I'm still in Vancouver."

"Why?"

"It was our honeymoon, Wally. We got married right after the convention. Some celebration, huh?"

"Oh my God, Eddie, I had no idea." He paused and with his hand over the receiver, Eddie could hear his muffled words as he informed Kate. "The kids got married in Vancouver. Now, Maggie's disappeared in this alien thing," he told her, then returned the receiver to his ear and spoke with earnest compassion. "Listen. Charter one if you need to, but jump on a plane and get your butt back to the facility and hook up with Dan. He knows more about what's going on than anybody. Kate and I will fly out and join you there, okay?"

"That's a good idea. Maybe Dan can help. Besides, there's nothing else left for me to do."

"It sure couldn't hurt. Until then, you know how to reach me if you need me."

"Yeah, Wally. Thanks"

* * *

EDDIE RETREATS TO BIR SERI

The private jet carrying a distraught young groom touched

down in Bir Seri at 9 AM. Though Eddie was astonished by the immense changes that had already taken place at the facility, he wasted no time getting where he intended to go. Dan was in his private office preparing for another Torenal conference scheduled for the following afternoon. Since he hadn't been apprised of the recent development, he was quite surprised when Eddie stormed in still frantic. The lack of sleep and obvious tension showed through like an open window.

"For God's sake, Eddie, you look terrible. What is it? What's wrong?"

With tears welling in his tired eyes and in broken raspy voice, he informed his trustworthy colleague. "The aliens, Dan. They took Maggie."

It was the first time Dan had been confronted with the effects of the Torenal infiltration on a personal level. He was quite fond of Maggie and quickly began to experience a portion of the grief that Eddie was enduring. He fell back in his chair, removed his glasses and let his head fall to rest in his hands. "Oh no, Eddie."

Not only did he have to confront a friend who suffered a loss, he was agonizing over the realization that he was partially responsible. Tears began to trickle down his cheek. "I'm sorry, Eddie. My God, I'm so sorry."

Nothing Dan might have said could erase the despair that saturated their lives at that moment. After several minutes of melancholy despondency, Eddie informed him between sniffles. "Maggie and I were married in Vancouver." Dan couldn't bring himself to face Eddie.

With both entangled in their individual prisons of sorrow, Eddie made another attempt to clarify his position. "They took her, and I want her back. Can you help me?"

It took a long while for Dan to muster the courage to respond, but he finally looked up, wiped the tears from his face and replied with humble benevolence, "If there was anything, anything at all I could do, you know that I would, but I don't have any control over this. At best, had I known, I might have been able to avoid it, but didn't know and what's done is done."

You may never be able to forgive me, but from the bottom of my heart, I am sorry."

As reality began to sink in, Eddie seemed to come to terms with what appeared to be the truth. His fear of finding love, only to lose it, had again been realized. His ticket to happiness had been ripped in half. Eddie replied with munificence, "I don't blame you, Dan. There's no one to blame but the Torens and as much as I'd like to smash that damn rock into a billion pieces, if there's any chance that Maggie's spirit is flourishing there..." Dan remained silent.

"I'd sure like to talk with this Kotoran fellow though. If nothing else, I want these Torens to appreciate what they've got in Maggie Bennett. If you don't mind, I'm going to hang around for a while. I've got nowhere else to go." His tone changed drastically as he recalled fond moments. "Maggie sure loved you guys."

Dan drifted back into his solitary cell of sorrow. "If there's one thing that I learned from Maggie, it's that God has a reason for everything. I just have to learn to trust in Him and that's not an easy thing for a guy like me to do, but I'm going to try." Eddie let out a faint chuckle and said with disheartening chagrin. "Do you know what's really sad? After all these years of working with her, I don't even have a photograph to remember her by." Dan didn't know how to respond. Eddie placed his hands in his pockets and quietly shuffled out the door.

At that moment, science and it all that it meant to both men, no longer seemed relevant. The only thing that had any real meaning was gone forever.

* * *

EDDIE COMMUNICATES WITH KOTORAN

Wally and Kate arrived at the facility later that same afternoon and spent most of the evening being what friends were supposed to be at times such as these. It may have been nothing more than wishful thinking, but Eddie did manage to reach one conclusion that night. Since their technology was so advanced, perhaps there was a chance that the Torens could return what had

been taken from him. After all, he had an inside track.

Bright and early the next morning, he put in a call to Dan and arranged to be at the studio when Kotoran made contact. He received a page about two hours later and rushed down to what was once Dan's laboratory, then casually entered the very crowded room. There were a lot of new unfamiliar faces.

Elaborate equipment filled every space and since everyone was so focused, Eddie's presence went unnoticed. He casually strolled through the room.

It took a while, but Dan finally spotted him. "I'm glad you could make it. How are you feeling this morning?" he asked with genuine concern.

"I'm all right." He paused to look around the room and spoke with obvious reference to Dazzle, "Are you sure my being here is okay?"

"Hey..." he smiled as he appraised, "...I'm running this show, remember?" Eddie made a vague attempt to smile. "This will be a good test too. It'll give us a chance to analyze their response and see what these intra-terrestrial aliens are all about," he offered encouragingly. "Are you up for this?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"We've got about fifteen minutes. Grab yourself a cup of coffee and try to relax." He pointed to a table of refreshments.

Eddie poured a cup and selected a ripe banana from an assortment of fruit, then leaned back against a wall to observe. Oddly enough, considering the significance and his extensive involvement, there was no sign of Vic Dazzle.

Just prior to the designated time for contact, Dan enlightened the team of professionals. "Could I have your attention please? I'd like to take a moment to introduce my associate, Dr. Grisham." Eddie struggled to conceal a large mouthful of banana. There was a brief round of docile applause as a form of bona-fide recognition. He acknowledged with a wave as he casually dropped the remainder of his breakfast in a trash container.

"Eddie will be addressing the Torens after the preliminary dialogue. Please extend to him the utmost respect and courtesy." He elected not to elaborate on any of the details concerning his oration. If the Toren's didn't know already, he didn't want to alert them as to the reason for Eddie presence.

"We're getting a preliminary signal," Peter Avery announced.

"All right," Dan directed. "Everyone to your stations." He walked over and sat in a chair in front of the League of Nations backdrop, attached a small microphone to his lapel and prepared himself for the opening.

Immediately, a message appeared on the monitors accompanied by a formal announcement. "We interrupt your regularly scheduled programming to bring you this special live report. Kotoran, Leader of the Torenal Republic is about to address the League of Nations."

Eddie was beginning to feel a little nervous. When his moment arrived, he wasn't exactly sure what he was going to say or how he would say it. He bowed his head in silent prayer. "Help me, Lord."

Soon the aberrant figure appeared on a large screen. Eddie watched the monitor with intense curiosity as the individual made his opening statement. "Dr. Karrington, Mr. Dazzle and Leaders of all nations, warm greetings."

"Mr. Kotoran," Dan indulged. "Good morning, sir."

"It is a beautiful morning in the world we share and there are so many issues to discuss."

"Indeed, there are."

"Perhaps, we should begin by focusing on the issue concerning your distinguished colleague."

Dan wasn't surprised by the intuitive insight, but the others were clearly astounded by the unanticipated disclosure. "Perhaps, we should. Dr. Grisham, would you care to join us?" he

politely invited.

Eddie raised his eyebrows in uncertainty and slowly made his way to the stage. "Good morning, doctor," the garbled voice greeted. Eddie only nodded to let it be known that he wasn't here for pleasantries. "Let me begin by extending our sincerest sympathy for your devastating loss. We are only now beginning to understand the true meaning of sorrow."

"No, sir," Eddie stated calmly, but directly. "Until you've experienced unconditional love, you can't possibly begin to understand. For most of us, love takes a lifetime to discover. As I have been forced to learn, it only takes a wink of an eye to lose it." He spoke freely and from the heart with words that invited the viewers to put into perspective the true ramifications of the devastating effects.

"What you have gained is everything that I have lost and all that I will never be able to share. There is no doubt that the spirit you have seized will serve your nation well, but I will live the balance of my life with a void that can never be filled. To you that may seem somewhat selfish and perhaps it is, but how can you possibly justify my loss?"

It showed primarily in the eyes, but the emotions that Eddie expressed seemed to generate a sincere sense of empathy. "It's true, Dr. Grisham. We cannot yet comprehend your grief, nor can we relate to the expression of love or the sorrow you are constrained to endure, but we do understand significance and your mate clearly had profound significance in your maternal order. You are certainly entitled to proper compensation."

"Compensation?" Eddie sternly objected. "In a situation like this, there is no such thing as proper compensation."

Kotoran continued with his rationalization. "Those who are entitled shall be assigned exclusive positions in the new order. We look forward to having a man of your stature serving as an ambassador to the Torenal regime."

"You don't seem to understand," he reiterated more aggressively. "That might suffice for some, but not for me and certainly not for a number of others. That's just not enough."

"What then, might I offer you?"

Eddie shook his head in disbelief. "In my case, it's really very simple. You had the technology to take her away. I assume that you have the technology to bring her back. That's the only thing you can offer me. I want my wife back."

Again, without expression and in a very direct manner, Kotoran replied, "I'm sorry, doctor, that just isn't possible."

"It's not possible, meaning you can't..." Eddie argued, "...or not possible, meaning you won't?"

Dan was beginning to get nervous, afraid that Eddie's reluctant attitude might jeopardize the process of establishing a peaceful resolution. He interrupted to offer mediation. "Mr. Kotoran," he said, while placing a hand on Eddie's leg as a signal to refrain. "I think what Dr. Grisham is implying..."

"What Dr. Grisham is implying is quite clear," he stated with profound dismay. "However, we would not reverse the process, even if we could. The sacrifice has been made."

"Sacrifice?" Eddie's voice began to crescendo. "You don't know the meaning of the word."

Kotoran calmly responded with a buoyant final note. "As a courtesy, we elected to appease the good doctor and hear his views. He clearly has a closed mind. Therefore, to continue discussing such trivial matters would be virtually pointless. Our transmission will now be concluded."

"Trivial?" Eddie challenged as the signal faded and the screen went black. "Trivial matters, my ass!" he reiterated to Dan with disgust. He yanked the microphone from his shirt collar and stormed off the set. The Dazzle trademark immediately signaled an end to the broadcast.

An ill prepared announcer's voice provided a closing statement. "In light of the unusual circumstances, we will be forced to cut our broadcast short. Of course, the Dazzle Network will provide a full report at noon. This is Bret Pickard reporting."

"That son of a bitch," Eddie exclaimed with increasing anger.

Dan strolled over to console him with a gentle hand on his shoulder. Eddie jerked his body away and headed for the door. "Eddie," Dan pleaded, but with sincere understanding, waved off security's attempt to inhibit his brash departure.

Eddie charged down the corridor, his mind cluttered with mixed emotions and immense frustration. He recalled how much Maggie enjoyed the serenity she had found there, so he headed straight for the meditation room.

As soon as he arrived, he selected some classic hard rock from the library and cranked the volume up to its maximum level. He pressed a button and the wall swiveled to reveal a well-stocked bar. He snatched a bottle from the rack, poured a glass and took a huge gulp. Since he wasn't much of a drinker, the unpleasant taste of tequila incited a malicious cringe. "My God, that's disgusting," he said aloud as he prepared for another swallow.

Suddenly, something clicked in the back of his mind. There was something very familiar about the Torenal setting. He reached over and shut the sound system down to better concentrate. He searched his mind for complacency. The background of Kotoran's stage, he had seen the peculiar structure somewhere before. He wisely returned the liquor bottle to the rack and made a quick exit.

Soon, he was knocking on Wally's door. "Eddie," Wally greeted with a compassionate smile. "How ya doin', kid?"

"I'm all right," he replied timidly and then extended a courteous gesture to his wife. "Hi Kate."

"I think you pissed that Kotoran fella off a little," Wally declared pretentiously.

"Maybe," Eddie boasted, "but I'm not so sure I pissed off an alien."

"How's that?"

"Do you have access to the replication library?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I'd like to see a tape of that broadcast," he inferred apprehensively as he moved towards the TV. "Play it back."

"I don't get it," he said and then motioned to Kate who quickly left the room.

"Just play it back. I want to see something."

"All right," he irresolutely agreed. Eddie took the remote from his hand and began forwarding through to scenes with vivid closeup views of the background. "What are you looking for?"

Eddie began to smile boldly. He froze the tape and enhanced the picture. "Does that look familiar to you?"

"What, Eddie? What the hell are you babbling about?"

"That right there." He got up and pointed with his finger at various parts of the screen. "Haven't you seen it before?"

"No. At least I don't think so."

"Well, I have," he proudly proclaimed.

"Where?"

"In the vault under the basement."

"Woe, Eddie. That's some bold finger pointing, buddy. Are you sure about that?"

"I'm positive. I don't know who is responsible, but I know what I'm talking about. There's no alien nation, this is nothing more than an elaborate hoax."

"Eddie, you've been under a lot of stress lately."

"Don't patronize me, Wally. I'm telling you, that show was recorded in the basement vault of this very facility and I can prove it."

"Do you realize what you're saying, son?"

"I know exactly what I'm saying. I'm going to blow the bottom out of somebody's ass. What are doing later tonight, say about three?"

"Woe there, Ponchovia. I don't like the sound of this."

"If I'm wrong, we don't have a damn thing to worry about. If I'm right, we've got some major TFP here! Are ya up for a late-night stroll or not?"

"If it'll put an end to this ludicrous notion of yours and give you some peace of mind, I'll go along, but under protest."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. I'll meet you in the meditation room at three o'clock. There's just one other minor detail I've got to work out." Eddie made a quick dash for the door. "See ya later."

"Yeah, see ya," Wally loathsomely replied to appease.

Kate reentered the room when she heard the door close. "Is everything all right, dear?"

"I don't know. I'm a little concerned about the boy. I think he's losin' it."

"Nonsense! If you only knew how often I thought the same thing about you."

"I'm serious, Kate."

"So am I."

* * *

CHAPTER 28

EDDIE'S QUEST FOR THE TRUTH

Eddie's plan required one more visit to Dan's office. He would have to obtain a key to the vault. Though he didn't care much for the thought, he was forced to consider the distinct possibility that Dan may have been involved. There was more than enough evidence to warrant the suspicion and only one way to know for sure.

He tapped lightly on the open office door. "Dan?"

"Eddie," he returned with welcome exuberance and an extended hand. "I'm so glad you stopped by. I know things didn't go as well as you hoped this afternoon."

"No, it didn't, but I owe you an apology. I lost my temper and overreacted. I hope I didn't go too far overboard."

"You got your point across, that's for sure. Don't worry. We'll get past it."

"Vic's not too angry with me?"

"Disappointed would be a better word, but I think he

understands. We would all like to do what we can to help."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, because there is one thing."

"Name it," he admonished decisively.

"When I was in the basement vault retrieving the blood samples, I lost this little charm that Maggie had given me. It was attached to my watch, kind of as a keepsake. Now that Maggie's gone, I'd kind of like to recover it. It's the only thing I've got left."

As Dan reached into a desk drawer to retrieve the key, he explained, "You're certainly welcome to look, but don't expect much. Vic had the place cleaned out when those items went on display in Vancouver. I seriously doubt that you'll find anything at all down there, but who knows? You might get lucky."

The key was no longer around his neck and Dan was more than willing to surrender it. At least for the time being, it allayed one grave concern. "You're probably right, but it's worth a peek. I'll get the key back to you right away."

"No hurry, just slip it in my box when you're finished."

If Eddie was right about the hoax and Dan was innocent, he'd want to exonerate his dear friend in the process. "Thanks, Dan. Thanks for everything."

"You bet." Eddie was just getting ready to leave when Dan called out to detain him, "Wait a minute." Eddie turned sharply.

Dan had a peculiar look on his face as he slowly reached into another desk drawer. The disturbing manner of his suspicious behavior prompted the momentary thought that he may have been reaching for a gun. Eddie took a deep breath and his eyes popped open wide, then he exhaled with a huge sigh of relief as Dan retrieved a large envelope.

He handed Eddie the package with a humble smile. "I'm not proud of how we acquired these, but I thought you might like to have them."

Eddie pulled out several surveillance photos of he and Maggie taken during their Paris excursion. Tears began to form in his eyes as he recalled the magic moments reflected in the photographs. At this point, he didn't care where they came from, he was just happy to have them. "Thanks," he managed as he cleared his eyes. "Thanks a lot."

* * *

EXPOSING THE HOAX

Three candles provided the only light that dimly illuminated the photos, which were propped up on the coffee table in front of him. Sleep was simply out of the question. As he caressed the golden band of fabric that Maggie had tied to his ring finger, his eyes shifted nervously between the clock and the pictures of his lovely bride. At 2:45 AM, he blew out the candles.

When he entered the hallway, Wally was waiting just outside the door. "C'mon you pessimistic ruffian, let's get this over with. We'll need a key."

"Got it," he flaunted.

"And how did you manage that?"

"Dan gave it to me. I'm convinced that he has nothing to do with it." Eddie headed straight for the meditation room.

Wally was a little confused by Eddie's direction. "You do know where you're going, don't you."

"I've learned a shortcut or two." They entered the room and approached the same corner that Dan had once used. The pie shaped corner swiveled out and they stepped inside. He punched in the appropriate access code. "There's nothing below the vault," he said inquisitively, "is there?"

"Yeah, there's one more level, but as far as I know, it's never been used."

"I'll bet it's getting a real work out these days," Eddie prudently announced. "Are you ready?"

"Go ahead, slick. Open 'er up."

He inserted the key and the vault door eased its way open. This time though, there was no interior lighting. The room was completely dark, and the temperature was a comfortable seventy-three degrees. "Isn't there a light switch or something around here?"

"Hell, I don't know. I can't even remember the last time I was in this box. Wait a minute," he advised as he leaned out toward what little light was radiating in the outer hall. He pulled a pen light from his trousers and started shining it around the room. Aside from an occasional beam of light reflecting off portions of shiny steel, the contents were not discernible.

"I remember now," he said, shuffling his way to the door of the inner Cryonic storage vault. "Here it is," he bellowed from the darkness as he began flipping switches. Slowly, a string of soft overhead lights began flickering. "I'll be damned," he declared in an astounded voice.

Eddie fell back against the wall in utter amazement. Though he knew in his heart that he was right, he still had a difficult time comprehending the affirmation.

The vault looked like a set for an upcoming episode of Star Traveler. There was an array of tiny models ranging from what must have been portrayed as someone's home to that of entire futuristic city. It was all in place, just as it had been depicted for the television broadcasts.

"Check this out, Wally. Meet the infamous Kotoran. Isn't that a kick?" His finger flicked the nose of a mask hanging on a rack near the platform.

"I never would have believed it," Wally timidly acknowledged. "Okay, I've seen enough. Whoever's responsible for this isn't dumb enough to leave it unguarded. Let's get the hell out of here."

"Hold on, Wally. Let me shoot a few pictures." He began snapping off a digital set while Wally backed up to the door of

the vault to keep an eye out.

"C'mon, Eddie," he nervously encouraged. "Hurry up."

"I'm coming, I'm coming." He turned and snapped a few more.

"Let's go."

"Let me get the lights."

"Make damn sure you leave everything just like you found it."

"I will," Eddie acceded in a whisper. "That ought to do it. Let's go."

They made a hasty retreat to the elevator and rode it silently back to the meditation room. They were both afraid to speak. "This could be dangerous, Wally," Eddie advised as they parted ways. "We'd better make plans to get the hell out of Dodge. I'll call you in the morning."

"Uh huh," Wally nervously muttered with as much courage as he could. He was terrified and it showed. The one thing Eddie hadn't considered was what he would do if he confirmed the suspicion. Now that he had, he wasn't sure how to present the new evidence or who to present it to. At least now, he had Wally to back him up.

Wally was extremely worried and couldn't help constantly looking over his shoulder all the way back to his apartment. He knew the proficiency of this organization all too well. They wouldn't be permitted to carry around such a secret, much less leave with it. He struggled with the apprehensiveness and could only imagine the perils that might lie ahead.

The keen perception was well founded. Shortly after arriving home, he climbed into bed with eyes and ears alert. He restlessly folded his arms behind his head on the pillow and then turned to gaze at his devoted wife. "I love you, Katie ole girl, always have and always will," he whispered softly.

He laid back again with his eyes fluttering at the ceiling. Then, he heard it, a very faint hiss. He lifted his head and

shifted it sharply from side to side to zero in on the source. He flipped on the nightstand light and placed his arms at his side in preparation to spring into action, but never got the chance. The sound was that of a gas being released and he was soon fast asleep. What happened after that, no one would ever know, but someone else had turned out Wally's nightlight.

He liked to sleep in on occasions, but Wally rarely missed a meal. When he hadn't shown up for breakfast, Kate went in to rouse him from that halcyon slumber. It was then she discovered that her loving husband had enjoyed his last meal.

There was nothing suspicious about the circumstances. At his age, death was inevitable. As far as she knew, Wally's appointed time had come, and he had simply slipped away peacefully in his sleep. She climbed into bed next to him and nestled as closely to him as she could. She reached out to stroke the fluffy mustache and as teardrops softly trickled softly down her cheek, spent the last tranquil moments alone contemplating life without him. The only life she ever knew was that which she shared with Wally P. McCarty and the love of her life was gone.

An hour later, the phone rang, but she simply chose to ignore it. Of course, it was Eddie, who became alarmed when there was no answer. He rushed to their apartment and knocked several times, then called out. "Wally, Wally, it's me, open up." Finally, Kate surrendered to the persistent visitor and opened the door. Eddie looked down at the teary-eyed woman and read between the lines. He spoke softly, "Where is he?"

She dropped her head down and pointed to the bedroom. Eddie cradled the frail woman in his arms. "I'm so sorry, Kate. God, I'm sorry." She couldn't possibly understand his subliminal meaning. "Would it be all right if I went in?"

"Of course," she said softly. "I guess I'd better call Dan."

"Yeah," he agreed and then walked slowly into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. He approached the bed as if he were afraid to disturb him and knelt to grasp Wally's hand in both of his. "I guess I really fucked up this time, buddy. It never entered my mind that someone could get hurt, especially you. I'm

a little late in saying so, but if you didn't know it before, I guess you know it now, I loved you, you old fart."

"For what it's worth, I'm pretty sure I've got it figured out. Big deal, huh? Now what am I going to do? Who am I going to tell and for that matter, who's going to listen?" He paused for a moment to consider the only obvious answer. "Well, at least I've got God on my side now. Maggie saw to that, so I can't lose, right?" He made a futile attempt to chuckle. His final words were directed to his new friend up above. "He's going to take a little getting used to, Lord, but it'll be worth it." Then, as if in a fond tribute, he flipped one last middle finger salute. "So long, buddy."

Kate had just hung up the phone as Eddie emerged. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I'll be fine. We had a lot of good years together, Eddie. I'm thankful. I just wish you and Maggie could have experienced half of what we got to share." Eddie headed quickly for the door. "Where are going in such a hurry?" she asked with a puzzled look.

"Wally and I had some unfinished business," he informed with a sense of duty and admiration. She seemed to understand. "He was a good friend, Kate."

"He loved you too, Eddie."

"And Maggie loved you." He bid farewell with a mysterious uncertainty, as if he'd never see her again. "So do I."

* * *

CHAPTER 29

FACING THE TRUTH

The basement conference room had been transformed into an extremely large and rather extravagant private office. Eddie walked straight in unannounced to find a huge thug of a man hovering over Dazzle like a female Grizzly standing guard over her cub. Vic wasn't the least bit encumbered by the intrusion. He stood facing a wall-sized, stain-glass map of the world and with his back to the door.

Eddie would normally have been extremely intimidated by such a situation, but on this day, he was on a mission. He was there to get Maggie back and Dazzle was the only man who could do it. There was one very intriguing element of irony surrounding the confrontation though. If Dazzle really was the Antichrist, intimidation would be the least of his concerns.

Eddie spoke with confidence. "I think we need to talk." As Vic turned to face him, Eddie focused his discontenting glare at the stone-faced bodyguard to make it clear that his presence wasn't required.

Dazzle had nothing to fear and motioned to the henchman. As he left the room, Vic stretched his arms and calmly folded them

behind his head. "Have a seat, doctor. I've been expecting you."

"I'll stand, if you don't mind," Eddie replied with vigor.

"Suit yourself. What's on your mind?"

"I think you have a pretty good idea."

"Do I?"

"Maggie, where is she?"

Vic leaned forward and raised his brows in rebuttal. "That is what this is all about?"

"That's right," he clarified more assertively.

Vic leaned back, propped his elbow on the arm of the chair and rested his chin on his fist. "A lot of people are missing, Eddie."

"So, I've heard."

"With her disposition, I would think that Maggie was an ideal candidate. If what they tell us is true, she is most likely experiencing a new ambit of expanded consciousness."

"I don't think so," he acrimoniously declared.

"You don't?"

"Matter of fact, I think you know exactly where she is."

"Do I now?"

"Don't bull shit me, Vic," he dauntlessly indulged. "That microscopic universe of yours doesn't even exist. The whole scheme was nothing more than an elaborate hoax."

"Come now, doctor, a hoax?" he challenged with arrogant dismay.

"Cut the crap. I'm not here to play games."

Now, Vic was slowly becoming more aggressive. "I sense a hint of hostility." Eddie peered assertively into his dispelling eyes. "That's an extraordinary accusation you've fabricated. I assume you have evidence to validate these peculiar allegations of yours."

"I believe the public would find these rather interesting." He tossed the pictures loosely onto the desk. Dazzle didn't even shift an eye to acknowledge them. "I could prove it if I had to, but that's not why I'm here."

"Oh. Why are you here Eddie?"

"Look, I don't give a damn who you are or what you are, and I could care less about your agenda. All I want is Maggie."

Vic leaned forward, lifted his arms in defense. "I don't have her."

"Who does?"

"My worst enemy, I would think," Vic said as he began to reveal more information.

"You're not going to try and sell me on that cockamamie alien invasion crap, are you?"

"No, you're right about that. You're right about a lot of things. It's a crying shame about old Wally, an atrocity really. I kind of liked him. Now, the poor guy will never get to reap the rewards for all those years of dedicated service. You really shouldn't have gotten him involved." That tidbit of information caught Eddie by surprise. The only way he could have known about Wally's death, was if he had something to do with it. "I am curious though. You seem to be implying that I'm not who I claim to be. Perhaps you'd care to edify me. If I'm not Vic Dazzle, who then do you suppose you are addressing?"

The moment of truth had arrived, and Eddie prepared himself to face it. He stood firmly and courageously glared into the piercing eyes of pernicious evil. A sense of serene confidence seemed to fill his soul as he spoke softly. "Several possibilities come to mind, but there is only one that makes any sense. I think you're Satan, the devil himself."

Dazzle responded with a sudden a burst of laughter. "The devil," he snickered. "And what sort of twisted scientific logic prompted you to arrive at that ridiculous conclusion?"

"Does it really matter?"

"No, it really doesn't." Dazzle's tone took a dramatic turn and his voice even began changing to a deep hoarse echo as he began to speak. "But let's explore that possibility, shall we? If I was who you say that I am, then wouldn't everything else they say about me be true as well?"

Eddie froze in place as the bizarre peculiarities proceeded to develop. "Like what?"

"Everything in that disgusting little book of yours." He got up from his chair, walked around to the front of his desk and stood in front of Eddie who attempted to stand as well. "Sit down, Eddie," he commanded. Eddie tried to resist but seemed incapacitated. "I really must insist." With that, he peered deeply into Eddie's eyes as if exerting some sort of psychic force. Eddie fell hard into the chair.

"Congratulations, Eddie, you win. You've got it all figured out, well, most of it anyway. What a waste. You were such an intelligent man too, intelligent, but not very smart," he began to confess. "You're right, there is no microscopic alien nation. The whole thing was nothing more than a half-assed, piss poor hoax, but it did serve its purpose," he emphasized with pride. "That little scam helped camouflage one minor unavoidable obstacle, an event that I had no control over. Are you familiar with the rapture?" Eddie stared at him with a puzzling glare trying to absorb what Vic appeared to be suggesting.

"That's right, doctor, the rapture! It took place just like the good book said it would, but thanks to that little charade, which you so innocently helped to corroborate, most of the world will never know what really transpired. There are a few religious freaks that have their suspicions, but nobody listens to them anyway."

"Granted, it wasn't one of my more elaborate schemes, but I thought it was colorful. It did create an unverifiable question

in the minds of most. That's all I really needed. It's even gotten the extremists all stirred up. I wouldn't be at all surprised if some radical group got a hold of that stone. It would be a shame if all that evidence were destroyed by vandals...say, Thursday around midnight."

Eddie quickly developed a sense of extreme consternation. "You really are the Antichrist."

"Scary thought, huh?" The man's personality began changing drastically. "Can you imagine? No, of course you can't," he laughed out loud. "Allow me to expound for you. The answer to your question is, yes I am. Damn that feels good," he boasted with another devious laugh. "I've been wanting to brag about it ever since I got here. I'm the devil," he said with a thunderous roar of laughter, "and nobody even has a clue. Well, almost nobody. There's you and of course, Maggie knew, but the rapture took care of her for me. Wally had a developed a hunch too and then, there's that pesky little preacher. Four out of 9 billion, that's not a whole hell of a lot. This is going to be a lot easier than I thought and so much fun."

"What...what...what are you going to do?" Eddie nervously inquired.

"Why, everything that repulsive little book of yours says I'll do...and then some. You won't tell anyone, will ya?" he giggled. "Of course, you won't. Being right isn't always a good thing, is it? Is it?" he repeated with a firm grip on Eddie's chin. "If you can't swim, you really should be more careful not to jump into water that's way over your head, kind of like where you are now," he gloated. "Life really is a bitch, Eddie, and right now, she's on the rag."

Eddie couldn't believe what was transpiring. He was at a complete loss for words and could only listen in awe as this evil entity vaunted of his plans. "It is actually kind of funny when you stop and think about it," he proceeded casually. "God and I are a whole lot alike in many ways. Most people don't really know if we exist, but there are a lot more people in the world who are scared shitless of me than there are people who believe in him. Of course, that was no accident either. That took some major doing on my part."

"Most people think that, when bad things happen to them, it's just their shitty luck. Not so!!! I get full credit. I've got an army of spirits that do nothing but manipulate people twenty-four and seven. Take yourself, for example. Had you known the end-results of your work, you wouldn't have joined the team to begin with, much less followed through, but you had no way of knowing for certain. That's because your case, I handled personally. I'm the one who planted all those doubts and kept you in the dark. It was like feeding goldfish. You ate it up. Doesn't that just blow you away?"

"Think about it, Eddie. You are directly responsible for my being here. You are the sole reason the whole damn world will literally go to hell in a hand basket." He leaned over, placed his hands on both arms of Eddie's chair and wrinkled his nose in Eddie's face. "Tell me, Eddie, how does that make you feel?" Eddie was at his mercy and just sat there with wide-open tear-filled eyes. "Awe, have I upset you? I am so fucking cruel, aren't I? So... How do you like me so far?"

"And that God of yours, he's a powerful little prick, but what the world doesn't know yet is that I am every bit as powerful. I'm responsible for all the weapons man thought he was creating. There's no doubt, we are going to duke it out just like the old book says, but there's one minor flaw in that pathetic piece-of-shit prophecy. He doesn't come out on top, I do!"

He proceeded to dance around like a boxer in a ring. "First, I'm going to kick the cosmic shit out of him. Then, I'm going to rip his glorious fucking head off and shove it up his omnipotent ass. Then, I'll stuff the whole 'Devil-forsaken' package of Divinity in a barrel of angelic shit and bury it on the most desolate planet in the whole fucking universe!" He accentuated the emphasis with a swift kick into the air.

"In the end, when it's all said and done, I'll be the one sitting on the golden throne, I'll be King of Kings and ruler of the universe. That's right, professor, I'm going to melt down the whole fucking ball of wax and start all over from scratch, only my design has a few more bells and whistles." He turned back toward Eddie and glared at him with bedeviling eyes. "The truth is what you've been searching for, isn't it? Well, there it is! But for some strange reason, I don't think the truth has set you

free."

Eddie attempted to lift his arm and strike out, but a reptilian arm lunged through the floor to restrain him. Eddie tried again with the other hand and a second paw snatched that arm. Dazzle gloated with an eccentric howl of repulsive laughter. "You just don't get it, do you? You really don't have any clue as to what you are up against." Eddie gritted his teeth and fought to struggle free but was utterly helpless. Dazzle was right, until this very moment, he had no idea how evil Satan essentially is.

The man standing before him began a bizarre physical transformation. Suddenly, it was Wally standing before him and the familiar voice spoke. "Don't fight it, kid. You don't stand a fuckin' chance. You're history, Harpo. That's all there is to it. You fucked up, Fulani. Now, you're going down with the rest of us."

Then image began another series of changes. Now, Dan was hovering over him. "I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciated your efforts. You were an excellent scientist, but an even better puppet. I'm going to miss fucking with you. You did everything I needed you to do, but you've outlived your usefulness. Your time is up. And for your information, hell isn't as bad as they make it out to be," he concluded with another insidious laugh, "it's much worse!"

The next face he saw was that of his beloved Maggie. "Eddie, Eddie, Eddie. This just goes to show you, I was right all along. If only you hadn't been so fucking hardheaded, we could have had a lot of fun together. Now, it looks like the good times are over for good. You're going straight to hell."

"It's a shame too that we wasted all those years being such friends, when all that love you were craving was right there at your fingertips the entire time. You could have had it all, but you didn't. At least you got a taste of it and I'll bet that's what you're going to miss most, isn't it?" She stood back and began a sensual exhibition, caressing her breasts and pressing her hands between her legs. "I'll bet you'd like me to fuck you one more time before you go, wouldn't you?" Then, she suddenly stopped and placed her hand over her mouth. With sad eyes, she childishly apprized, "Oh, silly me. What am I thinking?" The

sweet soft voice quickly converted back to that of Vic Dazzle's. "You're already getting fucked!"

Satan's actual voice began to roar out. His eyes turned bright red and began to glow. "You are in my court of law now. I am the ultimate judge and consummate jury. Eddie Grisham, you've been found guilty of nothing and innocent of everything. Therefore, I sentence you to eternal damnation. I sentence you to hell!"

The mind game that Dazzle was playing began taking another drastic turn. "Take a look," he instructed and directed with a flamboyant wave of his arm. "Let's see what we have for the impoverished Eddie Grisham behind door number one." Eddie began trembling as a huge perplexing portal began to form in the center of the stain-glass mural.

With shooting stars of every color racing through a funnel of dark twisting clouds, a mystifying window opened into another dimension. "Don't be so apprehensive, doctor, consider this cosmic trip a rare privilege. You'll be the first man to experience all the wonders of the 'Dark Side' without having to endure death and I'm going to give you a personal escort. Welcome to MY world."

Still bound by the demonic grasp, Eddie immediately began tumbling through the long tunnel of swirling clouds, which led into a vast fiery cavern with bubbles emerging from lava like substances that permeated through infinite canals of bottomless pits. The heat was like that of a volcanic furnace, but it was mystically combined with an underlying sensation of suffering in a bitter cold arctic freeze.

Imprisoned in each floating cell was a person feebly stretching against the elastic walls, their deformed bodies and mangled faces pressing through the gel-like barrier in torturous agony seeking escape from the suffocating environment. The sound of shrieking voices cried out in tremendous pain and misery, an endless chorus and a deafening choir. A swarm of winged demons in flight randomly attacked each bubble with lightning fast speed to send it hurling back into the streams of molten fluid.

Although it appeared imminent that Eddie would soon be sharing the same eternal incarceration, he wasn't experiencing

bewildering fear as one might have imagined. Instead, his heart went out to those he found entrapped there and instinctively, he began to pray.

Satan, who stood perched on a protruding ledge high above, began an immediate denunciation. His fiendish voice echoed through the eerie caverns like that of an angry beast. "ENOUGH!" he shouted with a violent roar. "I won't have it. Such blasphemy will not be permitted in my kingdom." With that proclamation, a cell with Eddie's name boldly engraved on the surface began floating towards him. It was about to envelope him when everything, including time itself, seemed to cease and freeze in a tranquil standstill.

All at once and instead, Eddie felt his body being engulfed by the sensation of astute glory and was instantly consumed by the purest white light he had ever seen. A vivid recollection of his neglected dream, the one he had been subjected to in Paris, surfaced as clearly as when he originally experienced it. As if spiritually empowered with supreme authority, he was shielded from the demonic forces that surrounded him.

"Satan," Eddie invoked with authority and absolute conviction. "In the name of Jesus Christ, I rebuke you." Immediately, the cabalistic atmosphere dissipated, and he was back in the plush office free of the horrid shackles that had bound him. A more vulnerable and much meeker Victor Dazzle stood before him.

"Ha," Dazzle shunned in a cynical tone, clearly directing his comments to the source of that supreme power. "I'm not impressed. I too have experienced manhood and your omnipotent faculties don't have the same affect anymore. This is my world, remember? I was given unbridled authority to rule here."

As he completed his statement, a rush of wind blew through the room and from within Eddie, another bright light began to emanate. With a brilliant trail, it started swirling around his body like stars in a desert wind. In a matter of seconds, the same glorious man from his dream was standing at his side in a pure white garment laced with gold.

"Hello, Eddie," the reverent voice of eternal peace spoke to reassure him. "Don't be afraid, I am with you. I have always

been with you and will remain with you forever."

Though Eddie had an inner sense of complete serenity as he stood in the presence of Divine Deity, he was still compelled to ask the one unanswered question that lingered in his heart. "What about Maggie, Lord?"

"Concerning the rapture, Satan spoke the truth," the awesome figure replied. "Maggie has returned home, but her home is with me now and that is in heaven. She'll be there waiting to greet you when you are called and she won't have to wait much longer," he jovially informed. "You've done a marvelous job, Eddie. You did what had to be done. I am extremely pleased with your work."

The Lord folded his hands behind his back and spoke passively, but with immense unbridled authority as he addressed the evil perpetrator. "As for you, Satan, this world and all that it contains is yours to exploit. I've made certain that you have complete unrestrained access to all the resources at your disposal, but that which belongs to me in this world, you will never prevail against. I can and will intervene as I deem appropriate."

"This man has served me well and will continue to serve as one of my personal representatives. He has willingly given his heart to me, which means he is no longer of this world. No weapon formed against him shall prosper." After quoting revised scripture to the now silent entity, he added, "That goes for every other believer in the perilous days that lie ahead. The trials and tribulation that you will subject them to, they are destined to endure, but this I promise you. While their reward will be great, you will pay dearly for every evil deed done to them for the balance of eternity."

Satan provided a brief hollow rebuttal. He spoke harshly to the Supreme Being, but with an air of idle respect. "You seem to have overlooked one minor detail."

"I have overlooked nothing," Christ replied with a self-assured smile.

"I may lose an occasional battle, but I still plan to win the war. One day soon, heaven in all its repugnant glory will be

all mine and even you will have to bow before me."

The Lord smiled to express his lack of concern, then winked at the ethereal spirit within. "Wage your war, Satan," he stated boldly, then turned to the stupefied doctor who was speechless. "It's time to go, Eddie." He nodded with humble ambivalence. The figure quickly transformed into another streak of light and whisked around Eddie's body, then disappeared inside. Eddie was left standing alone facing the Prince of Darkness, but with a newfound spiritual strength.

Bestowed with a new understanding and confidence in the future, Eddie bid farewell to his inferior nemesis. "Well, I guess that takes care of that. Doesn't it? You were right about one thing though; I had no idea what I was up against. I do now, but I have also seen the light and the truth has set me free. I'm not afraid anymore. You'd better make the best out of what little time you have left, mister. Based on what I've seen, you're going to need all the help you can get. Until we meet again."

"And you can count on that," Satan informed as Eddie's body quickly began to fade like a mystical apparition. Just a faint outline remained when Dazzle spoke again, "We will meet again and it's not going to be as easy as you think, doctor. I'm going to be on your ass like flies on shit every step of the way. I'll make you wish you had never been born." Soon enough, he was speaking to an empty room. "I will win in the end. Do you hear me? I will be the ultimate victor!" He grabbed a heavy lamp from the desk and sent it hurling in the direction of the apparition. It smashed against the wall with a thunderous crash.

The commotion prompted his faithful bodyguard to come bursting through the door with his high-tech weapon drawn. He randomly directed its aim in search of the enemy. "Mr. Dazzle," he called out as his eyes wandered back and forth between him and various areas of the office. "Are you all right?"

"Of course," he scolded. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Sir?" he questioned.

"Where were you when I needed you?"

"I just stepped out the door. I haven't been gone ten seconds."

"Very fucking funny," he replied to the spirit who had just departed.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" The loyal employee indulged, assuming the satirical comment was intended for him.

"Forget it."

"Where is Dr. Grisham?" the guard asked, still searching the room.

"He had to leave rather abruptly."

"I was right outside, sir, he never..."

"He's gone, Duke, and you will be too if you don't sharpen your skills."

"Yes, sir," he replied as he holstered his weapon. "Should I have a team search the grounds?"

"No, that won't be necessary. He took a shortcut."

"A shortcut, sir?"

"Trust me. He's gone."

* * *

CHAPTER 30

EPILOGUE - NOW WHAT?

As if aroused from a spectacular dream, Eddie awoke the next morning only to find himself in a comfortable bed in an unfamiliar room. The very strange surroundings prompted an immediate search for clues as to his whereabouts.

The rustic setting seemed pleasant enough. He was peering out over a multicolored comforter as bits and pieces of all that had recently transpired began filtering back into his impoverished mind. Slowly, the latest less-threatening mystery began to unfold.

He retrieved his glasses from a nearby nightstand and began slipping his legs into the pants that were neatly folded on a nearby chair. A stiff morning breeze toyed with the wooden blinds through an open second story window where a bright ray of morning sunlight was casting shadows of a large oak tree's dancing branches. He leaned out for a breath of the fresh country air, which only served to reinforce his presumption that he had never been there before. The secluded log cabin was surrounded by trees and through the leaves, he could see bright specks of sunlight glistening on the rippling water on a nearby lake.

He then heard the rustling of pans from the kitchen downstairs and cautiously cracked the door to peer down the hallway. Slowly, he made his way to a balcony overlooking a rather quaint great room. If he hadn't been so distracted, he might have noticed his reflection in the bedroom mirror and espied a new head of hair. Having been in the presence of ultimate glory, the dark brown color had been transformed into a silky white.

He began to experience a distressing sensation that someone was behind him. He slowly turned his head slightly and glanced out of the corner of his eye over his left shoulder, then looked again to his right. Before he allowed the trepidation to consume him, he was quickly reminded, '**No weapon formed against you shall prosper**'. Then, he heard a faint grunting sound and looked down to find a rather plump and seemingly harmless pug-nosed bulldog sniffing feverishly at his pants leg.

"Hi ya pooch," he said in a soft friendly whisper. As Eddie reached down to test the waters, the whimsical pup plopped over and spread its legs to entice a congenial belly rub. "Well, you're no watch dog. That's for sure." He squatted down to accommodate the mutt. "Shhhh," he instructed as he continued his inquisitive probe. The pudgy little pup wrestled its way to his feet, perked up its ears and with a puzzled tilt of the head, torpidly began to follow.

When Eddie got to the bottom of the stairs, he paused to trace the source of the noise. He certainly didn't sense trouble, but took note of the closest exit, just in case. The speckle colored mutt flopped down a full inch into a sitting position about five feet away and continued to study the affable stranger in his domain.

The inviting aroma of fresh fried bacon and brewing coffee was most enticing and the fact that breakfast was being prepared helped to relieve any anxiety. He tiptoed around the next corner to find Eugene Martossi toiling over the stove.

"Hello," Eddie said softly as he knocked lightly on the doorframe. The knock sent the tame little puppy into a fierce barking frenzy. "Damn!" Eddie yelled as he leaped through the doorway to avoid being bitten.

"Bandit," Gene bellowed. The dog immediately refrained. "Good morning," he began as he wiped his hands with a towel and rushed over to greet him. "What a surprise. You were the last person I expected to find sleeping in my house, but it's good to see you again." He carried on as normally as possible but found it increasingly difficult to avoid staring at Eddie's bright-white, uncombed hair dew. "So, how have you been?"

"Fine, all things considered, and yourself?" Eddie replied with a curious eye observing Gene's peculiar obsession with his head and another trained on the unpredictable pooch.

"Very well, thank you. Don't worry," he advised to satisfy at least one of Eddie's concerns. Bandit's about as fierce as gravy on mashed potatoes. Are you hungry?"

"I sure am."

"I hope you eat better than you sleep."

"How's that?"

"You were sleeping like a baby when I found you, but I'm hoping you eat like a horse. I've got a lot of food here."

"I haven't eaten in two days."

"I supposed you would be then." He then proceeded to begin solving the mystery. "So, what time did you get in?"

"I don't know," Eddie stated plainly, expecting Gene to be the one shedding light on that subject.

"I must have been sound asleep when you arrived. I didn't even know you were here."

"You didn't?" he asked with astonishment. They had different questions but were both seeking the same answers.

"If I hadn't slipped into your bedroom to get some fresh towels this morning, I still wouldn't have known. It isn't that you aren't welcome, of course," he explained, "but you really should have called ahead and let me know you were coming. To

find an unexpected guest sleeping in your house is a little bewildering." His vision kept drifting to the fabulous head of white hair.

Eddie realized that he was staring, but still had no idea why. "Yeah, I guess that must have been kind of strange," he offered while attempting to sort out the puzzling details for himself.

"Have a seat, breakfast is just about ready. Catch a cab?"

"Huh?"

"There's no car out front, so I assume you took a cab."

"No, no cab," he replied. "You mean, you honestly don't know."

"Should I?"

"Well, I was kind of hoping."

"You don't know how you got here?" he asked with wonder.

"Well, I've got an idea, but at first, it seemed a little farfetched, more like a dream. Now, it's starting to seem like the only logical explanation."

"Eat up." The man placed a plate in front of him and then delved further as he sat down beside him. "I thought maybe Maggie dropped you off, but she'd never been to the cabin either."

"Ah...No." Eddie struggled with an explanation. "I wish she had, but...ah...well, she had to...go home."

"Don't tell me that you two had a lover's quarrel already."

"No, Gene, she's gone home to be with the Lord."

Gene was quick to respond, almost as if he anticipated the announcement. "The rapture, right?"

"You knew about that?" Eddie locked up a mouth full of food

in complete amazement.

"More like a pretty safe hunch. Several of my friends were taken. The church had been anticipating the exaltation for quite some time. I was never sold on that alien foray. To be quite honest, I was half expecting to be caught up myself."

"Oh," he said compassionately to express that he understood Gene's disappointment. "Maybe there's a reason."

"I'm sure there is and who am I to question God?"

"Maybe I'm the reason," Eddie submitted with a smile to begin his explanation.

"I seriously doubt that, but if there's something I can do to help you, I'd certainly be glad to try," he said to appease the gesture. Again, he found himself gazing capriciously at the top of Eddie's head. "How did you get here, Eddie?"

"What would you say if I told you that God brought me here?"

"Actually, that wouldn't come as much of a surprise. If you feel that God directed you, I think that's wonderful, but I was referring to your means of transportation."

"That's just it, Gene, I didn't even know you had a cabin. I don't even know what state I'm in. I wasn't speaking figuratively. I'm telling you, Reverend, I was delivered like some sort of mystic package."

"You mean someone brought you here, but you don't know who."

"No, I'm saying, God brought me here Himself and He wasn't driving an S-U-V."

"I see," he said in an appeasing manner, but still attempting to dispute the claim without insulting Eddie. "I'd have to admit, Eddie, that would be a new one on me."

"I'm telling you, Gene," he insisted more emphatically as he looked at his watch. "Less than eight hours ago, I was in

Syria."

"You were in Syria?"

"Yes, sir."

"Eight hours ago?"

"That's right."

"You're absolutely sure about that?"

"Positive. See..." He twisted his arm across the table to demonstrate his sincerity by showing him the time displayed on his watch. "By my watch, it's 4:30 in the afternoon Syrian time."

Though the time on Eddie's watch didn't offer solid evidence, Gene was careful not to be disparaging. "What were you doing in Syria?"

"I was looking for Maggie."

"In Syria?"

"Actually, she disappeared while we were in Vancouver, but I thought the aliens had her, then I thought Dazzle did."

"In Syria?"

"Yeah. That's where his office is."

"And did he have her?"

"No, God has her."

"And how do you know that?"

"He told me."

"Who, Dazzle?"

"No, God."

"Oh, God told you that."

"Yeah. As it turns out, Maggie was right. Dazzle really is the Antichrist."

"God told you that?"

"No, Dazzle told me that himself."

"Oh,"

"I discovered that the alien infiltration thing was a hoax."

"You know that for a fact."

"Oh yeah, I've got photos of the whole alien layout." He paused for a moment as he recalled a few pertinent facts, then stressed one of them with despondency, "I... HAD... photos. I left them in Syria. Anyway, at the time, I didn't know it was the rapture that took Maggie. I thought Dazzle did and I was just trying to figure out a way to get her back."

"How did you know that it was the rapture?"

"Dazzle told me."

"And how did he know?"

"That's what the whole alien hoax was for, he was trying to cover it up." Eddie took a deep breath and continued to casually describe the intricate details. "When I finally figured it all out, I went to see Dazzle. When I told him that I thought he was the Antichrist, he confessed, but then went off on this wild demonic illusion kick and even tried to send me to hell. What a trip that was! There for a minute, I thought I was a goner. Dazzle opened spiritual portal and started transporting me through it. I was right in the heart of Hades when God showed up."

"God...showed up?"

"Yeah, and right out of the blue too." He chuckled aloud and then took another bite of his breakfast before making his

declaration. "I'm sure this sort of thing happens to you preachers all the time, but this was a new experience for me. I'd never seen him before." He nibbled at a strip of bacon as he considered all the facts. With a mouthful of food, he confessed, "Actually, I had seen him once before, but that was in a dream and I didn't know it was God at the time, but this time when I saw him, I wasn't dreaming and that's how I recognized him."

"You should have seen it, Gene. God straightened Satan right out, man. He told Dazzle that this was Satan's world, but those of us in it who gave their hearts to God belonged to Him and that he'll be punished big time for anything he does to us. Then Dazzle told God that he was going to win the final war and be the one who ends up sitting on God's throne. God didn't seem too worried about it though. Then after he had finished his business with Satan, he asked if I was ready to go. He didn't say where and I didn't ask, but the next thing I knew, I was waking up in your house."

Gene was almost stunned by Eddie's rather preposterous revelation and wasn't quite sure how to debate the issue without offending him, but he had to help Eddie realize just how outlandish the proposition sounded. He continued to invoke a logical explanation. "And you're saying that God brought you to my house?"

To expedite his exegesis, Eddie was rambling in an earnest attempt to keep from boring the erudite man of God with what surely must have been perceived as another laborious account of a typical encounter with the Almighty. "I don't actually recall the ride, of course, but I remember being whisked away. I guess he figured you were the only other one left who could relate to what's going on. Wally knew about the hoax too, but Dazzle got to him first and now he's dead. Wally was a great guy and I don't mean any disrespect, but he just didn't know God like we do."

"Like we do?" Gene replied with confusion pasted on his face.

"I mean, Wally had never seen God or talked with him before."

"And you presume that I have?"

"Well yeah, you're a preacher, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but..."

"You've talked with God, haven't you?"

"I talk to him and he communicates to me, but..."

"You've seen God, haven't you?"

"Well, no, not exactly," Again he was staring with even more intrigue. "But I suppose that might explain the hair."

"Huh?"

"Your hair, I was curious about your hair." Eddie locked his face into a pristine questioning glare. "Have you looked in a mirror lately?" he asked with a cunning smile.

"Not lately," he retorted with an inquisitive glance. "Why?"

Gene politely pointed to the next room. "On the wall next to the door." He followed with to observe Eddie's reaction.

"Holy shit!" Eddie bellowed as he stared at his reflection in utter amazement. Then, as he ran his fingers through the milky follicles, added one final, "Woe!"

"I don't suppose there's a logical explanation for that either," Gene added.

"I sure don't have one."

"It's just a thought, mind you, but when Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, having been in the presence of God, his hair had turned white." Though Eddie's extraordinary story seemed incredulously farfetched, Gene was beginning to warm up to the concept.

"Wait a minute." Almost as soon as he said those words, he began to realize that the reverend was having extreme difficulty absorbing the facts. His ignorance concerning biblical facts and

lack of experience concerning religious doctrine were beginning to spark rational awareness. The reference to Moses seemed to indicate that the nature of his encounter wasn't such a typical occurrence after all. "You think I've flipped my lid, don't you?"

"Eddie," he indulged, primarily to convince himself. "When Maggie first got me involved in this whole Antichrist theory of hers, it all sounded tangible enough and seemed like a worthwhile cause, but I've got to be completely honest with you. What you are suggesting is rather difficult to put into perspective. You're taking the concept of spirituality to a whole new level. I mean, actual conversations with God and the devil are a little out of my league. That's Old Testament, parting of the Red Sea kind of stuff."

Eddie was floored by the implication. Though it was all so very real to him, he began to discern that if Gene had doubts, everyone else would surely perceive his testimony as the babbling of an idiot. "I'm not making this up."

"No, no, no, no, I didn't say that," Gene was quick to reassure. "What I'm saying is, that it all sounds pretty enigmatic." Eddie was stupefied and it showed in his expression. "You have to try and consider this from my perspective. You're a scientist, look at it from that viewpoint."

As he began to consider that incredulous perspective, he quickly replaced the look of frustration with a humble smile. "Oh! I think I see what you mean, but as incredible as it may seem, it is the absolute truth. I guess you had to be there." He sat back and shook his head as he recalled one other detail. "He told me he was going to make it tough."

"God told you that?"

"No," he chuckled. "Satan told me that. He said he would be right on my butt every step of the way and was going to make my job as difficult as he can."

"And your job is?"

"No different than yours. Raising Dazzle from the dead was just one phase of God's plan for my life. Now, it's time to warn

the world and save as many souls as we can in the short time that we have left." Eddie quickly attempted to reestablish a new perspective. "Okay, let's start from scratch. I have no way to prove it, but I know for a fact that Vic Dazzle is the Antichrist and, somehow, we have to convince the rest of the world. The question is, how?"

"I don't know, Eddie, but I'd guess that leaves us about three and a half years to get the job done. After that, everyone will know the truth, but it will be too late."

"Where do we start?"

"I don't suppose he told you that."

"Who?"

"God."

"Are you saying that you believe me?"

"I can't afford not to, Eddie. Besides, he may not speak to me like he spoke to you, but he speaks to me through the heart and my heart tells me to believe."

With insightful vigor, Eddie was now applying the same logic and rationale principals he would if conducting one of his scientific experiments. He again had his feet planted firmly on the ground. "God didn't offer any advice on procedure, but he did make me one promise. He said that he'd be with me forever and no matter what. I guess it's safe to assume that he's here with us right now. He's the one taking care of business, just through us instead of for us. How does that go again?" he asked in deep recollecting thought. "Not by might..."

"...Not by power, but by My spirit sayeth the Lord. Now that's a method I'm a little more familiar with. I think you're right. God brought us together for a reason. Everyone has their predestined purpose in life and if we've been commissioned to warn the world of Dazzle's identity, we'll just have to conform to the decree and do what we feel led in our hearts to do."

"That's fine, but I'm not real familiar with the process."

It didn't take long before Reverend Martossi assumed his role as a genuine man of the cloth and spoke up accordingly. "He'll show us the way." Gene bowed his head and began a silent prayer. This time, Eddie didn't hesitate to join in. Suddenly, Gene's eyes popped open with a modest revelation. "A book!"

"THE book?"

"No, I was thinking more along the lines of a new book! You're a famous scientist now. Famous people write books about their fascinating exploits, and they tend to sell. People want to hear what you have to say."

"Yeah, a book. That might be just the ticket. Why not?"

"Maybe, a novel?"

"A novel, huh?"

"Sure, we could write a story about a scientist and his assistant who get caught up in a Cryonic experiment that rejuvenates a famous man who turns out to be the Antichrist. It has a bit of ring to it, don't you think?"

"I like it, Gene. And it would make one hell of a movie too. Maggie always loved a good movie. She would get a real kick out of that. You don't happen to have a computer around here, do you?" Gene confirmed with an exaggerated smirk. "Then let's get started." They headed for the study; a room lined with theological books from floor to ceiling. "We've got some souls to save."

"In the days ahead," Gene cleverly injected, "there will be one more majestic rejuvenation, but this one's not going to take place in some secret laboratory. The Body of Christ will rise again, united in one spirit. All the fabulous miracles that Jesus Christ performed in His era will pale in comparison to what His Body has in store. It's His Holy Spirit that will revive the Church, we're just going to set the alarm clock."

"And what happens after that?"

"The most awesomely incredible series of events in all human history, which culminates in the return of Jesus Christ!"

The End of the Beginning of The End

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MIRROR- MIRROR

A NOVEL BY

DAVE LINDSAY



Mirror-Mirror follows the release of *Encore*, a futuristic fiction novel published in 2000. The author's spirited imagination is unwavering, but it's his flair for conveying those astonishing visions that attract his readers.

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A carpenter in 2008 purchases a peculiar mirror only to learn that it conceals a mystical portal that enables him to travel through time seven years into the past. So he contacts his younger self in 2001 and uses knowledge from the future to build a phenomenal empire. But when a full-scale nuclear war takes place in 2008, Vinni Cross becomes the last man alive on a desolate planet. He and his younger counterpart must use their unique capabilities to save the world and their precious wife from nuclear annihilation.



MIRROR - MIRROR

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Seven Years of Bad Luck In A Heartbeat!



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SYNOPSIS

The story centers around one key character, Vinni Cross, a single forty-eight-year-old out of work carpenter struggling to make ends meet. He attends an estate sale auction in June of 2006 seeking older woodwork items that he can purchase cheap, then repair and/or restore. Almost all the items are auctioned off at prices well out of his range. When no one else offers a bid on a dilapidated, full length, antique mirror, Vinni bids a dollar. Out of facetious pity, he manages to purchase an antique mirror.

When the lights go out the other side, he removes the entire wood backing to discover that the mirror was designed to conceal a portal into that dimension. Through a frightening series of steps, he learns that he can 'slide' through the back side (a mystic portal) and return. But, when Vinni passes through, he loses all physical attributes and becomes an invisible field of energy...much like a spiritual entity. Through another menagerie of amusing events, he discovers that he can travel back in time precisely seven years.

Using his newfound capabilities, he devises a plan, a means of capitalizing on his new discovery. Vinni determines that he could conceivably travel back in time, locate 'himself' seven years younger begin building a virtual empire. In a matter of days, Vinni Cross rapidly becomes one of the wealthiest men in the world and, of course, falls in love.

Suddenly and without warning, nuclear war erupts in present time. A massive onslaught of nuclear missiles is unleashed from and upon every nation in the world. Complete annihilation of all life in this world is inevitable. To escape, Vinni is forced to dive through the portal and into the past, the only available sanctuary. Now, trapped seven years in the past, his obsession becomes a quest to prevent the devastating event from occurring. If successful, will he be able to get his physical life and the love of his life back?

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