

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.

She never really understood it, but on those rare occasions when the innate forewarning descended on Maggie, there was usually a sound reason and 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 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," she stammered, then swallowed to clear the intuition that had suddenly re-emerged and 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."

She fumbled for a reply. "Well, sir, Eddie...I mean, Dr. Grisham's not in as yet and I personally set all of 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 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 bobbed 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. "Hold my calls, Mag. I don't want to be disturbed."

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

Dr. Grisham braked hard in his tracks. "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 great first-impression. 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, but time is one of the many luxuries I just don't have 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, 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. Unfortunately, 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 that 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 that 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 currently 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 that I would be acquainted with something like that."

"Actually, your lack of awareness offers a slight indication of just how well-protected our organization is. Like yourself, we don't publish all of 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, sir, it's 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 team and consider working with our organization."

"Why? My techniques are based on methods that were printed in your own journals. 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.

"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. There was none.

"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. You're talking major T-F-P."

"T-F-P?"

"Oh, 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. "I'm in no position to offer any explanation other than to express an urgent need to maintain absolute confidentiality and we do have our reasons."

"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 of the terms, but the last one, that was a doozey. 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. 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," 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 a 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.

β.Ú/β

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 out five hundred grand 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 have 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. A number of 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 of 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 of this."

"And where do you expect -- all of 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 on the inquiry for now." As the list of questions grew, 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 could never be perceived as heaven...a pastel hell, perhaps, but certainly not heaven.

† ≤ ★ ≥ †