

Pawn

A Novel About Reality

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Other books by this author:

[The New Republic of Texas](#)

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"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Hamlet, Scene V

William Shakespeare

This book is dedicated
to my beloved friend Tiny.
Here's to you, my friend,
wherever you are.

Preface

I saw a UFO once. It wasn't a shiny disk or a triangle, merely an orb much brighter than any star, a bright white light with rotating colors beneath, red and green. It moved about the night sky in a way that no human craft possibly could. It wasn't an earth-shaking event nor one that lasted for long but it confirmed to me that there are, indeed, "more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies."

There's been many a night I've looked up at the night sky and hungered to know what was up there. What lies out of sight, what wonders, and terrors, does our universe truly hold?

I may never know. I will probably never experience what many others have experienced. But I know in my mind, and more, in my heart, that we live in a world and a universe full of secrets, of unknown truth, and of unbelievable events. Our reality is mostly an illusion.

I know this not because I've experienced it, but because I have known those who have. I've met them, been close to them, and through them I have entered that other reality, the world where everything we believe is turned upside down, where fear lives, where no one is safe, and where nothing makes sense.

I don't know if it was a bizarre coincidence or fate that I visited the UFO Museum in Roswell on the very day Constance Clear was to speak there. I met her, heard her tell of her patients' abduction experiences, and I listened as one of her patients shared her incredible story in person. This was just a prelude of things to come.

A few weeks later I flew to Vancouver to meet a friend who had an even more strange and horrifying tale to tell. A story we were going to share with the world.

I called her Tiny. She was a most incredible woman. And for a while, too short a while, she was my very best friend. I listened as she described a life lived in that other reality, where UFOs are real, where Grey aliens live, where terror and fear ruled the night.

That was a long time ago. She's gone now. I have never forgotten her and I still miss her. I have not forgotten her incredible journey through life, either.

But I can't tell you what I'd like to tell you. I can't tell you her story. I can't because in the end my friend feared for her life and her safety and would not let me tell them.

So instead, I wrote this story. Though entirely fictional, Pawn is based upon all that I learned from my friend, from meeting and listening to other abductees, and from my research on the subject. It was

inspired by my Canadian friend. I wrote it to tell a story I could not tell, about the struggles of people who live in a reality the world does not accept as true.

This story was written well over a decade ago. I've revised it only a little. The narrative remains the same. It is just as timely today as it was when I first wrote it. The subject of UFOs and abductions may be old news, blasé, but it has not gone away. It most likely never will.

This book is dedicated to those people who live this reality, day after day. People like my friend Tiny, and many others. This is their story, all bundled up in a way that will touch your heart and allow you to step into their lives through these characters for just a little while.

Chapter One

“Good morning, Richard.”

“Good morning, Laura.” Richard forced a smile for his close friend and co-worker, Laura Bright, as he walked past her office.

“What happened to you?” Laura rose from her desk and followed him through his office door. “You look horrible.”

“Thank you, you look great, too,” he said flatly.

“I mean it,” Laura said, brushing aside his poor attempt at humor. “What happened? What’s wrong?” She perched herself on the corner of his desk as Richard literally fell into his high-backed leather office chair.

“I’m not sure, actually,” he said, staring across the room absently. “Not sure.”

“Not sure?”

“Yeah. Not sure,” he repeated. “Pamela was working late, as usual, so I decided to go for a drive. Took off up ’75, past Plano, then took a farm road towards the house. Nice drive in the country and all that.” He stopped for a breath.

“And?”

“And, I don’t know.” He pushed himself back and stretched his arms upward. “And, I’m not sure. I must have dozed off or something.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I remember driving along this road. It was after dark. And it was raining a bit. Just a heavy sprinkle. I remember flickering lights, a low-flying plane, which had to be odd since the clouds were so low. I remember flickering lights. Anyway, I leaned my head back and next thing I know I woke up and drove home.”

“You know that makes no sense.”

“I know. I know,” he said. “But anyway, I got home at midnight. I have no idea how that happened.”

“That’s nutty,” Laura said.

“It may be, but it’s true.” Richard leaned his head backwards and from side to side, stretching the muscles in his neck. Then he looked at Laura. “Pam thought I was out with a woman.”

“You weren’t were you?” Laura’s gaze said a tiny part of her question was serious.

Richard frowned. "Of course not."

"Why would she think that?"

"I have no idea. Except..." he thought a moment. "The battery in my phone was dead. And that was strange because I know it was charged yesterday morning. But it was dead. She couldn't call me."

"Sounds like Twilight Zone time to me."

"Tell me about it," Richard said, reaching his hand back to hold his neck and stretch. Then he remembered. There was a weird scratch, he thought of it as a scratch, on his back, just below and to the left of his neck. The spot was a little sore and his arms ached some and he groaned unconsciously.

"Are you OK?"

"No, not really," he muttered. "And there's this odd thing, on my neck. Look." He turned and held his collar out. Laura stepped closer and curled a finger in his collar to hold it so she could look where he was pointing. Richard took a deep breath, smelling her perfume. Her long, dark hair flowed around her face, framing the puzzled look on her face. An unpreventable shiver passed along his spine.

"Got a chill?" She gazed at the mark as best she could. "That's odd."

"No joke," Richard muttered. "And Pam figures it is just about the right size for it to have been done by a woman's fingernail."

"Fingernail, huh?" It took her a second to catch his meaning. "Oh, I see, fingernail. As in... um, intimate contact kind of thing."

"Exactly," Richard said. "If I did have an affair I sure as hell wish I could remember it," he grinned, "It might have been fun."

Laura pushed him and he spun a quarter-turn in his chair. His legs bumped the inside of his desk before he could steady himself. "You are awful," she exclaimed.

"I was joking."

"I know." Laura walked towards his office door, "Besides, who'd want an old married guy like you anyway?"

"Thanks, I love you too." He grinned at her.

"Oh, I know you do," she returned flatly. "Now I have to go to work." At the door of his office she stopped and turned back toward him again. "But," she said quietly, "seriously, let's have some lunch and talk about it, ok?"

"OK, I'll try."

“Good. See you later, boss.” Laura winked and then disappeared out the door. Richard stood and bent forward, trying to grasp his heels with his hands. He was a little dizzy and when he staggered he decided to abandon the effort.

The morning passed slowly. Richard busied himself with requisitioning supplies and solving problems and mostly doing as little as possible. He kept trying to figure out what happened the night before and why it had taken him so long to make the little trip. Laura gave him glances now and again as she would pass his office. Just after one PM Richard was shuffling papers on his desk and trying to look busy when Laura tapped on his open office door. “Lunch time?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, looking at his wrist. He frowned when he remembered his watch had quit working. “Oh yeah, sorry, my stupid watch quit.”

“What’s this? Chopped liver?” She pointed to a wall clock opposite Richard’s desk.

“Oh yeah, well, who looks up these days?”

“You got that right.” She leaned against the door frame. “Shall we have one of Sam’s super submarines?”

“Why not?” Richard stood, brushing imaginary dust from his lap. “They haven’t killed me yet.” He walked past her and they brushed against each other. Another shiver ran along his back. He turned to his secretary, Nancy Carter. “Nan, I’m going to lunch. Need me, call me, ok?”

“OK, Mr. Cleveland.”

“Good.” He led Laura through the office and towards the elevators.

The ride from the fifth floor to the basement took only a couple of minutes. Neither of them talked. They both stood facing the elevator door. Richard wondered why people did that. Don’t talk, eyes front, or stare at the blinking numbers above the door. It was an odd ritual he performed countless times a day, as did several thousand other people in this office and countless billions across the country. Odd. He was thinking of odd things. Like how it took him three hours to make a thirty-minute trip. And why had his watch stopped and his phone battery gone dead?

Laura stayed quiet, sensing that Richard’s brain was working overtime on something. They ordered sandwiches, took them, along with chips and drinks, and settled into a booth in a corner. The sandwiches were unwrapped, chips laid out, tea sweetened and a bit of sandwich gone before Laura spoke.

“You look confused.”

“I am confused,” Richard said, not realizing they had not spoken since leaving the office. “I am confused.”

"Well?"

"Well," he began, "I told you." Then he said nothing.

Laura sat a few more minutes in silence, apparently thinking about what he'd told her earlier. She studied him as he sat avoiding her eyes and halfheartedly ate his sandwich. Richard was an ordinary guy, middle age, pudgy but not heavy, brown hair that was showing no signs of thinning. He could be considered handsome, she thought. Quickly she blinked and shook her head and spoke. "What kind of plane?"

"Huh?"

"The plane, what kind of plane was it?"

"What plane?"

"The one you saw flying so low, silly."

"Oh, I dunno...."

"Didn't you see it?" Laura leaned back and placed her half-eaten sandwich on the wrapper. She carefully wrapped it up for later. "I mean, twin engine, single engine, you know, what kind of a nut would be flying that low?"

"Um," Richard moaned, holding his forehead with his fingers and scrunching his eyes closed, "Um, I, uh, don't know. I don't think I saw it." He wasn't being entirely truthful with her. He had an image in his head but it was not an airplane and it did not fit any kind of reality so he dismissed the image as his wild imagination.

"Didn't see it?"

"I don't think so."

"What do you mean, you 'don't think so?'" She leaned forward. "Either you saw it or you didn't."

Her perfume drifted across the table and set Richard's head spinning. Those intense blue eyes could see right through him sometimes and he usually tried to avoid them. But this time he let them slice into his soul and he looked deep into them. Laura wore only a hint of makeup but, as usual, she was stunning. They stared at each other for a long moment and then suddenly she broke the gaze and looked across the room at an aquarium where several large fish swam about slowly. Richard let himself take a look at her a little more closely than he had before. Her neck was slender. The muscles were taught because of the way she had her head turned. She wore a fairly low-cut dress which gave a glimpse of shoulder but no cleavage. She is very attractive, Richard thought. And he wasn't sure why he was thinking it. "I didn't see it," he said quietly at last.

"Hmm?" She turned to him apparently having forgotten the question.

"The plane, I didn't see it."

"Oh," she said, turning again to the aquarium. She was far off somewhere. "Oh, too bad," she whispered. Richard wasn't sure what it was that was too bad. Suddenly she leaned back, pulled her shoulders up, took a deep breath as if to shake off whatever it was she'd been thinking.

"Jeff is taking me to a concert tomorrow night," she said.

"Yeah?" The change in conversation, tone and subject, was abrupt. It didn't help Richard's confusion.

"Yep," Laura returned, "He is. Isn't that grand?"

"It's grand," Richard said.

"Are you two getting along well these days?"

"Of course."

"Well, there were those problems."

"Oh that," Laura purred, "Yeah, he's cut back on his drinking a lot. He only has two kegs a night." She chuckled. "Oh, really, he is doing well. We're fine."

Richard didn't care for Jeffery Callahan very much. Callahan became maintenance supervisor for Northpark Towers about a year and a half ago. He and Richard had had a couple run-ins over their office's maintenance problems, typical kinds of problems with an aging office tower. But it wasn't the differences over how things should be maintained that bugged Richard. It was Callahan's macho he-man demeanor. The man ran a couple of good passes for touchdowns while in college and still thought he was some kind of football hero. He could be loud and annoying and Richard often wondered what Laura saw in him.

"Good." Richard said flatly, "I'm glad he's well." Somewhat grumpily he rose and collected his refuse. Laura followed suit, placing the half-eaten sandwich in her handbag and stuffing the remainder of her trash into the top of the empty paper cup she'd drank from. They walked past a trash receptacle where they dropped their litter and exited the little submarine shop without speaking.

Office work kept Richard busy the rest of the day and kept his mind off the night before. Eventually he looked up and discovered the clock on his wall showed five minutes past five. He made a mental note to get a new battery for his watch.

"Ready?" Richard stood in the doorway of Laura's office. She was busying herself arranging paperwork in neat stacks.

"Sure," she said, looking up at him, "Just getting ready for the mad rush tomorrow."

"Well, let's beat the mad rush down the elevators, eh?"

"I think we're too late for that," she returned, nodding in the direction of the foyer where a crowd was gathered around the elevators.

"The hell with it, then," Richard said, "How about coming into my office and let's have a cup of late afternoon coffee and watch the crowd go away." It was something he'd wanted to ask her to do a hundred times but hadn't gotten up the nerve. Today, for some reason, it just popped out.

"I, uh," she said, avoiding his gaze, "I don't know."

Richard sensed she was nervous about the offer and he became nervous too. "OK, then, well, no big deal," he offered. She looked out the window for a moment and then back at him.

"Sure, why not?" She put her purse in her desk drawer and slid it closed. "Why not? Let's let the rush go away. How's that?"

"Sure, that's what I think."

"Fine, then, I'll make the coffee." Richard went to the break room not far from his office and started a pot of coffee. Then he went to his office to find Laura standing behind his desk staring out the plate glass window.

"I love this city," she said as he entered.

"I do too," Richard agreed. "Don't know what it is about it, but I do love it." He started to say something about when he and Pamela had lived in town but decided not to bring Pamela up at all. Instead he stood silently beside Laura and soaked up the view. They stood there for a long moment until the silence became uneasy and Richard realized that with the last, distant "ding" of the elevator they were most likely alone on the floor. "I'll check the coffee."

"Good," she said quietly, lost in thought.

Richard fixed two cups, his with cream and sugar, hers with cream only. He held them out so he wouldn't spill them on himself and went to his office. Laura was now on the opposite side of his desk, sitting on it and reading something lying on his desk.

"Here you go," he said handing the cup to her.

"Thanks," she said, taking the cup but still looking at the paper. "These the third quarter figures?"

"Yeah, just got 'em. Not bad, huh?"

"No, not bad. Looks like my people are making me look good."

"You look great," Richard blurted without thinking. Another uneasy silence rose in the room. "I mean...."

"Thank you," Laura said, giving him a quick eye-to-eye glance. Then she settled into one of two chairs in front of his desk. Richard took the other instead of sitting in his office chair. "This is nice," Laura concluded.

"It is."

"I'm glad you thought of it."

"Me too."

They sipped their coffee and sat for a while, each avoiding the other's eyes but aware of each other's presence. They hadn't noticed the "ding" of the elevator or heard footsteps in the hallway.

"Honey?" The voice came from outside Richard's office. It was somewhat throaty, mid-range, and instantly recognizable as that of Jeffery Callahan. Richard sat upright instantly.

"Jeff," Laura said, turning in her chair, "Hi." Callahan came lumbering into the room. The way he walked made Richard think that he must walk around going "woof, woof, woof," in his head all the time. Sometimes it was funny. Today it was simply annoying.

As he stepped through the office door Callahan noticed Richard seated in the chair next to Laura. He shot Richard a blank look tinged only slightly with bravado "what are you up to" in it.

"What you doing, honey?"

"Having some coffee, ding-bat, what does it look like." Laura gave Callahan a look that indicated she had mentally added the word "duh" at the end of her sentence.

"Why are you having coffee?" Callahan stood between them now, grimacing. Apparently he never caught the sarcasm in Laura's voice. Richard wondered how the man managed to get the job he had now. Of course, in Richard's opinion, he did it poorly.

"I wanted some," she said again, her voice still slightly sarcastic.

"Hi, Jeffie," Richard muttered. His tone was patronizing but that, too, was lost on the ex-football player.

"Hi, Ricky," Callahan muttered. He was the only one who called Richard "Ricky" and Richard was sure he did it to aggravate him. Richard was, after all, the kind of "nobody" Callahan would have snubbed in college and continues to look down his "I have money and you don't" nose. He gave Richard only a fleeting glance and turned back to Laura.

"I mean why haven't you headed home?"

"What's the hurry?"

"Well," he said, "I mean, isn't it time to go?"

"I'll go whenever I want to," Laura said defiantly, "anyway, Richard and I were having coffee and waiting for the traffic to let up on Central Expressway. You run along though. I'll be home in a bit."

"Well," he said, reluctant to leave. "Well, OK, what about dinner?"

"I'll pick up some Chinese or something."

"OK, then, fine," he said, stepping backwards, "Well then, anyway, I have a couple things to check on anyway. I'll be up in my office for a little while."

"Fine, I'll call you before I head out."

"Fine," he said. Abruptly he turned and never gave Richard another look. Laura watched him walk towards the elevator, turned in the chair she was sitting in so she could see him. Richard watched Laura. When he heard the elevator doors swish gently apart he turned to look out the window.

"Will Pamela be home when you get there?"

"Hardly," Richard growled. "Sorry," he apologized, "anyway, she will probably be late. She's always late. And she could do most of her work at home if she wanted."

"Maybe she has another fella," Laura said without thinking. "Oh, gee, I'm"

"Don't worry about it. Pamela? Not likely. Maybe she'd go for a fella if he had a keyboard attached to his chest and had a fifty-gig hard drive in his head." Richard frowned.

Laura sputtered and suppressed a laugh at the imagery. "I'm sorry," she said. Richard looked at her.

"For what?"

"Never mind," she said. "I mean, well, I'm sorry you, um, I mean," she tried to explain the thought she'd had without sounding callous. "I'm sorry you're, um, neglected." She grimaced. "Not neglected. Oh crap, I'm digging a hole for myself."

"It's OK, I think I know what you mean." He paused, "and thanks."

"Your welcome." She finished the last bit of coffee in her Styrofoam cup. Then she stood, tossed the cup into a receptacle beside Richard's desk, and turned to him. He stood when she did. "I suppose the crowd is gone now."

"I suppose so."

"I had better go."

"OK."

"Thanks," she looked at Richard with an expression he could not read, "we should talk again."

"I think so." He wondered what they had talked about.

They walked together to the elevators and when the doors opened a cleaning lady came barreling out not expecting them to be there. Richard's quick reaction prevented a disaster. He took Laura's elbow and steered her aside as the cart came out of the elevator being pushed by a short, middle-aged Hispanic woman. She looked up startled. "Lo ciento," she said frantically, "Lo ciento, señor."

Richard said, "no problemo," in an exaggerated Spanish response. He suspected she had been sent to this particular floor by Callahan to make sure someone was here besides the two of them. And maybe to try to catch them at something.

The lady hurried through the door from the foyer into the office lobby as the two of them stepped onto the elevator. They rode down silently. Just before the doors opened Richard turned to her. "I suppose now we'll be the talk of the building."

"I suppose so," Laura grinned at him.

"What about Jeffie?"

"Oh, he's a little boy," she said. "No problem."

"Right." Richard frowned. He'd hate for Pamela, or any other woman for that matter, to call him a "little boy." At least in the tone she used for Callahan.

"Fun, huh?" Her eyes twinkled as she spoke the words. They walked through the huge glass doors and down the sidewalk together. Then they parted as their vehicles were in opposite directions. Richard walked on to his car and got in. He sat there for a while thinking about Laura. She was such a terrific woman, attractive, funny, exciting.

"...and attached," he added out loud. "And you're married too, stupid," he said to himself. Placing the car in gear, he looked back over the seat to back out of the parking lot. "Oh well," he said aloud.

He drove straight home. The traffic was still heavy but not as bad as it would have been twenty minutes earlier. He made it home just as darkness was falling. When he turned into his driveway he noticed headlights behind him and just as he thought, the lights belonged to Pamela's car. He stood beside his car and waited for her to pull up and get out. He met her as she got out of her car.

"Hi, sugar," he said, giving her a light kiss. She barely responded to it.

"I've had a horrible day."

"I'm sorry."

"The downtown LAN went to hell today. I was on the phone with Larry all day, trying to get him to do what he needed to do to fix it. I had to deal with that as well as write some stupid little program for Green. He wants a program he can use to monitor someone on a PC. He thinks somebody in the office

is doing something screwy, illegal or something like that, and he wanted me to write a shadow program. I don't like it. Too 'Big Brother' for me. But he'll have his stupid program tomorrow."

"You wrote the whole program today?"

"Most of it. The rest I'll finish tonight."

"Oh," Richard muttered knowingly.

"What?"

"Nothing, I just thought we'd have a night together."

"Not tonight, I'm too tired and frustrated," she kissed him on his cheek, "and I have to write the program."

"Whatever." Richard was used to these brush-offs. "Let's eat." He walked off towards the house not looking to see if she was following.

Chapter Two

"Richard!" Laura rose from her chair and stepped into the hallway outside her office as she saw Richard pass by. She held a DVD in her hand.

"What?" He turned, looked at her and then at the disk. "You get your new promotional stuff in?"

"Oh no," she said, glancing at the disk in her hands and back at him. "It's something I think you should watch."

"It is? What is it? A girlie video?" He grinned.

"Funny," she said, swatting the air as if a fly was buzzing her head. "It's a TV show. That one called 'Mysteries.'"

"What's it about?"

"You have to watch it."

"Why?"

"Because you have to."

"What is it?"

"Never mind, you have to watch it."

"Fine, give it to me, I'll take it home."

"Now, you have to watch it now."

"Right, just forget work." He walked towards his office and Laura followed close behind clutching the disk.

"Doesn't matter. You have to watch this thing." She was insistent.

Richard looked up at her with a frown, "I don't have time, Laura," he paused, seeing the expression on her face, "what is the big deal?"

"The big deal is on this disk," she said, "OK, then, coffee break. Ten thirty, how about it?"

Richard looked at his wrist where his watch should be and frowned. "OK, fine," he muttered, settling into his chair, "I'll watch the thing at break time." He started shuffling paperwork around on his desk looking for what he wanted to begin the day with. "Where the hell..." he grumbled at no one in particular. He heard a noise and looked up. Laura was still standing there. "I'll watch it, already," he said in a dismissive tone. She frowned, cocked her head to the side as if to respond, clamped her mouth closed and left his office.

After she had gone he felt bad about being so grumpy but he'd spent the drive in to work this morning thinking of every miserable thing in his life he could think of. Just one of those days.

For the next couple of hours everything in Richard's life took a back burner to the report he had finally located. When he'd finished he knew Laura wasn't going to be happy. Her staff would have to take a couple of hits.

"Well, might as well bite the bullet," he said to himself, rising from his chair and heading out the door of his office with a yellow pad. It took him only a minute to get to her office. The door was open, as usual. He walked up and tapped on the door with the knuckles of his left hand. She was turned in her chair looking out her window. When she heard the knock she whirled in the chair, feet up, like a child at play.

"Break time?" She rose and picked up the disk she had been wielding earlier this morning.

"No, not yet," Richard looked at his wrist, grumbled, and then turned to view the clock on her office wall. He was surprised to see that it was break time. "Dang, I didn't realize how close it was."

"Well, close enough," she said. She came around her desk and towards him smiling.

"We have to talk," Richard said, "I have a little problem."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, look here," He held the note pad up and started to show her the figures on the pad. She glanced at them absently.

"Whatzit?"

"Look," he said, "here's the office budget for last month, and the month before," he pointed. "They look fine, but projections...."

"Oh, Richard," she muttered, cutting him off. "You worry too much." She took the pad from him and looked it over. The notes at the bottom of the page indicating budget cuts for her department were not lost on her. "Oh, well, we'll figure it out. I have a few ideas already." She handed him the pad, shrugged, and slipped past him. "Now come on, break time."

"But..." He couldn't believe she'd seen the figures and had said nothing. "Um, we...."

"Come on."

"OK," he said, tucking the pad under his arm and following her around the cubicles to the conference room where there was a video player. "But we'll have to go over these numbers after the break."

"No problem," she said, walking up to the television and poking her disk into the machine. She motioned for Richard to sit. He obeyed. She could be bossy sometimes, he thought. Before she started

the machine she went to the conference room door and posted the "In Conference, Do Not Disturb" sign.

"What is this?"

"Just don't want to be disturbed." She pressed the play button on the machine and picked up the remote. As it came on she settled down in a chair opposite Richard at the large oval conference table and adjusted the volume using the remote. Then she forwarded the video. In a few minutes she pressed a button and the video slowed and the picture was normal. "Just watch this."

An announcer spoke on the video as a camera zeroed in on an average-looking suburban home.

"Bridget Stanley is an ordinary twenty-seven-year old woman. She's a mother of two young boys, wife to Toby Stanley, housewife and part-time secretary. Nothing unusual or out of the ordinary in Bridget's life. Until last February. On that day Bridget's life changed."

As the announcer spoke, images of an attractive young woman, Bridget Stanley, or an actress playing her part, were shown on the screen. There were scenes in a grocery store, in an office, and in a back yard where the young woman was playing with children. The announcer's voice faded with the word "changed" and the screen grew dark and segued to a foggy night scene.

"One night, Bridget was up late putting some last-minute touches to a floral arrangement. She was working in a tiny alcove at the back of her suburban home. Suddenly there was a bright light, with a pinkish hue, in her back yard. She looked out the window to see what was there."

Along with this narration an obvious re-creation of the events described was being shown.

"Bridget was shocked to see a UFO, a flying saucer-shaped object she described as looking like a 'cake plate' upside down. Emanating from beneath the craft was a reddish glow, quite bright. The UFO made no sound.

"The events that followed are astounding, mystifying, and very frightening. But Bridget did not recall them, or that she had indeed seen a UFO, until some months later. When we come back we'll tell you her incredible tale."

Laura pressed the fast-forward button as Richard stood. "Where are you going?"

"I get you," Richard said. "And you are nuts. I've heard about this stuff, seen my share of these shows. Whatever happened the other night..."

"At least see the rest of it."

"I don't think so," Richard said. For some reason he was angry, something he very rarely was. He flashed Laura a glance and exited the conference room. He felt a sudden pang of remorse for acting that way. And he felt a little foolish. But he wasn't going back to watch that video. Instead he went to the

break room and made some fresh coffee. As the coffee maker started brewing Laura came into the break room. She didn't speak right away but instead stood looking at the coffee decanter.

"Richard," she started. He held up his hand.

"OK, look," he turned to her, caught her gaze briefly and then looked away. "Listen, I don't know what happened to me. Frankly, I don't want to know. I have enough on my plate just now. And I don't believe in that alien bullshit." He walked across the break room and stared blankly at a bulletin board, not reading anything but instead doing all he could to avoid Laura's gaze. "Sure, I like science fiction, all that stuff. But it's fiction. There's an order to things and God has everything figured out and that's that."

The coffee maker puffed as steam rose from it. The coffee was ready. Richard spun on his heel and went to the machine. He took a cup from the inverted stack of foam cups beside the pot, rinsed it out in a small sink, then filled the cup with steaming coffee. He added cream and sugar and swirled the cup in an attempt to stir the beverage.

"But Richard," Laura tried again.

"Nope," he said with finality, "I may not be the most righteous and holly-roller guy on the street but I do have faith. This stuff doesn't fit." He walked towards his office.

He kept his door closed and worked on other projects instead of going to Laura to talk over the office budget. He tried to understand why he felt angry. What was it? After a while he pushed back from his desk and spun around to look out the window at the city below. Everything looked so ordinary, so normal.

"Aliens my ass," he muttered aloud.

Time passed and eventually he looked at his wrist, frowned, then looked up at the clock on the wall. It was lunch time. He turned in his chair, stood, picked up the half-empty coffee cup, its contents now quite cold. He opened his office door, went to the break room, poured the cold coffee down the sink and tossed the cup in the trash. Then he walked to Laura's office.

"OK, let's watch the vid."

"You sure, Richard?" She was still seated at her desk working on something.

"I'm sure." He turned and then turned back, "No, I'm not sure. But, let's see it anyway."

"OK then," she stood, picking up the disk. She followed Richard to the conference room once again and closed the door behind them.

"Some one's going to get funny ideas," Richard muttered in a weak attempt at humor.

"Let'em," Laura said. "Sit." She put the disk in the machine and pressed the start button. In a few the program came back on. Laura spun it forward to where she'd stopped it before.

The scene was a cheesy depiction of some kind of alien craft hanging above someone's lawn. A door opened on the bottom side of the craft and two humanoid beings drifted out of it. Richard thought the scene was reminiscent of some kind of ghost movie or something. The narration continued:

"What Bridget discovered through hypnosis was that she had been taken up in an alien craft. Somehow, she says, the beings lifted her off her feet and floated her through the window and up into their craft."

The scene changed to a sterile-looking room with the woman lying on a metal table. Shadowy figures prodded her and an object hovered in midair above her as if it was scanning her.

"Bridget recalls being examined by short, large-eyed beings. She describes them as a mottled-gray color, no body hair, clothed in a body suit of the same color as their skin. They had small openings for ears, a tiny mouth and nose, and very large, slanted eyes.

"Bridget recalls that she was not frightened. She had an odd sensation, like being drugged."

The scene fades. The announcer is sitting on the edge of an office desk.

"Bridget is only one of many who have reported being abducted by alien beings. Why did this happen? What is the purpose of this examination? These questions we have no answer for."

The scene fades again, this time to the young woman seated on a sofa apparently in her living room.

"I don't understand any of it," the woman says. "It is too bizarre to consider. But it happened." She looks upwards and her expression is one of puzzlement and pain. "I know it happened. I just don't know why."

The narrator was on again now, recapping the story:

"On a cool February night Bridget Stanley's life changed forever. The morning after the event she remembered nothing of it. But she had odd bruises on her inner thighs and shoulders and experienced dizziness all day the next day. There followed a bout of depression she could not explain. A few weeks later a friend recommended she consult a counselor. The counselor, in an effort to discover what was causing the depression, performed hypnosis on Bridget and made a greater discovery than he had expected...."

Richard wasn't listening any longer. He was staring blankly at the screen.

Laura saw his gaze and pressed the pause button. The picture froze. "Are you OK?"

Richard sat for such a long time before responding Laura thought he hadn't heard. But suddenly he turned to her. "No, I'm not alright. No, I'm not." He stood and hit the off button on the machine. The picture on the set disappeared and in its place appeared a solid blue screen. "I'm not alright at all." He stared at her for a minute and then at the blue screen. Eventually he slipped back into the chair he'd been sitting in opposite Laura.

After what seemed like an eternity, Laura spoke, "well?"

"Well?" He looked at her again. "Well," he stood and pressed the on button on the video player, "Well, let's see." The video started up again. He sat quietly watching it with a pained expression.

"...Bridget Stanley revealed under hypnosis not only that she was a victim of an abduction on the particular evening we've told you about, but that she has been a frequent abductee throughout her life.

"We consulted Dr. Howard Stansfall, professor of Social Anthropology at Oklahoma State University in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Dr. Stansfall is author of the book **In The Dark of Night**, which he claims is a revelation of alien activity around the world. Dr. Stansfall is also a long-time researcher of UFO's and related phenomena...."

There followed an interview with the professor during which he stated that Bridget Stanley's case was not unique but was rather common. He said that thousands of people across the country and tens or hundreds of thousands around the world are abducted every day and have been abducted throughout their lives. He referred to a survey completed a few years earlier that indicated the number of people who may have been abducted reached into the millions.

"Bullshit," Richard blurted. "How the hell could aliens do something like that and not be seen or heard?"

"They are seen and heard, Richard," Laura said, her tone serious. Richard looked at her. Consternation was on her face. "People just don't believe what they see."

"Yeah right," he said, giving her an odd kind of stare before he settled back down to watch the show.

The camera panned outward to reveal that Stansfall was sitting next to Bridget Stanley. He continued, looking at her.

"What Ms. Stanley experienced has been experienced by thousands of people, many thousands. I have worked with several hundred myself. For the past fifteen years I have been meticulously recording sessions and trying to understand what the aliens are trying to do. I have some ideas but nothing solid and nothing that I can speak of yet."

Richard sat absorbed in the program. He wasn't sure why but he had to hear it. The professor continued to explain the extent of abductions and the way that everyone, even abductees, made a conscious choice to deny them. When the interview was complete another one began. This time the setting was not a plush, professional office but an outdoor restaurant.

"This is Mitchell Hargrove, author of the book *Shadows and Illusion*." The interviewer turns from the camera to Mr. Hargrove. "In your book, Mr. Hargrove, you claim that there is no such thing as an alien abduction. How do you explain what Dr. Stansfall and others are saying? Are you saying Mrs. Stanley is lying?"

"Not at all," Hargrove responds. "Or, not exactly. It's a matter of popular culture and New Age gurus running amuck, and good, innocent people like Mrs. Stanley getting caught in the middle."

"They always do that," Laura hissed. Richard blinked at her sudden outburst. "They always do that," she repeated. Richard looked at her crosswise. She said nothing else so in a minute he turned back to the screen. The man now being interviewed had explanations for everything Dr. Stansfall had said. He claimed "the good doctor" was caught up in some kind of fantasy and used hypnosis to validate his beliefs. Hargrove pointed out the inherent problems with recovering memories through hypnosis, talked about "false memory" syndrome and gave cases where "memories" had been concocted by clever hypnotists which had never actually occurred. Suddenly the video stopped and the blue screen popped up again.

"Enough of him," Laura said.

"What?" Richard was a little dazed by her sudden actions and intensity of emotion.

"They always do that," she said, standing and removing the disk. "This Hargrove guy is an idiot."

"And that professor isn't? What he says is too fantastic for anybody to believe."

"It's true."

"You believe that stuff?" Richard stood with a slight smile, "Come on, Laura, it's ridiculous. He makes it sound like we're just puppets in the hands of some kind of sneaky alien race. It's absurd."

"It's true." Her gaze was a little frightening and certainly not light or joking. The two stood for a long moment looking at each other. Richard was trying to read her thoughts but they were hidden beneath a stern expression that was not the Laura he knew. Slowly the smile on Richard's face, which had frozen and become a caricature, faded and was replaced by a worried frown. The air seemed cold and charged. It was very uncomfortable for Richard. He wasn't sure where to go from there.

Laura eventually softened some and swept the tense moment away. "It is true," she repeated, turning and walking towards the conference room door. At the door she put her hand on the knob and

turned to Richard. "We will talk again, ok? I think we'd better get back to work." She smiled weakly and opened the door. Richard followed her out.

They each went to their offices and said little to each other for the rest of the day. Richard could not get the show out of his mind. He considered what the professor had said and several times dismissed it as fantasy. But for some reason he couldn't quite get rid of everything the man said.

This wasn't the first of these kinds of programs Richard had seen. They were fairly common, stories of alien visitation, abduction, and they were always stirred in with ghost stories and sightings of the Loch Ness Monster or Big Foot or some other kind of nonsense. The shows were never supposed to be believed by intelligent, thinking, college-educated people. They were just entertainment, exploiting people's fears and foibles. He had certainly not for a minute considered any of it to be true. At least not until he'd seen the look on Laura's face. He was now worried that he did not know her as well as he thought.

At a few minutes before five Laura tapped on Richard's closed office door and eased it open gently before he could respond. She peeked inside his office as if to make sure she wasn't walking in on something.

"Hi," Richard said.

"Hi," Laura echoed. "I have to go now. The concert, you know."

"Oh yeah, forgot," Richard said.

"Well," the distance that had come between them after their leaving the conference room remained. "I mean, I'll see you tomorrow."

"OK, that'll be good."

"Yeah, so," she took a step backwards from where she'd walked into his office, "so, I better go."

Richard stood. "Look, Laura," he started, not knowing what was going to come out of his mouth next. "Look," he repeated, waiting for the words, "I don't know about this stuff. Really." He walked around his desk and then leaned against it, facing her. "I mean...."

"I know what you mean, Richard," she said. "I'm sorry, it's just that..." she stopped herself from saying whatever she was thinking. "It's OK."

"Well, it's not OK, but then," he paused, "I don't know." Standing, he turned and looked out the window. "I mean, you know, this idea, this alien idea, it changes things. Changes things far too much for me."

"I know." Her voice was soft.

"Well, I don't. I just don't." He stood there staring out the window. "I mean, this throws a huge wrinkle in what I've always believed." Richard turned again, settling back on the corner of his desk. "I know we've never talked about faith and church or anything like that and I know I'm far from some kind of super religious guy but there are things, I mean," he paused. "I mean, hell, I don't know what I mean. I've always believed in angels and devils and maybe even ghosts in a spiritual kind of way but I have a very, very hard time with little green men."

"Gray," Laura said coolly, "gray men. And not men." She looked so absolutely sure of what she was saying Richard found himself struggling for words.

"Little gray men," he said at last. "OK, then, gray alien guys. Whatever. The Bible says things, things will happen, you know...."

"I know, Richard," Laura eyed him sympathetically, "I really do know. I was raised a Baptist, like you, right?"

"Sure, wasn't everyone in Dallas raised a Baptist?"

"Well, some were Methodists, like Jeff, but still, I know what you mean." She took another step backwards and leaned on the door facing. "I do understand. And I'm sorry if it causes you trouble, all this." She gave Richard the most serious look he'd ever seen her give. It was almost haunting. "But you have to face it. Now, you have to face it." Richard pursed his lips and blinked, fidgeting where her stood. "I know it is not easy."

"No, I think not," Richard said, not knowing what else to say.

"Look," she said, offering a weak smile and becoming more like the Laura he knew, "I am not usually forward or anything and I don't want you to get the wrong idea," she looked over her shoulder out the door to see if anyone was nearby. As a precaution she stepped into the office and eased his office door closed. A brief grin passed across her features. "People really are going to talk," she said. Then she looked more serious. "Anyway, Richard, can we have dinner some time? I mean soon? I mean, I need to talk to you and not here."

"OK, sure," Richard said, "I can do that."

"What about Pamela, would she mind?"

"I don't care what she would think," Richard growled. "Well, anyway," he walked back around his desk and settled into his chair. "I don't see any big deal. I mean, we work together and have lots to talk about concerning work, don't we?" He leaned backwards, lacing his hands behind his head. "Besides, Pam has lunch and dinner all the time with that Green guy, her boss. So, sure. What about Jeffie?"

"He'll grumble but he'll be OK."

"Good then, when?"

"Tomorrow evening too early?"

"No, I suppose not. Where shall we go so I can make a reservation?"

"Doesn't matter as long as it's secluded and quiet."

"OK, then, it's a date."

"Well, sort of."

"Yeah, sort of."

"I better go," Laura reached for the door and disappeared before Richard could say anything further. Unlacing his fingers he sat upright and turned in his chair to stare out the window. He and Laura both seem to be doing that a lot lately. He wondered what they were looking for.

Chapter Three

Thursday morning broke in the Cleveland household with the same ferocity as the thunderstorms that raged outside.

"What the hell do you mean you have to go to Houston?"

"I can't help it."

"Bull," Richard said. He was extremely irritated that Pamela had sprung a trip to Houston on him that morning. He didn't know why he was irritated, either. It was certainly annoying that she did this kind of thing, telling him an hour before her flight that she has to go out of town. And it was common. They didn't talk to each other much anymore, since they'd lost Robert. Each of them lived in their own little world. They lived more like roommates than spouses. Still, this time, for some reason, Richard was angry and annoyed that his wife would be gone for several days and had hardly given him any advanced warning.

"Look, Richard, I have to go. The Houston office LAN is so screwed up and that pinhead they have in charge down there can't take instructions over the phone. I tried to feed him stuff over the Net and he just screws it up. I just have to go get things straightened out. Hell, we're about to get to the end of the year processing and no telling what will happen if we try that with what they have down there now."

"Fine, then, I'll just sit around and amuse myself." With that remark Richard suddenly remembered what he had forgotten when he came home the night before, which was that he had a dinner engagement with Laura for that evening. He wouldn't be alone after all. At least for a while. An odd feeling rose up in his stomach and he started to understand why he was angry. He was angry because he felt vulnerable and alone and distant from Pamela and he didn't trust himself just now. With her safely nearby there wasn't much of a problem but with her leaving there could be.

As quickly as the thoughts sprang into his head he dismissed them. It was stupid. Laura was living with Jeffery and was happy and it was just stupid.

Richard sat on the bed in their bedroom half-dressed while he watched Pam toss things into an over-night bag. He stood and walked towards her. He embraced her from behind. "Oh, dear, I'm sorry for being a putz." He kissed her neck gently. She squirmed impatiently. "I love you."

With as much gentleness as she could she pulled away from his embrace, turned, and gave him a soft kiss on the lips. "I love you too, sweetheart." Then in a flash she was back at her packing. "But I really have to get out of here. I'm going to miss my flight."

"Fine," Richard said. He started to slip into his "dejected husband" mode but decided against it and instead showed her his "who gives a damn" attitude. These games were really tiresome and he wondered if they'd ever get past them and back to the love and affection they'd shared in years past. He finished getting dressed without saying another word to his wife, who hardly noticed at all, and went to the kitchen where the auto-brew coffee pot was waiting for him. He was sitting in the kitchen daydreaming when Pamela whisked through, kissed him briefly, and disappeared out the garage door.

"Oh, by the way," he said to the door where Pamela had exited, "I have a date tonight." He grinned slightly, mockingly, "yeah, somebody you know. Laura, from work?" He paused as if to hear a reply from Pamela, who was by now pounding on the steering wheel of her car somewhere on I-30 yelling at a slow driver. "Yeah, well, thanks honey, I will have a good time." He stood and placed his coffee cup in the sink, ignoring the urge he had to smash it.

The drive to work was no different than it was on any other day. There was too much traffic and too many construction signs and too many honking horns. Richard's timing was impeccable, however, and he arrived five minutes to eight, in spite of the bad weather, heavy traffic and road work. He was happy to park his car in the designated space in the parking garage but always felt a tiny bit of guilt that his staff had to park out in the lot and suffer this rain. As he stuffed himself into a crowded elevator he said to himself for the thousandth time that the company needed to try flextime so everyone in the building wouldn't be trying to go up and down at the same time. Whoever build these high-rise buildings with six elevators never thought about how several thousand people would get to their designated floor all at the same time. When the elevator opened on the fifth floor the exhale of air from its occupants pushed Richard into the foyer. Only two others stepped out behind him. He turned and greeted them briefly, not sure what their names were but recognizing the pair as being part of Laura's staff.

About halfway to his office he heard another elevator open and a split second later he heard Laura's voice. "Richard!" It was a little too loud and slightly breathless.

He turned to see a frantic Laura standing before him disheveled and blurry-eyed. "Hi," he said, "what happened to you?"

"Oh, sorry," she said, wiggling her foot trying to get it back into her high healed shoe. "Well, long story." She succeeded with the shoe and stood with her hand outstretched as she leaned against a

partition adjusting the shoe on her upraised foot. "I didn't mean to yell," she said, "It just sort of came out. My shoe caught on the damn carpet." She put her foot back on the floor and tested the shoe by standing on that one foot alone, still leaning on the partition. "Oh, why do women have to wear these blasted shoes?" She bounced slightly and then seemed content with her efforts.

"Pam doesn't wear 'em. Not those kind of heals," Richard said. "I think you do so you can look down on your boss." He grinned.

"Sure," she walked up to him, "at least I don't have to look up to him," she smiled, "I mean, look up at him."

"Yeah, right."

"So?" There was a sparkle in her eye and a question on her features.

"So what?"

"So, what about...."

"No problem. How does Japanese sound?"

"Great. But I don't eat squid."

"Fine, we'll stick with octopus."

"Yuk." She smiled. "Fine, then. I have to take care of some stuff at lunch. But I'll be back."

"OK," Richard said, retreating towards his office. Laura followed.

"I have some ideas about that budget thing, too."

"You do?"

"I do," she said, "I'll get them jotted down so you can look at them this afternoon."

"Fine." Richard walked around his desk and moved the blinds. He could see nothing but clouds and rain. "This weather sucks."

"It does," Laura said, standing in the door of his office. "Well, it's off to pay the piper." She disappeared down the hallway. Richard stood for another long moment looking at the weather outside and then settled into his chair.

At noon Richard went down to Sam's and had himself a small salad. He was a little nervous about his evening with Laura. He knew it was silly, but he was still nervous. So he wasn't hungry. He hadn't given much thought to the alien stuff, as he referenced it in his mind, since the day before, until he settled down with his salad next to the huge aquarium in Sam's Submarine shop.

As he sat nibbling on his lunch he remembered the somber look on Laura's face and the oddly serious way she'd talked about this most absurd of subjects. Something Richard was having a difficult time with was the level of emotions he was experiencing. He was usually a fairly levelheaded and stoic

guy. But since Monday night his emotional stability had been altered in some way. He corrected the thought, "been altered." As if someone had changed him. Things had just been a little different. Probably just anxiety.

Richard thought about Pamela. He loved her very deeply. Or did he? Since they'd lost Robert neither of them had been able to bring back what they'd had before. And Richard suspected Pamela had not tried. She'd buried herself in her work and separated her life from his almost as effectively as if she had moved away. They never talked. They rarely had meals together and never at their own dining table. On the rare occasions when they were both at home and had not had dinner they'd usually call in a pizza or something and ate while doing other things. He wasn't sure if he loved her anymore. And that made him sad.

"Have a good one, Sam," Richard said to the shop owner as he passed out the door. He heard a grumbling reply from the kitchen. He walked on to the elevator and pressed the "UP" button. Ten minutes later he was back at his desk buried in a pile of paperwork.

When he heard a light tapping at his office door Richard looked up to see Laura standing there. She'd obviously gone for a style and changed clothes at noon. Her appearance and the subtle smell of her perfume brought Richard to his feet. "Nice."

Laura smiled smugly. "Whatever are you talking about?"

"Oh, your new doo," he said.

"Wah, thankyee kind sahh," Laura said in a mock-southern accent. She smiled. "I just thought I'd get something done since I didn't have time to get things together this morning."

"I see." Richard sat. Laura took the same chair in his office she usually did.

"It's true."

"OK, sure, nothing to do with this evening?"

"Oh that," she said, suppressing a smile. "I forgot to tell you, I can't go."

"Oh," he said. He tried very hard to keep his face from showing any disappointment. He failed.

Laura smiled. "Silly, I'm joking. But no, has nothing to do with this evening. I just thought it was time for a new hairdo."

Richard tried even harder to keep a grin off his face. That effort failed too. "Well, then, it's squid and Sake."

"I'll take the Sake," Laura said, "but you can keep a lid on the squid." They both laughed at her remark. "By the way, do you think you and Pam could put me up for a few days?"

"What?" Richard stammered wondering if she had been reading his mind. That was a stupid thought, he said to himself. "I mean, why?"

"Well, the jackass I live with pulled another one last night." That explained why she had looked the way she did this morning, Richard thought. "I told him I'd had enough."

"You did?"

"I did."

"And?"

"And, I packed a little bag this morning, just enough stuff missing for him to worry."

"I see." Richard leaned back in his chair with a slightly worried look on his face. "He didn't hurt you or anything, did he?"

"Oh no, just got blubbering idiotic drunk."

"Oh." Sometimes Richard considered going to some kind of guru to learn mind control. He needed to learn how to control his own thoughts better. Visions of Laura arriving on his doorstep with an overnight bag while Pamela was away led to other thoughts.

"I was kidding about you putting me up," Laura said. "I have a room at a hotel."

"Oh, well, just as well, Pamela is out of town," he blurted without thinking. "I mean...."

"You are so funny sometimes," Laura laughed. "Such an old-fashioned guy in this new century." She stood.

"You wouldn't think I'm old fashioned if you could read my mind," Richard said to himself. Out loud he said, "Gee, thanks," implying an insult.

"I better get those figures finished for you." Laura walked towards the door. "It's work time now. We can play this evening."

"Yeah right." Richard stood and he had no idea why. "Well, anyway, see you in a bit." He sat down clumsily.

"OK, silly guy," she said. Then she was gone.

For the remainder of the afternoon Richard bit his lower lip, pounded out a rhythm on his desk with a pen, stood and walked around his desk, but could not find a way to concentrate on his work. Around four he gave up and pulled a science magazine from his desk drawer. He was on the fourth article, describing the inner workings of some new airplane, when he heard a tapping on his door. It opened before he could reply.

"Ah hah!" Laura slipped through the doorway as soon as there was room enough. "Caught ya!"

"Yep." He dropped the magazine on his desk.

Laura picked it up. She looked at the picture. "Science. Such interesting stuff."

"Yep."

She tossed the magazine back on his desk and flopped into a chair. She still looked nice but a bit frazzled. "Damn, my people are not going to be happy."

"Why's that?"

"Because," she said, "I can make your figures work, but I'll have to be short a man. Cartman is leaving next week so we'll just not replace him. Double up on the territory."

"Cartman leaving?"

"Yeah, went with one of the big guys or something, I dunno, maybe he won the lottery. Anyway, he said he was leaving." Laura stretched, lifting her arms high over her head and yawned. "Any Way," she yawned, "the figures will work."

"Good." Richard caught the yawn and tried to suppress it.

"So, shall we go to dinner?"

"It's not five."

Laura rose and walked to the wall clock. She moved the hour hand fifteen minutes forward. "It is now."

"But my watch..." Richard started to protest.

"Ah, that thing hasn't worked all week." She grinned, "come on, the raw fish might spoil before we get there."

"What about dear Jeffie?"

"Screw him," she muttered, walking out of Richard's office with Richard close behind.

Richard got the impression that she was sneaking out before the maintenance supervisor could get wind of his girl leaving with some other guy. "Someday," Richard thought to himself, "Jeffie and I will tangle." He walked towards the elevators while Laura went to her office. She said she had to take care of a few things. She came hurrying up just as the third elevator opened. The first two Richard had summoned had arrived early so he stepped in, pressed a button and stepped out, sending them on their way. He held his hand to allow Laura to go first and then stepped into the elevator behind her. He sniffed her perfume as the elevator drifted downward and he was almost high on it by the time he stepped out on the first floor.

"Your car or mine?"

"Oh, Richard, um," she frowned, "Maybe we should take them both."

"Well, sure, whatever," he said, disappointed.

"I mean, you know, you'll be in a hurry to get home to Pamela and I have to go over to the hotel, and all."

"Oh, didn't I tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Pam is in Houston."

"Oh, you did tell me," she said. For a few minutes she was in deep thought. Then her head shook almost imperceptibly. "Yep, think we should take both cars."

"OK, I'll meet you there."

"Where?"

"Tsuribori." Richard had chosen a particularly up-scale Japanese/Chinese restaurant located near Highland Park, the ritzy suburb buried in the northern part of Dallas.

"Oh, nice choice." She smiled. "You are buying, I hope. I'm a poorly working girl."

"Dutch, sweetheart."

"I wonder if they serve grilled cheese sandwiches?" She laughed and walked off towards her car.

Richard arrived at his car first since it was in a designated space. He waited near the exit of the parking lot for Laura and followed her through the gate. He followed Laura through the afternoon traffic. She drove somewhat erratically, and dangerously, especially since the streets were wet. The thunderstorms of the morning had passed but had left low clouds and a damp atmosphere behind. There was a chill in the air. Richard loved days like this. Most people think they are dreary. He felt pretty good. He had an easy day at work and he was going to have dinner with an attractive woman. Hang the consequences.

At the restaurant Laura took the closest parking slot and left Richard to drive around a bit to find one much farther from the door. She was standing, shivering, outside when he walked up.

"Why didn't you go inside?"

"Some gentleman you are. Whatever happened to holding the door for a lady."

"Sheesh, lady," he muttered sarcastically, pulling the door and holding it for her.

"I am a lady," Laura squeaked, giving the words a high-pitched tone. Richard smiled and followed her into the restaurant.

The two of them had spent quite a few lunches together, munching on sandwiches at Sam's or somewhere along the street down from the office at some restaurant. But they had never gone to dinner. Richard could not believe how nervous he was. He told the maître 'd he had a reservation and in a couple of minutes they were being shown to a table. They walked silently through the stylish

oriental restaurant. It was darkly lit with very elaborate Japanese décor. A Japanese stringed instrument played softly in the background. In the center of the main dining room there was a magnificent pond full of Imperial Carp. They were led to an alcove which was quite private.

Richard noticed he was not the only one who was nervous. Laura's hand trembled slightly while she took her napkin and arranged things on the table in front of her. He'd noticed before she had a funny way of arranging tableware, shakers, carafe's and things, in sort of a fan shape in front of her.

"Are you through playing with the tableware now?" Richard grinned.

"Oh, for now," she smiled at him and placed her hands in her lap.

"Good." They looked across from each other for a long moment. "You look very nice."

Laura scrunched up her features and imitated a hillbilly talking through his nose, "Why thannnkee, Rheeechard." She was trying to dispel the butterflies in her stomach with humor.

"You are weeeeeehhlcome," Richard mimicked. After a composing silence, he said, "but you do look lovely."

"Thanks," she said sheepishly. A waiter arrived with their drinks. When he left, Richard slid around the round booth in Laura's direction ever so slightly and turned to her. She was seated on his right. The booth was large enough to seat six.

"So, what's this stuff you want to talk to me about?"

An odd look appeared on Laura's face. "I'm not sure," she whispered.

"Not sure?"

"No, I mean, not sure I can talk here." She looked around at the décor.

"Why not?"

"Well, I wasn't thinking of a place exactly like this."

"Oh, sorry, did I...?"

"No, no, it's wonderful!" She realized how what she said must have sounded. "No, really, I'm really very glad we're here." She paused. "It's just that, this is so, um, normal."

"Well, not exactly normal," Richard reminded her, "Not for you and I."

"That's true."

"So?"

"So, let's wait till after dinner."

"You are driving me nuts," he said. But it wasn't just because she wouldn't tell him what she was thinking, he mused to himself. He was also struggling with the twinkle in her eyes, reflections from the lamps on the wall he was sure, and that slight scent of perfume. He marveled at how so many women

seemed to be swimming in some obnoxious perfume and made him wish they'd just smell like body odor but Laura always carried a hint of something, just enough to catch him off guard but never overpowering. Pam used to do that, he thought. A slight pang of guilt tweaked his stomach. Then he felt anger at the way she was now. It was not his fault Robert was killed. It was nobody's fault.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the thoughts, he looked across the table at his dinner companion. She was smiling at him.

"Where were you?"

"Huh?"

"You drifted away there for a second."

"Oh, sorry," he stammered, "never mind." He hadn't noticed that a waiter had brought soup and won ton. He picked up a spoon. Laura held a pair of chopsticks expertly in her right hand and lifted the soup bowl up to her mouth with her left. Then she sat the bowl down abruptly and dropped the wooden eating utensils and looked at Richard with a serious expression.

"Richard," she began, "OK, I know, this might not look right, our being here. But we are good friends, right? And co-workers." She seemed to be rationalizing things in her mind. "I mean, what's a little sushi?"

"It's a ball of rice with a slice of raw fish, wrapped in seaweed."

They both laughed.

"You know what I mean, you dork."

"Don't call me a dork," he shot back, "And yes, I know what you mean." His words softened a little more, "but I still think you look great."

Laura picked the chopsticks up again and smiled. "Thanks. You're a very nice guy."

Another waiter arrived holding their meals. The plates were placed before them. Each was a compartmentalized dish with decoratively displayed bits of food in each compartment. Japanese food was one of Richard's weaknesses though he was sometimes not sure how to act in a place like Tsuribori. They ate and talked lightly about the food and the stormy weather. After the meal Richard ordered another bottle of Sake and turned to Laura.

"OK, now, shoot."

"Oh, Richard," she groaned.

"Now, girlie," he said.

"Oh, alright." She swept a strand of hair back that had been provocatively hanging before her eyes. Then she unceremoniously wiped her forehead with the silk napkin. Richard had not noticed until then that she had tiny beads of perspiration above her eyes.

"Are you warm? Shall I ask them to turn the air on?"

"It's not the air," she said, "It's what's inside my head." She frowned. "I mean, what I'm thinking." Her features scrunched up in frustration, "Oh, dang, this isn't working well." Suddenly she had an idea. "I wonder if it is raining still?"

"I don't know, why?"

"Well, this dinner has been so... pleasant. So normal. So...."

Richard thought she was going to say romantic but she didn't. It had been romantic but they had somehow come to an unspoken agreement to drop that idea. They were friends. Just friends.

"Yeah," he helped her out, "very nice."

"Right. Nice." She smiled. "I'd rather not screw it up with what I want to talk about. Not here. Can we go somewhere?"

"Where?"

"I don't know. Somewhere else."

"OK, sure." As they had been talking the waiter had arrived with another small bottle of Sake. Richard poured two tiny cups full of the steaming beverage. "After this I probably need to take a walk in the fresh air."

"Me too. That would be nice, a walk."

"Then we'll take a walk." They sipped the Sake. When they finished they rose, Richard left money on the table to cover the check, and they walked outside.

"Which way?" Richard looked up and down the brightly lit walkway in front of the restaurant. Tsuribori was located in one of those renovated sections of North Dallas that had wide brick sidewalks, cast-iron outdoor furniture, nice landscaping and a commons area.

Laura pointed towards the commons area which was once a part of the street but was now closed to traffic and sprinkled with iron bistro tables and chairs. Everything was wet from the rain but the sky was not as turbulent as it had been and it was not raining. The air hinted of a cold front.

They walked in silence for some time. Richard was simply enjoying the company and Laura trying to get up her courage. When they reached the commons area Richard checked a couple of chairs for water. The breeze had dried them sufficiently. He sat, motioning for Laura to do the same. The sharp, chill north wind puffed in Richard's face and he felt wistful.

"It's a bit chilly but this is nice." Laura was looking upwards at the low clouds which were filled with city light, illuminating the entire area with an orange glow. Victorian era streetlamps lined the commons and the one nearest the two of them cast shadows on Laura's face.

The air, the place, the company and possibly the Sake were making the evening considerably surreal for Richard. He found his thoughts drifting in a dozen different directions.

"Okay, let's talk," Laura said at last. She scooted her heavy chair in his direction.

"Fine." Richard passed a contented smile in her direction. "I'm listening."

"Here goes," she said. She sucked in a breath, held her head up, and stuck out her chin slightly. "About Monday night."

"Yeah?"

"Um, I think..." she was struggling to find words that would not sound totally off the wall. "Forget what I think," she said, apparently changing her mind. "I know. I had planned to tell you all kinds of stuff and things and now, tonight, it's just been too nice, too perfect, too..." she paused, then plunged ahead, "perfect."

"I agree, it's been very nice."

"Yeah." She took another deep breath, her bosom rising and falling with it. Richard noticed. She noticed that he noticed. "Anyway, forget what I think," she paused, "I have a request."

"I'm listening."

"OK, let me say this." She leaned back, looked around, "this, all this, this place, this city, this night, this dinner, it's all wonderful and normal and..." She looked at him with intensity now, "And, it's just not all there is. There's more. Going on, I mean. That we don't know about. Most of us don't know about. Things not as nice and pretty and normal and wonderful as right here, tonight. Things happening." Her words came out in a rush like she was pressing them through a filter. "I've never spoke of these things, these other things, to anyone, ever, not ever. And I'm so afraid to talk to you," she bit her bottom lip, "I'm so afraid you'll think I am crazy."

"You are crazy," Richard said, trying to lift the dead-serious aura surrounding his friend, "that's why I like you." It didn't work.

"No I'm not," she said sternly. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound crazy. I'm not crazy. And I'm not going to tell you why I'm crazy, I mean, why I'm not crazy but what I was going to tell you. I'm not going to tell you, not yet, not tonight, not here. This is too real and too perfect."

"You are making me crazy."

"I'm sorry. I really am." She thought a minute. "Here, here's what I'm thinking. Tomorrow is Friday, right?"

"Yep, thank God."

"Right. Well then, how about we give everyone half a day off? And you go somewhere with me?"

"I don't know," Richard sat back, "Productivity being what it is...."

"Productivity my rear end, it's fine. Think," she leaned towards him, "we'll take a bite out of payroll expenses. I know nobody will moan, they've all put in a hard week. But we can put it to a vote. I'll instigate it, like a mutiny, what you say? Just our little conspiracy."

"I don't know."

"Forget it. I'll do it anyway. And you'll give in because you are a big sucker, I mean, a big teddy bear kind of guy." She smiled, having lightened the atmosphere all by herself.

"Sucker is right," Richard grinned. "Give it your best shot."

"I will," she grinned back. Then she stood. "Then we have a plan. We'll dump the office tomorrow and you and I will go somewhere."

"Where?"

"I'll tell you," she said, motioning for him to follow her back towards the restaurant. "I'll tell you." Richard rose from his chair and followed.

As she walked ahead of him he watched her movements. She was a bit stocky, a little clumsy on her feet, but she carried herself with confidence that Pamela lacked. Laura is a strong woman, underneath, he found himself thinking. Pam is not so strong.

When she arrived at her car she spun around and blurted, "have you been looking at my butt?"

"God!" Richard roared, laughing, and very glad she could not see how red his face was. "You are insane!"

"Of course, have to be to work for you." She winked and slipped into her car. The window slid down as soon as the door closed. She reached her hand out towards Richard. He took it in his own. "Thank you, friend, for a wonderful evening." There was that sparkle again in her eyes. Richard looked into them, dark and emotional as they were at this moment.

"Thank you, friend," he said, squeezing her hand slightly and releasing it.

"See you tomorrow." The sound of Laura's sporty little car cranking drowned out anything else she said.

"Tomorrow." Richard watched as she backed up and sped away. Then he walked slowly to his own car. He still felt the imprint of her hand in his. He lifted his hand and sniffed. He could smell her

perfume. For some reason his forehead was moist so he lifted the hand a little higher, wiped his forehead, and then wiped his hand on his pants leg.

Chapter Four

When Richard pulled into his driveway it was almost ten PM. He could still remember the smell of Laura's perfume and the sparkle in her eyes. The evening had been very nice. More than nice. And it ended as it should have, a handshake and a quick goodbye.

The skies were clearing now and the air was cold. A brisk north wind whirled around the small trees in Richard's front lawn and stirred bits of paper in the street. Somewhere in the distance Richard heard a dog barking and farther away he heard the bellowing of a semi-truck on the highway. The neighborhood was quiet otherwise. The night would be cold, he knew, an early front sliding down from Canada promised to bring temperatures to near freezing by morning. He started to leave his car in the drive where he usually left it but decided that since Pam's car was gone he'd pull it into the garage. He slipped back into the seat, pressed the garage door opener, and pulled into the garage.

While the garage door was still closing Richard opened the door leading into the kitchen and entered, dropping his keys on the bar and walking to the answering machine which was blinking. There was a message.

BEEP

"Ah, where are you? Probably on another drive I suppose. Anyway, I'm in Houston. Things are all screwed up here. I don't know how long it will take. You have the number, I left it on the refrigerator under the magnet. And I have my cell phone. Talk to you soon."

Richard wondered why she never said she loved him anymore. Maybe she didn't. He shrugged. There was a second message:

"Um, hi, Richard, I just, um, wanted to say thank you for a pleasant evening. I kind'a knew you wouldn't be home but I just wanted to say thanks. And, um, see you tomorrow."

He re-played the second message just to hear Laura's voice again. Then he erased both messages. As he passed by the refrigerator he noticed a hand-written note Pamela had stuck under a smiley-face magnet. It said simply, "here's the numbers in Houston if you need them," and it listed several numbers. Nothing else. He walked on to the bedroom and began undressing.

For a long time Richard lay awake thinking about his life. He had a wife he still loved, but who was as far away from him as Mars. Even when she was in the same room. He had a friend at work he knew

he was getting feelings for and didn't know how to deal with that. Then there was Monday night where everything went weird. He was so confused he wasn't sure which end was up.

Eventually he fell into a fitful sleep and dreamed the most disturbing dream he'd ever had. He dreamed he'd been floating upside down and then was being poked on by some kind of thing, some animal or something, and then he saw Laura flying above him smiling and he heard a laugh, Pam's laugh. Pam was looking down on him, only she had no hair and had huge dark eyes and she was laughing, mockingly, oddly, terrifyingly. He woke covered in sweat.

He looked at the clock on the nightstand. It was about to buzz and wake him up so he rose and switched the alarm off. With some effort he stood and went to the bathroom. After he'd shaved and showered he returned to the bedroom. He stood in front of his closet and tried to figure out what to wear. Eventually he settled on a pair of dark cotton slacks and a long-sleeve cotton shirt. He also reached for a jacket since the temperature was supposed to be cool outside.

Being up early meant he had time before he had to leave. He fixed himself some cereal and coffee and sat at the dining table. Across the table from him, on a shelf, was a picture of his son, Robert. He had been very proud of his boy, though the boy had been what is often called a "nerd." Robert was unbelievable with computers and had a grasp of some subjects few adults possessed. He'd loved history, and geography. He was not very good with girls and Richard remembered Robert's first date, some girl from school. Robert was fifteen. Richard had to take them to the theater. They lived in North Dallas at the time and Richard worried about them being out at night. But all went well, as far as Richard knew. Robert didn't talk about things that much. He was like his mother in that way. Richard wished he had talked more, wished he'd known the boy better.

Tears filled his eyes as Richard remembered the phone call from the DPS. They said something about a rain slicked street, high speed, Richard couldn't remember everything. In fact, he couldn't remember much at all, except seeing his boy laid out on a cold stainless-steel table with no apparent injuries. Internal bleeding, ruptures, something. Richard dropped his head onto his arms and sobbed. It was still almost more than he could bare sometimes. And Pamela had blamed Richard and had never forgiven him. As if he'd placed Robert in that car and drove it into that guardrail.

Rising with a start Richard said aloud, "well it's not fair." He sniffed and wiped his nose on a towel. Not wanting the cereal any longer he rose, swallowed the remainder of his now-cold coffee, and walked to the sink where he poured the cereal in the disposal and flipped the switch. He ran a little water then turned the machine off and left the bowl in the sink. Then he picked up his keys and walked out the

door into the garage and got in his car. Within a few minutes he was in the middle of morning traffic staring blankly at the car ahead of him.

"Morning, Richard," Laura said with a friendly smile.

"Hi, Laura."

"What's the matter?" She could read him like a book. Sometimes too well. He wished Pamela paid as much attention.

"Nothing," he muttered, walking past Laura's office toward his own. She rose and followed him. He heard her behind him as he walked into his office.

"I know that look, boss man," she croaked, "bad night?"

"Bad dreams. And I was thinking of Robert this morning."

Laura's eyes fell and she looked sadly at her friend. "I'm sorry."

"It's ok. I got to get over it someday." He perked up a little and looked at her with a smile. "I enjoyed last evening."

"I did too. Very much." Her smile was beaming. Without saying more she turned and went back into her office.

The first hour of the morning went by routinely. Richard found Laura's notes on the budget cuts on his desk so he checked them against his figures. He was impressed. She had found a few things he had missed. They really made a good team. There were a couple of heart-shaped doodles in the margin of the notepad that Richard wondered about. About nine-thirty Laura walked into his office and smiled.

"I'm afraid you have a bit of a rebellion on your hands, boss." She winked. Her tone was a little too loud. It was clear she wanted someone outside his office to hear her.

"Is that so. What now? I can't give any pay raises."

"Pay raises nothing. We want freedom."

"Freedom?"

"Absolutely. It's colder than a polar bear's boogers out there and some of us have not winterized yet. We want off early."

"Not a chance," Richard said, looking up. Laura looked puzzled. Had Richard forgotten the night before? "Not unless I can leave too."

"Permission granted."

"And who gives you such grave authority?"

"I give myself such authority. Since you are obviously beat and somewhat grumpy, I have decided that you are not fit for command and therefore I have assumed command. My first action is to give you

leave to go home. And I will direct the swabbies to take the afternoon to buy coats and antifreeze for their kids and cars, respectively.”

Richard leaned back in his chair amazed at how Laura’s mind worked. She should be a writer or something. “OK, well, if that’s the case, here,” he picked up a note pad. “You take care of this stuff and I’ll get the hell out of here.”

“Fine,” she said, suddenly surprised, taking the pad from him. He rose and took his jacket from the rack in the corner of the room. As he did so Laura looked at the pad he’d handed her. It was the one she’d left on his desk and she saw nothing different. Then she noticed arrows through the heart-shaped doodles she’d drawn.

“Later,” Richard said, walking out of his office. Laura stared after him blankly. Richard was acting odd.

“Richard,” she said in a serious tone. He turned to look at her. “Where are you going?”

“Didn’t you just relieve me of command?”

“Well, um...”

“Well, then, no use me sticking around, is there?”

“I was just, um, kidding.”

“I know,” he said, a smile on his face that had no joy in it, “But I’m still out of here.” Lifting the cell phone from his pocket he mouthed the words, “call me.” Then he winked and walked toward the elevators. Laura exchanged stares with Nancy, Richard’s secretary.

Twelve thirty that afternoon when his cell phone rang Richard was walking along a sidewalk downtown Dallas. He wasn’t sure why he was there, he’d just gotten into his car, pulled out of the parking garage and took a left turn. One road led to another and he was downtown. The air was brisk, dry, and cold. Wind whipped around the tall buildings and threatened to tear the jacket from Richard’s back. He had stopped in at some café and had some coffee and then started walking the streets. His intention was to think but after he got there he just let his mind go blank.

“Hello?”

“Where are you?” It was Laura.

“Downtown.”

“What the hell you doing there?”

“Thinking. Or not thinking. Whatever.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

"Well, meet me for lunch, OK?"

"Where?"

"Brannigan's."

"Is that on the Northwest Highway?"

"Yeah."

"OK, I know. Be there in an hour."

"An hour?"

"I'm downtown. I have to find my car."

"Oh," there was a pause. "If you say so. See you there. Hurry, OK?"

"I'll try," he said and pressed the OFF button on his phone. Then he dropped it back into his pocket and walked back the way he had come.

Just over thirty minutes later Richard pulled into the parking lot at Brannigan's. He saw Laura's car parked already. After finding a slot he pulled in, got out of his car and walked towards the restaurant. Above the door of the restaurant was a four-leaf clover with the name "Brannigan's" emblazoned across it. Richard pulled on a handle attached to a vinyl-padded door. Inside he discovered a dark, smoky restaurant, lots of people, a long bar, and a stand near the door with a sign, "Please Wait to be Seated."

"May I help you sir?" A slender, attractive girl of about twenty smiled at him.

"I'm here with someone," he said, looking beyond the girl and into the room.

"The name?"

"Huh?" Richard looked at her.

"The name of your party?"

"Oh, um, Laura. Laura Bright."

The girl checked her notepad. "Right this way, sir," she said. Richard followed her. She led him to a semi-secluded booth near the back of the restaurant. She held her hand to invite him to sit himself across from Laura and ask, "May I get you a drink, sir?"

"Coffee," he said. Then he looked at her, "Make that an Irish coffee."

"Very well, sir," the girl said and disappeared in the direction of the bar as he settled down.

"Irish pub, Irish coffee, huh?" He looked at Laura. She smiled.

"Makes sense to me," she said. "What do you want for lunch?"

"I'm not really hungry."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." He shook himself and peeled his jacket off as he sat in the booth. It fell behind him and he leaned back against it in the soft cushioned seat. "This is a nice place." He looked around. "I've never been in here before."

"We like it," Laura said.

"You and Jeffie, you mean."

"Yeah, Jeff and I." She leaned across the table a bit and squinted to see Richard's face in the darkened room. "You don't like him much, do you?"

"What's not to like?"

"You don't, I can tell."

"Oh, he's OK," Richard lied.

"No he's not. He's an asshole. I have no idea how I managed to fall for him. We haven't.... um, I mean, there's not been any kind of relationship between us for months. I have been looking for an apartment. And I finally found one."

"That's interesting," Richard said. "Somehow I don't think Jeffie has picked up on your feelings."

"What makes you say that?"

"The way he acts when he's in the office."

"Well, he's just too stupid to understand. I told him."

"If you say so. I hope it doesn't become a problem at work."

"Why would it?"

"He is the maintenance boss, you know."

"I know, as if he'd know which end of a screwdriver to use. He's been talking that his dad is going to get him bigger and better things. Maybe he'll move on now that I'm not his anymore."

"Will he give up so easily?"

"I don't know. I hope so." She leaned back and laid her head on the back of the booth. "Forget the big dope. Let's talk about something else."

"Like what?" As he asked a waitress arrived dressed in a skimpy skirt and tight-fitting top and delivered his drink. He smiled at her and mouthed a thanks.

"You."

"I'm a boring subject."

"Nope. Remember, I asked a favor of you."

"Gee, you got off half a day early, a splendid Japanese meal, give her the moon and she wants the stars too."

"Yep, give me the stars."

"Sheesh," Richard sputtered sipping his coffee.

"Seriously," she said, "I mean, there's this guy I want you to see."

"What guy?"

"A therapist."

"What?!" Richard almost spilled his drink.

"A therapist." She held her hand up to prevent him from commenting further. "Hold on, now, let me finish. I want you to see this guy so you can find out what happened Monday night."

"Oh, that."

"That."

"Persistent, aren't you?"

"Of course. Now," she leaned forward, "This guy, Jim Matchett, he can help you find out."

"Maybe I don't want to find out. Maybe I was gang-raped by a bunch of drug-crazed female bikers or something."

"Right. You'd still have a smile on your face," she blurted before thinking. "Oh, geeze, sorry, hey, that was crude. I'm sorry." Her embarrassment was Richard's amusement. He laughed.

"Something about putting brain in gear before engaging mouth?" He was still chuckling.

"Yeah," Laura said, glad the room was dark so Richard couldn't see her red face, "Something like that."

"So, how will this guy find out what happened? He has a crystal ball?"

"Hypnosis."

"Geeze," Richard exclaimed, "I don't think so."

"It's a perfectly simple thing. He's hypnotized me. No big deal."

"You? What you need to find out? What possessed you to fall for Jeffie?"

"Yeah, right," she brushed the comment aside. "Really, come on, Richard. I'll be there. What do you have to lose?"

"Oh, my dignity. I saw that episode on Gunsmoke where Ol' Doc hypnotized Festus and had him stand on a table in the saloon and squawk like a chicken."

"It's nothing like that, goofy." She leaned a little closer to him. "Nothing like that. Been there, done that, no big deal."

"So, why did you do it?"

"I'll tell you. But you have to go there first and talk to Jim."

"Jim is it?"

"Don't be silly. So, what else do you have to do? Walk around downtown and freeze your nose off?"

"Well," Richard was being talked into something he didn't want to do but he felt powerless to resist. "Well, fine. I'll go. Let me finish my coffee."

"Good." She grinned. "We have a two-thirty appointment."

"Why do I feel like climbing onto this table now and clucking like a chicken?"

"Oh, I don't know." She was acting smug and it annoyed Richard. But he grinned anyway.

An hour later Richard followed Laura into a small office. "Good afternoon, Mr. Cleveland." The short, balding read-headed man who greeted them wore thick glasses. He gave him a broad smile. "I'm Jim Matchett. Welcome." He led Richard and Laura past a receptionist counter that was unattended down a corridor and into a large office. The office had one wall covered by an enormous bookshelf and had a collection of volumes standing, lying on their side, and in various kinds of disarray. There was an over-stuffed couch and matching chair, an ottoman, and a large wooden desk. The desk was old and battered. Behind it stood a worn high-backed executive chair. The man motioned for Richard and Laura to be seated on the couch and they took up positions at either end of it. The man settled into the armchair and promptly placed his feet on the ottoman.

"Well," Matchett said, "Laura tells me you had an experience."

"You could call it that," Richard muttered. He squirmed uneasily and clung to the arm of the couch feeling that if he let go he'd sink right down into it and vanish. "Before you say any more, Mister, um,...."

"Matchett. Call me Jim, will that be ok?"

"Jim. Fine. Jim. Before you say any more, Laura talked me into coming here and I'm quite uncertain about the whole deal. I mean, there's something I heard in church once about this stuff, hypnotizing stuff, and...."

"Let me assure you, Mr. Cleveland," the counselor said softly, "you have nothing to worry about. Hypnotism is only an enhanced form of consciousness. You will be in full control. Some people can't be hypnotized and others are easily hypnotized. All we want to do is unlock a few doors in your mind that for whatever reason have been closed."

"I don't know," Richard looked worried. He now sat on the edge of the couch, his knees bent in a painful-looking sort of way.

"Is the couch uncomfortable?"

"Not exactly," Richard said. "I am uncomfortable."

Jim Matchett looked from Richard to Laura who had said nothing since they entered. He spoke to her. "Well, Laura? What shall we do?" The two seemed quite familiar with each other, Richard noted.

"You're the doctor, doctor," she said bluntly but with some amusement.

"Hardly a doctor, Laura," the man smiled, "but I have an idea." He turned to Richard. "How about you sit behind my desk, in that chair. We can proceed from there."

"I can do that," Richard said, struggling to his feet. He walked around the desk and settled into the executive chair. It was almost as soft as the couch and he felt himself sinking into it as well but he decided not to make an issue of it. Maybe it was just his imagination.

"Better?" Matchett looked at Richard inquisitively.

"Better," Richard said.

"Good. Now, what has Laura told you?"

"About what?"

"Her experiences."

Before Richard could answer Laura spoke up. "Nothing, yet, Jim, except that you have been working with me."

"Nothing?" He looked at her in a slightly scolding manner.

"Well, we never got around to it," she said. Richard got the impression that he had been the topic of discussion this week in Jim's office. He wanted to feel a little offended and angry but he couldn't. Instead he leaned back in the comfortable chair. He was anything but relaxed, though.

"Oh, well then," Matchett said, "Let's get started. He glanced at Laura and then turned towards Richard. "Let me repeat, there's nothing to worry about. Hypnotism is simply a method of getting to hidden truth, your subconscious, forgotten memories. Do you understand?"

"I think so," Richard muttered.

"Well then," the comment seemed to be a habit with the counselor, "then we may begin by you telling me what happened Monday night."

"Oh, OK, well...." Richard repeated the story he'd told Laura on Tuesday. He showed the doctor where the mark had been on his neck though it had healed already, very rapidly he thought. When Richard finished, the counselor sat for a few minutes without speaking. Then he began to ask questions. Laura was quietly observing from the couch.

"Do you mind Laura being here?"

"No, I don't suppose. Should I?"

"It is up to you. Sometimes it is comforting to have a loved one or friend present. But then sometimes information is revealed that might be a little embarrassing."

"Hmm," Richard thought. "You say that I'll have control of my thoughts?"

"That is correct."

"Then, I'd like her to stay." Laura looked pleased at his choice.

"Good. Well then. You say you can't remember what kind of airplane you saw?"

"No, I don't remember." Richard scrunched his eyebrows in puzzlement. "I'm not hypnotized now am I?"

"Oh no," the counselor chuckled, "no, no, I'm just getting prepared for our session."

"Good," Richard looked relieved. "This is all too weird."

"I understand. Well then. About the aircraft. Did you see it?"

"Well, no, I didn't see it." Richard lied.

"I suspect that is not the case," the man said, looking at Richard and lifting a single eyebrow.

"Are you psychic too?" Richard was annoyed.

"No, oh no, I have just spoken to many people in your position. Well then? What did you see?"

"You'll think I'm nuts."

"Not at all."

"Fine. Here goes." Richard took a deep breath. He'd pushed the memory of what he saw out of his mind and now he recalled it with some difficulty and reluctance. "I saw a UFO."

Matchett was not in the least surprised. He showed no emotion at all. "Go on."

"It was hovering over a field, about a hundred feet in the air, about, um, thirty feet across I guess. I could barely make out the outline of it against the glow of the clouds. There was a red, pulsing light from underneath it."

"Anything else?"

"No, I don't think so." Richard thought for a second or two. "I am sure, I don't remember anything else. Except pulling into the drive and getting lambasted by my wife when I came in late."

"So how much time was missing?"

"Time missing?" The phrase sounded odd, like Richard had dropped a few hours out of his pocket and he couldn't find it. He couldn't help but smile a little. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, how much time elapsed between the time you saw the UFO and you arrived home?"

"Oh," Richard stammered, "Oh, I see, well, about three, maybe four hours. I'm really not sure because I wasn't keeping up with the time. Maybe that's why I lost it." He grinned and looked at Laura who rolled her eyes. Matchett, however, did not express any amusement.

"Do you often hide your nervousness with humor?"

"No, sometimes I punch people who ask silly questions," Richard blurted, offended by the man's question. Laura exhaled and clamped her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing.

"I see," Matchett said, never missing a beat. "Well then. Let us begin."

"OK, sure," Richard felt a little better now, a little more at ease. He was smiling.

"This is a serious thing, Mr. Cleveland," the counselor said. He looked around at Laura who looked at him and shrugged.

"I'm sorry," Richard said, "Really, I do understand. And yes, I am nervous and sometimes I cover it with humor." He wondered what this man was doing with his emotions. Suddenly Richard went from feeling jovial to almost depression. "I really am out of my league here."

"I understand. Well then. Let's begin. This session will be video recorded, do you understand?"

"I do."

"Lean back now and try to relax. Concentrate on my eyes...." Within a few minutes Richard was sitting with his eyes closed in a trance-like state.

"Are you aware of your surroundings, Richard?"

"I believe so."

Matchett pressed a switch on a recorder on his desk. He was now sitting on the edge of his desk near Richard who was leaning back in the executive chair.

"We're going to explore a little, will that be alright with you, Richard?"

"I like to explore."

"Good. It is Monday night. Do you remember? You were frustrated, you didn't want to go straight home. Do you remember?"

"I do...."

Through questions and answers the hypnotist worked step by step up to the time Richard saw the UFO.

"Now then, Richard," he continued, "describe what you saw."

"There was this large craft, a Frisbee-shaped disk, no lights on it other than a red pulsing light emanating from the lower part of it. It is dark and I have trouble making out its shape and size. I can

only tell what it looks like because of the orange hue of the low clouds. City lights. But the air is thick with misting rain and the whole place seems to light up with the pulses of light.”

“What do you see next?”

“I’m standing there outside the car, looking at this thing, this UFO.”

“And?”

“And, holy shit!” Richard has a look of amazement on his face now. “Holy shit. What are they? They’re flying. No, floating. Floating. Right towards me. I got to get the hell out of here!” His voice is frantic now.

“You are safe, Richard, you are safe. Now, calmly, describe what you saw?”

“Holy shit, it’s those gray things. Alien things. Like on that book cover, not ET, not like... no, they are smallish, thin, long narrow arms. And they are floating towards me. I got to get the hell out of here!” Richard’s voice rises and he squirms in his chair.

“You are safe, Richard,” Matchett cooed, “tell us what happened next.”

“These things, these aliens, they’re coming at me. I try to get in my car but I can’t move. I’m like frozen. I can hear my heart beating in my ears. Shit! Damn! Hey, they are lifting me. Up, hell, what are they doing?” Richard groans. “They are taking me with them. I saw them. I wasn’t supposed to see them. Nope, now they got me. Lord God help me, help me,” Richard’s tone of voice is pleading, almost childish. Laura winces at his words and his tone.

“Go on, Richard, what did they do?”

“A room, I remember an emergency room. No, not an emergency room. Something similar. A nurse. Is it a nurse? No, but a human-looking thing. A thing, but more human, smaller eyes, some hair, the other ones have no hair, this one has hair, is a little taller. It is female, I think, female. Yeah. She comes closer, looks me in the eyes. Close.” Richard’s breathing grows rapid and shallow. “Better, I see, they will not hurt me. I am on a table. Something. Ouch,” Richard rubs the end of a finger, “What they do that for? Blood test. What the hell for? I’m on my side, no, just being lifted up. Ouch,” he rubs his neck, “what the hell was that?”

“What is happening to you, Richard?”

“I’m being examined. Where are my clothes? I have no clothes on. How did they get them off? The female one, she is looking me in the eye again. I see, nothing to worry about. Oh, oh, OH!” Richard sat up. “Holy shit,” he said clearly. He came out of the trance.

“Well then,” Matchett muttered. He rose from his perch on the edge of his desk and returned to the chair next to the sofa.

"I..." Richard looked at Laura, "I don't believe it."

"I'm sorry, Richard," Laura said. Then her look softened, she stood and walked toward him. She took his hand in both of her own and looked at him intensely. Richard saw something behind her eyes, deep down, something that he didn't understand but was a little disturbing. In a moment she gently let go of his hand and returned to the couch.

"But," Richard was struggling with the memories he now could recall. "How could it. This, this," he stammered, "This changes everything. Everything, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps it does, Richard," Laura said softly.

"They did experiments," Richard continued, "blood, and skin sample, the thing on my neck, and they...."

"It's OK, I know what they do."

"Do you?"

"I do," she said.

"You know they, they, took a, they made me...." He couldn't say what was in his mind.

"It's OK, Richard. We know what they do." Laura's gaze was comforting, understanding, but, Richard thought, a little disconcerting.

"It's quite common, yes, quite um, common," Matchett spoke up. He had sunk into the soft chair with his elbows on the arms, hands together, fingers extended and touching. His expression was contemplative. "I must tell you, Mr. Cleveland, it is quite common."

"You may as well call me Richard," Richard said, "and, how many people do you see?"

"Me? Oh, I've had a few, yes a few," he purred absently, not looking up but instead keeping his gaze straight ahead at his hands. "Oh, several, I think. Confidentiality, you know, but several."

"And Laura?" Richard suddenly looked at his friend through new eyes. "You?"

"Me." There was more behind the word but he didn't ask.

"Well then," the counselor muttered, "well then, I suppose we'll not do more today. Shall you return, Richard?" Finally the man looked up at Richard.

"Well," Richard said, "I'm not sure. Should I?"

"Oh, I suspect so, sir," the man stood. "I suspect there's more."

"God," Richard muttered, struggling with something deep within his mind, "I hope not."

"We will see," Matchett said.

"Jim is pretty intense, isn't he?" Laura was looking at Richard, who was now standing.

"I think so," Richard agreed.

"Well then, let us make an appointment. Shall we?" The counselor led the other two out the door and back down the hallway. When they arrived at the receptionist's desk Matchett settled into a secretary's chair and opened a schedule book.

"I have evening sessions available. Laura usually comes to those. Do you wish for her to be here again?"

"I think so," he said, looking at her, "Do you mind?"

"No, of course not," she said a little more eagerly than she had intended.

"OK, then, when?"

"When is my session?"

"Let's see," Matchett ran his finger down a column. "Monday evening, Six PM. I'm sorry, no openings before or after that."

"That's OK, he can use mine."

"I don't want to, um,"

"I have been coming for a long time. Trust me." She looked at Matchett, "We'll be here."

"Well then, it is," he said and penciled in Richard's name beside Laura's. "We will see you then!" Abruptly he stood and greeted a person sitting in the waiting area in front of the counter. Neither Richard nor Laura had noticed them sitting there until that moment.

Following Laura out the door, Richard looked up at a clear night sky. Stars twinkled at him now as dusk had just fallen. The air was quite cold. He looked at Laura who was studying him.

"Are you in a hurry to go somewhere?"

"Not exactly, I don't think." Richard said. He stuck his hand in his pocket, pulled out his phone, switched it on. There were no messages. He dropped the phone back into his pocket. "What do you have in mind?"

"Oh, maybe a bite to eat. And talk."

"I can do that," Richard said. He slipped his hand into his pocket and held down the button on his phone and switched it off without letting Laura know what he was doing. He followed her to her car. Everything seemed somehow unreal, like he was dreaming. Some terrible battles were underway inside his head. Laura turned and stood before him as she leaned backwards against her car. He looked at her. "This changes everything, you know."

"I understand what you are saying, Richard," Laura said quietly, "But really, you have only just learned of things, things that are going on, you have just learned the truth."

"It changes everything for me. Inside me. Nothing will ever be the same."

"I know," she said. "I know." They found themselves in an embrace without knowing how it happened. Richard could smell her hair and feel her holding him. There was nothing sensual or romantic about this embrace. It was more like a family kind of embrace, comforting, caring. For a few minutes it was very pleasant for both of them and then it became quite awkward. They separated clumsily. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Richard looked her in the eyes.

"For that, it's not fair. You are married. Anyway, I shouldn't have."

"It's OK, it's fine."

"We should go."

"Don't you want to talk?"

"I do. But, not now, not tonight." She looked at him with a look that said she didn't trust herself with him. He understood. He felt the same way.

"You are right, I think," Richard said reluctantly. "I better go." He reached for her hand and somehow they wound up in another embrace. This one had more emotion, more feeling. "Right," he placed his hands on her shoulders and held her at arm's length. "Right, I better go." He stepped backwards. "When shall we talk?"

"I'll call you. Tomorrow, OK?"

"Tomorrow. Don't forget."

"I won't forget."

Richard waited for Laura to get in her car and drive off before he went to his car. Then he got in and headed towards home.

During the drive he went over and over what he remembered from the session. His head was spinning and he could not quite grasp what had happened to him. This just didn't fit within his reality. Abductee. God, he thought, he was one of those. An abductee. Impossible, his brain said. But then, there were the memories. And he didn't need hypnosis to remember the UFO. Again and again he thought about being taken up by the beings. He recalled more of their appearance as he thought about it. They were exactly like what he'd heard, short, frail, gray-skinned, large eyes, large head. Just like the stuff he'd heard. Heard and not believed.

By the time he arrived at his house he was very upset. Nobody would believe what has happened to him and he'd dare not tell anyone. Thank heavens Laura had been there. She believed. But then, she's had the same experience, she said. Sort'of said. He wondered about that. And what was it she

hasn't told him. It was frightening. He pulled his car into the empty garage and left the garage door open. Instead of going in the house he walked out into the cold night air.

Looking up at the sky the stars seemed to look a little different. A little ominous. "What's the deal?" he asked aloud, looking up. It was a kind of prayer. "What's the deal?" He stared upwards until his neck ached and no answer was forthcoming. He dropped his head downward to stretch the stiff muscles in the back of his neck and then he walked into the house, pressing the button to lower the garage door just before he entered the kitchen. The answering machine was blinking. He pressed a button on it to play the messages.

"I'm burning the midnight oil, Richard. Looks like I'll be in Houston until next Wednesday or so. They can't live without me there for any longer than that. See ya."

Right, Richard thought, whatever. Second message:

"I have to let you know, Richard, it is real. It is real. At least you are not alone. I was alone. It is real. You have to remember that. See you soon."

Richard pressed a button, deleted Pamela's message and played the second one, from Laura, again.

"Is it real?" Richard asked the machine. "Is it real?" He walked towards his bedroom and had his shoes and shirt off when the phone rang.

"Hello, Richard?"

"Laura."

"Yes, I'm sorry for bothering you. I'm really worried. Maybe we should have talked."

"Um, maybe, but...."

"But what?"

"Talking wasn't all that was, I mean," Richard really felt stupid for letting his thoughts slip out. "Never mind, we'll talk tomorrow."

"I, um, well," she stumbled on her words, "Yes, right, you are right. Tomorrow. When will you get up?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I'll call, will that be OK?"

"I'm free. Pamela is in Houston till Wednesday."

"Oh, good. I mean, I don't mean good, I mean," there was a pause, "Hell, I can't talk. It's good that you will be free. I'll call, OK?"

"Sure, call."

"Well, good. OK. I'll go. Get some rest, OK?"

"I'll try."

"And Richard?"

"Yeah?"

"You are not alone."

"I know. And I'm glad."

"I'm glad I can be here. Is that OK?"

"It's fine. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Right. Goodbye."

"Bye." Richard lowered the phone to its cradle.

He was sitting on the side of the bed Pamela usually slept on. He missed her being there, her warmth in the night, the way she yanked the covers from him and her goofy sounding little snore. He lay back, thinking. How many times had he leaned over and kissed her, hoping for some kind of affection, and not getting it? How many times had he whispered "I love you," and have her not respond. He knew she was awake. So many times, so many nights, so many years. It hurt. It still hurt.

But now, things were different. Life was different. After tonight, after Monday night, everything was different. He never knew, never believed, ever, not until now. "It is real," Laura insisted. What is real? God is real. Or is He? Life? Or is the whole thing an illusion? Is this all a dream and will he wake up and find himself and Pam and Robert all happily living in North Dallas?

No, that is not going to happen. Robert is gone and Pamela has left him, in mind if not in body. He is alone. He felt alone. But, he wasn't exactly alone. There was some kind of comfort in knowing Laura knew, Laura understood. Or did she understand? Did anybody understand?

On the nightstand beside the phone there was a Bible. Richard picked it up and spent the better part of the rest of the night looking for answers he couldn't find.

Chapter Five

"Hullo," Richard muttered into the receiver. He had one eye closed and the other was squinting, trying to see what time it was on the digital clock on the nightstand. He exhaled heavily when he saw it was seven-thirty. Maybe it was in the evening, he thought with a panic. Had he slept all day?

"Richard!" Laura's voice boomed from the earpiece.

"Uh, gggnhhh, mmm, yeah." He struggled to pull himself upright onto the edge of the bed.

"Are you going to sleep all day?" There was a chuckle, "rise and shine!"

"Umpfff, yeah, right," Richard mumbled. "Is it really seven-thirty in the morning?"

"Of course. Time to be up long ago."

"You're nuts."

"Of course." There was a pause, "let's have breakfast?"

"Breakfast? God! I have hardly gone to sleep."

"What time did you go to sleep?"

"I'm not sure." He looked at the clock as if it would tell him when he finally dozed. It didn't. "I'm not sure."

"Well, anyway, you can sleep later. How about that breakfast?"

"Ugh, well," he struggled between his desire to sleep and his wanting to see Laura. The latter won out. Besides, he thought to himself, he'd probably not get back to sleep anyway. "Uh, ok, where?"

"How about the lake?"

"Huh?"

"A picnic, at the lake."

"It's cold outside."

"Not that cold. Come on you weenie, why not?"

"Well, ok, sure, how long?"

"Meet you there in an hour, you know, at that park at the end of the peninsula, there off of the interstate."

"Um, uh, yeah, sure, you won't be hard to find. Only person insane enough to be out there."

"Right. See you there." The phone clicked.

With slow deliberation Richard placed the phone in its cradle. Then, even slower, he rose from the bedside and stumbled into the bathroom. Half an hour later he slipped out the door into the garage. Soon he was driving towards the lake on Interstate 30.

There were a couple other cars in the park besides Laura's. Richard saw a pair of young lovers and an old man walking a dog. Laura was sitting at a picnic table bundled up in a coat. Before her sat a small thermal chest.

"Hola, mi agmigo!"

"And a jolly good day to you too," Richard grumbled. He nursed the large cup of coffee he'd picked up along the way as if it was the most precious of liquids. Carefully he settled onto the bench opposite Laura. He squinted into a brilliant sun and placed his back towards the breeze, which was cold. Laura faced away from the sun and towards the lake and the breeze. Her cheeks were a bright pink from the cold. She must have been sitting there for some time already.

The place where they were sitting was an unkempt county park located on a peninsula-like extension of land on the lake that separates Rockwall from Mesquite on the eastern side of Dallas. In the summer it is a favorite place for weekenders, fishermen, boaters and so forth. In the winter it is practically deserted. The two sat on a picnic table which had a looping steal pipe frame that curled around to support the benches. The sky was a brilliant blue. The sun was ten or so degrees above the eastern horizon. The temperature was in the mid-forties.

"Isn't it a beautiful day?"

"Speak for yourself." Richard held the cup to his lips with both hands and sipped the fast-becoming-cold coffee. "So what is for breakfast in this arctic park? Raw fish snatched from the jaws of a polar bear?"

"You are such a wuss," Laura grumbled good-naturedly. "Tacos of course. Chorizo y huevos, con queso!"

"Down right Hispanic you are today, aren't you?"

"Si, me amigo."

"Well, me ah-mee-gah, let's eat."

Laura shrugged and popped the top from the thermal chest. Inside was a thermos bottle and some things rolled in foil. Steam rose from the chest. "Here, grumpy," she said, handing Richard two tacos. "And more coffee. You want it?"

"Oh, Lord in heaven on high, more, more," he held the cup in his hand towards her and she filled it with steaming brew. He ignored the tacos on the table before him and pulled the cup to his lips. "Ah, ah, yes, life, there is life here...."

Laura laughed. She poured coffee into a ceramic mug that had been sitting on the table and took a sip. Then she unrolled one of the tacos. Richard took a taco and they ate while the tacos were still warm.

"Thith thtuff ith goodth," Richard muttered with a mouthful.

"Didn't your mother teach you not to talk with your mouth full?"

"Ththnoth," Richard said after he'd taken another bite from the taco.

"They are good," Laura agreed.

"Thank you." His voice was clearer now that he had finished the taco. "So why out here and not in a nice warm Pancake House or something?"

"So we can talk."

Richard paused. A shadow crossed his features. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

"Don't you want to talk?" Laura took the foil wraps on the table, squeezed them into balls, and dropped them into the chest. Then she re-filled her cup and Richard's with the last of the coffee.

"We're going to need more of that," Richard said, watching the last few drops from the thermos drip into his cup.

"Yeah, well, we'll get some later."

"Yeah." He turned and swung his legs over the bench. He now faced away from Laura and towards the lake. The cold wind sliced at his exposed face. He looked out across the water where the last wisps of a morning fog was only now blowing away. "You know," he said, "I am the world's greatest talker. I am." He was talking a little loud so she could hear him. "But just now," he turned, lowered his voice, and looked at her, "Just now I'd rather not talk at all."

A motherly kind 'of worried look came upon Laura's face. "I know," she said.

For several minutes neither of them spoke. Richard didn't know what was going on in Laura's head but he knew what was happening in his own. His chest pounded as if someone was jumping up and down on it. His head was no better.

"Richard," Laura began, "I know," she paused, "I think, well, I know this must be difficult." For a person who usually had a remark for every occasion she was having a very difficult time with this particular conversation.

"It is so...unreal." He leaned backwards, clutching the graffiti-carved tabletop. "Isn't it?" He eyed her intensely, "Isn't it for you?"

"It's different for me." She looked at him. She appeared to be trying to decide what to say next. What the right thing to say would be. "It is different for me," she repeated, "at least now it is."

"What do you mean?"

"Can I trust you?" Richard's expression told her that was not the right question. "I know I can trust you. I'm sorry. That's not what I mean. I mean, I am going to trust you."

"You can certainly trust me, Laura."

"I know I can. It's just that," she bit her lower lip, "It's just that what I have to tell you might be, "another pause, "might be too much for you. Just yet, it might be too much."

Richard's stomach stirred with worry. After the week that had just passed he wondered what in the world could possibly be too much.

"Let's try this." She seemed to have decided upon another direction. "The experience you had was real. You accept that, don't you?"

"It's not easy," Richard said, "It's damn near the hardest thing I've ever in my life had to face. Ever. But, yeah, I have to accept it. Nothing else. It happened. If there's one thing I never do is go into denial." He started to add that his refusal to live in denial was the reason he and Pamela were worlds apart but he didn't. It was just a fleeting thought and somehow it didn't fit in this conversation. "It's not easy, though."

"I know. I really, really do know."

"Well, it is. But we have to." He looked at her. She was shivering from the cold. Her face was a mixture of red and pink. Her eyes were watering a little and Richard wondered why. The wind wasn't high enough to make them water. Little wrinkles fanned out beside her eyes, like the ones his mother had around her eyes. She'd called them worry wrinkles.

"We have to." The air was charged with tension and she felt such emotional turmoil that she wanted to cry. She struggled against it. It wasn't sadness, or any particular emotion, just the level of all the emotions within her. "Richard, I have had to deal with this, what do you call it, 'reality?', for some time." She studied his face for some kind of reaction. It was blank. She continued. "I've been seeing Jim now for about two years." Richard looked mildly shocked.

"Two years? You were abducted over two years ago?"

"It's not that simple," she said. Richard looked puzzled. "I know," she looked up towards a small wisp of cloud overhead, "God, how do I tell you this?" She looked back at Richard. He seemed to sense

the struggle within her and reflected some sympathy. "I don't know. I don't know how I deal with it. Mostly by being me. By, um, I think, just accepting things and," she paused and looked down at her empty coffee cup which she was clutching with both hands. They were a dark red from the cold. The temperature was falling instead of rising as it normally did during the day. And the wind was picking up a little.

"It's getting colder," Richard noted. "Do you want to sit in my car, or yours?"

"In a minute," she said. She needed this cold, this biting wind to keep her steady. Beads of perspiration formed on her forehead in spite of the cold. "I have never, ever, told anyone." She paused again. "I mean, what has been happening to me. Nobody." She saw Richard looked worried now.

"Go on."

"Let me give you a little background." She saw Richard shiver and pull his coat collar up. "Oh, oh, Richard, you are freezing, let's get in the car."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't want you to freeze." Concern about the weather and Richard's gently chattering teeth helped lighten the mood a fraction. Laura stood and gathered her things. "Let's sit in your car. A little more room."

"OK," Richard agreed and walked towards his car. Laura opened the passenger door of her car, which was to the left of his, and placed the thermal chest she'd been carrying in the seat. Then she walked around and got in the passenger side of Richard's Chevy.

"Now," Richard said, starting the engine, "we can talk." He smiled at her.

"Good. That's better." She pressed the window button on her door. "May I crack it a little, for air?"

"Sure." He grinned at her, "Do you have some Eskimo in you?"

"Don't think so," she smiled back weakly, "just need some air."

"Go on."

"OK, then, well, you should know that what happened to you last Monday night is not unusual. It's been happening for a very long time and all around the world."

"That's what that Matchett fella said."

"Well, it's true." She took a deep breath and looked at him sideways. Then she shifted in the bucket seat so she could face him. Richard shifted as much as he could too, although the steering wheel kept him restrained. He reached over and adjusted the heater controls. Then he looked at Laura

expectantly. "It is true, and I have to tell you that I have been," she paused, "I have been abducted." Richard had expected her to say that so his expression didn't change. "But there's more."

"More?"

"More." She took another deep breath, unzipped her coat and pulled at it to get more comfortable. "More. Let me ask you a question."

"OK, what?"

"Do you have any memories, ever, at all, of missing time, like last Monday, or of strange wounds or marks, or of waking up feeling like someone is in your room, or anything like that? Anything before last Monday?"

"No, I don't think so." He looked at her with an unreadable expression.

"Well, it's important." She took a deep breath. She seemed to be slightly suffocating.

"Roll the window down, silly," Richard said. Before she had a chance he pressed the button on his door and lowered the window about halfway down beside her.

"Thank you," she said. "Now, that's better." She inhaled the cold air. "Better." Looking back at him she frowned, then yawned and her eyes watered. "This is difficult," she continued. "It is not easy. I'm not sure I should even tell you. Please understand, I am really, really very sorry that you had to go through that experience on Monday. I know how it feels to find out that those, um, those things, have..., what? Abused you? Kidnapped you? I know." She looked out the window at the lake and somewhere far, far beyond it. "I will just say it," she spoke almost at a whisper, "I discovered two years ago that I have been some kind of project or something. I have been abducted, taken, many, many times. I don't know how many times. Since I was very young." She paused and listened. Richard said nothing. She couldn't look at his face for fear of what she'd see. She continued. "I had nightmares, bad ones, for years. I had odd scars and sometimes I'd wake up sore. Things have happened to me. Things I don't want to even think about, much less tell you. I have a book, you can read it, it tells about others. But anyway, two years ago I was working for Barkley and Lambert, and they had an employee assistance program thing that would pay for counseling. I went to see Jim. Thank God it was Jim. Anyway, we talked and he hypnotized me. And I found out." After a long pause she looked at Richard. He was looking at her with the same flat expression. "It's still happening."

Richard didn't know what to say. What could he say? This sounded incredible. Too incredible. Being caught at the wrong place at the wrong time is bad enough. But a continual thing? "I, um," he stammered, "I don't know what to say."

"This will take some time."

"I think so."

"In fact, I still struggle with it and it's been two years."

"I can imagine." He paused. "No, I can't imagine. I can't." When he looked at her he felt the most intense feeling of concern, and of something more. His chest swelled up and he struggled to swallow. This emotion, this feeling, was so new to him, so deep, he didn't know how to react to it. He knew he wanted to hold Laura; he wanted to hold her tightly. He wanted to tell her everything would be all right. But it wouldn't be all right, would it. "...it won't be all right, will it?" He didn't realize he'd mumbled the words aloud.

"What?"

"Um, I said," it was his turn to roll down a window. He stuck his head outside into the cold and inhaled deeply. The chill and burn in his throat from the cold helped some. He turned back to Laura. "Whew, wow, hey, this is, we are, I mean, wow...."

"I know." She lifted her left hand in the air and sort 'of swung it back and forth hesitantly. Then she took Richard's right hand in her left and covered it with her right. Richard turned and placed his left hand on her right so they were holding each other and looking into each other's eyes. "This sounds like some kind of cheap science fiction movie. Or an episode of 'Mystery Theater.' I know it does. But it isn't."

"I don't understand this."

"Neither do I," she said.

"I want to...."

"Shshshsh," she lifted her right index finger to his lips and shook her head. Then she patted his hand gently and turned to look out the window again. "It must be near freezing now."

"Must be."

"You know, Richard, people who experience trauma together, like in a plane crash or something, and who live through it, or endure it, they bond, somehow. You and I, we are experiencing trauma. Maybe not a crash or something, but it's just as difficult. Just as terrible."

"All this changes everything," Richard said, simply echoing the words that had been bouncing around in his head for days now.

"It kind 'of does." She looked at him and turned again, leaning against the car door. "It's not really new to me. Not really. There's been a part of me that has always known, even if I couldn't remember. These, what, these beings, these Grays, as they are called, are up to something. They are doing something."

"Where does this fit?" Richard recalled his biblical search the night before. "Where does it all fit? I have faith, you know, I believe in God, in the Christian faith, in Christ. And this, this, what, this alien crap, it doesn't fit." He forgot Laura was there. He was talking out loud to himself now. "I looked. Last night, I looked, I read the Gospels again, here and there, I even prayed, something I haven't done in a long time, not sincerely, not like that. And I cried some. I hate this!" He pounded his fist on the steering wheel with a thud. Laura jumped. "I hate this. This sucks. It really, really, absolutely sucks." His breathing was rapid and he felt like he was about to cry.

"I know, Richard, I really understand, I know," she didn't know what else to say. Instinctively she leaned toward him, pulled him gently towards her, and embraced him as a mother would a heart-broken child. He held her tightly for a long moment and then moved backwards. She let him go and returned to leaning on the door. Both of them had moist eyes. Neither spoke.

"What sucks more is," he looked out the window, "and this really sucks, it is, nobody would believe me. It's crazy. It's nuts. I can't even go to see a pastor. He'd think I was off the deep end or possessed by devils or some shit like that. Who can I tell?"

"Nobody. Nobody will believe you." The words Laura spoke were so flat and absolute that Richard turned to look at her.

"God," he said, tilting his head sideways, "You have been dealing with this alone."

"Yes." Her voice was a coarse whisper.

"How. How have you lived with it?" He looked into her face. "How can you be so, calm, so, happy sometimes, so, you know. I don't know how I'll even face tomorrow."

"I went through hell," she said. "I am going through hell. But I realized that it doesn't matter, things happen and things are and there's nothing we can do. Nothing. So, I have to go on. There are moments, hours, even a day or two now and then, that I feel normal." Richard looked at her with his mouth drooping.

"No, I really can't imagine. This changes so much, so much reality, it makes so much a lie."

"NO, Richard, it doesn't, NO, nothing is a lie!" She spoke to him firmly. "You can't, you can NOT think that way. I know. I've been there, I went through it, you must not."

"But," he said, "but..."

"No buts. It's the same sun there, comes up every day, the same moon, the same stars. And only the most naïve and the most closed-minded would say there couldn't be any life up there. Everything is the same. What if you found out you were adopted. Would it change the way you loved your parents? NO, it wouldn't. This doesn't change the past. The future, maybe, but not the past. And it only changes

the future because you know things now.” Her words came fast. She had obviously thought all of these things through. “Listen, Richard, there’s nothing you can do. And nothing has changed.”

“You sound as if you have been thinking about these things.”

“I have. I know eight other people like myself, who are abducted all the time. All the time.” Her hands flailed in the air. “Can we get out and walk? I’d like to walk.” She sat back against the seat, leaned forward slightly and turned her head to look at him. “Can we? I need air.”

Richard reached for his door handle. “Sure, ok. Sounds like a good idea.” He slipped out as Laura opened her door. They met at the front of his car. She motioned in the direction of the lake and they walked along in the icy wind. Richard zipped his coat up tightly. Laura left hers undone. When they had walked about thirty feet she turned to face him.

“This thing, yeah, like you said, sucks.” Her lips pursed. “Yeah, but there’s not a damn thing we can do about it.” Her eyes sought his. “I would not ever in my life want you to be caught up in it. But, now that you are, I am so glad that, well, that you will listen to me. It hurts so bad to have to be quiet.” She turned and began to walk again. “That bumbling dingbat Jeff wouldn’t know an alien if it bit him on the butt.” She laughed briefly, and sadly. “I can’t talk to him.”

“I don’t get it.” Richard stopped and turned towards her. They were near the lake shore now and waves were crashing against the bank. A slight mist was in the air. “I don’t get why you two are together.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Laura sputtered, walking off along the shore. “I don’t know. He can be a nice guy, down inside somewhere. Actually, I was dating him when I found out. About the alien stuff, that is. I just needed someone so badly, he was there for me. He had no idea what was happening but he understood something was. We were very close for a while. I moved in with him and it was nice. Until I found out more.”

“Like his drinking.”

“That, and other things. He has a temper. And, he’s a momma’s boy.” She continued to walk with her coat open and her hair flying in the cold wind. It would whip up into her face and she’d move it, and it’d return. Several times she held her mouth open and pulled a few strands away from it. Richard kept tugging his coat collar up trying to shield his ears. But the cold wasn’t important. Not really. Them together, talking, that was important.

“So now you’ve left him.”

“Well, I went back last night.”

“Yeah?”

"Yeah, I did. But, I'm going to move out."

"I see."

"Richard," she stopped and turned to face him again, "this thing, this alien thing, I know it must be terrible for you. It must be. We will deal with it. Together. I'm here for you, any time you need me. OK?"

"OK." He shook his head and started walking back the way they had come. He realized he'd left his car sitting with the windows open and running. And it was a couple hundred feet away now. "I hope some enterprising kid doesn't find my car."

"Nobody will bother it, nobody's here now." The young couple and the old man with his dog were both long gone. There wasn't a person or a vehicle anywhere in sight besides on the interstate in the distance.

"I suppose not." He kept walking but slowed his pace a little. "What about heaven, and hell? Is there really a God? You say this doesn't make my past a lie, but doesn't it?"

Laura looked at him intensely. "What is Truth?"

"Truth?" Richard made something between a grimace and a grin, "Oh," he said, remembering that she had quoted the Bible. "Right."

Laura shook her head. "I don't know. I suppose I am what they call an agnostic. Maybe. I believe in God, or a God, or something. I can tell you it was hard to keep even that with what has happened to me and with me finding out. But I do. I am more of a believer now, I think. I learned to pray. When I got past this 'God why have you let this happen to me' thing I learned to pray and ask, sometimes beg, for comfort, and it helps." She walked on, leading them now. "I don't know, maybe it's just psychological, but, it helps."

"What about Robert? Is he in heaven? Is there a heaven? God. So much. So much!"

She slipped her hand out of her coat pocket and took Richard's hand. They walked back to the cars without talking.

"This is enough for one day," she said to Richard as they arrived at the cars. They stood between the vehicles, Richard leaning on his car and Laura leaning on hers as they faced each other.

"It's enough for a couple of lifetimes, I think."

"I have to check out an apartment."

"Good luck." Richard looked at his watch. It was a new one. The old one refused to work even with a new battery. It was almost noon. "Look, we've been out here half a day. I'm in bad need of coffee. Will you go with me to the Pancake House?"

"I can't," she said. Her eyes showed she wanted to. "I have to look at this apartment. I have a room reserved at a hotel but that is too expensive."

"OK, sure, well, let me know." He wasn't sure what she was supposed to let him know. It just seemed like the thing to say.

"I will." She appeared to understand him and it puzzled him more. "I have to go." She walked around her car and opened the door. "Will you be alright?"

"I'll be fine," he said. "A country boy will survive and all that."

"Sure," she said, faking a smile at his attempted humor. "Sure. Well, I'll see you Monday."

"Monday?" Richard had been trying to come up with a reason to see her on Sunday.

"Yeah, at work."

"I suppose we have to go there, don't we?"

"We do." She started to get into her car and then stood again, looking at him with some concern. "Richard?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for listening."

"No problem," he said. He was thinking to himself that he had no choice. But he was glad to have been there. "I'll see you Monday."

"Yeah, Monday." They both got into their cars. Richard pressed the buttons and raised the windows. He'd expected the car to be as icy as the air outside but the heater had kept it at an acceptable temperature. He knew Laura's car would be cold. He waited for her to start up and back out before he placed his car in reverse. She waved at him and sped away. He backed out and drove back towards his home.

Richard stepped through the door from the garage into the kitchen just as he heard the garage door clump closed. He dropped his keys in the usual place on the bar and walked to the refrigerator, opened it, took out a gallon jug of milk and drank from it. In the corner of his eye he saw the answering machine was blinking. He put the cap back on the milk jug, chucked it onto the shelf and closed the refrigerator door. Then he pressed a button on the recorder.

"Wake up Richard, you can't sleep all day. I had a break so I thought I'd call you. What are you doing, anyway, this weekend? You could clean a little if you wanted, you know. You never do any housework. Anyway, don't eat the bon-bon's, they are for a little thing at the office next week. I forgot to tell you. Well, talk to you later."

Pamela's message was the only one on the machine. He felt a tiny disappointment that Laura hadn't called. But that was silly, he told himself. He erased Pamela's message and walked into the den where he picked up the television remote and fired it at the TV. He stood, flipping channels until he decided he didn't want to watch television anyway. He walked into their home office where Pamela did her work and he had his own computer. He sat down and reached for the mouse, clicking up the internet. He brought up a search engine and typed in the words "alien abduction." A list of web sites appeared. "467,976 pages found," he saw on the screen.

"Wow," he muttered. He clicked on the first listing.

A pot of coffee and several hours later Richard was more confused than he had been when he sat down at the computer. There was no shortage of information on the "abduction phenomena," he discovered. And no shortage of opinion about what it was all about. Some "experts" claimed that the "visitors" are from another dimension. Others say from another time. Still others give this planet or that one. One web site claimed they, the aliens, had bases on the moon and Mars and stations circling the earth. One group claims that the beings are not aliens at all but come from hidden under-ground colonies on the earth and have always been here. No wonder nobody believed anything. Nobody could make up their minds what was really happening.

Richard sat in front of his computer reading all evening. He concentrated on first person accounts and on UFO sightings. With few exceptions the first-person stories were very similar to his own. He read about the now famous, or infamous, "Betty and Barney Hill" story, people who claimed to have been abducted in the early nineteen sixties. He continued to dig for answers to his questions but instead just came up with more and more questions. His growling stomach told him he was hungry some time just before midnight. He looked at his watch. "Wow," he muttered, "Missing time." Then he smiled at his own joke. The time wasn't missing. His back and arms told him he'd been sitting at the computer far too long. He closed his browser and went to the kitchen.

Opening the refrigerator door, then the freezer, he saw Pamela's Bon-Bon's. "The hell with her," he said, "She can buy some more." He reached in and brought the box out, tore it open, and plucked a half dozen of the frozen treats out of their fancy paper holders. One of them he stuffed in his mouth and the rest he walked around holding until they started to melt in his hand. Then he sat them down on the counter where they made puddles of chocolate as he dug in the refrigerator for something else. He withdrew a package of cheese which he opened. He broke off a large piece. He dined on mild cheddar and chocolate Bon-Bons. Not the meal of kings, but it filled an empty stomach. He topped the meal off with a long drought of milk from the jug and went to bed.

As he lay there staring up at the ceiling of his bedroom a wave of panic swept over him. He'd read account after account of abductions and virtually every one of them were lifetime experiences, not one-time events. Was Monday night a fluke? Had he been in the wrong place at the wrong time? Or was it part of something else, something more? Would they come tonight? He was alone. What if they did? Would he remember? He had never felt this kind of fear and panic. How did Laura live with it? Only his fatigue drug him finally into a fitful sleep.

Chapter Six

Sunlight burst upon Richard as he pulled himself upright in the bed. He looked at the clock. Nine-thirty. Damn, late for work, he thought, and quickly tossed his feet over the edge of the bed and jumped to his feet. Then he realized it was Sunday. He fell backwards onto the bed. He missed Pamela being beside him. Even if all she did was snore and pull the covers, she was companionship. He had a sadness inside which told him he'd be spending many more days alone. He shook it off and sat upright. Sunday. Sunday? Church.

Church? His mind was tossing around an idea. He'd not been to church in years. Long ago he'd grown tired of the petty bickering, the constant arguing about this or that being the truth, people saying one thing and doing another. But the basis of the Church, the Truth of the Church, he always believed in. Even now, knowing what he knew, he could not abandon his faith. He had to make it fit. He just had to.

With some effort he stood and went to the bathroom. After a shower and shave he put on his pants and went to the kitchen to make some coffee. He halfway expected Laura to call. The phone never rang. Once the brew was underway he went back to the bedroom and got dressed. He wondered if the entire church building would fall on him or only parts of it, it'd been so long since he had gone to church. Pamela would no doubt ask if he had gone crazy or think that maybe that non-existent affair had him feeling guilty.

Dressed and with a cup of coffee in his hand he got in his car, waited for the garage door to come up, and backed out. The sky was overcast and the air was not as cold as it had been on Saturday. Fine, the weather suits my mood. Dreary. He drove the few miles to First Church, found a parking spot, and sat in his car while he finished his coffee. Then he got out and walked toward the building. Here and there he saw someone he recognized but no one he knew more than very casually. He found a seat near the back just as the service began.

"Let us stand for the opening prayer," the pastor said from the pulpit. First Church meets in a modern building with dark mahogany fixtures. It was designed in a traditional manner but has all the latest in sound equipment and audio/visual. Above and behind the pastor who now stood with his head bowed there was a large screen. Below it was a small choir loft where about twenty people stood in robes. The pastor began praying and Richard bowed his head. After the prayer the congregation was

seated. Words to some song appeared on the screen behind the podium which was occupied now by a young man in a robe similar to but more ornate than the robes the choir wore. He raised his hands and music started and the congregation sang. Richard did not recognize the song so he just looked around.

Everything looked so normal, he thought to himself. These people had no idea. No idea. For some reason the phrase "Caesar fiddled while Rome burned," bounced around in his head. Outside in the shadows and in the darkness of night some kind of entity was having its way with humanity and here these good Christian people were singing their hearts out, gleefully, and totally oblivious to what was happening. Surely some of them knew. Surely some of them had some idea.

No, he thought, they didn't. Richard's mind struggled to reconcile the two images, this wonderfully normal American church service and his now-vivid memory of being whisked up from his car and into some kind of craft where he was probed and wounded and violated. His ears buzzed with the conflicting realities.

After several songs, an offering, and a special by a twenty-something duo, the pastor took the podium. "Thank you, thank you all for coming." The pastor smiled. Richard could barely make out his features since he was so far away. "God bless all of you. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ I greet you all and ask you to stand with the reading of God's Word." The congregation stood. The pastor read from Revelations.

"Oh, no," Richard thought to himself, "Not an end-times sermon." His fears were realized. From Revelations the pastor switched to a few verses about being "caught up." Richard frowned. He sat along with the rest of the congregation and listened.

"One of these days, and not too long, I believe, things are going to change. The dead in Christ will rise first and then they who are alive will be caught up! To meet Him in the air!" How many thousands of times had Richard heard that particular phrase? He considered sneaking out but decided he'd endure to the end. He knew he was being unkind and bordering on sacrilegious but he couldn't help himself. He tried to focus on the pastor's message. It was a typical end-of-times message. Richard only half listened to most of it. Richard was sure he had himself endured an eternity by the time the pastor began to wrap things up.

"Let us stand," the pastor bellowed. The congregation stood. "Let us pray, fervently and in earnest and ask God to bring about that day, when peace shall dwell upon the earth and mankind shall live among the hosts of heaven." The pastor immediately bowed his head and began a prayer. Richard rose to his feet.

After the service the pastor stood at the foyer door greeting people as they left. Richard made a point to be in line to shake his hand. "Quite an interesting sermon, pastor," Richard said, shaking the pastor's hand.

"Thank you. Do I know you?"

"Well, I've been away," Richard lied. He hoped he'd not go to hell for that but he just couldn't say he was tired of church people and had quit coming. "I'm Richard, Richard Cleveland."

"Well, nice to meet you, Richard. And thank you." He dismissed Richard abruptly and turned to the person next in the line. So much for a conversation, Richard thought. Suddenly he had an idea. He went along with the crowd until he was standing outside. Then he sidestepped and found a place to wait for the crowd to thin. When there were fewer people around Richard went back inside the building. The pastor had left his post at the door so Richard went to find him.

"There, there, the little clippy thing," the pastor was telling a sound man, "See, the microphone wasn't staying put like it should." The pastor seemed slightly less cordial now than he had before. "Gary, can you fix it? It is important the people hear all the word without the ruffling of my robe."

"I'll fix it pastor," the man responded. He took the clip-on microphone from the minister and looked at the clip.

"Pastor," Richard said. The pastor turned around and smiled.

"Yes?" He looked at Richard intently. "Richard, was it?"

"Very good," Richard said. "Yes, Richard Cleveland."

"Where was it you have been?"

"Oh, just off on business," Richard remembered what his mother had said, one lie leads to another. She was right after all. "I was wondering if I might not have a minute of your time this afternoon. I have a friend who is in something and I'm quite worried. I have to be gone after today, for a while, and...."

"I don't know, I usually rest on Sunday afternoon, and prepare a sermon for the evening service."

"It'll only take a few minutes."

"OK, son, sure, maybe I can fit you in." He looked at his watch. "How about you come back about three. Will that be good?"

"Three. That will be fine. Thank you, Pastor."

"You're welcome." The minister turned back to the sound man who was now clipping the microphone on his own shirt collar.

"Nothing seems to be wrong, pastor," the man was saying. Richard walked up the aisle and out the exit. On his way he listened to the pastor fuss with the sound man over what the pastor said was a

problem with the clip that made him sound like he was shuffling cards while he preached. Richard didn't remember hearing any sound like that.

As he sat in his car Richard looked at his watch. Quarter to one. He backed out and went through a fast food place and picked up a burger and fries, and coffee. He drove down to the lake and sat eating it in his car and remembering the conversation of the day before. He remembered Laura's face as she told about her being abducted. She said she still was sometimes. He shivered unconsciously.

"Rabbit ran across your grave," Richard's mother used to say to a shiver like that. Old wives tale. He reached his arm back to feel the indentation still in his back, the "scoop mark" as it was called. Some kind of tissue sample thing. He thought again about what had happened to him and as the memory ended with his remembering a device being attached to his genitals he shook himself and got out of the car. The air was misty and clouds were low. Moist air from the Gulf of Mexico was doing battle with air from Canada and North Texas was the battle ground just now. Typical late fall weather. Or was it early winter? Richard pulled his collar up and walked down to the edge of the lake. He stood there trying to clear his head.

Finally his feet reminded him he'd been standing in the same place for a good while so Richard turned and walked slowly back to his car. Ten minutes to three, his watch indicated. He drove towards the First Church of Rockwall. Not sure where the pastor's office was he drove around in the parking lot looking for a car. He found one parked at the back of the main building. He got out and went through a door marked "Church Office." Only a couple of lights were on in offices. The corridor was dark. Richard wandered down the hallway until he came upon an open office door that had a sign that read "Pastor's Study." The pastor sat behind a huge oak desk and looked to be reading something. Richard tapped his knuckles on the open door.

"Oh, hi," the pastor looked up and closed the book he was reading, careful to insert a marker to keep his place. "I almost forgot." He rose and extended his hand. "Richard, is that correct?"

"That's correct." Richard followed the pastor's hand which invited him to seat himself in a chair facing the desk. Richard sat and looked at the pastor.

"I have a couple of questions. I'm a bit concerned about a friend of mine."

"I see," the pastor said. He looked at Richard. "Go ahead and tell me."

"I have this friend, at work, I work in an office in North Dallas." Richard's stomach twisted as he realized he had told the pastor he'd been away on business. But the man didn't seem to notice. He went on. "Anyway, I have this friend who came into my office the other day and claimed to have been," Richard paused, "you're going to think this sounds goofy, but the guy says he's been abducted by

aliens.” The pastor pursed his lips and leaned back. “I mean,” he continued, “he is serious about it. Adamant, actually. He described it in detail and said he went to a hypnotist and uncovered memories that had been suppressed. I think he’s looney but the guy is serious and I want to help him. What shall I say?”

The pastor had a sad look on his face. “I know, these things are coming up more often these days. It worries me, actually.” He leaned forward, fidgeting with papers on his desk. “Sometimes it’s figments of a vivid imagination, I think,” the pastor said, “and sometimes, I believe, it’s demonic activity. The times are getting short, you know, as I indicated in my sermon today. Yes, and things are picking up. The devil, that old sly serpent, is using the media and popular culture to lure people away, to pull them away, to steal their crown!” He sounded like he was quoting one of his sermons. He may very well have been. “I’m sorry, I digressed. Your friend, he says he has had hypnosis?”

“Yes, that’s what he said.”

“Well, that is enough there to make me wonder. Hypnosis is a dangerous thing. Far more bad than good comes from it. Unscrupulous and ungodly men practice it and plant ideas in people’s heads. I’d never condone its use.”

“But what do I tell the guy? He is a friend.”

“Hmm,” the pastor leaned back and held his chin. “That is a difficult one. I think I’d suggest that he get counseling. Christian counseling, of course, not some quack with a pocket watch and gold chain who manipulates minds for his own ends. Yes, maybe I could talk to him?” The pastor had an idea, “yes, I’m sure I could find a spot on my calendar. I am a licensed pastoral counselor. Have him call me tomorrow, my office. Our rates are reasonable and we accept most insurance. Does your company have one of those programs to pay for counseling? Maybe that could help?”

“I’m not sure he’d talk, you know, he’s not a religious guy. But I’ll ask. And yes, we have one of those Employee Assistance Programs. I’ll ask him. Well, I’ll let you get back to your sermon.” Richard stood to his feet.

“Of course, anything I can do,” the pastor said. “Anything at all. I’ll be glad to help.” He looked a little puzzled. Richard seemed to have cut the conversation short. And he had. He’d learned all he wanted to know. Richard shook the pastor’s hand and walked towards the door. “Where will you be going?”

“Going?” Richard turned back to face the minister.

“Yes, you said you are traveling with your business, I was just curious?”

"Oh," Richard said, "Austin." He'd burn in hell for sure, he thought, telling a third lie to cover the first two.

"Austin, well, beautiful town. What is it you do?"

"Office Management and consulting."

"Sounds like interesting work."

"It is. I'll run along now," Richard took another step towards the exit, "Thanks again."

"Any time."

Richard walked down the darkened hallway and out to his car. He sat in the seat for a period of time before backing out. He'd not find any help here. He suspected such would be the case. The pastor thought "alien activity" was some kind of spiritual thing, something evil. But Richard was becoming more convinced the alien activities were not spiritual or religious or anything of the kind.

Slipping behind the seat of his little car he looked down at his watch. Three thirty. "What to do," he asked himself. He picked up his cell phone and checked it for messages. There were none. Backing out slowly he tried to come up with a destination. He didn't want to go home. Too quiet. He wondered what Laura was doing. Then he put the question out of his mind and pointed his car towards Dallas. He wasn't sure where he was going until he got there: a mall in Mesquite. The lot wasn't very crowded even for a pre-holiday weekend. He found a place fairly close to the entrance. The air was thick with moisture and the temperature was in the mid-forties. Not too bad. He walked into the mall and looked around. He had no specific idea of where to go. He was just going. He walked around the huge shopping complex for half an hour and then went into a bookstore.

Walking between aisles of books he wondered where books on alien abductions would be. There were plenty of offerings on the Net, he recalled from his evening search. But he couldn't find any in the bookstore. He looked in the science area, science-fiction, news, several other places he thought they might be. Eventually he gave up and went to ask.

"I'm wondering," he said, getting a young girl's attention who was wearing a badge with the store name on it, "I'm looking for books on aliens. Alien abductions, stuff like that."

"Oh, yeah," she said, "Hmm, let me think." She walked to a computer and punched some keys on the keyboard. "Hmm, yeah, there they are. Should be," she tiptoed and pointed as if reaching over the shelves, "Back there, see where it says 'Religion/New Age?'"

"I think so," Richard's gaze followed her finger.

"Somewhere there, I believe, by author and subject." She turned to him and smiled, "any particular author?"

"I can't think of one," Richard said. "Thanks." He walked back to the corner of the store where she'd pointed. For some time he looked on the shelves and couldn't find anything. There were books on metaphysics, astrology, ghosts, a whole host of odd subjects. Then down near the bottom he saw something that might be what he was looking for. There were exactly three titles that dealt with aliens. One of them, a thick paper-back pocket edition, was titled **In The Dark Of Night**. It sounded familiar. Where had he heard it? Then he remembered. It was on the television show Laura had brought to the office. The author had been interviewed. Richard picked it up. "An exposé of alien activity around the world," the subtitle read. On the back of the book there was a short blurb:

Doctor Howard Stansfall, PhD., reveals for the first time the shocking truth about what has been happening in the dark of night, and increasingly, during daylight hours, in virtually every city and town in America and around the world. People are being abducted by an alien race, examined, and returned. Many people are not even aware it is happening to them. They recall under hypnosis vivid details of an alien craft, of examinations and reproductive and sexual activities between themselves and aliens which are producing a hybrid race, part alien and part human. What do their activities mean for the human race? Find out the alarming truth!

"Yeah, right," Richard muttered. He could not deny the fact of abductions, not now. But a hybrid race? Sexual activities? There were some things, Richard thought to himself, that falls too far beyond the pale for believability. He carried the book to the front counter.

"Oh, cool," the girl at the counter said, "I like reading all that spooky alien sci-fi stuff!" She grinned and took a twenty-dollar bill from Richard's hand. "I've read all about it," her voice took on a mock-spook sound "Oooh, alien abductions, oooooohh." Her grin was permanently attached to her face as she handed Richard back some change and bagged the book for him. He took the book, gave her a weak smile, and left the store.

"Sci-fi is right," he said to himself as he walked through the mall. He made a pass through the food court of the huge mall and picked up a cup of coffee. Then he went back to his car and headed home. Arriving just after dark he parked outside the garage and went in the front door. He passed through the living room and on to the kitchen where he spied the light blinking on his answering machine. He pressed a button.

BEEP

"Hi, Richard, it's just Laura, wondering what you were up to. No big deal. I'll catch you tomorrow. I think I have a place, though. Bye."

Richard pressed the erase button and walked through the quiet house to his bedroom. He frowned at missing the phone call. Why hadn't she called his cell, he wondered. He considered calling her back but decided not to. Instead he changed into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, walked barefooted into the living-room and tossed the book he had just bought onto the over-stuffed sofa. Then he went into the kitchen, started a pot of coffee, and returned to the sofa and the book.

In the preface Richard discovered that the author stated he'd interviewed more than a thousand people who had what he called "valid" abduction experiences. The book, the Preface said, was made up primarily of testimonial evidence. The author, Dr. Stansfall, claimed to know what the aliens were up to and indicated that some kind of changes were soon to come to the human race.

"The people whose stories are in this book," Richard read, "are ordinary people. They are professionals, blue-collar, housewives and even children and teenagers. They are all races, all creeds, all religious backgrounds. They have nothing at all to gain by telling their stories and in fact are for the most part reluctant to tell their stories at all. They would prefer that what has happened to them be revealed as a hallucination, as a figment of their imagination, anything but the real-world, cold, hard truth that a real alien race regularly abducts them from their homes, gives them painful and embarrassing examinations, withdraws semen or ova, and even forces them to have sexual intercourse with some form of alien-human hybrid. They reveal the horrifying, shocking and disturbing truth of what is and has been happening around the world."

Hearing the coffee pot gurgling Richard stood, holding the book and reading, and walked to the kitchen. He poured himself a cup of coffee and walked to the table, still reading.

As he finished the preface and turned to the first chapter he looked up and out the window next to his front door. "This is nuts," he said aloud. "This is just too weird." He took a sip of his coffee and read some more.

When Richard's left foot began to protest because he had been sitting on it too long he stood, stretched, and put the book down. He looked at the clock. Twelve-thirty. He looked again. Could that be right, he wondered? He'd been reading for hours. The coffee pot was long empty and his growling stomach told him he hadn't eaten. He walked to the refrigerator and rummaged around for something to nibble on. Deciding on some carrots and assorted leftovers he took the collection to the kitchen table and dropped it there. Then he went to the refrigerator again and returned with a milk carton and a glass. His last trip took him back to the couch where the book lay opened to a spot very near the end. He settled into a chair and nibbled while he finished the book.

What he had read had turned his insides over. Account after account recorded in the book sounded exactly like what had happened to him. The descriptions of the aliens, the ship, the room, even the instruments, the same. Richard recalled seeing the little “Gray” aliens, huge heads and eyes and miniscule nose and mouth and ears. It was something of a classic character these days and one that stares out from stores and book covers and on TV and in the movies. And Richard recalled some other kind of beings, taller, more human-looking. The sum of all of the abductions recorded in the book revealed that the aliens were most likely up to something having to do with reproducing some kind of hybrid alien-human race. Only a few of the abductions were one-time events as Richard had experienced and were, like his, something of the wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time situation. The vast majority were life-long abduction experiences.

“Damn,” Richard muttered, biting off a bit of carrot. He didn’t like the way this book concluded at all. He wanted answers to all of the questions it posed. Those and many more that sprang up as he read the book. He lay the book down on the table and collected the items remaining from his late-night feast. He put them up and went to the bedroom where he undressed and crawled into bed. The time was already past one AM but he could not sleep. He lay for a long time matching up the details of his experience with the experiences he’d read about in the book.

He had much to talk to Laura about, he thought to himself, just before he sank into a fitful and unrestful sleep.

Chapter Seven

"You're late," Laura hooted at Richard as he passed her door on the way to his office.

"Shoot me," Richard replied. He unlocked his office door and entered. The book he had read the night before was tucked under an arm. He dropped it on his desk. Then he went to the window and opened the vertical blinds, looked out across the partly cloudy sky, and turned around. Laura was standing at his desk holding the book. He hadn't heard her come in. "Come on in," he said sarcastically.

"I did." She was lost in reading the back cover of the book. "So," she said, not looking up, "you found yourself a book."

"You could say that."

"I've read it," she said, tossing the book back on his desk. "I've read it three times, I think. And I've lived it, too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." There was more in her expression than in her word. Then it was gone. "I have an apartment."

"Cool. Where?"

"Windchase West, up off 635."

"Windchase, have I seen that complex?"

"I dunno, at 635 and just off 75."

Richard tried to remember if he'd seen them when he drove up US 75. He could not recall them. But that didn't mean much. The Metroplex is filled with thousands of apartment complexes. "Nope, don't recall them."

"Oh well, no big deal." She dropped into her usual chair in front of his desk.

"Have a seat," he said, again with sarcasm and adding a smile. He sat down behind his desk. "Got your message."

"You did?" The words had no significance other than to fill a void in conversation. "Did you have an exciting weekend?"

"I went to church."

"Church?"

"Yep." He considered telling her about his conversation with the pastor. He decided to keep that part till later. "It was," he searched for a correct word, "odd."

"Odd?"

"Yeah. Odd." He made a half-turn in his chair to look out the window. "Odd."

"Explain."

"Well, there all those people are, all normal and stuff. They have no idea what is really happening. And if they did, many of them would freak. They'd lose their faith. Some might even hang themselves or something."

"It's true," Laura agreed. "You know some people theorize that the aliens have not revealed themselves because of the panic they might cause."

"I know," Richard said, turning back to Laura. "I spent a long time on the Net the other night. There's all kinds of screwy theories. Who do you believe?"

"Well, this guy," Laura said, tapping her finger on the book Richard had brought with him.

"Think so?"

"Know so," Laura said, picking the book up. "These stories?" She thumped the book with her forefinger while holding it with her other hand, "they are true. Been there, done that."

"You said." Richard noticed her voice had lowered and she'd glanced over her shoulder before she made her last remark.

"I know." She stood. "Tell anybody and I'll deny it to my dying breath."

"Why?"

"Right." She walked towards the door. "Leave that book there, where people can see it. Don't say a word but just listen to the comments you get. Better yet, go into the break room and open it up and pretend to be reading it."

"I just might do that."

"Well, do it. I dare ya. Then see what I mean." She stepped back into his office and closed his door. "People don't believe this crap. Some of them, most of them, wouldn't believe it if the frickin' spaceship landed in their front yard. And because I do, I'm a kook. A nut. A screwball. Try breaking through the glass ceiling with that hanging over your head!" She opened the door and stood outside his office. "Go ahead, try it." She grinned at him a knowing grin and walked back to her office.

"I will," he said softly. She could not have heard him.

For the next couple of hours Richard busied himself with the usual Monday morning paperwork. He worked undisturbed until about ten, when his phone rang.

"You never called." Pam didn't sound disappointed. She was only stating a fact.

"Oh, Hi Pam," Richard said, sitting up and arching his back in a stretch. "I didn't did I? Well, neither did you."

"I was busy."

"All weekend?"

"All Weekend." The line was quiet as if for dramatic effect. "I need to talk to you, Richard."

"Shoot."

"I mean in person."

"Well, come home."

"I mean, soon. Can you meet me at the airport?"

"When?"

"Three o'clock."

"Today?"

"Yeah, I know, big favor and all that, but the best flight is then."

"Isn't your car there?"

"It is. Which reminds me. Take a cab. I want to get it out of long-term parking."

"And how will you get home?"

"That's what we've got to talk about. Can you be there?" Her voice faded as if she moved the phone away from her mouth. "OK, Richard, hey, I have to go. American Flight 327 from Houston Intercontinental, not sure what gate, you can call and find out. Be there will you dear?"

"I'll try," Richard looked at his watch. "I..." The line went dead before he could say any more. He slowly put the receiver down, his face showing the confusion behind it. For more than a minute he simply sat and stared at the phone. Then he shook his head and pressed a button on his phone.

"Nancy," he called.

"Yes sir," his secretary answered over the speakerphone.

"Do me a favor will ya? Call and cancel that meeting I had with what's his face this afternoon and call the airport, American, and find out where Flight 327 is coming in from Houston. What gate and arrival time."

"Yes sir, American," she was speaking slowly, apparently writing as she spoke, "flight three two seven." Pause. "Got it. Anything else?"

"Not now." Then he remembered, "Nancy,"

"Yes sir,"

"Call me a cab, have them pick me up at the front door at two PM. Make it clear they have to be there, OK?"

"A cab?"

"That's what I said."

"OK, sir, any particular company?"

"One that has cars, preferably," he said lightly, "No, no particular company. Can you handle that?"

"Absolutely."

"Good."

Richard leaned back in his chair and stretched. He wondered what Pamela was up to now. He would find out soon enough, he thought to himself. He leaned over his desk and went back to work.

Hearing a loud voice coming from down the hallway Richard looked up. He'd been back at paperwork for about an hour. Ten minutes past eleven. The loud voice was coming from the direction of Laura's office. He immediately recognized it as Jeffery's. Richard rose from his chair and walked in the direction of Jeffery's voice. He walked up to Laura's office and Jeffery was standing just inside saying something about coming home.

"I'm not going back, Jeff. There's not been anything between us in a long time, and you know it." Laura was sitting at her desk looking a little worried.

"I love you, Laura."

"You love your damn football, Jeff, and your momma, and money, but not me."

"That's not true." With each word Jeffery's voice rose a little in volume. "I love you and I want you home. Stop this crap and come home this evening."

"A van will be at the apartment tomorrow to pick up my things."

"Where you moving?" Jeffery was sounding particularly dumb today. His voice had that cotton quality, the kind football players have when they've been on the bottom of a few too many pileups.

"Well?"

"It's not any of your business."

"You can't afford to move!"

"I can and I have."

"Excuse me," Richard butted in.

"This is none of your business Cleveland," Jeffery blurted.

"I'm sorry, but I have to ask you to lower your voice, Jeffie. We are trying to work in this office." As Richard spoke Jeffery's chest swelled. He intimated he might take offense to Richard and maybe do

something more. But Richard continued, "And I'll also have to ask you to take your squabble out of this office." Richard turned to Laura who looked worried. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Richard, sorry for the disturbance." She turned to Jeffery, "How about calming down and acting like a grownup, Jeff."

The angry ex-football player huffed. "Awwwe, I git it!" A knowing and unkindly smile broke across his face. "I git it. You two." He took a step towards Richard. "And you are married." He took another step towards Richard. "I figure things out, Cleveland. You two been sneaking around here at night and stuff."

"We haven't been sneaking anywhere," Laura said, coming around her desk with a more worried look on her face now. "Don't be stupid."

"Don't lie to me, bitch," Jeffery's tone turned hard and bitter. "I seen you. I know."

"You don't know anything...." Laura began. Richard cut her off.

"Listen, Jeffie, let us not have a scene here." Richard stood as tall as he could but was still dwarfed by the younger man.

"You scare me not, Cleveland." It was the kind of remark a twelve-year-old would make. Coming from a grown man it sounded more silly than anything else.

"What?" Richard laughed. "What did you say?" He looked into the face of his opponent who was turning quite red in the face. Laura picked up the phone.

"I'm calling security," Laura said.

"Go ahead. They work for me," Jeffery shot at her.

"Look," Richard smiled, walking to Laura's desk and taking the phone from her. "Jeffie, listen, this isn't getting you anywhere." He gently placed the receiver in its cradle and sat on the corner of Laura's desk. "Listen, you know that if we tangle in this office it is going to tear a few things up and it'll be out of your budget to fix it. Besides, you could turn me into pulp very easily, and what would it accomplish?" Richard was smiling somewhat strangely. "Not a thing, would it? Probably just make Laura angrier at you. Maybe get us both in trouble. We could both be out on the street looking for another job." Richard stood. "Jeffery, things happen between couples. You have to believe that." As he talked he walked up to Jeffery and stood beside him. "Hey, I've been married a long time." Richard placed his hand on the big man's shoulder in a friendly gesture, "Let me tell you, hotels and the occasional apartment, move out, move in, it happens to the best couples."

Jeffery looked into Richard's eyes. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, Jeffie," Richard said, gently slipping his hand across the big man's shoulder and steering him towards the door, "that you get more flies with sugar than with a fly swatter."

"Huh?"

"I mean, you will scare a woman off for good if you come in and demand things," they were headed down the hallway now. "You have to be subtle."

"Subtle?"

"Sure, you have to let them know that you still love them, send'em a card or a flower or something, you know, sweet talk. If they love you, then they'll come back." They approached the elevators.

Richard walked the big guy up to one and pressed the up button. "You know what I mean, don't you?"

"So you've had this problem before too?"

"Sure. Pamela has jumped ship a couple of times," Richard lied.

"And she came back?"

"Every time." A ding indicated an elevator was arriving. When the door opened, Richard steered Jeffery towards it and into it, holding the bar so the door wouldn't close.

"Hmmm." Jeffery looked puzzled.

"But I didn't demand, Jeffie, just let her know I love her. Works every time, if they love you, they come back."

The big man thought for a minute. "But what if they don't come back?"

"Then they never did love you. Haven't you seen the poster?"

"Uh, um, yeah, sure," he didn't sound sure. "Well, what if they don't come back," he repeated.

"There's plenty of fish in the sea, Jeffie, lots of fish in the sea."

"Yeah, there is. There sure is!" He raised his voice as if for Laura to hear it. She did although he couldn't see her. She was standing behind a turn in the wall beyond the elevators.

"There certainly is." Richard reached around the door and pressed the top floor button where Jeffery's office was. Then he stepped out and let the doors close. As they were closing, he said, "Hey, and Jeffie?" There was no answer. "Don't worry about Laura and I. My affairs don't usually last too long. Pamela gets suspicious." The doors clamped too just as his last word was spoken and Richard heard a banging from inside the elevator. Then he heard laughter.

"You are nuts," Laura squeezed out between breaths, "He could kill you, you know."

"I'm worried," Richard said flatly. "Do you think he'll come back down?"

"I hope not," she said, trying to recover her composure. "He'll probably figure you were joking by the time he gets to the top." She walked with Richard back towards their offices. As they approached hers they both stopped. She turned to him. "Only a short-term fling, huh?"

"Well," Richard grinned, "something like that." He winked and walked back to his office.

Seeing the time was almost noon he started to go to lunch and then decided he'd skip lunch since he was leaving early. As he settled back down to his work there was a tap on his door.

"Gonna eat?"

"Oh, Laura," he looked up at her. He grinned, "Just close the door and we'll start on that affair."

"Sure, right here in front of God and everybody."

"Well, maybe we should wait."

"I think so."

"No, actually," his voice took a more serious tone, "I'm skipping lunch. I have to meet Pamela at the airport at three."

"At the airport?"

"Yeah. Weird, huh?"

"Well, with Pam," she started to say nothing was weird with Pamela but she stopped herself. "Oh, I'm sorry, out of line."

"It's ok." He brushed it off. "Anyway, have to take a cab, she wants me to pick up her car. Still not sure how I'm supposed to get it from this garage to the house, or get mine, or whatever."

"Take it home. Then get a cab to work in the morning."

"You have any idea how much a cab would cost from Rockwall?"

"Oh, nothing much more than a couple hundred."

"Something like that."

"OK, then, I'll pick you up."

"Right, you'd have to get up at five."

"No problem."

"You are serious."

"Sure," she said, then smiled mischievously, "Or I could drive out this evening and we can start that 'short term affair' thing."

"Now that's a plan," Richard grinned at her. He tried not to reveal the thought that passed through his head when she said that.

"Then it's settled."

"OK, fine."

"See you at seven in the morning."

"Awe, thought it would be seven this evening."

"Sorry, sugar, got to pack." She grinned again and disappeared in the direction of her office.

Richard stared at the spot where she had been standing.

At a quarter of two Richard tapped on Laura's office door, which was open.

"Hi," she said, then tagged on, "dear."

"Hello, darling," he replied in mock-adoration.

"I'm out of here. Anything before I go?"

"Nope. Tomorrow morning at seven?"

"Sure, thanks, I'll owe you one."

"Make it dinner. We need to talk some more, you know."

"Yeah, I know," he said.

"I know," Laura said, giving him a sympathetic look, "I know, Richard. Have you called Jim?"

"No, not yet."

"You should."

"I will." Richard glanced at his watch and saw it was five till two. The cab would be waiting.

Quickly he stepped into Laura's office and closed the door. "Listen," he said, pulling a chair up close to her desk. "That book, what it says," he paused, not sure how to ask what he was wondering, "Have you, did you, I mean...."

"All of the above," she said. An unreadable expression was on her face.

The words sucked the air out of Richard. He stood. He wasn't ready to accept what she had just said. His eyes showed disbelief.

"Richard," she said softly, "I know what you are thinking. I have said everything that must be going through your mind now. Said it to myself. And you don't have to believe it. Not yet." She looked at him, a painful expression on her face, "I hope this doesn't change anything. Between us, I mean."

"No, no, of course not," he said, looking at his watch. Now he regretted getting into this conversation. He was going to be late. "Hey, damn, I have to go. What are you... oh, you're packing you said." He walked quickly to her door and opened it.

"I was joking. I'm packed. And about half-way moved."

"Really?"

"Really," she said. "Why?"

"Well, I want to talk to you more, but I really have to run."

"Sure, I'll call you on your cell, OK?"

"Sure, about five?"

"That will work. Talk to you then."

"OK, see ya," Richard rushed for the elevators. A cab sat by the curb. Its driver was reading a paper. Richard rushed up and jumped in the back before the cabbie knew he was around. The cabbie dropped the paper.

"You call me? Are you Richard Cleveland?"

"Yeah, that's me. Dallas Fort-Worth Airport."

"Okee doke," the guy muttered and dropped the cab meter. "Which terminal?"

"American." Richard gave him the flight. "And I'm in a hurry." He paid little attention to the traffic and scenery as the cab sped towards the airport. He was thinking about what Laura had said. How does she deal with that, he asked himself. "Hell, how do I deal with it," he said aloud without realizing it.

"What's that?"

"Sorry, thinking out loud." The driver grunted, looked in his rear-view at Richard, and kept driving. The cab pulled up at a terminal quicker than Richard thought he should have.

"We're here," the man said, "Thirteen thirty-five."

"Here," Richard said, stuffing a couple of twenties in the man's hand. He leaped from the cab and rushed off towards the gates. As he went he took off his watch and belt and wedding ring and as he arrived at the security check point he hurriedly dropped them in one of the little baskets and added all the contents of his pockets. Then he rushed through the metal detector and the alarm sounded.

"Something there," the guard said. Richard stepped back through the detector which went off again.

"Crap," Richard said, not sure what it could be. He fished around in his pockets and then took his jacket off. He tossed it on the counter next to the detector and walked through. The machine went off again. "Well, Damn," he muttered.

"Step over here, sir," the guard said.

"I am in a hurry to meet a flight, officer," Richard said.

"I understand sir, but we have to check you."

"OK, fine." He stood where ordered. The guard instructed him to raise his arms and the guard scanned him with a hand-held scanner.

"OK, you may go."

"Thanks," Richard blurted and grabbed his things, putting his belt back on as he went. "Probably a damn filling in my tooth," he grumbled, wondering why the detector went off. The flight was due fifteen minutes ago. Pamela would not be happy. Except when Richard arrived at the counter he saw "DELAY" flashing beside the flight number Pamela was supposed to come in on.

"Flight 327 from Houston?"

"Delayed, sir, it's on the ground now, should be arriving at the gate any minute."

"Good." Richard smiled weakly at the attractive, dark-eyed attendant behind the counter and fell into a seat nearby. The seats at DFW airport are far from comfortable. He was glad he didn't have to wait on many flights there. Only a few minutes passed before weary passengers came clomping down the ramp. Pamela was in a group of three or four others. She carried no bag other than her purse. She walked straight out of the tunnel and over to the screens and looked at the departing flights. Richard walked up behind her.

"Boo," he whispered into the back of her neck.

"Ooooo," she squealed and shot Richard a cross look. "Richard, don't do that."

"Sorry," he grinned, "You are in a fine mood."

"All kinds of hell broke loose in Houston," she said over her shoulder, still looking at the flight listings. "Darn."

"Darn?"

"Look, my flight is delayed going back too."

"This is a considerably expensive trip for a couple of hours."

"Well," she said, turning at last to look at him. "I wanted to tell you in person."

"Tell me what?"

"Later, let's get some dinner." She walked off down the corridor looking for a restaurant. Richard followed. He wondered if he should be worried or something.

They located a restaurant and were seated before either of them spoke. "Tell me," Richard said.

"What?" She had been looking over the menu. "Oh, hold on, just a minute, what you want?"

"I don't care."

"Richard!"

"I don't know, a burger, I guess."

"Burger! Steaks and seafood and everything here and you want a stupid burger."

"I happen to like burgers."

"Whatever," she said, and turned back to the menu. "I thought you could help me decide but I don't want a burger."

"Get a steak."

"Nah, had steak for lunch."

"Sea food then."

"I don't know."

"Then get a freakin' burger."

She looked at him over the top of the menu, "You are so ridiculous," she said. The waiter arrived. She smiled at the young, uniformed man, "I'll have the steak and shrimp."

"Sheesh," Richard muttered.

"Well, you wouldn't help me decide, so I ordered both."

"Whatever you say," Richard returned. Then he looked at the waiter. "House burger, cheese, fries, coffee."

"Very good sir." He left after collecting the menus.

"OK, now, what?" Richard was impatient.

"Well," she began, looking down at the table and then out into the terminal corridor. "We, I mean I, I mean we, Oh Richard, you make this hard."

"Me?"

"Well, anyway." She shifted her gaze to him and then to some spot across the room behind him. "I have to go to Houston."

"I know," Richard said.

"No, I mean, I'm MOVING to Houston."

"What?" Richard was surprised but not as shocked as he thought he should have been. "What do you mean you are moving?"

"The company needs me there. It's corporate headquarters you know, and they want me to work out of there."

Richard sat quietly absorbing her words. The waiter brought her salad and a wooden platter with bread. Richard reached over and broke an end off of the small loaf.

"Richard, use the knife," she scolded, slicing the opposite end of the small loaf with a knife that lay beside the bread on the platter.

"Just like that?"

"What? Just like what? Don't be a barbarian, use the knife."

"Forget the damn bread," he said, "I mean moving to Houston. What am I supposed to do?"

"Go with me, of course."

"I don't think so," he bit off the piece of bread in his hand, "I don't think so. What about the house?"

"Oh we can sell it or something. I don't know all the details yet. Your company has an office in Houston, you can transfer."

Richard stared at her for a long moment. "You have it all figured out, do you? I thought you loved Dallas. You said last time we came back you'd never leave."

"Oh, Richard, you should see my new office," she said, ignoring his remarks, "It's on the twelfth floor, the whacha-ma-call-it tower in west Houston. It's huge! Not exactly a promotion or anything like that but it kind'a is. The view from the window is spectacular. You can almost see the Gulf on a clear day!"

"Sounds nice," Richard grimaced, "you didn't answer my question."

"What question?"

"Last time you came here you said you'd never leave."

"Was that a question? Oh, well, you know, this is an important career thing for me."

"And the hell with what it'll do to me?" Richard was getting angry now and feeling some other things he wasn't sure of. He wasn't admitting it to himself but part of what he was feeling was relief.

"Well, like you were thinking of Robert when you...."

"You can kiss my ass," Richard roared and stood, "I had nothing to do with Robert's...."

"I'm sorry," Pamela said, looking sincere, "I'm sorry," she motioned to the chair Richard had risen from, "Sit, Richard, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that, I just, never mind."

"You may have a good idea, Pam," Richard said, still red-faced at her remark. She had a habit of tossing in an accusation that Richard should have given more thought to letting Robert ride with that group of kids. It was bad enough that he blamed himself but she sometimes pointed blame too when she felt cornered or wanted her way. "You may have a good idea."

"What do you mean?"

"I think we died when Robert died."

"No, honey, we are here."

"I mean us. You and I. Our relationship."

"Naw," she said, "We still love each other."

"Are you sure?" Richard leaned back. "What makes you sure?" He looked at her with a blank stare.

"I'm not so sure. We should have gone to counseling."

"You know I don't believe in psycho-quacks."

"Well, then," he said, "where would we live?"

"I have looked at this wonderful condo not too far from the office."

"You do know that our corporate office in Houston is on the far East side of Houston, don't you? So we're supposed to live in a condo close to your work and I fight Houston traffic every day?"

"Well," she squeaked, "I don't know, Richard, we have to work this out, don't we?"

"Looks like you have it figured out already." He finished the bread in his hand and took the rest from the platter. After a couple of bites he said, "you go on to Houston, Pamela. I'll stay here."

"Oh, come on, Richard, you know I make more than you do."

"So what?"

"So, then, my job is more important."

"Oh, is that the way it is?"

"Sure."

"I don't think so." They leaned backwards as their meal arrived. For a few minutes Richard assembled his burger the way he wanted it and Pamela cut up her steak. "Pamela," Richard began again, "I love you. I think I love you. Which is probably not good." He saw she was listening to him, so he continued. "Maybe this Houston thing is the best. Maybe we need to figure out if there's anything left and somebody said absence makes the heart grow fonder."

"Richard," she said quietly, "We've been, I mean," her eyes were moist, "Please, Richard. I love you. I want to be with you. But this is important to me."

"Then go. I'll be here. Fly in on the weekends maybe. It's not that far down '45, either. I don't know, Pamela," he shook his head, "I really need to think about some things, too. Some things that have come up with me."

She looked at him with some suspicion. "Richard, are you, is there...."

"No, not an affair," he said, though the first image that popped into his head was Laura's smiling face. He shook his head. "It's something else." He was considering what he'd tell her next, about Monday night and everything that had happened.

She saw his look was very serious and he looked troubled. "What is it Richard?"

"You remember last Monday, when I got home late?" He looked at her carefully, "something, something I found out, changes everything. I mean, life, everything."

"You sound spooky," she said, then took a bite of steak. "Chewy," she mumbled.

"Well, maybe," he said. "Are you interested or not?"

"What, what," she said. "You have to be so melodramatic sometimes."

"Last Monday I was," he paused, "abducted."

"Kidnapped? You're kidding, by who?"

"Aliens, I was abducted by aliens."

Pamela exploded with laughter. "Good Lord, Richard," she said, "Oh, God," she patted herself on her chest, "I'm going to choke," she laughed, "you are going to make me choke. How can you come up with these things?" She fanned herself with her left hand and lifted a glass of water to her lips with her right.

Richard stared at her for a while, then forced a grin. "I don't know."

"Aliens, God," she chuckled, "Really Richard, really." She picked up a piece of shrimp and broke the tail off. Richard watched her. He knew she'd react the way she did. He wondered why he'd just blurted it out.

"See," Richard said after a while, "I'm going nuts. Better that you live in Houston."

She was still giggling, "I think so, you wacko maniac," she smiled at him.

Richard smiled back at her but it was only a facial expression with no emotion behind it. It wasn't that she thought he was being absurd. He'd expected that. What hurt was that she could not see the pain behind his eyes. She should see the pain, he thought. He looked away and wiped the corner of his eye. "Is there smoke in here?" He grumbled.

"No, silly, you can't smoke in the terminal."

"Something then," he wiped his eyes to rid them of the moisture that suddenly appeared in them.

There wasn't much else to say so they didn't say much for the rest of their meal. They made small talk about work, things that had no consequence. Pam kept looking at her watch. As the waiter cleared away the dishes and poured Richard a final cup of coffee Pam leaned back against the seat cushion. "My flight will leave soon."

"What time?"

"Well, supposed to have left already, but the delay said five."

"Hanging around a long time, are you?"

"Well, flights are hard to come by and Carla got these at the best rate."

"Carla?"

"My secretary." She said it with nonchalance but Richard picked up on how important it made her feel.

"I see, new secretary, too."

"Oh, yeah, didn't I tell you?" Pamela slid out of the booth and stood, brushing off her dress.

Richard looked her over and said to himself she still looks so very nice. He stood. "About time?" He didn't bother looking at his watch.

"About time," she said. "Oh, dang, almost forgot," she dug in her purse and pulled out a key ring. "Here, honey, my car is um," she dug through her purse and pulled out a slip of paper, "Here, see, Lot, um, whatcha thing, there," she pointed on the paper. As she talked she removed a car key from a ring holding a dozen other keys.

"OH, ok," Richard said, taking her key, "I could have just gotten the spare key and picked up the car, you know." He was implying she didn't have to fly to Dallas.

"Oh, no, no big deal." She grinned at him as if she was only going shopping and would be back in a few hours.

"If you say so," he muttered.

"No, really. I have a company car now, a new one. Really nice, you'd like it, full size sedan, kind'a plush and luxurious."

"Wow, what are you doing..." he started to make some kind of off-handed remark about fooling around with the boss but stopped himself. A very small voice in his brain was saying that very thing. "I mean, sounds like a promotion to me."

"Well, to be honest," she said, looking down, "I got a bonus, and this transfer, because I saved the company a couple hundred thousand dollars. Some bugs in the software were costing them a fortune and I fixed it. It was nothing really, just little teeny glitches that were tacking on a number here and there. Nobody knew it. But anyway, it was no big deal."

"Bonus, you say?"

"Yeah, not much," she pursed her lips, "just enough to get the condo."

"I see," Richard wasn't sure how to take what she was saying. She'd gotten a bonus, transfer, new company car, rented a condo, and not said a thing about it before now. No wonder she hadn't called.

"Oh, Richard," she scolded mildly, "Don't look so, something." She reached a finger out and tweaked him on the nose. "It's really a good thing, you know. And you'll come. Maybe you can fly down on a weekend or something. See the new condo. You'll love it. Furnished and all. You'll come," she said confidently, "you love me, right?"

"Yes, I love you right," he said flatly.

"Oooh, you!" She hugged him, "I love you too. I have to go now." They had been walking along the corridor as they talked and now stood before the gate where Pamela's plane was due to leave in a few minutes. A boarding call echoed in the corridor. "There it is. I have to go."

"What shall I do with your car?"

"Whatever, darling, you are good at those things." She kissed him on the cheek and disappeared up the ramp. He stood looking after her.

"What things?" he ask to no one. Then he frowned, turned, and walked towards an exit. It took him half an hour to find her car and another half an hour to get out of the airport. As he was pulling out onto the freeway headed towards home he remembered Laura was supposed to call at five. It was six now and no call. He fished his phone out of his pocket and checked. It was on. Battery was fine. No messages. He shrugged and drove home.

Chapter Eight

As Richard turned up the street towards his house it was almost seven pm. Laura's car sat in his driveway. Now he was puzzled.

He waved at her and got out. She met him as he walked to the front of Pamela's car.

"Hi."

"Hello," he said, "your watch messed up or something?"

"No," she said, "Why?"

"Seven AM, dear girl, it's seven PM."

"Oh, I was thinking about that affair thing," she grinned.

"Yeah, right," he returned the grin somewhat weakly and walked past her towards the front door. Laura followed.

"You don't look well."

"I'm ok, I think. As ok as I can be. Pamela's moving to Houston."

"Moving? You are moving to Houston?"

"I said Pamela's moving." He opened the door and Laura followed him through. Richard led Laura through the living room and into the kitchen. Pamela wasn't much of a decorator. The rooms were rather haphazardly arranged. The place was comfortable, though, and looked lived in.

Laura walked through the living room behind Richard, looking around. She'd only been there on a couple of occasions. The last time had been more than a year ago. Some kind of party as she remembered. It was odd being here with only Richard. She noted the pictures of Robert, and a few other pictures, a painting here and there, the tan leather sofa and love seat, stereo and television console. Just as ordinary as could be.

"You have a nice place, Richard," she said lightly.

"Thanks," he said, checking his answering machine. No messages. He tossed his keys and the one to Laura's car on the counter in the usual place. "So," he said, turning to find Laura standing close behind him. "What brings you out to the boonies?"

"Sorry I didn't call," she said. "And I am not sure." She turned and walked back towards the living room. Richard followed. She flopped down lazily into the love seat. "Hmm, comfy," she said, then looked up at Richard who sat on the arm of the sofa. "Well, you said something about talking. And, I

wanted to talk.” Her expression was not readable. “I hope I haven’t stepped out of bounds or anything.”

“Oh, no,” Richard said, “No, not at all. It is just that...,” he slid down the side of the arm and onto the sofa. Then he kicked off his shoes and put his legs on the sofa. He now faced Laura who sat sideways in the loveseat with her legs crossed. “It’s just that, you know, this thing. Pamela in Houston.”

“Oh, yeah,” Laura had almost forgotten he said that. “So? What’s the deal?”

“Well,” he started, “The deal is, she didn’t ‘exactly’ get a promotion, she said, just a bonus and a company car and a nice, big office on a top floor of an office tower in west Houston.” He grimaced. “And a personal secretary.”

“Sounds like a promotion to me.” Laura shook her head, “What’d she do....” She had the same kind of remark in the back of her mind that Richard had thought earlier, about Pamela and the boss. She caught herself.

Richard took note of Laura’s expression and grinned. “She saved the company a lot of money, apparently.”

“I see.”

“Well, she got a condo, already, didn’t ask, and now she wants me to move.”

A worried look flashed across Laura’s face. “You going to move?”

“Nope.” Richard said the word with little emotion but as soon as he had said it he suddenly thought about the implications. He took a deep breath and it caught.

“No?” Laura looked relieved.

“No. This is home. Here. I love this city and my job. No, she took this on herself. She’ll have to figure out that I’m not going. Sooner or later she will.”

“What then?”

“I don’t know,” Richard looked up and around the room. He saw the pictures of Robert, of the three of them, of that happy family that did not exist any longer. His head dropped unconsciously, “I really don’t know.”

Laura sensed his pain and sadness. She moved as if to sit beside him but stopped herself. “I’m really sorry, Richard.” She meant more than that Pamela was moving. He knew what she meant.

“I understand. Thanks.” He looked up at her, trying to smile.

“Should I go? I mean, maybe,” she slid to the edge of the chair and stood.

“No, no, please,” Richard waved at her to sit. She sat down again. “Really, it’s nice to have you here. I don’t want,” he looked out the front window, “don’t want to be alone.”

Suddenly the air became charged with emotion that kept them both from talking for a few minutes. Laura cleared her throat. "Well," she said, standing, "do you have any food here?" She walked into the kitchen.

"Goodness!" She stood before an open refrigerator door. "You have nothing, my good boss."

"What can I say?" He swung his feet around, stood, and walked to the kitchen. "We eat out. Or do junk food. Or call in. Pamela isn't exactly the homemaker type. Not since...." He didn't finish his sentence.

"Well," Laura said, "fine then. Let's go eat."

"How about we just call something in. You like Pizza or Italian?"

"Oh, lots of fat, calories, plenty of greasy pepperoni and stuff? You think I like that?"

"Well, we can call in Chinese."

"Oh, I love pizza," she grinned, "as if you didn't know, dingbat. Make the call." She closed the refrigerator with a grimace.

Richard plucked a magnetic card from the refrigerator and walked to the phone. He placed a call and ordered a pizza. As he hung up he looked at Laura, "but we need beer."

"Beer. Yeah, what's a pizza without a beer?"

"Boring."

"Right, boring. I'll go get some."

"No, let me."

"Richard," she gave him a give-me-a-break look, "I will go get the beer. You, um, do whatever. Make yourself comfortable or something," she chuckled, "you know. Pay the kid when he shows up with the pizza. I'll be back." She had been walking across the living room as she spoke and with her last words she disappeared out the door. Richard heard her car door close a couple of minutes later. He still stood in the living room in his sock feet.

"What is this," he asked himself as he walked towards the bedroom. Quickly he changed into shorts and a t-shirt and went back to the living room. There was nothing to tidy up. Instead he plopped on the sofa and picked up the TV remote. He'd watched ten minutes of a news program when there was a knock on the door. He jumped up, pressing the "off" button on the remote as he did. Laura stood at the door holding a couple of bags.

"I thought you might have gone off to Dallas or something. Where'd you go?"

"Down to the grocery in Rockwall."

"You could have stopped at the convenience store," he said, pointing in the direction of a store only a couple blocks away.

"I know," she said, "but, I wanted good beer. And besides, we needed a couple more things."

"We did?"

"We did," she said, placing the packages on the dining table. She extracted two plastic containers that held salads, Richard could see, a bottle of dressing, a loaf of French bread. From the other bag she took out some specialty beer. Two six-packs.

"Wow," Richard said, spinning a dining chair on a leg and sitting in it backwards with his arms folded over the back. "Party time, huh?"

"Oh, just a little something." Laura walked to the kitchen and looked in drawers to find utensils and things. "You could tell me where this stuff is," she grumbled good-naturedly.

"You seem to be in control," he said. "So, go for it." He didn't add that he didn't know where most things were himself.

"Fine," she said, pulling and pushing drawers until she found all the things she was looking for. Just as she was arranging things on the table Richard stood and opened two of the beers. There was a knock at his door.

"Oh, dinner time," he said, and went to the door holding his wallet. A few minutes later he returned to the table with a large pizza box which he opened, revealing a steaming, thick-crust pizza.

"Yummy," Laura said.

"Yep," Richard said, picking up a beer and taking a sip. "Beer, pizza, good company, what else could a man want?"

"Oh, I dunno," Laura muttered without thinking, "Love, riches, glory, all that stuff."

"I'll settle for a beer, a pizza, and you."

"Damn," she grinned, "I rate third beneath beer and pizza. And settle for, eh?"

"Well," Richard crooned, "Um...."

"Silly boy," she said, "sit. Eat." She pointed at his chair. He turned it and sat in it correctly, pulling up to the table. Laura sat across from him. She passed him some bread which he broke with his hands and they started eating. He briefly thought of the way Pamela fussed at him for tearing bread in that fashion. Then he forced the thought from his mind. For half an hour they made small talk about work and the weather and ate pizza and salad and drank beer and avoided the two subjects uppermost on Richard's mind. Pamela was one of them. Only after most of the pizza was gone, several beers put

away, and they were leaning back groaning that they had eaten too much did the other subject come up.

"I told her." Richard looked across at Laura.

"Told who what?"

"Told Pamela."

"What?"

"About Monday." He saw Laura's eyebrows rise a little.

"Oh, you did?"

"I did." Richard's face was almost in a spasm to decide what emotion to reveal.

"Well?"

"Well, she said I was nuts. Thought I was joking." He grimaced, "She laughed her head off."

Laura sat looking at him for a minute. "So," she leaned in his direction, "what did you expect."

"I expected," he said, standing and plucking his third beer from the table, "I expected, she'd laugh."

He walked into the living room and stood at the front window looking out at the darkness. "I expected her to do just what she did," he said, "but," he paused. "But I expected her to notice that I was hurting, that I was puzzled, that I was, hell, still alive." The last few words Richard spoke rose in timbre until they were almost a shout. "Sorry," he said, turning to look at Laura, "Didn't mean to yell."

"It's OK," she said, walking near him and looking out the window as if to see what he was seeing.

"There was a time," Richard continued, "When she knew, instinctively knew, anything that was wrong with me. I could hide nothing. Now," he shrugged, sipped at the beer, "now, she looks right through me." He felt a pressure on his shoulder and turned to see Laura standing beside him with her hand upon him.

"Richard," she said at almost a whisper, "I," her tone was tender but reserved, "I am sorry."

Richard forced a smile, shook his head and reached up for her hand. Taking it in his, he looked into her eyes, "it's not your problem," he said, "but thank you." He gently let her hand go and went to the sofa. He sat the beer on an end table that separated the sofa and loveseat and flopped onto the sofa. "It's just that, damn, why does EVERYTHING have to change. All at once. What's the deal?"

"Beats me," Laura said.

"What the hell does it mean?"

"I don't know," Laura said, falling into the loveseat and looking towards the window. "I don't know at all."

Richard suddenly felt his head spinning. He shook his head and slid forward to sit on the edge of the sofa in the manner that Laura was sitting. "What's going on, Laura?" His gaze held a combination of worry and fear.

"I wish to hell I knew," Laura said, suddenly falling back in the chair. She lay there, almost prone with her head cocked up uncomfortable-looking against the back of the loveseat and her knees protruding beyond the edge of the chair, bent, her feet doubled back under them. She was being very unladylike.

Richard marveled at her flexibility for a second then slid back into the depth of the sofa. Silence filled the room for a few minutes. Richard reached for his beer and took a couple of sips, finishing it off. Laura pushed back into the chair and extended her legs outward and stared at her feet.

"Laura," Richard said at last, "can you tell me what has happened to you?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"I'm sure."

"Positive? I mean, even after what you went through, you know, it'll stretch your brain, may pull it right out of your head." What she said would have been funny if she hadn't said it with such a serious tone.

"I'm listening."

"OK, then," she said, sitting a little more erect, "I'll tell you. At least, what I can. There's still lots locked away in my brain. Jim and I have worked on it but it's hard. Very hard."

"I understand," Richard said, then, "no, I really don't understand. But," he considered his words, "I care. And I'm listening."

"You'll be shocked."

"I don't think so."

"I know so." She looked at him with such an intensity he suddenly wasn't sure he wanted to hear what she had to say after all.

"I've had these experiences all my life," she said, "since I was a little kid. Maybe earlier, I don't know for sure." She told Richard about a life-long ordeal of abductions, examinations, experiences, both positive and painful. She was sometimes cared for, sometimes treated coldly, by the beings called "Grays." She had been taken possibly hundreds of times even before she entered high school.

"Things changed a little then," she said quietly. "More, um, happened to me."

Richard sat in silence, unable to comprehend what Laura must have gone through. Must still be going through.

“Richard,” she looked at him with an expression he couldn’t read. Pain, regret, more, but it was all mixed up. Her eyes were soft and a tear drifted down a cheek. “Richard, nobody knows this stuff you know. Nobody except Jim. Even Jim doesn’t know it all. I remembered it but I didn’t tell him. It’s too,” she took in a breath and it caught, “too... personal. Too difficult.” She stood and walked to the window. Her shoulders were drooping and she looked like a wilted flower. She appeared to be sobbing.

Richard slid to the edge of the sofa, sitting squat-like with his feet beneath him. He wasn’t sure what to do. He wanted to go to her, to embrace her, to comfort her. It wasn’t anything sexual or even romantic, just one person feeling the pain of another. He didn’t want her to hurt. But something held him back. There was silence, broken only by little sobs coming from Laura.

“Are you, I mean,” Richard stammered, “Do you want to do this? You don’t have to.”

Laura turned and faced him, her cheeks smudged and the small amounts of makeup left on her face was smeared. “I want to. I really want to. I want another person in this stupid world to know, to listen, to understand, at least a little.”

Now, with her facing him looking so vulnerable and open, and so distressed, Richard felt feelings stir within him that were more than person to person. He shifted uncomfortably, suddenly afraid of what might happen next.

Laura sensed his feelings. She held a hand towards him, fingers extended and hand open, “There’s more, Richard, let me tell you.”

“OK,” he said, sliding backwards again. His heart was pounding and he wondered if it was making his shirt bounce. Unconsciously he scratched the middle of his chest as if to relieve the pressure. It didn’t work. He swallowed but the lump in his throat would not go away. “OK, I’m listening, Laura.” He said her name with emotion.

She settled back into the loveseat and twisted to pull her knees up beneath her chin. Since she was in a safer place, to Richard’s mind, he rose and went to the kitchen and brought back a towel.

“I’m sorry,” he said, handing her the towel, “we don’t have any tissues I don’t think.”

“Thank you.” She took the towel and rubbed at her face. Then she looked up at Richard who was standing beside the loveseat.

“Anything else you need?”

“Not now, I don’t think,” she said. Richard sat on the sofa again. “Here goes,” she muttered.

The story Laura told Richard next was very close to the limit of believability. She told him that while in High School she had been “assigned” a hybrid, a male, which she regularly had sexual relations with. She became pregnant and carried a child for several months before it was taken from her. “I was

nineteen," she said, "In college, and I had been with a couple of guys before, you know," she looked away, not wanting Richard to look at her. "I had no idea at the time, of course, Jim and I figured all this out, but, I do remember not having a period for three months. Seems like it was that long. I was pretty worried but didn't go to a doctor. It was a wild time then. I was young and stupid." She paused, "and I had no idea."

"How could this? I mean, where were you living?"

"First, in a dorm, then an apartment, after I left home for college. How? I don't know. At night, somehow, they just took me." She was staring at her feet again, "I don't know. Charlie and I were together for some time."

"Charlie?"

"Oh," she said, "I gave him that name. Funny, things are so clear now but then, I was, you know, like one of those split-personality people. I had two lives and my 'ordinary' life had no inkling of what was happening in my other one." She frowned. "I met him once. In my ordinary life."

"You met him? The alien?"

"He's not, he was not, exactly an alien. He is a mix-breed, more human than alien. His eyes were too large and a little odd, and his face too narrow, but he could pass on the street with a pair of glasses on."

"Oh, I see." Richard didn't see, but he had to fill the air with something.

"Well, there was this time," Laura said, leaning forward and looking towards Richard, "I remember now, pretty clear, I was sitting at one of those outdoor tables, at a coffee shop, near the college. This guy comes down the street, you know, the sidewalk, all bundled up and with glasses on. Dark glasses. I remember thinking he looked odd. A friend and I were sitting, drinking coffee, and here he comes, walking pretty ordinary, but sort-of swishing, you know, swinging his arms. When he drew near me he stuck his hands in his pockets. He turned, stopped as he got to my table, turned to me, and in this real bizarre kind of sing-song voice, very nasal, he said, 'hello Laura.'"

"No shit?"

"Nope. It was the weirdest thing. My friend, um," she paused, "I can't even remember her name now, she looked from the guy to me. I said, 'do I know you?' He just walked on and disappeared around a corner. It was Charlie, I know it was." She sat a minute. "Charlie," her tone now was wistful, "that wasn't his name, of course, it was some kind of something I couldn't pronounce. It started with some kind of Cha-Ra, something, I don't know. I just made up Charlie." She paused, "I think he loved me."

"Loved you?"

"I think so." Laura leaned towards Richard, reaching across to place her hand on the arm of the sofa. In an absent gesture Richard placed his hand upon hers. She turned her hand up and grasp his tightly. "You know what? These memories, they were so close to the surface, so close, I think he did that. I think he wanted me to remember him, you know?"

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know." She squeezed Richard's hand and then fell back into the loveseat. "I don't know." Her gaze went out the window again. "One day he wasn't there anymore. There was another, and I struggled with this new one." The room became so quiet Richard could hear the ticking of a clock which hung on the kitchen wall. Plimp. Plimp. Plimp. "I think I loved him too. I think so." She looked back at Richard suddenly. "Is this the most ridiculous crap you have ever heard?" Her statement was loud and abrupt.

"Huh?" Richard wasn't sure what to think.

"Sounds like some kind of weird sci-fi movie, doesn't it?" She stood, "Well, it happened, it all happened. I know damn well it did." Walking towards the window she seemed stressed again. Her hand absently pressed against her lower abdomen. "I have proof, sort 'of. I have scars." Suddenly aware of herself she quickly moved her hand. Still facing the window, she said, "I had an examination, a few years ago. Some problems. Inside. There are scars. Unusual scars. Strange scars. The doctors had no idea what they were and neither did I. The doctor even asked if I'd been sexually abused as a child. But he had no clue. But later, with the memories, I think, maybe, I have had, carried, more than one child." She seemed out of breath.

Richard stood, walked towards her, took the points of her drooping shoulders in his hands and gently turned her around. Then he embraced her gently and held her as she stood there. He could feel her emotions, somehow, sensed them, and something swelled up inside himself. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. He smelled her perfume. He clutched her tighter. Her arms slowly, hesitantly, rose from her sides and reached around him. They stood there in an embrace for what seemed like forever.

After some time Richard relaxed his grip but didn't let go because he wasn't sure what he would do. He felt such strong feelings for her. It had been a very long time that he'd felt this way for anyone.

"Richard," Laura said softly, "I think...." She stopped. Her hands slid from behind him and gently pressed against him, moving him backwards. He let her slip from his arms. "I think, we might, um," she stepped backwards, sliding her hands along his arms until she clutched his hands, "what is this?" She looked deep into his eyes.

"I don't know, Laura," he said at almost a whisper. His voice was coarse with emotion. He cleared his throat. "What is it?"

"Are we on rebound? Or is this something else? You've been hurt and so have I. I just moved out. Pamela is moving." She let go of his hands and took another step backwards, still locked into his eyes with her gaze. "Are we making a mistake?"

Richard took a deep breath. He felt as if his chest would explode. He couldn't breathe. "Whew," he exhaled, "Damn," he stepped back. "Wow." He broke the gaze, turned, walked to the kitchen where he opened the refrigerator and pulled out another beer. Twisting the top he took a drink from the bottle and then stepped back, closing the refrigerator door. Laura was standing near the window, staring into the darkness beyond. He walked back into the living room, stopping in the center of the room and looking at the back of her head.

"Um," he croaked, his voice not cooperating with him, "A'hem, Umm, Laura," he took one step towards her. "Damn," he took another cautious step, "I mean," he took a step backwards. Then he turned and sat the bottle on the end table between the two chairs.

"Richard," Laura whispered, turning to look at him, "I didn't expect this." Her eyes sought his. When they found them Richard stepped closer to her. She stepped towards him and reached out to take his hands again. "This isn't good."

"No, it isn't."

"But, I mean, really not good."

"I know."

"You are married."

"Technically."

"Technically my ass," she grinned slightly, "technically and altogether."

"I suppose so."

"So, I should go."

"You should go."

They stood holding each other's hands and looking into each other's eyes for a long time. No words were spoken. Then they came together in an embrace, Laura placing her head carefully on Richard's shoulder.

"I want," Richard stammered, "I want, um, to kiss you." He felt her arms tighten about him.

"I want to kiss you, too."

"But, you know."

"I know." Her arms relaxed and she moved. Richard thought she was going to step away. Instead she only moved back far enough to look at him again. Slowly she moved her hands upwards and took the sides of his head in them gently and he leaned down and kissed her. He kissed her once, softly, on her lips. Then passionately. They clung to each other. Then, suddenly, they both stepped backwards and stared into each other's eyes. Laura turned to the window and Richard went to the sofa and fell onto it.

"Damn," he said. He could feel the blood pounding in his ears. He reached for the beer and took a long drink. It was not very cold and was quickly going flat but he didn't care.

"I agree," Laura said. Then she started giggling. Then laughing. The tension, thick as molasses, that had filled the room dissipated as if a wind had swept through. Richard smiled.

"Wow," Richard said.

"Yeah," she said. "Wow." She turned and came toward him, plopping lazily on the sofa beside him. Then playfully she leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. He sat the beer down. "Beer breath," she muttered.

"Sorry," he said, wiping his mouth.

"No problem," she said, and then turned to be almost on top of him and they kissed again. Then she giggled and pushed him away and slid to the other end of the sofa.

"Well, boss, now you've done it." Laura was eying him playfully.

"What is that?"

"You have broken one of them rules. Fooled around with the hired help."

"Shit," he said, getting up and picking up the bottle he had been drinking from and another he'd left there from earlier. He walked to the kitchen, poured the rest of the beer down the sink and dropped the bottles into a trash receptacle. When he turned around he found Laura standing beside him. He hadn't heard her get up or come into the kitchen. "Uh, oh," he said, startled, "Hi."

"Hi." She smiled.

"Are you going to file a grievance or just sue the company?"

"What'll get me more dough?"

"Well, a lawsuit, I suppose."

"Then, that's what I'll do."

"OK, then."

"OK, then," she echoed, "so I may as well have something to sue about." She pulled at his t-shirt and kissed him again. "This could become a habit." She put her head upon his shoulder and they embraced.

"It could," he said. Then he eased her gently backwards. "Laura, I...."

"Don't say it," she said, placing a finger on his lips. "Don't you say it, Richard Cleveland." She moved her finger, tapped his lips, and flitted into the living room almost on tiptoes. She'd abandoned her shoes hours earlier and was walking in stocking feet.

"But," Richard protested, following her into the living room and sitting beside her on the loveseat. He lifted an arm and she settled in under it.

"No buts," she said, patting him on the chest and then turning to rest her head against his shoulder.

"But," he said again.

"No, Richard," she moved her head from side to side. "You may love me. I think so, maybe. And I may love you. That's a pretty good bet. But, we can't say that. Not yet."

"Why not?" He squirmed. He felt so comfortable with this woman. He thought he should feel guilty, too, but Pamela was leaving him. And the truth was they had left each other long ago. Their marriage had been only one of companionship for a long time. Richard thought they were still together only because there was nothing pushing them apart.

"Because, dummy, you are married and this is crazy and we're both emotionally freaked and this could be some kind of fly by night thing and...."

"Shsh," he moved his hand over her mouth. "Listen. Maybe we've got something, maybe not. And you are right, this is the most weird of situations and all that." He took a breath and moved his hand from her mouth up to twirl her hair in his finger. "I don't know where we'll go from here, but I know you are my best friend. I hope you know that."

"You are my best friend, too. And I don't want to screw that up." She twisted so she could look upwards at him. "Have we?"

"Nope. Not yet," he said. "And we won't."

"No?"

"No."

"Good." She squirmed just enough to stretch up and kiss him briefly on the cheek. Then settled down to where she was again. They both sat looking out the window again. It was as if they were looking for something, waiting on something. "Richard?"

"Yeah?"

"What do you think this stuff is all about?"

"I don't know. You should have a better handle on things than I."

"I don't know anything," she said, "Nothing. I know what has happened to me. That's about it. Really, after Charlie, you know, things changed. I fought them. They did a better job of locking up my memories. And, I think, their, um, 'visits,' have been less frequent. I'm sure of it. Maybe because I'm older. I don't know. I do know it's not the usual pattern. These days things are mostly happening faster, not slower. More often, not less. But, anyway, I'll tell you something."

"What?"

"I had a hysterectomy."

"You did?" Richard wasn't so shocked. In fact, he doubted anything would shock him any longer. He rubbed the top of her head gently as she talked.

"I did. Right after I started going to see Jim, when I figured out what had been happening, I made an appointment and now I have had, I mean, now, well, you know."

"I see."

"I told you," she said, "I had a child. Their child. They kept it." She sat up and turned to look at him. "I've met my child. Him. I should say, I've met him. He looks so," she paused, "human."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she leaned back onto his arm again. "Yeah."

The tension, and most of the passion, had dissipated and been replaced with a feeling of companionship and understanding. "This is nice," Richard said quietly.

"It is nice." She shifted her head back and forth to make it more comfortable. "I met my son, I suppose you'd say son. Years ago, I think, times and dates tend to run together, you know. And with everything that has happened. Anyway, there's a memory of me being on the ship. They brought this child to me. It was an adorable little boy. He looked, you know, human. Except his eyes were not exactly right, but not that different. And, well, it's hard to explain. But he had blond hair, blue eyes, God," she exhaled, "I don't understand this crap." Richard felt her tense up. He moved his arm down from her head to her waist and pulled her against him. She relaxed.

"Neither do I, dear girl, neither do I."

Richard was leaning back in the loveseat, his head resting on the back of it, with his eyes closed. He felt Laura scrunch down as if to get more comfortable. Time passed. He must have dozed off. A startled exclamation from Laura woke him.

"Hey," she said, suddenly sitting upright. "Holy cow, look what time it is."

Richard blinked and squinted, reading the clock on the entertainment center. He scooted backwards to be more upright in the chair. Laura stood, pulling at her blouse and skirt. It was in a little disarray. "Um, gee, it is late."

"Late nothing, it's after midnight."

"Well, that's late, isn't it?"

"Yeah, very late." She walked around, stretching. "I think we went to sleep."

"I think so." He smiled and stretched his arms forwards, "nice, huh?"

"Yeah, nice, but what to do now?" She stood in the center of the room. "If I drive home I'll have to come right back. Unless you want to drive your wife's car. Damn."

"Well, you could just stay here."

"Yeah, right," she said.

"I'm serious." He stood. "I'm not asking to go to bed with you," he said, "or you me. Whatever. We have a guest room and a soft couch. I'm sure you could find something to sleep in. Pam's stuff is all over. You two are about the same size."

"Are you crazy?"

"Maybe." He moved next to her and pulled her against him. "Listen, I know, I'm not supposed to say it but just now, I love you. Anyway, I don't want to ruin anything, you are my best friend and I need you in my life and I think you need me too. So we'll play this one note at a time. I am particularly happy to just be with you. I don't need anything more. I care about you and I think," he leaned back, holding her shoulders at arm's length, "I think maybe, we'll be alright." He leaned down, tapped her lips with his, then her cheek, and then allowed himself to gently kiss her neck as he took a deep breath. Her smell was intoxicating, for sure. He released her and walked to the kitchen where he took a glass from a cupboard and got some water from the outlet in the refrigerator door. After drinking the glass in one gulp, he wiped his mouth and sat the glass on the counter. Laura was still standing where he'd left her. The look on her face was not readable.

"Well," she said at last, "It might be a good idea. Or, practical, at least." She grinned, "Does that guest room have a lock on the door?"

"Of course," he said, "but you can trust me."

"I meant on both sides," she said, "I don't trust you, or me."

"I know what you mean," he said, "we have to be adults about this." He took a step towards her and then stopped himself. "OK, well, yeah, sure, the idea of waking up with you beside me is quite nice. But, not yet, I don't think. Not yet."

"Right," she said, "Not yet. Friendship. We have that. We can't wreck it."

"Nope."

"Well then, point me to, um, Pam's stuff and the ladies room."

Chapter Nine

Richard shuffled along the short hallway and tapped on the guest room door. No sound. He tapped again. Finally he heard a muffled voice and then heard the doorknob click. Laura peered through a crack in the door.

"Huh?" She looked groggy.

"Hello, earth calling Laura."

"Oh yeah," she said, opening the door wider and placing a hand in the small of her back and arching it. "Good Lord you should have used softer concrete when you poured that thing."

"Sorry, you could have slept on the couch."

"You could have given up your nice, soft, pillow-top."

"You could have joined me," he grinned.

"We're not going to discuss that," she grinned back at him. "Ha, your hair is standing up like a porcupine."

"Well, yours is a bit miffed too."

"Oh, yeah," she was suddenly aware of herself, "Gee, hey, I know I look like a dog," she said, almost physically shrinking before him, "You have never seen me like this." She stepped back towards the guest room door.

"Hey, you," Richard said, stepping after her, "You look, um, fine." What he was thinking was not fine. He didn't say it. The way she looked actually sucked the air from his lungs. "Don't worry about it."

"Well," she said, relaxing a little, "what the hell. It's not that I'm all that self-conscious."

"Nope."

"So, then, may I use Pam's makeup and junk?"

"Like that adorable face needs makeup."

Laura smiled, "It needs it. Trust me. Got to do something about these bags," she said, pointing an index finger at each eye.

"Lovely bags they are," he said and without thinking kissed her cheeks just below each eye. Then he stepped back, "Whew, sorry," he stepped back some more, "damn, this isn't easy is it?"

"No, it's not," she said. Her arms rose briefly and she took a half step in his direction. Then she quickly folded her arms behind herself and bolted into the guest room and closed the door. Richard

heard the lock click. He grinned and walked into the kitchen to make some coffee. As he approached the coffee pot he heard the guestroom door open and heard shuffling feet in the hallway. He had only a quick glimpse of Laura and then his bedroom door closed and he heard the lock click. He went to the laundry room and took clothing off the rack there and changed from his athletic shorts and t-shirt into dress clothes. He dug some socks out of the dryer and went back into the kitchen. The coffee was made and he poured himself a cup and sat in a dining chair to put his socks on. He heard his bedroom door click and out came Laura. She had on the same skirt as the day before but was wearing one of Pamela's blouses. Her hair was fixed and she had on touches of makeup. As she walked stocking-footed into the kitchen he stared at her.

"What?" She looked at him nervously and then went on a search for her shoes.

"I can't decide." Richard smiled.

"What!"

"If you look better now or when you are in bed."

"Oh, ho," she laughed, "very funny."

"I think...."

"I think you better drop this line altogether."

"Maybe so." There was a thump against the front door of the house and Laura jumped. "What was that?"

"Paper." Richard stood and walked in his sock feet to the front door, opened it, and reached down for the paper. He closed the door quickly as cold air was blasting through it. "Wow, another front, I suppose."

"Must be," she said, now on a knee, holding one shoe in the air with one hand while probing underneath the loveseat with her other hand. "Ah ha," she said, retrieving her other shoe. She twisted her legs and fell into the loveseat very unladylike.

"Very good, your grace."

"Oh, shut up," she barked. With her shoes on, she stood and bounced up and down. "I sometimes hate being a woman." She wiggled her feet, "your shoes look so much more comfortable."

"I wouldn't know," he said, walking back to the kitchen with the paper. "I've seen gals wear shoes like mine."

"Yeah, and they wore thick glasses too," Laura said. Then she thought how callous that sounded. "That's not fair. Anyway, these things are no fun."

"Go in there and stick on a pair of those spikes Pamela wears."

"If I did," she said, smiling at him, "I'd bust my rear for sure."

"Yeah, especially with your graceful waltz."

"Jerk" she sputtered and swatted at his head. "Like you are a perfect gentleman, there with your coffee and your paper, never offering a lady a cup of coffee."

"Hey, I expect my women to wait on me, not vice-versa."

"Oh, no," her lower lip curled inward, "Oh, you are digging your grave, buster. Besides, I am not 'one of your women.' Like you have a harem or something."

"I do."

"Sure you do," she laughed, walking to the coffee pot. She plucked a cup from a hook on the wall, filled it, and walked to the table. Richard was flipping through the paper. "The world still here?"

"So far, I suppose," he said, flipping another page. Something caught his eye on the lower corner of a page. It was a picture of Dr. Howard Stansfall. "Hey," Richard folded the paper and held it up to read the article. "Hey, that Stansfall guy, he's going to be in town."

"In Dallas?"

"Yeah."

Laura rose from her chair and moved around to look over Richard's shoulder. As she stood behind him he recognized Pamela's perfume. But it was different on her. And distracting. "Hey, you are making me crazy," he said. He hadn't meant to say it aloud.

"What?"

"Never mind," he said sheepishly.

"Oh," she grinned, "sorry. I smell like Pam, huh?"

"No, you smell nice." The minute he spoke the words it occurred to him how they sounded. He sputtered and laughed, "I mean, you smell different. Hell, I don't know what I mean." For some minutes they laughed at Richard's clumsy speech. When he recovered, he shook the paper in his hands and popped it into another fold. Then he held the article where Laura could read along with him.

"Hmm," she said, "He's going to be, yeah, I know that place, downtown. Hey, that's tonight, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Dang, I'm supposed to get my stuff moved."

"Do it today."

"Right."

"I'm the boss, I'll give you half a day. Want some help?"

"Oh, that would go over well."

"It would, wouldn't it? My neighbors, whoever they are, have already pegged me as an adulterer."

"Yeah, well, that's not so bad as having the folks in the office think so. We have to work there together. And then there's Jeff."

"Yep, there's Jeffie. So, then, take the afternoon off with my blessings," Richard said.

"If we don't get going it'll be afternoon before we get there."

"I suppose so," Richard said. He left his empty cup on the table, switched off the electric pot, and went into the bedroom to get his shoes.

"Well, we made it." Laura pulled into a slot in the parking lot. "Too bad the hired help don't get a place in the great and mighty parking garage."

"Yeah, it is. And too bad the hired help can't afford a real car." Richard tried to extract himself from the small sports car. "Now I know how a sardine feels."

"I'll have you know this wonderful piece of machinery, with its power and grace, it's style...."

"And cramped seats...."

"Shush, this wonderful thing deserves to be in that garage. It cost far more than that toy car you drive."

"What's wrong with my car?"

"It's a kid's car."

"You are so funny."

"You should drive your wife's car now."

"What, that bummer Beemer? I don't think so."

"Whatever," Laura slammed her car door and pressed the alarm button on her key ring. The car made a blip sound. "You are boring," she told Richard.

"Watch it. I am your boss, you know."

"I'm so afraid," she said, smiling. She followed him through the employee entrance to the building. They walked to the elevators. The office was already bustling when they stepped out on their floor. Richard winked at Laura as they parted at her office door. He went towards his. Nancy, Richard's secretary, came out of her cubicle and walked towards him.

"Mr. Cleveland, you have had three messages from a Mister Simonton, I think is his name, something about office furniture?" She handed him a note. And then she handed him a second note.

"Your wife called a few moments ago. She said she tried your cell phone. She asked you to call her."

Here's a number." She pointed. "That's a Houston number," she said. Richard understood that Nancy was fishing for more information. He left her with an empty hook.

"Thanks, Nan," he said, turning and walking into his office and picked up the phone.

"Pam," he said when he heard his wife pick up the phone and say hello.

"Oh, Richard," she said, "I called."

"I know."

"Well, I'm coming in this weekend and get my things, what I need. Will that be alright?"

"Why wouldn't it?"

"I don't know," there was a pause on the line. "I just thought. Never mind, I don't know what I thought."

"Whatever, Pam, doesn't matter." Richard felt his throat closing off. He hated the feeling. He wanted to end this conversation. "Pam, you have made your choice, you know."

"I know," she said. "Richard, there's not much left, is there?"

"No, Pamela," he understood her to mean between them, "No, there's not."

"I'm sorry, Richard."

"I am too," Richard said. He could barely breathe now, the emotion was so strong. He was thinking this must be what it feels like to be hung. He tried to clear his throat.

"Are you alright? Do you have a cold or something?"

"No, I'm fine. When are you coming in?"

"I don't know, exactly, but I'll call first."

"No need for you to do that," Richard said, "It's your house too."

"Well," she said quietly, "I'll call."

"OK, then, whatever."

"OK, I better get back to work."

"Me too."

"Good, I mean, I'll see you soon."

Richard was struggling for a breath.

"And Richard, I, uh," she seemed to be unable to finish her sentence.

"Me too, Pamela. Goodbye." He slowly let his arm relax until it was hanging at his side, the receiver still in his hand. Quietly he hung it up and walked to his office door and closed it. Then he returned to his chair and sat behind his desk. He turned and faced the morning sun outside his window. He wiped his cheeks and fought the emotions that rose inside him. Once as he brushed his face he felt

the smooth surface of the gold band on his left hand. With deliberation he slipped it from his finger and dropped it into his pocket. He did not know how he could hurt so much.

His phone rang and brought him back to reality. He'd been thinking about years past, when he and Pamela and Robert had been happy, living that perfect life that few ever knew. At least they had known it, if only for a while. Nothing lasts forever, he said to himself as he whirled in his chair and picked up the phone.

"Mr. Cleveland, it's that man again," Nancy said.

"Fine, Nancy, send him through."

"Yes sir." The phone beeped and Richard heard another voice on the line.

"Good morning," Richard said to the man on the phone. Then he deliberately sank into the routine of his day and tried to forget about everything else.

"Hi boss," Laura said, after tapping on Richard's office door and opening it slowly.

Richard looked up from the paperwork on his desk. "Hi." His expression told Laura he wasn't doing too well.

"Haven't seen you all morning."

"You know, work, work, work."

"I know, all kinds of junk for me to do, too." She sat in her usual chair. "So what's wrong?" Her expression was sincere and concerned.

"Oh," he said, tossing the pen in his hand down on his desk and leaning back in his chair, "Oh, hell, Pam called this morning." His hands came together. He had a habit of whirling the ring on his finger, except the ring was not there now and his hand felt funny.

Laura noted its absence. "What happened?"

"Nothing, really," Richard said. "I mean, really actually, nothing. She just called to say she was coming to get her things Saturday."

"And?"

"She asked me if it was alright."

"And?"

"Well, she no longer thinks of that house as home, you know. So fast, so sudden." He stood. "God," he said, bending as if someone had punched him in the stomach, "How the hell can it hurt so much?" He sat on the edge of his desk.

Laura stood and walked to the door and eased it closed. Then she walked to Richard. She placed an arm around him. "I wish I could do something, Richard. I wish I could."

"Nothing anyone can do," Richard said, giving her a weak smile and turning to the window. He walked right up against the glass and stood there. "Except maybe God, of course. He could bring Robert back. He could fix us. Make things work again. If there is a God."

Laura walked to the window and stood beside him. "I wish it worked like that," she said. She placed her hand on his shoulder.

Richard felt himself sob and fought it off. He turned towards Laura who embraced him. He grasped her and sniffed, laying his head on her shoulder. "This sucks," he muttered into her collar, "This sucks bad."

"Shsh," she cooed, squeezing as tightly as she could.

A tap at Richard's door sent them in different directions rapidly. Richard slipped into his seat as the door opened slowly. Pamela was not close enough to the chair she usually sat in to make it so she just sank onto the side of Richard's desk as if looking over something on it. Nancy peeped into the door.

"I'm not interrupting anything am I?"

"Of course not, we're going over budget figures," Richard said, pulling a handkerchief from his desk drawer and blowing his nose. "Dang, I think I'm getting a cold."

"The weather," Nancy said, "terrible. Just right for colds and things."

"I know. What can I do for you Nancy?"

"Oh," the young girl smiled meekly, "I was looking for Ms. Bright."

"Laura?"

"Yes sir, there's a call for her. It was forwarded here when she wasn't in her office."

"Oh," Laura said, "send it to my office, please."

"Oh, fine, Ms. Bright," Nancy stepped backwards through the door, "It's Mr. Callahan."

"Great," Laura said flatly. "Tell you what, Nancy, take a number, I'll call him in a minute."

"Very well," she said.

When she had gone Laura and Richard looked at each other. "That nosy little girl," Richard muttered, still with the handkerchief at his face.

"Oh, she's harmless."

"Right." He stuffed the handkerchief in the drawer.

"Yeah." Laura walked towards the door. "I'm leaving for lunch, and the day, do you want to have a bite of lunch before I go?"

"Oh, no," Richard stood, "I forgot. Yeah, so, that thing starts at like seven-thirty, I think."

"It does, I think."

"So, when will you be free, with your packing, I mean?"

"Well, I called the moving service. Their guys will be there in about an hour, so, with any luck, it'll be around five or so. I don't really have that much. I'll take my time unpacking."

"Oh, ok then, let's have dinner somewhere downtown before the thing."

"Sure."

"I'll call you, have your cell phone?"

"OK, yeah, when you get off."

"I will."

Laura walked down the hallway. Richard had a thought and followed her to her office. She went inside and he followed her and closed the door behind him. "I have a question."

"Yeah?"

"OK, you said that, they, them, you know, take you, since you were a kid."

"Yeah."

"Well, how do they know?"

"Know what?"

"Where you are? I mean, you move around, different apartments, stuff, how do they know?"

"I don't know," she said, looking at her fingers, which were tip to tip in front of her, her elbows resting on her desk. "But they do." She looked up at him. "They always do."

Richard cocked his head to the side, puzzled. "Oh, well," he opened the door, "that thought just occurred to me." He stopped, "when you are at home, or wherever you are?"

"Wherever I am. Once in Mexico when I was on a trip."

"Oh, ok, I was, ...wondering." He pulled the door open slowly. "OK, then, good luck with the packing."

"No problem," she said. "Richard?"

"Yeah," he turned back towards her.

"I'm here, you know." Her words were full of unspoken meaning.

"I know," he said, "and you have no idea how important that is to me."

Her smile spoke more to him than any words could. He returned the smile and walked back to his office.

For lunch Richard had a pack of cheese crackers and coffee from the break room. Then he spent the bulk of the afternoon haggling with the man who'd called that morning over pricing and delivery of replacement office furniture. The logistics of replacing chairs, desks, and various pieces of office

furniture in an office such as his was complicated and required planning. This task was the exact kind of thing to take his mind off his troubles. He didn't slow down clearing the work on his desk until he heard a tap at his opened door. He looked up and saw Nancy standing there holding her purse.

"I'm about to go, Mr. Cleveland," she said. Her voice was so high-pitched and she spoke so softly most of the time Richard had a difficult time understanding her.

"Huh?" He looked up at her, "Oh, fine. Sure, see you tomorrow."

"Do you need anything?"

"Need anything?"

"Before I go, I mean."

"Not a thing, Nancy, thank you."

"No problem, Mr. Cleveland." She turned to leave and then stopped and stepped back. "Mr. Cleveland?"

"Yes?"

"I, um, maybe it's none of my business, but, I hope things work out for you." Her face showed genuine concern.

Richard understood she must have seen that his ring was not on his hand. He smiled at her, "Thanks, Nancy, I'll be fine."

"Good," she said, "I, I mean, we, are, um, pulling for you."

"Thanks."

She headed for the elevators at a more rapid pace than usual. His weariness must be showing more than he thought, he said to himself. He closed the folder in front of him, stood, took his jacket from a rack in the corner of his office, and walked towards the elevators.

Richard punched Laura's cell number into his phone and pressed send before he dropped his little car into gear. It rolled backwards slowly out of the lot. He looked in the mirrors and held the phone to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Richard," Laura said.

"Yep, how's the move coming?"

"We're at my new apartment. I had a little tiff with Jeff, ha, tiff with Jeff, funny," she paused, "anyway, he acted like a three-year-old so I didn't get all my stuff. I'll get it later."

"Gee, what happened?"

"I'll tell you when I see you. No big deal."

"So, where shall we have dinner?"

"Why don't you come by here. The guys are unpacking stuff and will be gone soon."

"Fine, I can do that. Where are you?"

Laura gave him directions and since he was now headed in the wrong direction on Central Expressway he cut across a lane of traffic and headed for an exit. A couple of horns honked as he swerved in their path. "Hello?" Laura was saying something but he couldn't hear it. He was concentrating on not running over anyone.

"Laura?"

"Yeah,"

"I'll see you in a few minutes. Gotta go before I run over a little old lady."

"OK, see you. Look for the moving truck, easy to spot. Big yellow thing."

"OK, bye." He deftly pressed the "Off" button on his phone without looking and tossed it onto the passenger seat. A few more twists and turns and Richard was pulling into a slot beside a large yellow truck with the words "MOVERS" painted on its side rather amateurishly. Some guy was clomping along a sidewalk with a box under each arm and Richard followed him. When the guy clomped up a set of stairs Richard was right behind. He found Laura at the top of the stairs telling the guy to be careful with the boxes.

"Hi Richard," she said, smiling at him.

"Hi." He walked up to her. "How's the move?"

"Just a few more odds and ends."

"Good." Another guy came clomping up the stairs with a box. He must have been in the truck when Richard passed by, Richard thought.

"This is all, ma'am," he said.

"Thank heavens," she muttered. The man grunted a reply. He stepped past the two of them and into the apartment. Within a minute he and the other man was back on the landing. He pulled a folded invoice from his hip pocket and looked at it.

"Looks as if it's charge, if you'll sign here," he pointed and pulled a pen from behind his ear. Laura took the pen somewhat reluctantly and quickly signed the invoice. The man pulled a pink copy from the back of the triplicate invoice and handed it to her. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Thank you." The men clomped down the steps. Richard followed Laura inside. He pulled the door to behind him. They walked across a box-strewn living room.

"Nice," Richard said looking around.

"It's a royal mess now," she said, looking at the boxes. "I'll never find anything, I'm sure."

"Lord I would hate to know I had to move." His remark brought back Pamela and her moving and he felt a stabbing pain in his stomach. He ignored it. "You'll get it all done soon and it'll look like a palace."

"Hardly a palace," she grumbled, "Maybe a servant's quarters. You know that company I work for, tight wads, pay sucks." She grinned at him.

"Of course, can't make money if we have to pay the slave labor, can we?" He walked past her and snooped around in the apartment. Two bedrooms, one bath, a kitchen-living-room combo, a large patio. It was spacious and the kitchen was elaborate and the appliances were new.

"Well, inspector," Laura said, "If you are through, shall we go eat?"

"Aren't you missing something?" He was standing in the hallway which had a bedroom off to his left and right and a bathroom in front of him.

"What?"

"Um, a bed."

"Well, I told you, a little thing with Jeff. The bedroom furniture in the spare bedroom of his condo is mine. But he was acting such an ass that I had to go. The idiot was threatening my mover guys."

"That was stupid," Richard said, "They looked like they could turn him into mincemeat."

"A kitten could turn him into mincemeat, the coward," she said, frowning, "anyway, I said the hell with it, we got the boxes and left."

"So are you going to sleep on the floor?"

"Well, no, I'll get a room. Tomorrow I'll go get some short-term rentals and see about getting my stuff back."

"I, um," Richard hesitated, "Have a spare."

"Spare what?"

"Room."

"Oh, yeah, you do," she said, tugging on a particularly large box. Richard gave her a hand and they scooted it towards the kitchen. "It's a good thing I had this stuff packed, Jeff would have made a bigger protest."

"You took his stuff?"

"No, I bought this stuff but he is convinced what is his is his and what is mine is his. The jerk." She pulled the video from the box and began to stack a very nice set of dinnerware on the bar.

"So?"

"So, what? I'll be ready to go in a minute."

"I mean, the room."

"Oh, the room." She stood. "Um," she said, moving back a step, "Do you think that is a good idea?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Well, you know," she said.

"I do?"

"Hello, anybody home?" She tapped on his forehead softly with her knuckles. "Your neighbors, the people at the office, Pamela, and...."

"And? I get the and." He grinned at her. "We are adults. I don't give a damn about the neighbors and the office bunch probably think we're sleeping together anyway, and who gives a damn about Pamela?"

"You do."

"I do," he said, his chin falling a bit as well as his voice, "Nothing I can do in that department, though." The fingers on his right hand fiddled with the empty space on his left-hand ring finger. "I think that, you know, it's kind 'a over."

"You were together a long time," Laura said looking at him sympathetically.

"Well, yeah, but, we've not been together, not really, not since we lost Robert." Richard stepped over a box and walked to the patio door. He stared outside at nothing in particular. "I mean, we've not even, um, you know, in like, forever."

"Oh, yeah, I wanted to know that," she muttered. Richard turned and saw her grin. "And you want me to come stay with you?" She placed the last of the dishes on the bar and dusted herself off. "I'm a mess."

"You look great," he said. "Well, what can I say? I like your company."

"Right." She stepped around another box and looked for her purse. "Anyway, Jeff and I, we haven't, either, you know. In a while." She was scooting boxes and pieces of furniture which sat around in disarray, "No wonder."

"No wonder what?"

"No wonder our hormones were pounding the crap out of us last night."

"Maybe," Richard said, leaning over and picking up Laura's purse from beside a box. "You looking for this?"

"Gee, thanks," she said, stumbling towards him and snatching the bag out of his hand.

"No problem. We go now?"

"We go now."

Richard went through the door first and waited for Laura to lock it. They walked down the steps together and out to where the big yellow truck had been parked. "Sardine can or toy car?"

"What?" Laura looked at Richard puzzled.

"My car or yours."

"Oh, what a choice." She looked longingly at her car, "Yours, I guess. Mine has the parking permit for the complex."

"Right." Richard pointed towards his car, "The toy it is," he said. They walked to his car. He held the door for Laura and then walked around and got in. In a few minutes they were speeding towards downtown. Ten minutes later Richard took an exit and pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant. He got out and started around to open Laura's door but she was out before he could. He shrugged and turned towards the restaurant.

"This is a good place," Laura said.

"Never been here." Richard set his pace to Laura's and they walked up the sidewalk together. He held the door as she entered. The restaurant was a Texas-style steak house. Inside there were long-horn heads mounted on the walls, barbed-wire collections, western posters, and country music playing. A tiny girl dressed in a short-sleeved bandanna styled shirt and short, tight, jean cut-offs smiled at them from behind a podium.

"How many?"

"Oh, eighteen," Richard said.

Laura punched him in the side with her finger. He jumped. She looked at the girl. "Two," she said, then to Richard, "You are crazy."

"Of course." He followed the little girl to a table in the back. They settled in, ordered drinks and a couple of bar-b-que plates.

"How many years have I known you?" Richard's head bobbed up and down as he spoke because his chin rested on his laced fingers and his elbows were solidly on the table. He was looking across the table at Laura.

"One, silly. Just one."

"Is that possible?" His head still bobbed.

"It is," she said, reaching across and pushing him so his chin would fall off his fingers.

"Seems like longer. Much, much longer."

"I know," she said, looking at him in the dimly-lit room. The drinks and food arrived. When the waiter had gone, she said, "It's odd. Like I've known you forever."

"Same here," Richard said. He was now leaning back and arranging things on the table in front of him. "I was serious, you know."

"About?"

"The room."

"Oh," she said. "I'll think about it."

"I'll keep my hands to myself," he grinned.

"Maybe I don't want you to," she said. In the darkness he had difficulty interpreting her expression. So he didn't try. Instead he slid his hand across the table and rested it momentarily on hers. She took his hand briefly, squeezed it, and turned it loose.

After they were through eating Richard paid the check and they walked out of the restaurant. "The auditorium is down that way some, isn't it?"

"I think so."

"Yeah," Richard shook his head, "I'm sure." He closed the door after Laura had gotten in and walked around the car. It took him only five minutes to find the auditorium where they were headed to hear the lecture and then ten minutes to find a parking place and walk back to the auditorium. "We should have walked from the restaurant."

"I think maybe so," Laura chuckled. She held his arm as any date would have and they walked through the entrance to the small auditorium. In the foyer was a large poster, the front cover of Dr. Stansfall's book, the same book that lay on Richard's desk at work, In **The Dark Of Night**, with a picture of the professor in the lower right corner. Another placard on a stand read:

Welcome to the

Monthly meeting of the

Aerial Phenomenon Research Group.

APRG is proud to present

Dr. Howard Stansfall,

Author, lecturer,

Professor of Social Anthropology.

Below the banner headlines there was a short paragraph describing the professor's accomplishments, background, and education.

"This should be interesting," Richard said, reading the poster.

"I think so," Laura replied, "I hope so."

"Let's take a seat, shall we?" He led Laura through a set of double doors and down a sloping aisle. They had arrived about twenty minutes before the program was to begin and there were not many people present. Little pockets of people stood here and there, talking. No one had greeted them or said anything as they came in. There were no programs that Richard found. They sat in two seats next to a central aisle, Richard next to the aisle and Laura beside him.

They sat a while, looking around like a couple of teens waiting for a movie to start. Laura turned to Richard. "Richard," she said softly.

"Yes'm?" He turned to look at her. Her eyes were moist and soft, he noticed. She was looking at him with an affectionate expression.

"I know...", she said, almost at a whisper so as not to be heard by anyone else, "you don't deserve to have had happen to you what did and I know it has screwed up your world," she looked at her feet, extending under the row of seats in front of her, "but I'm going to be selfish now." She looked back at him. "I am so very, very glad you are here, with me. That you understand me." She gave Richard one of those simple smiles that can melt the heart of the coldest man.

Richard felt emotion stir within his chest. He returned the smile and reached to take her right hand in his left. "Laura," he said, "there was nothing anyone could do about what happened. Nothing. And maybe I would have been happier not to have known. But some day, I would have. And anyway, I want to know what is going on in this world, no matter how," he looked blankly towards the stage where a duplicate of the posters in the foyer stood, "no matter how troubling, difficult, or unbelievable. Frankly, I'm not happy that this happened to me but I am glad that I have found this stuff out." His gaze returned to her. "And," he continued, "the feelings I have for you, well," he hesitated, "they've been there longer than two weeks." He had to stop talking, his chest was pounding too loud. He was sure it was echoing through the auditorium.

"Me too," she said.

Richard resisted the urge to kiss her. Instead, he said quietly, "Maybe there is some kind of plan or something."

"Maybe," she said. There was a droplet on her cheek now. She brushed it away. Before the conversation could continue they heard footsteps beside them. They both turned to see a tall, thin, 30ish man in a slightly dated brown suit standing beside them. He was wearing a white shirt and a tie with UFOs on it.

"Good evening," he said, smiling at them. Richard and Laura stood. They shook hands. "I am Victor Young, president of APRG. Welcome to our seminar."

"Thank you," Richard and Laura returned in unison.

"If you have any questions about our group, please, feel free to ask, and if there's anything I can do for you while you are here, just let me know." He smiled at them and moved on up the aisle, greeting others in the auditorium. Richard and Laura sat down.

"Love that tie," Richard muttered in Laura's ear.

"Don't we though," Laura returned. They quietly chuckled to themselves. A few minutes later the man was on the stage thumping on a lapel microphone. The "thud, thud, thud," sound vibrated through the auditorium which had poor acoustics.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Young began, "Thank you for coming, and welcome."

Richard realized the hum of conversation had fallen off and he turned to look behind them. The auditorium was almost full now.

"For those of you who have not been here before, we are," he stepped sideways slightly and pointed with his opened hand, palm outward and fingers together, at a poster, "the Aerial Phenomena Research Group. Our goal is to research and record anomalous sightings, UFO's if you will, and investigate them. We have some brochures which, I apologize, were not in the foyer as you came in, but will be there as you leave, if you wish more information on our organization." The thin man smiled at someone in the audience sitting near the front. "Fred, my friend, side-kick and our some-time secretary," the smile on Young's face indicated some sort of inside joke, "was a wee bit late in arriving and he had picked the new brochures up from the printer. They are here now and you may pick one up on your way out.

"Once a month we hold this meeting to discuss current research and investigations and to inform the public about what we have learned. Our focus is, specifically, the four-state area, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and of course, Texas. Arkansas, also, is included within the radius we investigate though there is another affiliate who concentrates their efforts there. We are an affiliate of a larger research group and our organization is made up of unlicensed part-time researchers, full-time professional investigators, volunteers and members." Young sounded as if he were quoting something

he'd said many times before. "We invite you, if you are new to our organization or have not heard of us before, to pick up a brochure and learn about our specific work and how to become a member." He walked to the edge of the stage and bent over, taking a tri-folded flyer from the man who he'd indicated was Fred the secretary. "Thanks, Fred," Young said, stepping back and holding the brochure up. "We are supported by our memberships and the work we do depends primarily upon membership dues." He held the brochure up and showed the back. "On the back of the brochure you will see information about membership." He folded the brochure in half then and put it in his inside coat pocket.

"That's enough of our fund-raising for the evening. Except," he leaned forward and pointed at something. Fred handed him something. "We also have a newsletter, this is one," he held it up, "and, the fees from subscriptions help too, as well as hard-copy reports of specific investigations. Those are available to anyone and the minimal fee for them also supports our research." He dropped the newsletter to the floor near the edge of the stage.

"So, that's that. Again, thank you for your patience and perseverance, my board of directors insists that I undertake that fund-raising speech." He smiled a smile that was disarming and warm. "Now, Here's Craig Schipper, our lead investigator, to bring you up to date on sightings and investigations."

A rather tall, professional looking man about 45, wearing a dark suit and tie, very shiny military style shoes, short-cropped hair, wide features, thick mustache and eyebrows walked up onto the stage, nodding at Young as he did. His face was not unkind but he was not smiling. Unlike Young, who stood near the edge of the stage, this man stepped behind a podium where there was another microphone. Young left the stage and took a seat next to his friend Fred.

"Good evening," Schipper said, "Thank you for attending. My name is Craig Schipper, formerly a detective with the Fort Worth police department, now working independently as a private investigator and also as an investigator for APRG." His voice was deep and booming. He didn't really need the amplification provided by the sound system. "I am not as comfortable speaking before a group as I am in the field, so I ask you to bear with me."

Richard thought he made an impressive speaker. He shuffled in his chair to try to get more comfortable in the hard plywood seats. He still held Laura's hand and he glanced down at it and smiled.

"My investigations in the past month have taken me to central Texas, Oklahoma, and once to Louisiana," Schipper continued. He related stories of sightings of lights, of "flying disks" and other things he had investigated. One turned out to be a hoax by college students, another an odd reflection of headlights on low clouds. One by one the man briefed the audience on his activities. It wasn't until his last report that Richard sat up to listen more closely.

“While I have traversed considerable countryside the past few weeks, the most important and elaborate sighting occurred within thirty minutes of here, just north of the suburb of Plano.”

Laura squeezed Richard’s hand as if to cause him to listen, but she needn’t have done that. He was already concentrating on the man’s words.

“A week ago Monday night there were about four sightings of an object. These sightings occurred in the vicinity of the communities of Parker and Wylie, which are north of Plano.”

Richard and Laura looked at each other astonished.

“I have two detailed reports with photos. The photos are undergoing analysis. Witnesses describe a disk-shaped object that was spotted hovering over a field and moving from southwest to northeast.” The man described the weather, low clouds, misting rain, he described the craft and the red flashing light. It was clearly the exact same craft that Richard had encountered.

“I’ll be damn,” Richard muttered. He felt Laura’s arm move under his and she pulled him gently in her direction, a gesture Richard understood to indicate she was with him. He turned to her and smiled.

When Schipper had completed his description, Richard wanted to raise his hand and say, “I saw it!” He restrained himself, however. He said to himself that he would catch that investigator and talk with him.

There was a short pause after Schipper completed his speaking. “Good, lord, Richard,” Laura turned to him. “It’s the one....”

“Has to be,” he said.

“Then, you have to talk to that guy.”

“I do.” He shook his head. Before he could say more Victor Young returned to the stage.

“Now it is time, ladies and gentlemen, to introduce our speaker for the evening. While the abduction phenomena is not specifically part of our research effort the two are certainly interrelated and we were very happy to have Dr. Stansfall available to speak to us. He happens to be a friend of one of our members and was already going to be in town for some other engagements so we invited him to speak. He was very kind to fit us into a very busy schedule.” Young more or less repeated the information in the biographical sketch from Stansfall’s book, then introduced the professor.

When the professor walked onto the stage a quiet anticipation settled on the crowd. No doubt many had come to the meeting to hear him speak. The impressive-looking man walked to the podium and looked out across the auditorium. His face was stern, his eyes deep-set and his countenance was serious. His graying hair was fairly long and a little in disarray. He looked the part of an “absent-minded

professor” type, complete with reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. He sat papers before him on the podium.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” Stansfall said. Richard remembered him from the TV show and thought that the man was even more impressive in person. Stansfall drew the pause after his greeting out and stood looking straight out at the crowd. The silence became a nervous one. Richard wondered if the man had forgotten what he was going to say next. But then he realized Stansfall’s actions were calculated for impact. And impact they did.

“The night is dark. Nothing stirring outside and the lights are off. There are no sounds out of the ordinary. You are at home. Safe.” He paused, looking into the crowd. “But are you?” Stansfall’s accent betrayed the fact that he was not a native Oklahoman. There was a bit more than a hint of British twist in his words. “You are driving along a highway, rather well lit, not so far out in the country that you can’t see the glowing lights of the city. It’s a clear night. You arrive home. Nothing out of the ordinary. Except the clock on the wall when you enter your living room says it’s several hours later than it should be.” Another long pause. “It’s morning. You wake up and find your pillow stained with blood. Your nose is bleeding. You are not prone to nose bleeds.”

Stansfall casts his view across the audience. “It is not my intent to bring fear into your life. I do not wish to alarm you. But you should be alarmed, ladies and gentlemen.” He pulls a handkerchief out of his coat pocket and wipes his brow. “And, you should be frightened.” Pause. “I am frightened.”

Richard sat motionless and breathless. Laura squeezed Richard’s hand and pressed her fingernails into his palm.

“The evidence is overwhelming. The numbers are overwhelming. The situation is unbelievable but it must be true. We are, ladies and gentlemen, being invaded. We are being taken, experimented on, abused, and returned, our memories wiped clean of what has been done to us. Women are carrying children implanted by an alien race and are having those children taken before they are born. And we are all helpless to prevent it.” He paused, then said quietly, “I am frightened.”

Stansfall then gave detailed accounts of abductions which he had researched. They were more than similar, they were identical. Richard’s mind struggled to stretch itself around the things he was hearing. Even with what he knew to be true, even with what had happened to him, it was all too unreal, too absurd. The professor spoke for almost an hour.

“There is nothing in the history of the human race that prepares us for the reality that is being thrust upon us,” Stansfall concluded. “Our religion, our folk-lore, everything tells us we are alone in this

universe. But the truth is that there are many races in this universe and at least half a dozen are visiting this planet of ours and having their way with us.

"I am convinced that both the U. S. government and the UN are aware of this and that both our national government and the United Nations Alliance are allowing these things to happen, if not actively participating in them. I cannot prove this belief but I am sure it is true. Write your congressman, and your senators, and your state legislatures and anyone else whom you can think of and demand an investigation. Some may call you kooks and some may think you are obsessed but if we do nothing, ladies and gentlemen, whatever agenda these alien races have will be completed, and I doubt, Madam," the professor leaned over and looked at woman sitting in the front row, "And I doubt sir," he switched his gaze to a man beside her, "that the outcome will be favorable for mankind." With that Stansfall stood erect, wiped his brow and quietly looked upon his audience. The room was absolutely silent.

Once the professor's words had achieved their maximum effect he smiled and said, "I will entertain your questions at this time." A din arose within the auditorium as hands went up and people began to question the professor.

"Good God," Richard muttered.

"I know," Laura said, "unbelievable."

"More than that. What do we think of all this? Are we just pawns? Subjects of observation? Is all of our history a lie?"

"I don't know, Richard," Laura said, looking at her fingernails curiously. She reached down and took Richard's left hand and turned it over. There were four deep impressions in his palm with small red smears in them. "Oh, damn, I'm so sorry," she said, reaching for her purse and extracting a handkerchief. "Damn, why didn't you say something?"

"Huh?" Richard looked at his hand where she had pressed her fingernails. "I'll be," he muttered. "I didn't even feel it."

"How could you not feel it?"

"I don't know," he said, rubbing his right index finger in his left palm, "Seems to be numb."

Laura looked up at his face and tried to decipher his expression. It was not readable.

Chapter Ten

Richard didn't pay much attention to the rest of the program. When it ended he stood and went looking for the investigator who had told about the sightings. Halfway across the auditorium he turned to Laura who was bounding along behind him. "Hey," he said to her frantically, "here's an idea. I'll try to catch that investigator fella, you corner the good professor."

"What shall I say?"

"Tell him we have to talk. Me. You. Him."

"OK, I will try." She turned and went in the direction of the small knot of people who were standing around Stansfall.

Richard looked after her and hoped that she didn't say why she wanted to talk to the professor. He feared someone else overhearing. He could imagine being the object of an investigation by this bunch of ...his mind came up with the word 'wackos' but he suddenly realized he was now one of them.

"Damn," he said under his breath.

He stood at the head of the central aisle in the auditorium, the highest point in the room, and scanned heads for one that looked like Craig Schipper. He had no luck. But he did spot someone else so he started pushing through the thinning crowd.

"Young, right?" Richard walked up to Victor Young.

"That's right. And you were?"

"Cleveland, Richard Cleveland." Richard saw that Young had no recollection of greeting him before the meeting. "Listen, I have to see your investigator, that fella, Schipper was it? I have some information he will want."

"You do?"

"I do."

"A sighting?"

"Well, more than that. Something, and I haven't been able to find him."

"Oh, he's gone already. We have a little form thing, if you'd like to fill it out to report a sighting."

"No, no thank you," Richard grumbled, more virulence in his voice than he had intended. His state of mind and frustration leaked out. "Oh, I'm sorry, really, thanks for the idea," he corrected, "I really do need to talk to Mr. Schipper."

Young eyed Richard curiously and then remarked, "Well, sure, there's a number on our brochure, for reporting sightings. Call it and when you get the voice message press 171. That's Schipper's voice mail. Or maybe I can relay a message?"

"One-seven-one," Richard repeated, writing the number in the palm of his hand. "OK, sure," he pulled out his wallet and extracted a business card and handed it to Young. "Could you give this card to him? When will you see him? It's very important and I know he'll want to talk to me."

"Sure," Young said, reading the card, "sure, he'll be in the office tomorrow, I suppose. Usually is."

"Office, right, where are your offices."

"The address is on the brochure."

"Yeah, right, well, thanks, Mr. Young," Richard shook the man's hand, "Thank you." He stepped back and made an about face, panning the room as he did. Laura was one of a few others still standing beside Stansfall who by now had made his way to the back of the auditorium and was autographing one of his books.

"God," Richard muttered, "Here is my book about the end of the world. It's a depressing, frightening epic of global proportions. Read it and have a nice day." Richard grimaced. No wonder 'ordinary people' regarded everything relating to abductions and UFOs in such a skeptical manner.

"Hi," Richard said quietly as he walked up behind Laura and cupped his hand beneath her elbow. She jumped slightly, startled, and turned to see him.

"Hello," she said, "next time just jab me in the ribs." Her grin gave away the fact that she was joking.

"OK, I will," he said, poking a finger in the direction of her side. "So?" He motioned towards Stansfall.

"So, nothing yet, he's just happily signing autographs and selling books."

"Making his buck before the end of the world comes," Richard muttered.

"Shshsh," she scolded him, "we'll get there."

"Maybe you should buy a book."

"I have a copy already," she said, waving at him over her shoulder, "back off."

The crowd eventually went away and they were left standing at the table alone except for the professor.

"Dr. Stansfall," Laura began, "My friend and I, Richard," she nodded toward Richard, "we would like to see if we could talk to you for a little while."

"I'm listening." His demeanor was brusque but not rude. He still had that "thank you for buying my book" smile on his face.

"We mean, in private."

"Oh," he said, moving his head backwards in an exaggerated gesture. "I see."

Richard didn't like the tone the man took with them. "Look," Richard began, matching the professor's sarcasm with an equal amount of acerbity, "I don't mean to be," he paused for the correct word, "rude, but, you are serious about this research and your book, and what you said a moment ago, aren't you?"

"Of course." The man appeared to take some offense.

"Well then, things have happened to us, both of us, that you might be interested in." Richard's words softened, "I'm sorry for sounding as I did, but, this has been a terrific ordeal for me. Worse than anything I've ever faced. Do you think we could find time to talk?"

"Well, let me see," Stansfall said matter-of-factly. He pulled a small date-planner from a briefcase sitting in a chair next to the table where his books were. "Um, maybe, there's a possibility." He looked up at Richard again. "I tell you what. I'll be in town, I think, a couple more days. I have a lecture tomorrow at SMU, on anthropology, and I'm not exactly sure what the university has planned for me beyond that. Why don't you give me your number and I'll let you know."

Richard wasn't sure if he was getting a brush off or if the man was sincere. He plucked a card from his wallet, took a pen from his shirt pocket, circled his cell number, and handed Stansfall the card. "The best way is to call my cell number," Richard told him, "I have voice mail on it and the phone is virtually glued to my ear."

"Ha," Stansfall blurted without humor, "that's an interesting concept." He deftly dropped the card in his shirt pocket and said, "I'll be in touch, Mr...." He plucked the card back out again, "Cleveland."

Richard was sure he saw a glimmer of recognition pass across Stansfall's features. Then it was gone. "I'll be in touch." Stansfall pointed the card at Richard and then dropped it into his pocket again. Then he turned to someone else standing at the table, dismissing Richard and Laura without a word.

The two looked at each other and shrugged. "I suppose we go now," Richard said.

"Did you find that investigator?"

"Nope, gone already. Got a number, maybe." He pointed towards the exit, "shall we?"

"OK," Laura said. She walked towards the exit. Richard followed. The night was dark and there was a mist in the air, a cold mist. "Weather stinks this time of year."

"Think so?" Richard took a deep breath. "I love this stuff."

"Ugh," she said, "you would." By the time they arrived at Richard's car, parked a block away in a paid parking lot, their hair was moist and both of them had a chill. "I should have brought my long coat."

"Do you have any idea where it is?"

"Probably not," she said, remembering that her things were stuffed in boxes. "God, I am so tired."

"My offer is still open," Richard said.

"Offer?" Laura looked at him and in a moment an understanding look appeared on her face. "I see." She chewed on her lower lip. Then she looked at her watch. The hour was late. "Well, fine," she said at last. "Run by my apartment and let me pick up a couple of things." They drove on in silence for a few more minutes. As Richard turned into the driveway of her apartment complex, she turned to him, "I'll only be a minute." She was out of the door as soon as his car stopped next to hers in the parking lot. She bounded up the stairs in a very unladylike manner and disappeared through the door of her apartment. Within five minutes she came back down the stairs. She was carrying a night bag and some clothes over her arm. She opened the passenger door, reached around and unlocked the back door, opened it and flung the bag and clothing inside. Then she jumped into the passenger seat, looked at Richard, and said, "Well, what you waiting on?"

Richard eyed her for a second, dropped his car in reverse, and backed out. Soon he was cruising as fast as the weather would allow on Interstate 30 towards his home.

"You need to live closer to town," Laura said.

"I know, what can I say," he said. "There was a time when this house was supposed to be 'our little piece of heaven.'"

"And now?"

"It's my little pain in the rear."

Silence fell again in the car. Richard took his usual exit when he arrived at Rockwall and wound his way along country roads to his home. He pulled up into the drive and parked in front of the garage. Laura was out and gathering her things from the back seat before he could be chivalrous so he went on to unlock the front door. He pushed it open and she followed close behind, heading straight for the guest room. In a second she came out again. Richard had fallen on the sofa in a heap of exhaustion.

"I'll get Pam's blouse back tomorrow," Laura said, "I dropped it off at the cleaners."

"You didn't have to do that."

"Oh, I think so," she said. She plopped lazily onto the loveseat. They sat listening to each other's breathing for a while. "Richard," she said eventually, "are you going to be ok?"

"I don't know, Laura," he said, flopping his head to the side opposite her and sort-of twisting it to look at her. He felt exhausted, drained, maudlin. He started to say something else but didn't have the breath.

"This is taking a toll," she said. "I mean, it's something that, well, I've been dealing with, but not you, and with Pamela, and everything...." Her voice trailed off.

"Yeah," he exhaled.

"I'm worried that something might happen, between us, that might not be meant to be but we fall into because, well, life is so screwy. I don't want that."

"Neither do I." He took another breath. "Laura, you are, like I said, my best friend." He sat upright only slightly. "I have to admit, you are unbelievably attractive. And, well," he looked at her hoping she could understand his thoughts. She did.

"Thanks," Laura grinned. Had there been more light in the room Richard would have seen the color that rushed to her face. "I didn't realize you were blind."

"Sheesh," Richard muttered.

"You're not so hard on the eyes yourself," Laura said.

"Ha, the blind leading the blind."

"Right, well," she stretched her feet out in front of her and pressed her head back into the thickly cushioned chair, "we understand each other. Last night was...."

"Silly."

"Sure, silly, but, I was going to say nice."

"You know something?" Richard suddenly sat up on the edge of the sofa. "I have to tell you something."

"What?" Laura didn't move. She had her eyes closed and could have been asleep except that she responded to Richard.

"The odd thing, the thing that makes us different, very different, is that we are such good friends. I love Pamela, you know. But, it's not exactly enough, is it? There has to be friendship, companionship, respect, some other things that I'm not sure Pamela and I ever had, not even when we had Robert." Richard stood and walked to the window, looking out at the darkness. "The thought of being a pal to Pamela, it doesn't compute. I don't think she has pals. Doesn't know the meaning of the word. She is too, what's the word," he paused, "classy? Elegant? What? I can't think of the right one. Do you know what I mean?" He turned to look at Laura who now was stretching as if trying to touch the ceiling.

"I think so," she yawned.

"It's like..." Richard said, walking through the living room and into the kitchen. He started setting up the coffee pot for morning coffee, "...like, can you imagine Pamela climbing a tree, or even playing ball? When we lost Robert, besides the hurt and the blame and the junk like that, we discovered that we are poles apart. Robert was our glue. I am not sure how we've managed to stay in the same house four years."

"Familiarity, convenience, companionship," Laura said, forcing herself to stand. "This is all a little thick for me now, Richard, I'm sorry."

Richard looked at her. Her eyes were moist and red. "I'm sorry," he said, "when I get tired I get kind 'a, mushy or something."

"I noticed."

"Well then," Richard said, setting the timer on the coffee maker, "I think it's beddy by time." He walked to her, lifted her chin with his hand, kissed her lightly on her lips, and said, "scoot, girl," as if he was talking to a ten-year-old.

"On my way, Papa." She disappeared through the guestroom door, closing it behind her. He took note that the lock did not click.

"Whew," he said under his breath, "I am nuts." He wandered into the living room again and fell on the sofa. He could not sleep. He was the type that when something needed to be done he wanted to do it then. When something needed to be said, he had to say it. Got a problem? Solve it and get it out of the way. But this thing, this thing with aliens, with UFO's, with everything, there were too many holes, too many un-answered questions, too much hanging in the air. Not only was his trying to make the new pieces of this puzzle called life hard to fit in his picture but the pieces themselves were contorted and misshapen. He stood again and walked to the window. Outside was darkness except for the glow of a distant streetlamp. He could just barely see that the mist had become a light rain. He'd heard there was the possibility of a freeze. If that happened this stuff would really turn nasty. Metroplex freeways are the most treacherous places on earth when there's a bit of ice on them.

Figures, though, he thought to himself. Cold and dreary and icy, like the stuff bouncing around inside him. He found himself in a panicky struggle to keep some kind of hope. And he fought a ball of fear in his stomach as he thought about tomorrow and the tomorrows to come. What is this alien race all about? What does it all mean for his country, and the world? Has everything always been a construct, a ruse, has the world he lived in been something entirely different than what he thought it was? He kept telling himself it is all the same, there were just things happening that he didn't know

about. But it wasn't that simple. Not at all. He searched his mind for explanations, for reasons, for anything to cling to and he found very little.

He walked to the front door, opened it and stepped out onto the sidewalk in his sock feet. His feet became instantly wet and the water soaked quickly up to his ankles. His hair at first was covered with stubborn little droplets of water and then went wet and limp and hung down beside his head. He stood there, feeling the chill and the rain and was thankful that something was, with absolute certainty, real. This rain, this cold, this was real. This sidewalk, the tree in the front yard, the cars, they were real. As real and solid as things could be.

He raised his head upward and closed his eyes, feeling the very cold rain pelt him. There were bits of sleet in the rain now, sticking to his eye-lids. He could hear the sleet making gentle ticking sounds as it landed on the top of his car. He stood there until he began to shake uncontrollably from the cold. He appreciated the cold, the shakes, the wind and sleet and rain. It was real. With one last look up at the low, billowing clouds glowing that permanent deep orange, he wondered what was up above them, what was at this moment passing above houses and apartments and even grass shacks in Africa or sea-side bungalow's in Mexico. What was happening? What did it all mean? What the hell did it mean? He turned and walked inside.

Chapter Eleven

A tap on his bedroom door woke him up. He lay on a heap on top of the covers on his bed.

"Ooohf," he muttered, hopefully loudly enough for Laura to hear.

"Are you awake?"

"Uwff, Mmm, I am now," he mustered.

"You better get ready, it's pretty late."

Richard pulled himself upright on the edge of the bed and sucked air through his nose. He smelled coffee. That told him that he was definitely late. As he rose and stumbled towards a dresser for some underclothes so he could take a shower he heard a muffled sound and then another knock on his door.

"Problem, Richard."

"What?"

"Ice."

"Crap," he muttered, going to the bedroom window.

"What?"

"C-R-A-P" he yelled the spelling of the word.

"I think so," her muffled voice returned. "I'm going to be in here having some coffee."

"Uuuffffggg," he huffed. When he emerged from his bedroom ten minutes later with his shirt-tale out and socks in his hands he did not look as fresh as he should have after having taken a shower and shaved.

"You look like hell," Laura said, sipping coffee from a mug that had a large, yellow smiley-face on it.

Richard fell into a dining chair on the opposite side of the table, bumping the table and almost pushing it into her. "Thanks," he grumbled, "I love you too."

"I know you do, sweetheart," she said, only her eyes showing how she meant it, "but I'll break your neck if you knock this coffee on me. I have to have it inside, not on me."

"Umpffff." Richard was struggling with intelligent words this morning.

"It's a damn ice-rink outside."

"Knew it would be," he muttered.

"How?"

"I went outside."

"Last night?"

"Yeah."

"Why the hell didn't you say something? We are stuck here, you know." She seemed a little agitated and Richard wasn't sure why.

"What's a matter with you, miss happy?"

"I don't know," she said. "I feel..." she looked up at the chandelier over the kitchen table, "pissed off, and I can't for the life of me figure out why?"

"Could it be..."

"No, it couldn't. I got fixed, remember?," she said, understanding he was asking if she had PMS.

"Ohhh," he muttered, lifting his brow. "Can't help you, then," he said, finally able to sound a little more educated. "But I'd kill for some of that coffee."

"Beg and I'll get you a cup."

"Do I have to get on my knees?" He pulled a black sock over his foot, switched legs, and put the other sock on.

"Oh, forget it, I'll get it. Just don't expect this treatment every day."

"I'll not have the pleasure of your company every morning," he said.

"No, I guess not." She sat a cup before him.

He leaned over it and took a deep breath. "Thank you God in heaven for this wonderful elixir," he moaned, clutching the cup with both hands and lifting it to take a sip.

"You're nuts."

"Of course," he said. When he'd soaked up some energy from the coffee he turned to her. "Bad outside?"

"Not good."

"I'm not sure what we could have done."

"We could have gone on into town," she said, "to my place, or a hotel or something. Now we are somewhat obviously stuck out here with little explanation."

Richard hadn't considered the consequences of that until she brought it up. "Oh, yeah, that."

"Yeah, that."

"I never thought." He sipped on the coffee, "I mean, never occurred to me, how awkward this will look."

"No joke."

"Roads closed?"

"Beats me, but probably," she stood and walked to his stereo. She flipped the switch and quickly lowered the volume, which came on quite loud. "Dang, what were you doing, rocking the neighborhood?"

"Oh, yeah, sometimes I do that."

She shook her head. In a minute she found the news station she sought. Within another few minutes the radio announced school closings and highway problems. One of the problems was the closure of the Interstate 30 bridge between Rockwall and Dallas. That was the route into town. "Well, that's that."

"Damned Texas Weather," Richard muttered. "Oh well," he shrugged. "Shall we be creative, shall we try the back roads into town, or shall we just tell the truth and not be believed?"

"I don't know," Laura said, "let me think about it. It's not that we don't have time." She walked to the front door and looked out. Richard's little leafless tree was bent and a few branches were broken from the weight of the ice. Making a decision, she closed the door, shutting out the cold. "Here's what we'll do. I'll call in and claim sickness or something, well, just say that I can't make it." She grinned, "It's not like the boss is going to be upset." Kicking off her shoes, she fell into the loveseat. "You, a little while later, call Nancy and let her know what she already knows, that the bridge is iced and you can't make it in."

"Brilliant." Richard rose and poured himself another cup of coffee.

"I thought so," she said, smiling. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Then just as quickly she popped her head up and opened them. "What were you doing outside last night, anyway?"

"Looking for reality," Richard muttered, handing her the smiley-faced mug filled with coffee. He sat on the sofa.

"What?"

"Reality, something that I could be sure was real." He sat his cup on the end table and leaned back. "You know, 'you've taken a turn, there's a sign-post up ahead, it reads, 'the Twilight Zone.''"

"I see." Her head went back again and her eyes closed. "Hmm. I think, yeah, I see that." Her voice sounded funny because of the way her neck was bent backwards. "Umm, I've had longer to deal with this stuff than you." Her left eye opened and she looked at him. "It is not easy."

"No, not easy." He picked up his cup and held it beneath his nose, sniffing the aroma.

They sat in silence, each in contemplation of life and what it had handed them. After a few minutes Laura rose and went into the kitchen where she picked up the phone and dialed the office. She got the

office voice mail and so she left a message that she wasn't doing well and was afraid to drive on the ice. Then she poured the last of the coffee from the pot into her cup and returned to the Loveseat.

Richard took his turn after a bit, calling the office. He reached Nancy. He told her what she already knew, the bridges were iced and closed, and he probably wouldn't make it in to work unless the temperature rose considerably, which was not being forecast.

For almost an hour a calm silence fell upon them. Both were tired, both had a great deal to think about, and both were nervous and anxious about being stuck in Richard's house.

At about nine-thirty Richard finally rose from the sofa where he had been dozing and walked to the door. He opened it and the cold immediately swept into the room like a weary traveler waiting for the inn to open. He invited it in, stepped aside and waved the icy blast past him. It worked on his senses, made him feel more alive, and more real, and more normal.

"Laura," he said, loud enough to be heard over the whirring of the wind outside the open door, "where do we go from here?" He turned and stepped back inside, reluctant to close it. "I mean," he said, looking at her, "where do we really go from here?"

"We go on, Richard," Laura said. "It's not easy for you, and I understand that, but I've been where you are with more to swallow than you do. And,... damn!" She sat up rubbing her elbow. It had caught some-how on the sofa. "I don't know why I am so frickin' irritable today." She stood, picked up the long-abandoned smiley-face mug, and carried it to the kitchen. "Anyway, you will work through it." She rinsed the mug and Richard's cup which was sitting on the bar where he'd left it. "Do you want some more coffee or something?"

"No," he muttered, "I don't suppose." He turned back to the outdoors, this time looking out the front window. "I am going nuts here."

"I am too," Laura confessed.

"You know, if we take the farm roads up around the lake to the north there are no bridges. I think we could make it back into town."

"Think so?"

"Think so."

"Well then, let's go." She walked towards the guest room to gather whatever she may have left there.

Richard wiped the counter and tidied up. When Laura came out again he looked at her. She smiled at him weakly.

"I think," Laura said as if deciding on something, "that, before we head out we should call Jim and make another appointment."

"Yeah, we need to." Richard fished around in his pockets and then it occurred to him what he was looking for was in the clothes he'd had on the night before. He walked towards the bedroom, talking as he went, "and I need to call that investigator guy, what's his name." He disappeared into the bedroom and then returned with the brochure for APRG which he'd folded and stuck in his shirt pocket.

As he walked back into the room Laura was picking up the phone. She punched a number and apparently got the counselor's voice mail so she left her cell phone number and hung up. Then she stepped away from the phone. "I hope you have better luck than I," she said.

Richard picked up the phone and entered the number listed on the brochure. Before anyone answered his cell phone rang. "Damn," he said, handing the kitchen phone to Laura and turning on the cell phone to take the call.

"Hello?" Richard said.

At the same time Laura heard someone come on the line. "Hello? Yes, hold please," she said.

"Yes, this is Richard Cleveland," Richard spoke into the cell phone.

"Well, Richard Cleveland is calling you and he is on another line," Laura said into the phone.

"Oh hello, doctor," Richard said.

"No, he is on another line. He wanted to speak to your investigator," Laura said into the kitchen phone. "Yes, what was his name, I forgot....."

"Yes, doctor Stansfall, I see." Richard was waving his hand in the air trying to indicate something to Laura but she had no idea what. She was now on hold waiting for the investigator to answer the phone.

"Not there? I see," Laura was saying.

"Right, Ice," Richard said, "well, I'm sorry about your lecture but I am glad we will be able to see you."

Laura looked at Richard now understanding his non-verbal communications. "No," she said, "No, that's OK, sure, here's a number for him to call." She gave the person on the phone Richard's cell phone number, thanked them and hung up.

"Yes, really, Doctor Stansfall, I am confident you will want to hear what we have to say." Richard was nodding his head, "Yes, right, well, we should see you this afternoon if we can get there." He shook his head again, "Right, well, sure, that's no problem. We'll see you then." Richard pressed the off button on his cell phone.

"That was interesting," Laura said sardonically.

"Wasn't it." He dropped the cell phone into his pocket. "So, what did you accomplish?"

"Well, the investigator isn't there. He's supposed to call you."

"Good. Wish we could see him this afternoon too. Stansfall's lecture was canceled so he remembered me and decided to call. He said something like 'he hoped the trip would not be a total waste,' or something like that."

"Sweet personality, the good doctor has."

"Indeed." Richard turned the kitchen light off and pointed towards the front door. "If I had any sense," he said as he held the door for Laura to exit ahead of him, "I'd have warmed the car up already."

"Oh, and how am I supposed to respond to that?"

"Don't you dare. I'm still your boss, you know."

"Poor, poor me," she said, smiling at him over her shoulder as she walked around his car. "If you'd really had any sense you'd have put the stupid thing in the garage."

"True," he said. They both got in after a minor struggle with the iced door latches. Richard started the car and then got out after popping the trunk release. He went back and rummaged through it. Eventually he extracted a can of de-icer. "I hope this works, it's last year's model," he said to no-one. He shook it and squirted some on the windshield, the rear window, and the side windows. It seemed to still be functional. He emptied the can and tossed it on the lawn where he could retrieve it later.

"Drive careful, boss," Laura said as Richard put the car in gear and tested the brakes.

"I'll do my best," he said. With deliberate caution he eased the car down the street. "The streets aren't so bad," he said. "Maybe patches but not frozen over. Shouldn't have any problems going the long way."

"If everyone in Rockwall hasn't figured the same thing."

"True." Richard drove into Rockwall and turned north on state 205. He turned left a little over ten miles later on state 78. This distance had taken him over thirty minutes. He headed towards the city.

Chapter Twelve

"Slow, slow, slow," Richard muttered.

"Well, we're getting there, anyway," Laura said.

"Maybe by spring." Richard was hunched over the steering wheel peering ahead, looking for ice he knew he'd not be able to see. Laura clutched the dash. Traffic was fairly heavy and they both imagined that quite a few more people from Rockwall were trying what they were. Richard had a row of cars behind him because he was driving slowly.

As he eased through the community of Wylie a full-size, late model sedan came around him at a dangerous speed. "Damn fool," Richard exclaimed. He wanted to get over but knew better than to make any erratic moves. The car went on past and then swerved into his lane too quickly. Then it apparently hit a slick spot, went into a skid and spun around and around across the highway. It sailed into a utility pole which, already burdened with iced cables, snapped. A transformer on the pole and headed straight for Richard's car hood.

Everything happened so quickly that Richard hardly had time to react. There wasn't much he could have done anyway. The icy road would have made any sudden move he made as disastrous as the speeding had been for the sedan. An enormous electrical transformer slammed onto Richard's hood and sparks flew blindingly from it. Richard's airbag inflated with an enormous BOOM and slammed him backwards against his seat. His car was not equipped with a passenger air-bag so Laura was strained against the seat-belts and then was flung backwards against the seat. Richard's car spun around and as it slid crossways of the highway the car behind him hit the rear of it, twisting the two occupants unmercifully. That vehicle, one of those sport-utility trucks, went into a spin itself and headed off towards the ditch opposite the sedan. A third vehicle went into a spin but through some kind of miracle missed all the debris and crunched cars that littered its path. The other three cars in the line all managed to stop.

Within seconds people were out of their cars. All except Richard and Laura, who sat inside Richard's little sedan while the transformer popped and whizzed on what was left of his hood. Wires sparking on the roadway told them both that the lines were still hot so their best bet was to stay put.

"Holy shit," Richard muttered. His nose was scrapped and bleeding from the airbag and his ears rang incessantly from the sound. "Damn!"

"I agree," Laura said, checking herself over. "Are you OK?"

"Well," Richard said, afraid to look, "I think so, except my nose hurts."

"It's bleeding," Laura said. She fished a handkerchief out of her purse. "Here," she said, handing it to him.

"Well, well, aren't we in a pickle." He kept shaking his head. It seemed to resonate from the sound of the airbag inflating. "Good God wish this would stop," he said, pressing his hands against his ears.

"I think we're going to be late," Laura muttered. The two of them were feeling the shock of the collision with the electrical transformer as well as a swiftly growing stiffness in their muscles from being tensed.

"No joke," Richard said, looking back at her. They both laughed nervously, thankful that they didn't seem to be badly injured. "I should kick that guy in the ass," he said, referring to the reckless driver in the bigger car.

"Might not be anything left to kick," Laura said, pointing. Neither had taken the time to see what happened to that car until just then.

"Wow," Richard muttered, "that had to hurt."

"Master of the understatement," Laura returned.

The large white sedan was bent in deeply at the drivers-side door. People were attempting to pull someone out, Richard could see, and he wondered why they were doing that. They should leave them there for the emergency crew, he thought. Then he saw flames leap up from the rear of the sedan and two men some-how managed to get someone out the passenger side just as the car was covered in flames and then exploded.

The explosion rocked Richard and Laura back and forth and he felt the heat through the windshield of his car. People near the car were knocked to the ground.

"Good Lord!" Richard exclaimed.

Laura sat watching the car burn and after some time said flatly, "I'll second that," as if she'd had the words on her tongue for a while and spoke them just to get rid of them. "The guy didn't make it," she said, pointing to where someone was tossing some kind of rug or something over the person, now the body, that had been pulled from the car. "God," Laura whispered.

"I hope that thing doesn't explode," Richard said, pointing at the transformer sizzling on the hood of his car. As he pointed he noticed something on his arms and realized he was covered with a grayish powder, apparently from the airbag. "Damn," he grumbled, brushing at his clothes and making the situation worse.

"Can they?" Laura stared at the big electrical device, "can they explode?"

"I've seen them explode," Richard said, "And it ain't pretty. But, if it was going to it probably would have already."

"That's a comfort," she muttered.

Within fifteen minutes several police cars, an ambulance and an emergency vehicle had arrived. Richard thought it felt like years. From a safe distance the policeman told them to stay put until the power was shut off. The two in the car needed no instructions. Eventually the policeman got the all clear and approached Richard's car carefully. When he was sure the power was off he pulled at Richard's door. Laura was out the other side and far from the transformer before Richard had gotten out of the car.

The policeman and an EMT walked both of them to the ambulance. They were examined.

"Well, you two will live," the EMT said. He was a younger man, early twenties, professional-looking in his uniform. He had close-cropped hair and was in possession of several medical instruments. Laura had dodged and evaded him and he didn't understand why.

"I'm sorry to have to do this," the man said, slipping a blood pressure cuff on Laura's arm.

"It's OK," she said through clenched teeth, "I have a sort of phobia."

"Well, you are fine," the EMT said after pulling the cuff from her arms. "We're going to take you to Parkland just to be sure."

"Parkland?"

"Yes sir, that's where we're assigned." The EMT understood Richard's reluctance to be carried into the heart of the city to the Dallas County hospital. It is not the best facility in town. And it required traveling miles of icy roads.

Richard then noticed the arm patches which showed that the men were City of Dallas EMTs. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"We were in the neighborhood," the young man said curtly.

"I see," Richard said. "Oh, ok. Well, let's go." Richard thought it was still odd that they were being taken so far but he shrugged his shoulders and resigned himself to the ride.

"In a minute," the EMT said. He made a call on his radio.

Richard and Laura settled themselves in the ambulance, each sitting on a separate gurney with their feet over the sides, their legs in the tiny space between the gurneys. With the two of them and the attending EMT the space was cramped.

"Damn," Richard exhaled, looking across at his little car. A policeman came to him and handed him some accident forms and requested insurance information. Richard could only provide him with a name of a company since his card was in the car and the car was not accessible now since the power company crew was trying to extract the transformer from it.

The officer took his information, and Laura's, and asked Richard where he wanted his car towed. Richard had no idea so left it up to the wrecker that was now on the scene as well. In another few minutes the EMT finished his consult with whomever and was ready to go. Another ambulance arrived so the EMT got out to tell them about the body from the sedan and the driver of the other vehicle which had hit Richard. Richard noted the ambulance was not from Dallas but was instead from Wylie.

"Well, what the hell do I do now?" Richard was still looking sadly at his little car.

"Get a new car," Laura said. She noticed Richard was banging himself on the side of the head gently with the palm of his hands. "You still have a headache?"

"Not a headache, exactly, a ringing. Like a damn gong is in it."

"My ears are ringing from that airbag. I didn't know the things were so loud." She pulled at her ear. "Damn, lost my earring."

"Well, now we do, huh?"

"Do what?"

"Know how loud they are."

"Yeah."

Richard thumped his head again. "But this is not my ears, it's my brain."

"That makes sense."

"No, I know, it doesn't, but, how do I explain it?"

"Maybe you should get an x-ray."

"I'll give it some thought," he muttered, now pressing the palms of his hands against his ears.

"Dead," the EMT said to the ambulance driver as he climbed in the ambulance. "Don't know about him. Internal or something." Richard noticed the two EMTs exchanged odd glances.

"What about the other driver, the one that hit my car?"

"He'll be OK, just shaken. Has someone to take him to the doctor. Knew one of those folks," the EMT nodded towards a little huddle of people, drivers and passengers from the other cars in the procession that had been following behind Richard. Then he whirled his hand to indicate it was time to go.

The trip to Parkland took over an hour instead of the half hour it would have taken under normal circumstances. Richard gripped the sides of the gurney he sat upright on. Laura was doing the same. They both faced the back of the ambulance.

"I wish this guy wouldn't drive so fast," Richard commented.

"I hate this," Laura said between clenched teeth. "I hate this."

When they arrived at the hospital and got out of the ambulance Richard's head was worse. The incessant siren and the rough ride of the ambulance hadn't helped. Laura was whisked away under protest and he was wheeled into an exam cubicle. As he sat waiting his pocket started singing. It was his cell phone which he'd forgotten. He pulled it out and pressed the on button. As he did a nurse came around a curtain.

"Sir, that cannot be used in here," she said brusquely.

"Hello? Just a second," Richard said into the phone, then, to the nurse, "I'm sorry, forgot it was on. I'll get a number."

"It must be turned off, sir," she said again.

"Fine, sure, ok, just a second." Richard turned back to the phone. Before he could say anything the nurse took the phone and pressed the off button. "What the hell!" Richard exclaimed. The nurse handed the phone back.

"No cell phones," she muttered then looked up as a doctor walked into the cubical holding a chart and giving him a look that told him he couldn't use the phone.

"I'm not using the phone," he muttered, slipping his phone into his pocket.

"Mister, ah..." the doctor looked at the chart.

"Cleveland, Richard Cleveland." Richard turned to the doctor. "How's Laura? Laura Bright, came in with me?"

"She's in the waiting room."

"Already?"

"She said she has some kind of phobia about hospitals."

"I think so," Richard said, remembering what Laura had told the EMT.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine," Richard said. He winced and rubbed the back of his head with his left hand.

"I see, just fine," the doctor said. Then the doctor examined Richard's nose after he pulled away a bandage the EMT had put on it. The scrape wasn't too severe. All of Richard's face was red and irritated

from the blast of the airbag. "Hmmm," the doctor muttered under his breath, "Hmm, those airbags save lives but don't do much for your looks."

"I'll survive," Richard said.

"Yeah, well," the doctor said, "Off with your shirt. You have a headache?"

"Ringing," Richard said, "more like ringing. Damned annoying, too."

"Ever had tinnitus, a head injury, anything like that?"

"Nope."

"It's normal for the airbag to cause ringing in your ears but not so much in your head," the doctor said, poking a lighted instrument in Richard's ears.

"Ever had any inner ear problems?"

"Nope."

"Hmm," the doctor said. He kept looking into Richard's left ear canal. "Hmm, you are sure, never any surgeries or anything? Ever get anything stuck in your ear, jab it with a cue-tip, anything like that?"

"No," Richard said, "why?"

"Hmm, well," the doctor's voice was guttural because he was stretching his neck out as he stood leaning over the bed and peering into Richard's ear. "There's a scar, looks like. Yes, looks like a scar, odd, I think, small, but, there it is."

"Scar?" Richard was puzzled.

"Yep." The doctor stepped back. "It could be just a lesion or something, but it sure looks like a scar."

"Well, I don't remember anything."

"Describe this ringing." He looked into Richard's eyes for a second as Richard talked, and then pressed a stethoscope against Richard's now bare chest and listened.

"OK, well, it's like my head is in a barrel. No, that's not right. It's like my head IS a barrel, and someone is on the inside beating the sides with their fist. Sort of a ringing thud."

"Ever experience this before your accident?"

"Nope." Richard thought. Then he remembered, it had occurred once or twice right after that Monday night. "Well," he started, and then stopped. He was sure if he told this doctor that it started after he was abducted they'd wheel him right down the hall to the room with the padded walls, "well," he continued, trying to fill in the rest, "I sort 'of had it a couple weeks ago."

"Bump your head?"

"Nope."

"Any trauma, any drugs, any other thing you can think of that might have changed or might have caused it?"

"Nope," Richard lied. Of course, he had no reason to believe the two things were related except that the ringing started after the Monday night experience.

"Hmmm." The doctor placed his stethoscope around his neck again, "well, let's get some tests. Just in case."

"What kind of tests?"

"Oh, x-ray, cat-scan, MRI, like that."

"Jolly," Richard muttered.

"They are not painful."

"Just costly."

"You have insurance?"

"Sure, but there are deductibles."

"We can admit you and that will save the co-pay."

"Oh, no thank you," Richard said, "that's fine. Are you done now?"

"Why? You have to wait for tests."

"I want to see about Laura."

"I see," the doctor said, "well, get dressed. I'll be back in a minute."

Richard slid off the exam table and picked up his shirt and put it on. He buttoned it but didn't bother to tuck it in. The doctor walked back into the cubical. "OK, you are scheduled for an MRI in half an hour."

"That was fast."

The doctor only nodded, then said, "you may step into the waiting area if you like for a moment."

"Good." Richard's ringing was subsiding a little. He still had patches of the white powder from the airbag on him and splotches on his shirt. He dusted at them as he walked down the hallway and into the waiting area. He saw Laura slumped in a chair. He also saw the investigator, Schipper, walk into the waiting area from a different direction. He thought that was odd.

"Laura," Richard said quietly, walking towards her.

"Mister Cleveland?" Schipper spoke to Richard.

Richard turned from Laura and looked at the investigator. "That's me," he stammered, "Your name is, um, Schipper, right?"

"Right," Schipper said, eying Richard.

"Laura," Richard repeated, turning back to her. "How are you?"

"I'll live," Laura said, "and you?"

"Gonna do an MRI. I am so looking forward to that." Richard paused, then added, "not at all."

"I imagine. How's your head?"

"Ringing, but not as loudly."

"That's good."

"Yeah," he said. He took a breath. "I'm sore as hell." He moved his arms and shoulders forward and backward in odd motions to try to work some soreness out.

"Me too." Laura frowned. "The seat belt put a nice bruise on my shoulder. And I found a couple bruises in places I couldn't account for."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," her frown grew deeper.

Richard waited for her to say more. He could see there was something lurking behind her eyes, something dark and troubling. "Well?" Anything Laura might have said was interrupted by Schipper, whom Richard had momentarily forgotten.

"Mister Cleveland," the tall man said, "I'm sorry about your accident. You were trying to reach me?"

"Well, yeah," Richard muttered, "how did you know I was here?"

"Oh, well, I am an investigator, you know. I keep a scanner on in my office and I heard your name mentioned by EMS. I'd just gotten a note from Victor saying you wanted to see me. Put the two together and here I am."

Richard looked at him with some confusion.

"My office is just up the street," Schipper said.

"Oh." Richard still thought it was odd that the man was there.

Schipper looked from Richard to Laura.

"Laura Bright," Laura said, standing, "um, I'm sorry, I forgot your name."

"Craig, Craig Schipper," the investigator said, shaking the hand offered by Laura. He turned to Richard. "So, how are you?"

"Great," Richard said. "Just peachy." He paused, then retracted his sarcasm. "I'm sorry, not the best of days. I'll be fine. The doctor wants to run some tests just to make sure."

"Who did you see?"

"Oh, I dunno, tall, red-headed, freckles, about my age."

"Nash," Schipper said, "I'll tell'em we will be a minute, if you want to talk."

"Um, sure," Richard muttered. Then he watched the investigator walk towards the E.R. receptionist area.

"An impressive guy," Richard said.

"Yes, he is."

Schipper returned and held a handout as if to lead the two out of the waiting area. He nodded with his head in the direction for them to go. The three of them started down a corridor. "I told Nash. They'll call me at this office where we are going."

"Know your way around here, do you?"

"Worked vice and homicide, Fort Worth, you know, but I got to know all the hospitals quite well."

"I see."

The three fell into silence until they reached a turn and then entered a private office. "We'll not be interrupted here," Schipper said, motioning for Richard and Laura to take a seat on a leather couch. Schipper took a seat nearby. He looked at Richard in anticipation.

"Well," Richard said, "I suppose you want to hear my story."

"That's what we're here for," Shipper said with a tiny bit of annoyance in his voice.

"OK, then," Richard took a deep breath. "That Monday night, what was it, two weeks ago? Anyway, I had decided to take a little side trip...." Richard told the investigator all that happened that night, including the missing time, and then he told what he'd recalled under hypnosis at Jim Matchett's office. Schipper sat quietly and with no expression as Richard talked. He only asked a couple of questions. "And that is about it," Richard concluded, "since then things have been," pause, "different."

"Different. I suppose they would be," Schipper muttered. He had not been surprised at all by Richard's narrative.

"There's a little more to our story," Richard said.

"There is?"

"There is." Richard looked at Laura, "Laura is an, what do you call it? An abductee."

"Were you with him?" Schipper looked at Laura.

"No, no, like I said, I was alone. I mean, she is one of those, you know, long-term abductees."

"I see." Schipper looked skeptical. "This sounds a little," he paused to think of the correct word, apparently, "coincidental."

"No shit," Richard muttered. "If it hadn't been for Laura taking me to Matchett's office, I would never have known this stuff."

"I know Matchett," Schipper said, "he and I have, shall we say, differed, on occasion."

Richard got the impression that he was not fond of Matchett. "Well, whatever, but that is what happened."

For several minutes Schipper sat thinking. He seemed to be processing the information Richard had given him. "What kind of car do you drive?"

"Did drive," Richard muttered, remembering his little crumpled blue car now somewhere forlornly discarded in a wrecking yard. "I drove a Chevrolet Cavalier, dark blue, older model."

Schipper's lips scrunched up. "I think I understand," Schipper said, apparently trying to decide what to say. "I have a couple of photo's I'd like you to see. How about I bring them here in a little while. You should be through with the MRI by then."

"How did you know about the MRI?"

Schipper stood. He either didn't hear or ignored Richard's question. He looked at Laura. "You are an abductee," he said flatly.

"That's right."

"How much do you recall?"

"Most everything now. I've been working with Jim for a couple of years."

"Matchett," the investigator rolled his eyes, "I see. I have to be honest with you, I have a few problems with your therapist. He's alright as a therapist, as far as I can tell, but, he has proven less than helpful to our organization."

"You mean the Aerial Phenomena thing-a-ma-jig."

"Right," Schipper paused, "Yes, the APRG." The investigator opened the door and held it for them. "It's just that Matchett's priorities are somewhat different than ours."

"Well, he's been a great friend and very helpful to me," Laura said. "I only discovered what has been happening to me a couple of years ago and it was very traumatic." She stepped through the door with Richard right behind. Schipper followed them out. The three of them walked back towards the ER waiting area.

"I have no doubt," Schipper said, a small amount of compassion in his voice, "I've met quite a few abductees whose stories clear. It is never easy. I'll be back soon, in about two hours. If you don't hear from me, call this number," he handed Richard a business card. "If I'm not waiting when you come out of the test, call."

"Fine," Richard said, taking the card and dropping it into his shirt pocket. Schipper made a turn down a hallway and walked off without saying anything else.

"That guy's spooky," Laura said as Schipper disappeared down the hallway.

"Life is spooky these days," Richard said.

Laura fell into a seat in the waiting area again while Richard walked back to the Emergency Room nurses' desk. He was greeted by a stocky, blond-headed nurse who said they'd been about to call. Richard was instructed to get onto a gurney and was whisked away. The tall red-headed doctor from the ER walked up to Richard while he was being moved from the gurney to the MRI.

"Do you want a sedative? This machine can be difficult. Especially if you have any hint of claustrophobia."

"No, I don't think so. I'll be alright."

"OK, well, if you need it, now is the time to ask, before the test begins. It'll take at least forty-five minutes, maybe longer, and you'll be inside that." The doctor pointed towards the Magnetic Resonance Imaging machine, a device that uses magnetic fields to map a body in a three-dimensional view. The machine looked like a giant doughnut with a hole in the middle where a type of carriage was. Richard had seen them but never been near one like this.

"Think it might bother me?"

"It's better to be safe than sorry," the doctor said.

"What will you give me?"

"Something mild, will not knock you out or anything."

"Well, fine, maybe it'll stop the ringing in my head for a few minutes."

"Not likely."

As if from thin air a nurse appeared and administered a shot to Richard's arm. He felt a little dizzy within seconds.

"Pretty strong stuff," he said. A technician took everything metal from Richard's pockets, his watch and his belt, and had him lay on the carriage. Richard's head was secured in a soft-molded head-rest with a vice-like grip. Then they informed Richard what the procedure would be and that he would be alone in the room. The last thing they did was ask Richard what kind of music he preferred so they could pipe it in for him, to help him relax.

Within a few seconds after the technician disappeared through the doorway Richard felt himself being moved into the machine. He gulped as his head moved into the tube. It was very frightening and even with the sedative he struggled not to yell out. Soft music played through the headset he had been given. He closed his eyes and dozed.

Chapter Thirteen

Richard sat up with a start. He was in a hospital bed dressed in an open-backed gown. His head started to spin. But the ringing was gone. So were his clothes. The room he was in did not look like a hospital room. It looked like a clinic, maybe, but definitely not a room in Parkland. He flopped back on the bed for a little while and then sat up slowly. He moved his feet to the side of the bed and sat there.

His ear felt odd so he reached a hand to it and discovered a bandage. He also felt a pain in his leg and reached down to find a small bandage on it too, just above his knee on the inside of his thigh. Slowly his head cleared. He felt strange. And puzzled about where he was and why he was here.

"Oh, you are awake," came a voice through a door that was opening. A nurse walked into the room and attempted to take his vital signs.

"Where the hell am I? What is going on?" Suddenly he was angry.

"I will have to leave that to the doctor. He will be here shortly."

Richard jerked his arm from her when she started to put a blood pressure cuff on it and slid off the bed. Air against his backside reminded him he was not dressed. "Where the hell are my clothes? Where the hell am I? I want some damn answers!" His voice rose with each word until it ended in crescendo.

"There's no need to shout. You are perfectly fine. Now have a seat and let me check your blood pressure."

"I want to know where the hell I am and what is going on," he said, walking towards the door somewhat unsteadily and clutching the gown in the back to keep it closed. As he reached the opened door he ran into Doctor Nash.

"You need some rest," the doctor said, "so why don't you come on back, lie down, and we'll talk."

"What? Rest? What the hell is going on?"

"Let's talk," Nash said.

Richard was fuming. He debated whether or not to knock this doctor out of his way and flee down the hallway. But a wave of dizziness swept over him and he flailed his arm to try to steady himself. Immediately the doctor and nurse expertly helped him back to the bed.

"Now listen, Mister Cleveland," the doctor said. "Take your time. You are not recovered from the anesthesia yet."

Richard sat holding his head steady and eying the doctor with anger.

"I know you are angry and in your situation I would be immensely angry too. But we did what we had to do and we think you will understand, if not condone, what we have done." The doctor took a step and sank into a plush chair that was against a wall opposite the bed. "There are things going on, Mister Cleveland, things which you are not aware of. Or are only partially aware. And the outcome of these things may determine the future of the entire human race."

"You are talking in Riddles," Richard muttered. "And what exactly is it you have done?" He fingered the bandage over his ear.

"I know you do not understand, and I am sorry." As the doctor spoke Schipper walked into the room. The nurse was leaving at the same time, having taken Richard's blood pressure and other vital signs and logged them in a chart now hanging at the foot of his bed. Nash stood and turned to the investigator, "well, I'm glad you are here. Where have you been?"

"Details," Schipper said flatly, "details." He turned to Richard, "and how are you?" His words showed no deep concern.

"How the hell do you think? I've been kidnapped and had some kind of medical something performed on me and I'm here without my clothes and where the hell am I!?"

"Calm down, Cleveland," Schipper said impatiently, "you are in a private clinic not far from Parkland."

"Where the hell is Laura?" Richard's voice was still at a high decibel.

"She is home."

"What time is it?"

"Seven thirty AM."

"I've been here all night?"

"That is correct."

"You better start making some goddamn sense, Schipper, and get my damn clothes!" Richard looked like he would blow a fuse. His face was red and his eyes sparked. He was now fully awake and angrier than he had ever been. "What kind of shit are you trying to pull?" His ear felt wet. He touched it and pulled his hand away to find blood on his fingers. "What the hell have you done to me?"

Nash handed Richard some tissues from a box on a bed stand and moved to examine the ear. He mopped at the trickle on Richard's ear lobe. "Be still, Mr. Cleveland, do be still."

"What kind of shit are you trying to pull?" Richard's voice rose but he sat still, worried about the blood.

"Important shit," Schipper returned bluntly, "now calm down so we can talk."

Richard struggled to calm himself and leaned back in the bed. Nash had stopped the bleeding and secured the bandage. He felt too vulnerable leaning back so he turned again and sat up on the edge. "I'm listening."

"Fine," Schipper nodded. "Your accident was unfortunate but it provided us with an exceptional opportunity. I knew about you being near that UFO already, having ran the tags on your car..."

"What? What do you mean?"

"One of the witnesses, the picture he took, had your car in it."

Richard frowned. "And?"

"And so, like I said, I had wanted to track you down, but you showed up at the seminar. And then we got news that you had been in the accident. We got you down to Parkland where Nash works, ran the MRI, found implants, and, well, here you are."

"What? Implants? What the fuck are you talking about?"

Schipper nodded towards Nash, who spoke, "We found and removed two implants. One located just outside your ear canal embedded in your head, and one in your leg. They were the same type of implants we have seen before."

"You've kidnapped more people like this?"

"No, no, we have had other abductees come to us. Now quiet down and let me explain." The doctor took a deep breath. He was beginning to show some nervousness. He did not appear happy with the situation. "What we discovered in those instances is that the aliens were able to read the brain waves, thoughts, or somehow discover what we were doing. Within hours the persons were abducted again and their memories were wiped clean. Or buried too deeply to be recovered. Whatever the aliens did, the abductees had no recollection of us or of our removing the implants. We even showed one of them a video of our procedure and we were accused of faking the video."

"You see," Schipper took up the explanation, "with you we have an almost solid case. We have evidence of you being at the place where the UFO was sighted, we have testimony of your abduction, we have the implants, and with your help we can put the rest of our case together."

"Case?"

"That's right."

"What are you talking about?"

"We plan to go public. You are our proof."

"Like hell," Richard said, "I'm not participating in any three-ring circus. I'm no idiot, I read all about alien abductions on the Net and I've heard how the news people poke fun. Nobody believes it."

"There's more to it than you know."

"What?"

"There's what the Grays have placed in your head. As soon as we are able to extract that, we will have their agenda and...."

"What the hell do you mean, 'extract?' You said you have the implant thing."

"There's the information, too."

"What information?"

"I think," Nash interjected, "that Mister Cleveland needs rest now, Craig." The doctor shot a hard glance at the investigator.

"Tell me what you are talking about!" Richard's demand was loud and echoed in the room. But it had no effect on Schipper.

"Right, Nash, you are right." He turned to Richard. "We'll take this up later."

"You will take it up now! Right now!"

"No, I think later will be good," Schipper said, immune to Richard's anger, "Rest now." He abruptly left the room.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," the doctor said. "And we regret having done what we did, I mean, not having done it, but having had to do it in the manner we did. Do it, I mean."

"Fine," Richard said, "now get my damn clothes."

"Give me a minute," Nash said. He left the room. A nurse entered in a very short time with his clothes. He put them on after the nurse left. As he was slipping on his shoes the doctor came back into the room.

"Now that you are dressed, why don't you come down to the lounge where it is more comfortable."

"Fine," Richard growled. He was still fuming. They walked down a corridor and through another door where there were several new, plush, lounge chairs sitting about with tables between. The clinic had the appearance of an expensive executive suite. Richard took a seat and the doctor sat next to him.

"I want to ask you some questions about you and your friend, Laura," Nash began.

"What about Laura?"

"She is an abductee, is that correct?"

"Yes, why?"

"We believe she may be the final piece in this puzzle. With her we might have the means of turning the tables on the aliens."

"How?"

"Why exposing them, of course. But we must have the most irrefutable of evidence, it must be solid and absolutely foolproof."

"No such thing as foolproof."

"As nearly as possible, then."

"Go on."

"We have discovered some things about the aliens. One is that they are not infinitely powerful beings. They have limits to what they can do. We discovered, too, that abductees are monitored. Part, if not all, of the alien's ability to monitor abductees comes through the implants. We have not been able to crack open the devices, if that is what they are, but we have run a hundred tests and have discovered they affect brainwave patterns and emit some kind of signal at two or three narrow-band frequencies. The signal is indecipherable but we are certain it exists and we are certain it is what the aliens monitor."

"The aliens have never been able to stop us from removing the implants. At least, they've not tried that we know of. But they were aware of our doing it and, as I said before, they picked up the abductees before we could learn anything else. But this time, maybe, we can prevent that from happening."

"How?" Richard was becoming interested in spite of his anger.

"By controlling you. And by controlling the situation."

"Controlling me?" Richard didn't like the sound of that.

"Maybe controlling is a bad choice of words. We have been working on a device that blocks a range of frequencies we believe are used by the aliens to track individuals. We are pretty confident it works because it is in place here, in this building. We have thwarted several attempts to infiltrate this building by unknown persons, persons who were most likely sent by the aliens. Or are aliens. Or hybrids."

"Hybrids?" Richard's eyes lowered.

"Right," Nash said, "cross-breeds, part human, part alien."

Richard stood and walked around the room, "give me a break!" But even as he said it Richard remembered what Laura had told him about Charlie. He had easily dismissed all other mentions of hybrids but was not as able to dismiss what Laura had said.

"It is true. But we don't have the time to explain it here." Nash paused. "Why do you think they extracted your semen?"

Richard's mind rushed back to the memory of the aliens' placing a device over his genitals. He shook his head to get rid of what followed in his memory. "It's insane."

"Of course. But it is true. The device is installed in this building and we haven't been compromised so far. So we're sure they cannot monitor us here. We can control, um, protect you by providing you with one of these devices."

Richard settled into his chair again looking uncomfortable. "So you think you are going to give me your own implant, do you?"

"No, not at all, nothing like that. We'll give you this transmitter and you will carry it with you. That's all. It will shield you from aliens while at the same time help us keep track of you."

"And you will watch me all the time."

"What do you think, Cleveland?" The words came from the hallway. Schipper walked into the room. "You are our ace in the hole. Plan on it, Cleveland, you will be watched."

"And what if I just walk out of here?" Richard stood and stepped towards the door.

"You can try," Schipper said, standing in the door defiantly. For a few seconds tension filled the air.

"Hell, Craig, do you have to be G.I. Joe all the time?" The doctor looked from Schipper to Richard. "Sit down. Both of you."

Richard settled uneasily onto the edge of a chair. Schipper leaned more than sat on the arm of another.

"Mr. Cleveland," the doctor resumed, "I don't have to tell you what is going on in this world of ours. You know already. We have one shot. You are it. It sounds rather capricious maybe but there's not a hell of a lot of hope for our species if something isn't done. We are powerless to fight them, can't even track them, haven't a clue about what they are trying to accomplish. The only possibility is that we can crack open the nut of public opinion and raise an outcry. And, possibly, with the information we can gain from you we might also be able to stop them from doing whatever it is they are going to do."

"But there's all kinds of stuff in the media about alien abductions," Richard said.

"Right," Schipper chimed in, "And you believed it. Before you were abducted yourself, that is."

"I didn't even believe it afterword," Richard mumbled. "But if people don't believe this stuff now..."

"Those little bastards have managed to turn themselves into the biggest joke on the planet. Hell, look at Roswell and Area 51 and Gulf Breeze and all those other things. People who claim abduction

experiences are nut cases, those who claim conspiracy are paranoid, those who believe any of them are naïve or just stupid." Schipper was making a point.

"So what makes you think they will believe me?"

"It's not just you, Cleveland. There's a hell of a lot more. And we have methods."

Richard looked at the investigator and waited for more. "So tell me!"

"Not a chance. Who knows what will happen to you after today. I'm not putting anything more in your head than what you have. This entire project is compartmentalized, nobody besides me and two others know about all the pieces. Not even I know it all. Nobody knows it all. So far we have eluded the aliens with this effort and by God we will make it work."

"How do you know you have?" Richard stood and walked across the room. He stood looking at an abstract painting. "How do I know? How the hell does anybody know?" He turned and looked from the doctor to Schipper and back.

"If this doesn't work, Cleveland," Shipper said, "you can lean over and kiss your ass goodbye." Schipper's tone softened, "It will all be over."

Chapter Fourteen

Richard stood in the middle of the room. Nash sat in a chair looking as if he was sinking into the upholstery. Schipper leaned against the door jam. None spoke for such a length of time that it soon became unbearable. All of them understood the ridiculousness, and the seriousness, of their conversation. Their conversation sounded like a script from a cheap sci-fi movie. But it was real. It was too real. It was so real it was unreal.

Richard wanted so much at that very moment to simply wake up in his bed beside Pam at his home and be amazed at what a vivid dream he'd had. But lifting his hand to the side of his head he felt the bandage. He looked at Nash and noticed a muscle beside the doctor's right eye twitching. Schipper reached underneath his jacket to scratch his side revealing a side arm in a shoulder holster. This was real. "And it sucks." Richard had spoken the last half of his thought out loud.

Schipper took his remark to be a delayed response to his previous statement. "Of course, Cleveland, but there's nothing we can do about it. So let's get on with it, shall we?" He nodded to the doctor and left the room.

"Right," Nash said, shaking himself as if to rid himself of the thoughts he'd been having. "OK, so, sit down, Mr. Cleveland, let's continue."

"What is left?" Richard didn't sit.

"We need as much information as you can give us on your friend and yourself. We have to know everything about both of you."

"What for?"

"All I can tell you is that when we go public we have to be sure the subjects are legitimate."

"Subjects. I'm one of those subjects." Richard's words were a statement, not a question.

"That is correct."

"And Laura."

"Right."

"And how many others."

"Right," the doctor looked up at him, "well, there could be others."

Richard shrugged. He was growing weary of this cloak and dagger stuff already. Every cell in his body wanted to scream. He wanted to race through the streets and shout, "take this away from me!" But he held himself steady and settled into a chair next to Nash. "OK, I give up. What do you want?"

"To save time, take these forms," the doctor handed Richard a clipboard and several forms of legal-paper length. "They are designed for medical screening but they will get us started. Complete one for yourself and one for your friend."

"I don't know her medical history."

"Whatever you can. We will go from there."

"Fine, I'll see what I can do." Richard took the clipboard and the forms. "I want to talk to Laura. Where can I get a phone?"

"That will not be possible."

"What the hell do you mean not possible?"

"Not exactly," Nash said, glancing at the door and saying more with his expression than his words, "but, for this to work, you cannot make any phone calls."

"Why?"

"Your call may be traced. And, we do not know how the aliens do things. There's a risk that they might be able to use Laura to get to you. Remember, we're dealing with technology far advanced, technology we do not understand and cannot evaluate. I can, however, get a message to her for you."

"That's great," Richard said, "Just great." He sank into the chair. "Just let her know I'm alright and tell her to let the office know I'm not coming in today."

"Your job has been taken care of," Nash said. "I will convey the rest of the message."

"How? Taken care of how?"

"It has been taken care of," the doctor repeated.

Richard was on his feet again, "this is bullshit, here, bullshit. What kind of Gestapo are you running?" He was more frustrated than angry now.

"I assure you, Mr. Cleveland, if I could tell you, I would. I, in fact, know little myself. We have higher security than the highest level of military security. Nobody knows the full picture. It's the only way we can try to head off the aliens." The doctor looked tired. He leaned against the door frame, "it's possible that our organization has been infiltrated with abductees or hybrids. We can't take any chances. I am, myself, stuck right here with you for the duration of this project. Only Schipper has any freedom at all and even he does not know all that is going on."

"This is all way too much for me," Richard said, still standing and trying to find something to do with his hands. "Way too much." He sank into a chair, his head pounding.

"I understand, Mr. Cleveland, it's all very troubling. All of us struggle with this. But the alien threat is real, and it is here, and we have to do something."

"Yeah," Richard muttered, "I know." His words had no conviction. He sat silently as the doctor stood and walked towards the doorway. "Well, hell," he spoke at last, picking up the clipboard, "you may as well call me Richard, since we're stuck in this thing." He didn't look up at the doctor but instead began reading the form and checking boxes. The doctor stood in the doorway for a moment longer and then disappeared down the hallway.

Richard answered the elaborate questionnaire as best he could for himself and then worked on another one for Laura. He didn't know very much about her background so much of that form was left blank. When he had finished he stood and wandered around the room. There were no windows and only one door. There were no signs, no brochures, books, magazines, nothing. He stepped to the door and peered down the hallway. It looked like any hallway in any clinic except that it was a bit bare. There was no receptionists' desk in sight nor was there any medical equipment anywhere. The corridor was long and made a turn beyond the room where he'd found himself earlier. He started down the hallway. Nash came around the corner as he did so. Richard scanned the ceiling in the hallway and discovered there were cameras there. He was being watched.

"Mr. Cleveland," Nash said, coming towards him, "Richard, you have finished the questions?"

"I'm sure you know that," Richard said, "considering that you have been watching me."

Nash ignored his remark. "Well then, let's see where that gets us." He went into the room and picked up the forms where Richard had placed them. Then he sank into a chair and motioned for Richard to do the same. He read them over carefully and then looked up, taking a deep breath. "I see, so, now let me ask you a few more questions." The doctor took out a pen. He began with a series of questions about Richard's family history, about his employment background, his marriage, and then specific questions about Richard's encounter.

Richard answered him more because he wanted to get this stuff over with than to be cooperative. The doctor took few notes and Richard was sure everything they were saying and doing was being recorded.

"Now, about your relationship with your friend Laura," the doctor said, "are you having an affair?"

"None of your damn business," Richard said.

"It is, Mr. Cleveland, if we are to learn all we can." The doctor's eyes were slightly glassy now, and very determined. Richard didn't like the way he looked. There were some changes in the doctor, subtle but Richard saw them.

"Have you been doing drugs or something, doc?"

"Why do you ask?" The doctor's previous nervousness was gone, as was his uneasiness with this situation. "And of course not."

"You just seem calm now."

"Stress does strange things to people." The doctor stood and walked across the room, "and if this situation isn't stressful then I don't know what is." He turned to Richard. "So, answer my question." It was an order, not a request.

"No. We are not having an affair."

"You mean to say, you have not had," pause, "sexual relations, with her?"

"No, we have not been in bed together," Richard said, standing and walking towards the doctor, "although I care a great deal for her and she cares for me, we respect each other and I am married, you know. So, what's the point?"

"We have to know your relationship." Nash walked past Richard and sat in a chair. Richard walked around the room, restless.

"You may as well sit."

"Never mind my sitting, just ask your questions."

The doctor asked a couple dozen more questions, probing and personal. Richard was very reluctant to answer some of them and some he didn't have an answer for. The doctor wanted to know how he felt about Laura and where he thought their relationship might lead and Richard wasn't sure of those answers himself. He did not tell the doctor about kissing Laura.

Nash did not seem satisfied with Richard's answers but eventually stopped asking questions. He stood. "I suppose you are hungry," he said, "what would you like to eat, Mr. Cleveland?"

"Eat?" Richard hadn't even thought about eating. But he suddenly realized he was hungry. He looked at his watch and saw that it was after one PM. He hadn't eaten for more than twenty-four hours. "I don't know."

"We can have anything you want delivered."

"I want to get the hell out of here."

"That is not possible. Not just yet," Nash said. "What would you like for lunch?"

Richard did not like this change in the doctor. He had taken on a different demeanor. "I don't give a damn what is for lunch," Richard said, "let's get this stuff going." As he was talking Schipper came into the room. Richard turned to him. "What did you do, drug the good doctor?"

"Cleveland," Schipper said, ignoring Richard's question, "we will work on what you have told us. Now we need to hypnotize you and see what else we can uncover from your abduction. Are you willing to undergo that?"

"I have a choice?"

"Of course."

"Right," Richard said, walking to the doorway. A part of him wanted to bolt down that hallway and get out of there. Another part told him he'd find a locked door around that corner and he'd not get very far. Still another wanted to get at the bottom of this alien thing and wanted to do something about what had happened to him. "I feel like," he turned back to look at Schipper, "a guinea pig."

"You are not, Cleveland," Schipper said, "we just have to have precautions. Surely you can understand, having been abducted yourself. You are aware of some of their capabilities."

"Well, let's get on with it," Richard said.

"We will," Schipper said, "soon. Have a seat, I'll be back in a while. We'll order some pizza, if that will be fine with you, and by then the hypnotist will be here."

A sound at the door caused Richard to turn and he saw the nurse that had attended him earlier enter. She was carrying some notepads in her hand.

"Here you are," Schipper said, "this is good." He took the note pads and some pencils from her and she left. He turned to Richard. "Take these," he said, "and try to draw anything you can recall about your abduction. What the aliens looked like, the ship, instruments, anything that comes to mind."

Richard reached out and took the yellow pads and pencils. "I'm no artist."

"Doesn't matter. This will give us some starting points for the session."

"Fine." Richard settled into a chair. The doctor slipped out of the room and Schipper walked to the door.

"Cleveland," Schipper said, turning to Richard.

"Yeah?"

"This is the most important thing you have ever done in your life. I hope you realize that." The tone of Schipper's voice bordered on gratitude.

"Yeah, you say," Richard muttered, "we'll see, won't we?"

Schipper left. Richard turned his attention to the pads. He started with a sketch of the spacecraft, if that is what it was. Then he drew the aliens. When he did he realized his drawing looked just like a hundred others he'd seen on TV shows made by other abductees. "God," Richard muttered, "I'm sitting in some clinic, a prisoner, drawing pictures of little green men." He shook his head.

Within minutes after Richard had tired of his task and put the pads down the nurse came into the room with a pizza box.

"Would you like a soft drink?"

"A beer would be better," Richard muttered, taking the box she was handing him. He opened the top and then closed it, indifferent to its contents.

"We do not have beer. Would you like a cola?"

"I don't care," he muttered, dropping the pizza on a small table between two chairs and walking around the room. "This place needs windows, I'm beginning to get claustrophobic."

"I will bring you a cola, then." She left.

"Fine," Richard muttered to no one. He looked up and around trying to locate the cameras. They were well hidden, he thought to himself, he could not find one. But he was sure they were there. "Hey, Big Brother, make that an orange soda if you have one," he said. Then he sat down and opened the pizza box. He glanced at his watch. Four PM. No wonder his stomach was growling. He wondered how long the pizza had been here. It was cold. He took a slice out and was chewing on a bite when the nurse came in carrying a soda can.

"Orange soda," she said, leaving it on the table and departing before Richard could say anything.

"Thank you, Big Brother," Richard muttered with his mouth full. He sipped the soda and ate a couple slices of pizza. When he'd finished the drink and pizza he stood. Within a few seconds Nash and Schipper entered the room with a tall, attractive woman who wore a doctor's white coat.

"Doctor Stratmeyer, Richard Cleveland." Schipper introduced them.

"I'm pleased to meet you," the woman said. It was a stock phrase that held no meaning.

"And you," Richard said, "are you going to shrink my head?"

"I'm going to hypnotize you. If that is alright."

"Right, like I have a choice," Richard said, making a spewing sound and standing. "Choice, do any of us have a stinking choice?" He took a step, then a back step, and fell back into his chair. "Fucking aliens." His voice faded with the last word he spoke.

"Now then, Mr. Cleveland," Stratmeyer said, pulling a chair up to face Richard. "I am Doctor Stratmeyer and I'm here to help you recall what happened." Her voice was patronizing, as if she was speaking to a child.

"Fine, doc, go for it." Richard looked into her eyes.

"Good." The doctor proceeded to explain the procedures she would use and then began to hypnotize Richard. She was eventually satisfied with her efforts. Richard leaned back with his head on the back of the chair.

The first few questions dealt with Richard's trip to the countryside and the abduction. After getting an outline of events, Stratmeyer took Richard's drawings and asked him about the aliens, the ship, and other things. She expertly drew out details of his experience.

Slowly Stratmeyer led Richard through his experience on the ship. Richard recalled the events even more vividly than he had with Matchett. She seemed fascinated that he could remember such detail. On occasion she would prompt Richard to think and then she'd pause while he sat silently. At one of these pauses she turned to Nash, who had returned at some point during the session.

"His recall is rather extraordinary," Stratmeyer said.

"I agree," Nash said, "It could be that Richard is the one we have been looking for."

"Possibly so," Stratmeyer said, tapping her chin with the end of a pen she held in her hand. She turned back to Richard.

"Following the examination, Richard, what next?"

Richard described being led down a corridor, metallic walls, floor and ceiling. He was taken into another room where some kind of screen was on a wall. Benches were aligned where he could sit and watch the screen. He was guided by two of the alien creatures and was more like pushed down onto the seat than invited to sit. He described these things to the doctor who made some notes. Nash scribbled on a pad he held in his lap.

Richard described watching some kind of film or presentation about the current world situation, the president and other world leaders, something like a documentary on national affairs. As he described the scenes to the doctor suddenly the vision in his head exploded into a brilliant white light. He grabbed the sides of his head and closed his eyes, which were literally hurting, although the light had been in his mind and he had not seen it with his eyes. He leaped to his feet.

"Damn!" Richard stood in front of Stratmeyer, who had shoved her chair back quickly as he stood. "Damn, what was that?" Richard opened his eyes. The room swam before him. He closed his eyes

again. His arms flailed behind him as he searched for the arms of the chair. He found them and eased himself back into the seat. Then he opened his eyes slowly, squinting. "What was that?"

Both Nash and Stratmeyer were looking at him. Stratmeyer looked a little shocked but Nash had a knowing look in his eyes. "What happened?" Stratmeyer asked him.

"I don't know, exactly," Richard said. His mind was clear now, and he knew he was no longer hypnotized. "A blinding flash of light, like someone hit me on the back of the head with a baseball bat."

Stratmeyer looked at him with a puzzled expression. She sat there for some time apparently trying to decide how to proceed. "I see," she muttered at last, "well then, perhaps we should continue this later."

"I think so," Richard said, again closing his eyes and leaning his head back. He was rapidly getting a severe headache. Stratmeyer stood, closing the chart.

"Doctor," Stratmeyer said to Nash, "what do you think?"

"I think we will have to continue this session later," Nash said. "It is as I expected, though." He stood. Stratmeyer stood. "We will have to use other methods, I suppose." He attempted a smile of gratitude for the hypnotist. "Thanks, anyway."

"You are welcome, of course," she said. Then added, "I shall be going now." Richard had seen the non-verbal exchange that had prompted her latter remark. She left.

"I was hoping that we'd get past that," Nash said.

"You knew what would happen?"

"Not exactly. We suspected, but we were hoping, since you are not a long-term abductee and since we've removed your implants, we were hoping, maybe, we'd get to that memory locked in your head."

"Well, thanks one hell of a lot," Richard muttered, wincing.

"It was necessary." Nash's words were unemotional and carried no hint of apology.

"What now?"

"I'll be back," Nash said. He left the room. In a few minutes he returned. Richard heard him but didn't see him. His eyes were still closed. "Here."

"What?" Richard squinted. Nash held a small paper cup, two pills in it, and a small glass of water. "More drugs? What are these, LSD?"

"They're for that headache."

"Right," Richard said, reaching out an unsteady hand and accepting the paper cup in one hand and the plastic one filled with water in the other. He looked at the pills suspiciously, shrugged, and tossed them in his mouth. Then he washed them down with the water.

Schipper came into the room as Richard handed the cups back to Nash.

"I saw," he said to Nash. "Damn, I don't get it."

"It looks as though the aliens have placed a block in the memory that always sparks this reaction when we try to probe it."

"Any ideas?"

"For now? No." Nash sounded tired.

"Well, then, we'll have to see later, won't we?"

"We will." Nash left.

"Cleveland," Schipper finally acted as if he was aware Richard was in the room.

"I was wondering if I was invisible."

"This has been a setback," Schipper said, "but there are still some things we can do."

"Like what?"

"I'll tell you when your headache eases up."

"You'll tell me now."

"Fine," Schipper said. He settled into a chair. "Now you go home. We wait."

"And watch me?"

"And watch you."

"And then what?"

"We'll see," Schipper said, standing, "we will see."

"Great," Richard said, pushing himself out of the chair. His headache was not letting up. "Just great."

Chapter Fifteen

"Where in the hell have you been?" Laura's voice came roaring through the telephone.

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me," Richard muttered. He sat in a rental car driving towards his home.

"Try me. God, I have been worried sick. The office is all screwed up. Pamela called wanting to know what the wreck was all about. Where in the hell are you?"

"Just now I'm driving towards the house. I need a shower and a change."

"That's not good enough, Richard," Laura's voice was scolding but Richard heard the worry in it. "Some nurse comes down the hallway at the hospital and said they had arranged for me a ride and you were having some tests and would call later. I waited forever and then the nurse came back and insisted I go home and rest. They damn near pushed me out the door. All night and nothing! What the hell is going on?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow. Really, Laura, I'm fine. I had, well, there was a little more to, I mean, hell, my brain is fried, can I call you in the morning?"

"Damn you, Richard Cleveland, you are making me crazy!"

"I'm sorry."

"I'm going to come out to your house."

"That's not a good idea. The roads are still bad and traffic sucks."

"I'll make it, the ice is gone and I'm coming, so you be there." There was a click. Richard frowned and pressed the "off" button on the phone and tossed it in the seat beside him.

Richard was glad the weather had warmed enough to get rid of most of the ice that had wreaked so much havoc. The roads were still slick with rain, however, and while above freezing now, the air was still cold and clammy. The rental car he drove was unfamiliar to him and he maneuvered it with extra caution.

When he pulled into his driveway and walked into his house he wondered if it had really been less than two days since he'd left. It seemed like an eternity. In his mind he went over the story he was supposed to tell Laura since she would no doubt show up on his doorstep soon. He was glad it was Friday. The office would be closed tomorrow. The light on his answering machine was blinking as he walked into the kitchen. He pressed it and listened while one after the other message played, most of

them from Pamela and each one more frantic than the last. A couple were from Laura. Richard frowned, shrugged, and walked towards the bathroom. He was stepping out of the shower when he heard the front door pounding. Quickly he slipped into a robe and went to the door. When he opened it Laura came blasting through.

"All right, goddamnit, Richard, what the hell is going on?"

"Hello to you, too," he said.

"Hello my ass, you disappear for a full day and then call like nothing happened. What the hell is going on?"

"Sit down, Laura," Richard groaned, "let me get dressed. I'll be back."

"Did you talk to Pamela?"

"Pam?"

"I told you, she's been calling everywhere."

"I got the idea from the messages," he said, motioning towards the answering machine. "No, haven't called her yet." He walked to the machine and hit the replay button. Pamela's voice came from the machine.

"Richard, what is this about an accident? Were you in an accident? Are the roads bad up there? Your insurance tracked me down when they couldn't find you. Where are you? Richard, pick up the phone, Richard? Hello? Well, call me."

The next message was louder.

"Richard, where the hell are you? The insurance company wants to know where your car is. Where are you, that's what I want to know. Are you injured? The hospital said you were gone. Where were you, are you, what is going on? Call me!"

A final message screeched out of the tiny speaker on top of the machine.

"Where the hell are you! Richard Deaton Cleveland, call me!"

"I think I better call her."

"I think you better," Laura said, her worried expression giving way to a tiny grin.

"I will call her from the bedroom while I get dressed. Fix some coffee or something." He waved an arm towards the kitchen as he hurried into the bedroom.

As he worked into a t-shirt and shorts he dialed a number from a pad on the bedside stand.

"Pamela?"

"Where the hell have you been?!"

"Worried about me, I see."

"Damn insurance company called, all kinds of crap, I can't find you at the hospital, where have you been? Are you dead or something?"

"Sure, calling from the grave," Richard said, "Calm down. I went to a clinic to get better care than I could at Parkland. Bump on my head. I got a room for the night downtown. Didn't want to risk the drive home. I'm fine now." He was telling Pamela an abbreviated version of the story he was going to tell Laura.

Pamela calmed a little and told him about the calls he'd received from the insurance company. Apparently they'd tried to locate him unsuccessfully and then found Pamela, who was listed as an alternate contact. The Mesquite office had given them her Houston number. They wanted to know where his car was so they could make an appraisal and wanted to know about his injuries. Richard wrote the number down she gave. He assured her he was fine and hung up. Then he walked into the kitchen.

"No coffee?"

"It's too late for coffee," Laura said. Richard noticed that the time was nine PM.

"Oh, I didn't realize it'd gotten that late."

"Talk," Laura insisted. "Where have you been?"

"Deerbrook Clinic," he said.

"What the hell were you there for?"

"I dunno, something, some kind of something, in my head. I'm no doctor, you'll have to ask Nash." Richard suddenly realized he'd spoken Nash's name with too much familiarity.

"Nash? Who's that?"

"The ER Doctor, the redheaded guy. He ran an MRI, some kind of bubble thing in my head, hell, I don't understand it. Had to do with the air-bag impact. Deerbrook has some new, sort-of experimental stuff there, they took me there." He was being intentionally vague and evasive. "I don't remember signing the release but I did. They showed it to me. I woke up there this afternoon. I called you as soon as I could get on my feet and get a car."

"That sounds pretty damn fishy," she said.

"I know, I'm sorry, but it's true." To himself, he added, "sort of."

Laura looked like she didn't want to believe it. She shrugged. "So, did it work?"

"What?"

"The medical miracle thing?"

"Oh, well, I don't know. Not yet. Maybe."

"I was beginning to think aliens nabbed you."

"Nope." He looked at her to see if she was serious or if her remark was flippant. He couldn't tell. In a rush Richard realized he hadn't considered how Laura was. "Hell, I'm a jerk, were you hurt at all?"

"Nah, I'm fine, just a little shaken," Laura said.

"Shaken, not stirred, huh?"

"Something like that." She stood and walked towards him. "But, I was stirred." She walked up to him and slipped her arms around his waist. "Good God, Richard, I was so worried about you." She held him and put her head on his shoulder.

Richard placed his arms around her shoulders painfully aware they were being watched. Another gift from Schipper. While Richard had been in the clinic Schipper's people had installed cameras and microphones in his house. At least they had told him what they did and explained that it was how they would keep tabs on him to see if the dampening device he carried worked.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, "I'm very sorry." He meant that, too. And for more than the fact that Laura was worried. He meant he was sorry for lying to her, for helping Schipper spy on them, and for every rotten thing that had happened to her. She'd been taken and violated and abused by the Grays all her life and now he was helping humans do the same thing. He felt terrible inside.

Laura took a deep breath and pushed back from Richard a little. She held him at arm's length and looked into his eyes. "This is, difficult," she said.

"I know, for me too," he said. "But, you know," he broke their embrace, turned to the refrigerator and opened it, not to get anything but to give himself something to do. "It's, what," he paused, "I mean, we just can't, jump into things."

"I know," Laura whined. "But," she took a step towards him, "I'm sure now, Richard, I love you."

Richard worked hard to evade her without appearing to do so. He was now fiddling with the coffee pot, getting it ready for the morning. He spoke to her without looking at her. "I love you, too, Laura." He dug in a cabinet for coffee and filters. "Things are so damn complicated. There's Pamela, and your friend Jeffie, and this alien thing, all kinds of complications." He felt a tug on his shoulder and turned to find himself looking into Laura's eyes.

"If we love each other, can't we work these things out?" Laura's eyes were pleading.

"God," Richard muttered. He kissed her passionately on the mouth, "you take my breath away." He stepped back. "But, yeah, well, we will work things out. We will. Just takes time." He turned and took the decanter from the coffee machine, filled it with water, then poured the water in the top of the machine and replaced the decanter. Laura hadn't spoken or moved.

"Richard," Laura said at last, "I am so confused."

"Me too, sweetheart," he said, not thinking about what he'd just called her.

"What are you going to do tomorrow?" Laura drifted into the living room and flopped down on the loveseat.

"Haven't given it much thought."

"Wanna help me get unpacked?"

"Oh, sure, how much you have to go?"

"Pretty much everything."

"I see," Richard walked into the living room and stretched out on the couch. "I'm expensive labor," he said.

"Yeah? What are your rates?"

"Dinner. A nice, expensive, sea-food dinner."

"I think I can afford you." She stood. "I better go."

"I am pretty tired."

"Unless," she paused and took a step towards him, "unless you want me to stay."

Richard was suddenly almost glad his house was full of hidden cameras. He knew he'd not be able to say no to her. But he'd not allow himself to be displayed on a dozen monitors at some complex somewhere with Laura in his arms. He stood. "I, uhm," he cleared his throat, "I want the time to be right, Laura. I don't think it is, not yet." He was not just thinking about timing. He was thinking about the cameras.

Laura shook her head, "probably not." She stepped towards the door. "But," she turned towards him, "what if I just stay in your guest room? It is late and I don't want to drive home."

"Guest room, sure, that'd be nice, to have you close by." Even as he spoke the words he felt a panic rise in his stomach. He considered talking Laura into going home. But he wanted her near. Who was he kidding? He wanted her. But there were the cameras. And there was Pamela. And there was.... The feeling of panic became a lump in his throat and he struggled to breathe.

"Hello? Earth to Richard?"

"A'hem," Richard tried to clear his throat, "I'm sorry, lost in thought for a moment." He hadn't realized he had been staring blankly at Laura while thoughts were banging around in his head.

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah, sure, just a little screwy in the head." He grinned at her.

"A little? Right," she kidded him. "OK, then, I'll be right back." She went out the front door. Richard settled down onto the sofa and again looked around for the cameras he knew were there.

"I hope you are having fun, Schipper," he said out loud just as the front door opened.

"Who are you talking to?" Laura entered carrying a small bag.

"Myself," Richard grunted.

"Yep, you are losing it."

"Done gone, sweetheart, done gone." Richard stood. He looked at the bag Laura was holding.

"Never leave home without it," she said, shrugging.

"I see." Richard walked towards the hallway that separated the two bedrooms. "I suppose you know where everything is."

"I suppose I do by now," she said, walking up behind him. "Do you know how old-fashioned this is?"

"Quite aware of it," Richard said. He turned, looked her in the eyes and started to say something else. Laura raised her hand.

"I know, I know, timing and all that." She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "It's ok, I know. Good night, Richard, sweet dreams."

"Same to you, Laura," he said. Quickly he left her in the hallway and walked to his bedroom before he forgot about the cameras and took her in his arms anyway. He took his shirt off and crawled into bed with his shorts on. As he eased back he heard the guest room door close. There was no more sound. He quickly fell asleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Richard woke to the brightness of the sun coming through his bedroom window. He rolled from his side to his back and was suddenly aware he was not alone in the bed. He looked quickly and saw Laura asleep next to him. She had a sheet pulled up around her but she obviously did not have on any kind of top. For a few seconds he lay looking at her trying to remember what happened. Then a memory came drifting into his head, of Laura coming to bed with him the evening before. He smiled. She was a beautiful and wonderful woman.

Something in the memory bothered him, though. Something seemed to be floating there, unconnected, hiding from him. Teasing him. He thought to himself that his first night with Laura should have been a memorable one but he could not remember much. Their love making was only a blur. That troubled him. As he considered this, Laura stirred and rolled onto her back. She made a little sniffing sound and then opened her eyes with a squint.

"Oh, oh, that window," she muttered, "bright."

"Good morning," Richard said. He smiled at her.

For a split second the expression on Laura's face was one of fear and confusion. She squinted and held an arm up. With that movement she apparently realized she had no clothes on so she quickly pulled the covers up to her neck with her free arm. "Richard?" Her breath was heavy. "Richard, what am, where am I? What?" She was silent for a few seconds. "Oh," she said, the situation suddenly sinking in. She moved her arm away from her eyes so that she could peer at Richard from under it. "Did we?"

"I think we did," Richard said.

She moved her arm and her eyes were squinting, "Can you close that curtain or something?"

"Sure," Richard said. In a flash he was at the window and closed the curtain. He didn't think about being in his underwear in front of Laura. Darkness enveloped the room and for a second he couldn't see anything. Slowly his vision returned. He went back to the bed, picked up the pillow and stuffed it against the headboard. Then he sat leaning against it.

"I feel strange," Laura said.

"You look beautiful." He pulled his knees up and folded his arms around them. "I feel a little odd to."

Laura held the sheet up and leaned over the edge of the bed, apparently looking for something. "I wonder where my clothes are."

"I don't know, shall I go look for them?"

"Would you?"

"Sure," Richard said. He stood and walked to the wall where he flipped a light switch. His eyes rebelled at the sudden light. He heard Laura exclaim too. "Sorry." He looked on the floor around the bed for Laura's clothes. He also noticed he had his underwear on wrong-side-out. "That's weird," he muttered. And in noticing he realized he was standing there without anything else on.

"What?"

"I have my boxers on backwards."

Laura sat up on the bed, still clutching the sheet to cover herself. She looked at him. "You do." She flopped back onto the bed, "Richard, this is too weird. She paused, "I know I said it, but, I don't remember much."

"Neither do I. Were we drinking?" He asked again.

"No, I don't think so. Let's see," she looked up at the ceiling. "You called, you were released from Parkland, and I came over to see how you were. It was late, I decided to stay. I think. Then..." she paused. "I don't remember drinking."

"Me either." Richard settled onto the edge of the bed. "But I have a hangover anyways. I feel like a rat has been running around in my head."

"Try a diesel truck," Laura muttered.

"Yeah."

"Yeah," she repeated.

Richard stood, collected a pair of jogging pants from a dresser, and walked out of the bedroom. He stepped into the bathroom, reversed his underwear, put on the pants, and went to the kitchen. The automatic timer on the coffee pot had come on some time ago and the coffee was old and strong. He didn't remember setting it up the night before. He poured himself a cup, and one for Laura, put cream and sugar in them, and returned to the bedroom. "Coffee?" He walked into the bedroom and sat the cup on the bedside stand next to Laura who was now sitting up wearing one of his shirts.

"I can't find my clothes."

"I haven't a clue." As he spoke he heard the doorbell ring. "Who could that be?" He turned and walked to the front door and peered through the peep hole. A blue jump-suited man stood outside. Then Richard remembered. Pamela was going to get her things today. He rushed back to the bedroom.

"Shit," he was muttering, "Laura, Pamela is going to be here any minute. Shit, guest room, you better go down there. Hope like hell I can find your clothes before she gets here. Maybe they are in the bathroom."

"This is insane, Richard." Laura leaped up and rushed down the hallway. Richard looked after her. He had no time to think about her shapely legs and everything else he could see now, though. He went to the bathroom, no clothes, and he looked around in the living room. He made one more sweep of the bedroom and quickly grabbed the cup of coffee he'd brought Laura and took it to the kitchen. The doorbell rang again.

"I'm dead," he said aloud as he went towards the front door. He heard Pamela's voice on the other side of it. Just as he was about to open the door he heard a key in it. Pamela came through the door, followed by a big, burly man, the one in the blue jump-suit. "Pamela," he exclaimed.

"Whose car is that, Richard? It's in the way."

"Car?" Richard looked past them and saw his rental car in the drive.

"Oh, yeah, that's um," the car she was talking about was his rental, "my rental. I got it yesterday, when I got out of the hospital."

"I thought you were in a clinic."

"Parkland, dear, I was in Parkland."

"Parkland? I know you said you went somewhere else."

"I did? Well, no, I was kept overnight in Parkland. Got a bump on my head, you know."

"Oh, yeah, how are you?" Pamela walked up to him and looked at his face. The skinned marks were still very obvious on his nose and his face was chapped but he didn't look as bad as he had the day before.

"I'm fine," he said.

"Good," Pamela said. She didn't even attempt to kiss him. Instead she walked through the living room and into the kitchen, looking around. "The movers are here, you see," she said. "Why did it take you so long to answer the door?"

"I was still in the bed. I was exhausted."

"But you have coffee."

"The timer, I set the timer."

"Oh, I see," she looked at him askew. She then turned and began opening cabinets and closing them, apparently deciding on what to take. "Do you want me to leave you some of these dishes, Richard?"

"Well, gee, Pamela, it would be nice," Richard said.

"Oh, ok, I'll leave the old set."

Richard frowned.

"Sir," the man in the blue jump-suit was tapping Richard on the shoulder. "Sir, do you know who owns that car out there, against the curb?"

"Uh, car. Car? Where?"

"There," the man said, pointing through the open door where volumes of cold air were pouring in. Richard saw the front of Laura's car.

"Oh, yeah, sure, that's, um, Laura's."

Pamela turned to look at Richard with a questioning gaze, "Laura? From your work?"

"Yes," he said.

"What's her car doing here?"

"I was worried about him," Laura said, walking into the room. She was fully dressed. "He called and sounded a little groggy so I came out to check on him. I was concerned because of that bump, so I borrowed your guest room."

Richard stared at her and hoped his expression wasn't something that would make Pamela suspicious. Pamela looked at Laura, then Richard, then Laura.

"Oh," Pamela said, "I see. Well," she turned to Richard, "I'm sorry I couldn't be here. Couldn't you get a nurse or something?"

"It was my idea, really," Laura said, walking to the kitchen and making herself a cup of coffee.

"Oh, well, OK then, I guess." Then with a toss of her head she dismissed the whole subject. She turned to Richard as she pulled a paper out of her purse. "I have a list of stuff I need, and want to take, if it's alright with you, Richard." She handed Richard the list.

As Richard looked over the list a younger man came in the front door carrying folded cartons. He was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt with some rock group's picture on it. Behind him came the man in the blue cover-alls carrying some more boxes. "We will need to move that little car, and the one in the drive, ma'am, to get the truck up here."

"Oh, sure, Richard and, um," she looked at Laura as if to remember her name, "Laura, here, will move them. Bring those boxes here and I'll show you what goes. You have those wrapping things, don't you?"

"Yes ma'am, the bubble wrap and papers, in this box," the mover waved a box he held under one arm.

"Good." Pamela opened several cabinet doors in the kitchen and left them open.

"You want all this?" Richard was looking at the list.

"It's my stuff, isn't it?"

"Well, it is our stuff. Won't it leave me a little short."

"You live on microwave dinners anyway, Richard."

"I suppose that's true."

"Of course it is."

Richard stepped back to allow the movers into the kitchen. They started assembling the boxes and taping them.

"I'll move my car," Laura said.

"Here," Richard said, following her towards the guest room, "let me get my keys, or the rental keys, and I'll move that too." He went into his bedroom and closed the door where he quickly got a shirt from a dresser, some shoes, and found the keys to the car in his pants pocket. He met Laura in the hallway coming out of the guestroom. He pointed at her clothes and she shrugged. He followed her out of the house. As he pulled the door closed with the two of them outside he shivered from the cold. He had on only a t-shirt. Laura had on her jacket.

"Where?"

"They were on the chair where I put them," she said. Then she looked at him with a puzzled expression, "where I put them? I don't remember that. Why did I say that?"

"I don't know."

"Things are strange, Richard."

"I know."

They parted and each walked to vehicles, moved them to a location down the street, and hurried back into the house where it was warm.

Laura went to the kitchen to get the cup of coffee and it was gone. Pamela noticed.

"Sorry about your coffee, Laura, but that was my cup. We had to pack it." Pamela stood in the corner of the kitchen like a foreman at a construction site. The movers were pulling items from a shelf, wrapping them and placing them in boxes. "Now be sure to mark the boxes there," she said to the mover.

"It's ok, Pamela," Laura said. "I'll get my things." She disappeared into the guest room. Pamela hadn't heard a word.

Richard picked up Pamela's list which had been lying on the bar. He looked it over again. "You are not taking the bedroom furniture?"

"You need that, don't you?"

"Yeah, but, you are taking almost everything else."

"Oh, I don't need the furniture, except that chair there," she pointed to a high-backed chair, an antique with elaborate scroll work in the back of it, "and the few other things. I bought a suite of furniture to match the townhouse. When are you coming to see it?"

"I haven't any idea," Richard muttered, tossing the list back on the bar. "I think I'll leave you to, um," he started to say something less than kind, but decided not to, "to get your things." He walked towards the bedroom as Laura came out carrying her over-night bag.

"I suppose I should go," she said.

"No, wait, let me get dressed, we can get breakfast."

"What about Pamela?"

"I'm just in the way."

"Oh, well, sure, I'll wait in my car."

Richard started to tell her to wait in the living room but thought her going on to her car was probably best. "Sure, well, I'll be out in a few minutes."

"Try to get your jeans on right side out," she said in a whisper. When he looked at her she winked and then walked through the living room and out the door. The only noise remaining was the clinking and bumping sounds of the movers filling up boxes with items Pamela and Richard had spent years collecting together.

As he got dressed Richard felt a huge lump in his throat. Pamela had been cold and distant from the minute she arrived and didn't even seem to care that Laura was there. He remembered a time when her eyes would light up each time she saw him. Now there was no light at all. He wondered what had happened to her. And to him. He was feeling a sense of loss but not what he thought he should feel. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was just after ten AM. The past few days were a blur in his memory. The accident, the trip to Parkland, his being admitted overnight, and last night. What happened last night? He did not remember drinking anything and he hadn't taken any kind of medications. But he had no clear memory. Everything was disjointed, unconnected. Nothing fit.

Fully dressed and donning a heavy coat as he exited the bedroom, Richard spoke to Pamela who still stood in the kitchen, "I'm going to get something to eat. Want to come along?"

"No, thank you, I ate on the plane. If a roll and coffee is eating. I'll get something when we get finished. Shouldn't be too much longer."

"Well, if we're not back, stop at that pancake place there on the hill, OK?"

"I will."

Richard left her to boss the movers and walked out the front door. He thought about Pamela's car and turned around and went back. She was pointing at keep-sakes and wall hangings in the living room now. "I will have to get me a decorator to fix the place up now," he said.

"Well, Richard," she said in a pouty voice, "you gave those things to me."

"I know, no big deal," he lied, "what about your car?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I'm going to drive it back. It would have been nice if you'd have put it in the garage, you know."

"Sorry," he said. "I was parking my car in the garage, until I messed it up."

"Oh, yeah, well, I'm going to drive it back."

"Why didn't you just have it shipped and fly back?"

"Hm, I wish I'd have thought of that," she said, her fingers on her chin.

"I was joking," Richard said. "Well, I'll see you in a bit. Oh, what happened to the company car you had?"

Pamela looked a little disappointed at the remark. "Well, you know, it belongs to the company. They want it for some executive or something."

"Oh, ok, sorry. See you in a bit." He nodded and turned towards the door.

"Yeah, sure, in a little while." She didn't look at him.

Richard walked outside and down the sidewalk to Laura's car. He got in on the passenger side.

"Hi." He felt a little nervous.

"Hi." She glanced at him and then looked out the windshield. "Do you feel as strange as I do?"

"At least that much."

"I wish," she looked at him, "I wish I could remember."

"Me too," he said, a grin hovering on his face. "I mean, uh," he wasn't sure what to say.

"Um, yeah," she said, pulling the shift down and driving away from the curb. "I sort-of remember," she went on. "But, well, I mean, you'd think...." Richard nodded.

"Yeah, like, it was," he took a breath. He had memories of making love but they were like pieces of a puzzle that didn't fit well together. He frowned.

Laura drove up the street and followed Richard's pointing finger to the café. They got out and walked towards the door. Richard held it for her and then followed. Neither spoke until they were seated, had accepted menus, and ordered coffee.

Richard sat looking sideways out the window of the café.

"You look sad."

"I am," he said, turning to Laura, "I suppose I am. We were together for a lot of years. Hard to believe it is really over."

"It is, isn't it?" Laura looked at him with compassion. She had noticed the way Pamela had spoken to Richard. There was no love lost there.

"It is." He leaned back as the waitress sat a cup of coffee before him. Then he fixed it the way he liked it. But instead of sipping it he just lifted the cup to his nose and sniffed, and then looked into the caramel-colored beverage as if looking for answers.

"I'm sorry," Laura said.

"Thanks," Richard looked at her and smiled weakly.

They sat silently until the meal arrived. Then they ate mostly in silence, glancing at each other off and on and making short comments about unimportant subjects. Richard felt comfortable with Laura. He was very glad she was there. When they'd finished eating and the plates were gone and fresh coffee was in their cups, Richard suddenly felt talkative.

"You know, it's not just last night. Everything is a blur, from Thursday on, since the collision."

"I'm having that feeling too."

"It's like, really, like, a picture that was smeared, you know, before the paint was dry."

"Fuzzy."

"Right. Fuzzy."

"Do you suppose the bump on my head is worse than I thought?"

"You don't have a bump, you have a scrape," she said, "and I don't have a bump. Something fishy is going on and it's making me crazy. Strange," Laura whispered as she lifted a cup to her lips.

"It is." Richard saw Pamela's car coming up the street followed by the moving truck. "That was quick."

"What?"

"There's Pamela."

"Oh, should I go?"

"And make me walk?"

"Oh, right," Laura smiled.

"Besides, I don't think she would notice if you were sitting in my lap."

"No? Let's find out." Laura made a move to slide out of the booth.

Richard grinned at her, "funny you are, girl." He watched Pamela pull up in the parking lot and walk into the café. She came towards his table carrying something.

"Richard, I don't know who this guy is but this Shippie guy is a pain."

"What?"

"Shippie, Ripper, something, he called twice. And your cell phone has been ringing. There it is." She sat it on the table. "You should have taken it with you."

"What about the, who? Who called?"

"Some guy, some investigator, he said, something to do with the accident I think. Said he needs to reach you right away." She paused for a breath, "are you in trouble? Did you cause the wreck or anything?"

"No, I'm not in trouble and no, I didn't cause the wreck. Another car caused it. A transformer fell on my car."

"A what?"

"Transformer, those big things like out there on the pole," Richard pointed out the window.

"Oh, well, whatever, call the guy. I couldn't get my packing done for him."

"I will. How about a number."

"He said you had it. I don't know it. I am not your secretary, like her." Pamela nodded towards Laura.

"Laura's not my secretary, she's...."

"Whatever," Pamela seemed out of breath, "I have to get back to Houston. Take care of yourself, will you?"

"Do my best," Richard said, standing.

"Well, I have to go," Pamela kissed Richard quickly on the lips and rushed out of the café.

Richard settled back into the booth. "She's nervous," he said apologetically.

"Oh," Laura said.

"Yeah." Richard watched her leave. As her car disappeared in the distance he turned back to see Laura staring at him.

"I wish I could help, Richard."

"You help more than you know, just by being right there." He slid a hand across the table and laid it upon hers. She turned her hand over and grasped his.

"I'm glad to be here."

They sat looking at each other for a long time.

Suddenly Richard's cell phone beeped. He picked it up and pressed a button. "Hello?"

"Cleveland, I've been trying to reach you all morning."

"Who is this?"

"This is Schipper. Craig Schipper. What's wrong with you?"

"Craig Schipper," Richard paused, trying to remember the name. "Oh, yeah, maybe, weren't you at that UFO thing?"

"Are you feeling alright?"

"I was in an accident a couple days ago. I'm still a little disoriented."

"Oh, I see," there was a pause, "well, I was told you wanted to see me."

"Just a second," Richard held the phone down with his hand over the receiver. "Do you remember a Craig Schipper? It's that guy from that UFO thing we went to the other night. He says I said I want to see him."

"I don't remember. Did we go to a UFO thing?"

Richard shook his head and shrugged, "Look, Mr. Schipper, I sort 'of remember seeing you talk about something but can't recall what it was. I don't remember asking for you. Not sure why I would."

"I see," Schipper paused again. "Well, do you think it would be possible for me to see you?"

"What about?"

"I think I'd rather tell you in person."

"I don't know...."

"Trust me, Cleveland, I mean, Mr. Cleveland, it is important. May I come to see you?"

"When?"

"Now."

"Now?" Richard looked across the table at Laura and held the phone down again. "He wants to see me now."

"What for?"

"I don't know. Wasn't I supposed to help you or something?"

"I think, yeah, with my boxes."

"Oh, OK, I'll tell him maybe later. This guy sounds weird." Richard held the phone up again, "Say, there, um, Mr. Schippler?"

"Schipper."

"Yeah, well, I have something to do this morning. Maybe next week."

"We can't wait until next week," Schippler said, "and we need to see Ms. Bright, too."

"Ms. Bright? What do you know about her."

"I need to see both of you right away. Trust me, Mr. Cleveland, this is quite important."

"Just a minute." Richard held the phone down, "This guy knows you," he said to Laura, "he wants to see you too."

"Me?"

"Yes." Richard waited for her response. She just stared at him.

"This is very odd, Richard, I have a strange feeling."

"Me too. Shall I tell him to buzz off?"

"No," she said quietly, "no, let's see him."

"OK, then," Richard lifted the phone, "Schippler, I live in Rockwall, it will take a while to get to town. I'm going into town anyway, where do you want to meet us?"

"I'll come there. When will you get back to your house?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you are not at your home now, when will you be there?"

"How do you know that?"

"Your wife told me."

"Oh, yeah, right. I'll be there in a few minutes. I'm just down the street."

"Look, I know this might sound odd, but, wait for me. In fact, let me come to where you are and I'll follow you home."

"You are right, it does sound strange, and I don't think I like it at all."

"I will explain it to you when I get there. Where are you?"

"We're at the pancake place, just off Interstate 30." Richard gave him directions. Schippler said he'd be there in twenty minutes and hung up. Richard placed the phone on the table gently.

"This has to top everything."

"What?"

"He said wait here until he got here and then he would follow me home."

"He did?"

“He did.”

Chapter Seventeen

Richard sat looking up the highway. He saw a dark brown, full-sized sedan come speed up to a stop sign and then turn into the parking lot. It looked like an unmarked police car. There were three people in the car. The driver got out and Richard thought he recognized the man but wasn't sure. The man came rather hurriedly through the door of the restaurant and had no problem recognizing Richard.

"Mr. Cleveland," the man said, "I'm Craig Schipper." He nodded at Laura, "Ms. Bright."

"You know me?"

"I know both of you," Schipper said, "if you are ready, we will follow you home."

"I suppose so," Richard said, sliding out of the booth and standing. His legs were sore from sitting so long. He bent and stretched them backwards. Laura stood.

"Let's be going then," Schipper said with an authoritative voice.

"Am I in some kind of trouble?" Richard's thoughts were scrambled and he had some idea that there could be trouble he didn't remember.

"No, no trouble," Schipper said. "Shall we?" He held his hand indicating he wanted Richard and Laura to go ahead of him. He followed them outside to Laura's car. "I'll see you at your house." He disappeared before Richard could say anything else.

"Ooh, macho guy," Laura cooed as she got into the car. Richard got into the passenger side.

"Something about that guy I don't like."

"You don't know him."

"Well, there's something anyway."

"If you say so." She started the car and backed out. In a few minutes she was pulling into Richard's driveway. They got out and walked towards the house. The brown sedan had pulled in right beside them. Schipper got out quickly, followed by the two others. Richard opened the door and turned to greet Schipper.

"This is Dr. Nash," Schipper said, answering the question on Richard's face, "and this is Dr. Stratmeyer."

Richard looked first at the tall, thin redheaded man and then at the woman Schipper called Stratmeyer. He could not remember the woman at all but the man looked familiar. Then he remembered. It was the doctor from the emergency room at Parkland. "What are they doing here?"

"I will explain everything in a few minutes," Schipper said, "may we come in?"

"I guess," Richard said reluctantly. He led the trio into the house. Laura was already inside.

"She didn't take your furniture," Laura commented. "But she got your walls pretty bare."

"I see," Richard said, standing in the middle of the room and looking around. Slight imprints made by dust remained on the walls, framing the locations of some paintings and wall hangings which Pamela had taken. Above the television there were a couple of wires hanging. She took the DVD player. Richard frowned. Then he noticed an odd spot on his wall right at the edge of where a cast-iron decoration had been hanging. He walked to it. The spot was about a half of an inch across and looked like an eye. It was pressed into the wall and, if the decoration had been there, would not have been visible. Richard poked at it with a finger. "What the hell...."

"Mr. Cleveland," Schipper got Richard's attention, "I think we should get started." Schipper looked from Richard to his television, which Pamela had not taken. "Nash, Dr. Stratmeyer, if you will be seated, here," Schipper pointed to the sofa. He makes an examination of Richard's TV, nodded, and said, "I'll get the flash drive."

Richard grabbed a dining chair from the kitchen, carried it into the living room and sat in it. He stared at the odd object in the wall. Laura fell into the loveseat. Schipper came back inside. He pulled the door closed and walked to the TV where he plugged in a thumb drive. He looked around and found the TV remote and turned it on. When he had it all ready, he turned to Richard.

"What I am about to show you will look very strange. In fact, you will no doubt be quite angry. But if I don't show you this video first, you will not believe anything I say."

Richard looked at Schipper with some skepticism. "I don't understand."

"You will. And, before we begin, let me apologize. We had no idea they would do what they did. Apparently they are capable of things we had not counted on."

"They? They who?"

"Do you remember where you were a week ago last Monday night?"

"Yeah, I, ah," Richard paused. Try as he might he could not remember. "Come to think of it, no, I can't."

Schipper looked at Nash, "It's a good thing we have everything on video or this would all be a lost cause, again."

"Yes, that is good," Nash said, "but without Cleveland's memories, we have a lot less."

"What?" Richard did not like being talked about as if he wasn't there. "What the hell are you talking about?!" Richard was getting a little angry.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cleveland," Schipper said soothingly, "let me roll the vid and I'll explain as it goes, OK?"

Dr. Stratmeyer sat up on the edge of the couch. "I still think this is a bad idea, Craig. This video will be too much of a shock to them. You should at least..."

"No, doctor, we need to shock them." Schipper turned to Richard. "Everything will be clear to you very soon."

"Well, you sure as hell better start making sense," Richard muttered, sitting in the dining chair beside the loveseat. Schipper remained standing as if he was an instructor in a class. Schipper started the video. Then he paused it.

"Like Dr. Stratmeyer said, this will shock you. I ask before you say anything at all that you watch the entire video. We have a few others, too, but maybe this will jog your memory. If not, perhaps, Doctor Stratmeyer can help us."

He turned back to TV and pressed play. The first thing to appear was a collection of boxes, which turned out to be different views or cameras. He explained that this video was from what he called his "master control" console. "I am an investigator," Schipper said, "and we have very sophisticated surveillance capabilities. We can work six projects, or locations, at the same time. This is one of our projects. You will recognize the locations. I spent most of the time monitoring this station last night myself."

"This was recorded last night?"

"That is correct, now, here we go." Pictures started to appear on the screen. Richard stared at the pictures. Suddenly he realized they looked familiar. Very familiar. They were his home.

"What the hell?" He stood, "what is this? Who are you?" He stood and walked to the spot on the wall he'd seen earlier. He picked at it with a fingernail and popped it out of the wall. It was a tiny camera with a short wire antenna. "Who are you people? What is this?" Richard was horrified. Laura had a similar look on her face. Schipper and Nash had stone faces but the woman, Stratmeyer, seemed a little upset.

"Calm down, Cleveland," Schipper said, "watch the video for a while and you will see that you were aware these cameras were here. At least, you were aware of them yesterday."

"Bull. I'd remember something like that. I'm not an idiot. What are you trying to pull?" Richard walked around the room looking for other cameras.

"Sit down, Cleveland," Schipper said forcefully. "We will be at this all day if you don't. I will explain, or it will become clear soon enough."

Richard hesitated. Schipper had a drill-sergeant way of doing things. He walked back to the chair. "This shit better become clear very soon or the lot of you are on your way to jail."

"It will," Schipper said. He pressed a button and the video started. There were two views of Richard's living room, one of his kitchen, one of the hallway, one in his bedroom and one in the guest room. There was also one outside his front door, one in the garage, and one on his patio behind the house.

Richard watched himself enter his living room through the front door. He was alone. He walked directly to the kitchen, pulled a card from his wallet and read a number, which he dialed. The sound was muted and dull until he picked up the phone, then it became clearer but with a slight buzz. He heard the conversation of the night before although he didn't understand its meaning. But there was no question he'd called Schipper the night before and told him something about someone coming over. He realized it was Laura he'd been talking about. After the telephone conversation Richard watched himself walk into the living room, look around, and say, "this sucks, Schipper."

Schipper pressed the pause. "Obviously you do not remember this. And there is a very good reason which will become clear in a moment." He turned to Laura. "You are an abductee. You do remember that, don't you?"

"God," Laura said, standing, "I've never told anyone that. Ever." She walked in a random direction, apparently very upset and beginning to piece some of this puzzle together. "God, how, how do you know?" She walked back to the loveseat and sat on the edge of it, fidgeting. "Does this have something to do with that?"

"It has everything to do with it."

Richard turned to Laura, "You are a what?"

"An abductee, Cleveland," Schipper answered for her. "I think, considering her state of mind and yours, that it would be best, shocking as it may be, that you watch the video first." They all watched as Laura arrived, Richard dressed in his bedroom, and had the conversation on the phone with Pamela. Richard felt a little embarrassed that the video showed him changing. He heard himself talking about Nash and his stay at some clinic. Schipper hit the pause again.

"The story you are telling Laura is not correct."

"No, I was at Parkland."

"That is not correct, either. You were at a clinic, at our clinic, but it wasn't as you tell it to Laura. That was the cover story you were supposed to give Ms. Bright."

"Cover story?"

“Right,” Schipper’s demeanor almost became compassionate, “Look, I know this is all confusing. But I wanted to let you know what you are telling her was not the truth but something we told you to tell her and you agreed to.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Like I said, it will all become clear soon.” Schipper pressed the button. Laura remained silent. Richard glanced at her and she was not paying a lot of attention to the video but instead seemed to be looking inside herself.

Richard watched himself and Laura embrace, and kiss, and was suddenly worried about what might come next. “Is this some kind of blackmail or something? Because if it is, it won’t work.” He looked at Laura whose features revealed she was thinking the same thing.

“Not at all,” Schipper said, again stopping the video, “and you will be surprised by what you see next. I know how you, um, woke up this morning. But, well, just watch.” He pressed a button and the video resumed. Richard watched as he went into his bedroom and crawled into bed and Laura went into the guestroom, undressed and got into bed. She did not put on any night clothes but instead went to bed without a top.

“This is embarrassing,” Laura said.

“I understand, Ms. Bright. We are professionals, however, and those two are doctors.” Schipper tried to reassure her. It didn’t work. Richard placed his hand on hers as it was lying upon the arm of the loveseat. Laura had pushed herself far back in the seat and seemed to be sinking down into it.

For some time the video showed no activity other than Richard in his bedroom and Laura in hers, both asleep, apparently. Schipper pressed a button and fast-forwarded the video. When some flashing lights appeared on the outside of the house, picked up by the front door camera, Schipper slowed the video to normal. Then he pressed pause.

“What you are about to see has never, to my knowledge, been captured on video. Cleveland, you cannot be prepared for what you are about to see. Ms. Bright, you have re-lived these experiences through hypnotism with your therapist but you are about to see things from a new perspective, and it might be difficult for you also. If you want me to stop the video at any time, please let me know.” He pressed a button and the video resumed.

Everyone in the room watched as the flashing lights grew brighter at the front of the house and then suddenly stopped. There was no sound other than ordinary traffic, an occasional night bird, and the wind. Richard watched as two, then three, figures descended in front of his house from out of range of the camera. They were smallish, human-shaped but not human. Two had large heads but their

features were not clear. The third was taller, more rounded and more human-like. They drifted almost directly towards the camera as if being lowered on wires. The two shorter ones were in front and the other behind. One of the shorter ones held a thin, spindly arm out as if to block something or point. Another reached to something apparently hanging on its waist. Then the three figures disappeared out of camera range and within seconds appeared in the guestroom where Laura was sleeping. They went beside the bed and lifted Laura, who was stiff and straight as a corpse after rigor, through the fabric of the covers.

As this was happening, Richard, also, was being lifted by several other beings who had come through the wall of his bedroom. At about the same time Laura and Richard were both floated above the bed and then out through the walls.

Richard jumped to his feet. "This is bullshit, what kind of, how the hell, you don't expect me to believe this shit do you?" He was stomping and puffing and looking into Schipper's eyes. But Schipper didn't speak.

"It happened, Richard," Laura said, her voice weak but clear, "God, I'm sorry, how did they, why did they?" She covered her face with her hands. "Oh God, I never meant for them to hurt you. I didn't know. How could I? I'm sorry...." Her voice was muffled and sprinkled with sobs.

The look Richard gave her was not describable. "What do you mean?"

"What she means," Schipper said, "Is that she is an abductee, she has been taken, like this, many times, since her childhood, I'm sure, though I don't know the specifics of her case. She and thousands of others are taken. She has been living with this for two years, Cleveland, and she told you about it after your first encounter, two weeks ago."

"My first encounter?"

"That is correct. You were abducted a week ago last Monday night. As far as we can tell, it was a case of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. At least your abduction does not fit ordinary patterns. But then a new pattern is beginning to emerge and that is why you are so important. These beings, aliens, are usually able to hide their ships, cloak them, to use the vernacular of science fiction, but there's nothing fictional about them. You stumbled upon one a week ago Monday night, on a farm road north west of here. You witnessed the ship and when they discovered you they took you."

"I don't believe it."

"We have a video of a session you had with Doctor Stratmeyer where you recalled all of the events up to a point." Schipper held out another flash drive, "here it is. I will show it to you next." He pressed the button to start the video. "But first, let's finish this one."

After Laura and Richard were taken there was no activity for several hours. Schipper ran the video forward. He pointed out the clock that was visible in the bedroom. The time was about a half hour before dawn. The red flashing light appeared again in the front of Richard's home and several figures appeared. Then all the screens went blank. Schipper left the video running and stepped in front of the set.

"Apparently the aliens created some type of dampening field, something, that killed our system for a while. It was possibly some kind of magnetic field that disrupted the cameras because, as you will see in a minute, it did not harm them but rendered them useless. We have attempted, on several occasions, to video an abduction but have always wound up with this blank signal. That was because the abductee knew about the cameras and somehow the aliens were able to read their thoughts, using the implants they have in their head, we think, and canceled the signals. Like these, the cameras are never damaged. The aliens are meticulous in their efforts not to cause damage or to leave any trace of their presence other than on the bodies of abductees.

"In this case, however, we removed your implants, without your consent and before the aliens could find out or, if they found out, before they could do anything about it." Schipper looked at Richard, "I know we have violated your privacy and your person. I know we have broken a couple dozen state and federal laws. But it was necessary. Your friend can tell you about these aliens and their evil purpose."

"I'm not so sure about their purpose being evil," Laura spoke up, "you have only part of the story. Yes, they abducted me, over and over, and still do, and yes, I fear them. But they have never hurt me, other than during examinations and those are necessary. For the children."

"Children?" Richard looked at her.

"These beings are creating children using human DNA mixed with their own. Hybrid beings, part human and part alien. Their purpose is unfathomable but cannot be benevolent."

"The children are important," Laura said, looking as if she was in a trance, "Important, the babies, it's for our future."

"Our future my ass," Schipper said.

"No, you don't understand," Laura said in a singsong kind of voice.

"I understand more than you know," Schipper said, now struggling to control his emotions. "Cleveland, you watch and you decide." He stepped from before the screen. The cameras showed the sun had risen and it showed Richard and Laura in bed together. Schipper ran the video forward to where Richard began to stir.

Richard and Laura watched as they found themselves in bed together. The video ended as Richard was getting up to close the curtain.

"At that point I processed this video and tried to contact you. We saw your wife arrive and we saw you leave before I could contact you. I knew I had to get to you as soon as possible and was surprised that the movers or your wife didn't find the cameras, which were obvious after some of the items in the house were removed.

"We also had to contact you before the aliens had the chance to do anything else. It is rare but they have been known to abduct people during the day and without anyone knowing it. Their cloaking devices work very well."

Richard and Laura were looking at each other. They realized they had not spent the night together or made love after all. But Richard was confused because he had memories of them being together.

As if reading his mind, Schipper spoke, "the aliens have manipulated your memories and removed the parts about your experiences of the past two weeks. They are able play your memories like a video and then pick and choose parts of it to erase. Then they insert bits and pieces from other memories in the place of those parts. The memory fragments are never clear but are usually enough to convince you. We'd hoped it wouldn't happen to you, Cleveland, since we removed your implants but I'd be willing to bet that they have been replaced. We have these videos, your testimony, other witnesses and photos and the best case we can ever hope to put together. We are now ready to go public."

"What?" Richard stood to his feet. "Public? You plan on showing that on the six o'clock news?"

"That, and much more."

"Like hell you are," Richard said.

"Before you say anything else, Cleveland, we will finish." This was another command. "I have the videos from your hypnosis sessions and much more evidence. And," Schipper paused, looking at Laura, "If the aliens are able to monitor this conversation, I can assure you that others know about what is going on, are monitoring this house now, if that is possible, and these videos are copies. There are several other copies being sent to several locations around the world as we speak and the originals are in a vault somewhere. You and I, all of us, could disappear from the face of this earth and the story will still be told." He paused, "And if you are wondering," he said, looking directly at Laura but obviously speaking to someone else, "None of us here in this room know the other persons who are receiving the copies of these videos."

Laura blinked and pushed herself deeper into her chair.

"You are serious about this, aren't you?" Richard looked into Schipper's eyes, which were colder than he'd ever seen anyone's eyes and Schipper's features were pure steel.

"I am more serious than you know, Cleveland. And things will proceed now with or without you. But it would be better, for all, if you would cooperate."

"This is fucking insane," Richard said, and settled into his chair.

Over the next two hours Schipper, Nash, and Stratmeyer told Richard and Laura everything they knew about what had happened to them. Stratmeyer was apparently a recent convert. She seemed to be as much off center as Richard was. Nash said he had a collection of cases where abductees had appeared in the emergency room at one time or the other, never the result of an abduction but bearing the marks of abductions. On three occasions they had taken the implants out but none had been taken without permission like Richard's were. Schipper's evidence was the most convincing. He had video of many alien craft, though most were not clear and were hard to validate. He showed them the picture of the craft Richard had seen which also clearly showed Richard's car nearby.

"The person who took the picture is an amateur photographer, and a hunter and sportsman. He managed to connect his night-vision scope to his camera and take these shots. Never have we had any so clear. Besides his photos there was at least a dozen witnesses to this craft."

"If the aliens are so meticulous, as you say, how did this fall into your lap?"

"I don't know, Cleveland, I've asked myself that a hundred times. But I'm not looking a gift horse in the mouth. Not at all. We have the evidence, we have you, Ms. Bright, anyone would have to be a total idiot not to accept this evidence. But it's not like we haven't been trying to get this kind of a case. We have been trying. For years. Persistence has paid off."

Richard sat looking from one face to another in the room. Laura was curled into a ball, feet on the chair, head on her knees. Stratmeyer sat upright looking at him until he looked at her. Then she looked away. Nash was looking at him with a steady gaze and Schipper looked at him impatiently. That expression was puzzling. "Schipper," Richard said, but then his voice trailed. Suddenly the room spun before him as if he was on a merry-go-round. He tilted his head sideways and then everything went black.

Chapter Eighteen

The back of Richard's head ached. It was the first sensation he felt as he slowly woke from a stupor. Instinctively he reached back to where he felt the pain. There was a bump. "Shit," he muttered. He was keenly aware that he was in a hospital gown, too. This time, however, he had on his boxers beneath the gown. He was also beginning to realize he was back in the clinic where he'd been taken from Parkland by Schipper. He also realized he could remember things.

Gingerly he swung his legs over the side of the bed he was lying on. As he twisted he felt something sticky on his left side beneath his arm. He reached around with his right arm and felt another bandage. He lifted his arm and looked. There was a small surgical dressing taped to his side. Around the perimeter of the bandage his skin was yellow, apparently from surgical disinfectant scrub. "Great," he muttered. He slid off the bed and onto his feet. The floor was cold and his knees were weak but he stood.

After taking a couple of tentative steps he started for the door. It was slightly ajar. Then he noticed his clothes neatly folded in a chair. He went to them and in a minute was dressed. Beneath the chair he found his shoes. He felt groggy. He was sure that was the reason the little flicker of anger inside him was not growing into a flame. Yet.

He swung the door open. It moved without a sound. Peering down the hallway he had no doubt he was in the same place he had been before. As he carefully slipped into the hall and moved along the corridor he started remembering. It was strange. Very strange. He remembered NOT remembering. How was that possible? Two sets of memories swam before his mind's eye, one of his being abducted and all the events that followed and the other a very different two weeks but both coming together on that Saturday when he and Laura woke in the same bed and Pamela got her things and.... "Oh, yeah," he muttered under his breath, suddenly recalling the meeting in his home and his blacking out. "Damn that son of a bitch," Richard said aloud, "he did it again."

"Richard?" Laura's muffled voice came from down the hallway. It was Laura.

"Laura?" Richard spoke her name quietly and then noticed her head peering around a door facing.

"Richard!" Her voice was a whisper but a frantic, high-pitched one. She disappeared behind the door.

Richard stepped into the room and then stopped suddenly. Laura still wore the hospital gown. She was oblivious to the opening in the back of the gown. She did not have on any underclothes. Richard cleared his throat in a gesture that Laura interpreted correctly. She grasped the back of the gown and held it together.

"They are probably watching right now," Richard said softly.

"God," Laura muttered, "Oh...." Her voice faded as she sank into Richard's arms. Her left ear was bandaged. He held her tightly and felt her shaking beneath his embrace. The gap in the back of her gown was forgotten by them both.

"What do you remember?"

"Everything," Laura said. "I mean, everything. My head is so full," she groaned, "so full." She was panting.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, suddenly I remember my whole life, I remember abductions, everything. Like someone switched on forgotten memories. It's all there." She pushed back to look into Richard's eyes. "I remember," she said softly, "when I was about six, walking through a park, coming upon the Grays. I remember," her face was pale and her eyes glassy, "their features never moved, like they had no facial muscles, but still, I had the impression they were smiling. The eyes, I think. It was all in the eyes."

"You remember everything?" As Richard asked his question he suddenly realized he could remember his own abduction experience. "My God, I can too!" He felt her soften in his grasp and he pulled her to him. "What do you think this means?"

"It means it worked." The voice came from behind Richard. He had not heard the door open or realized anyone had entered the room. The voice was that of Dr. Benjamin Nash.

For a few seconds Richard and Laura were too startled by Nash's sudden appearance to say anything. Then the anger that had been inside him took hold of Richard. He stepped towards the doctor and exclaimed, "what the hell have you done?!"

"We've only given back what the aliens took from you." This sentence came from outside the room. It was Schipper's voice and in a second he was standing in front of Richard and Laura. Richard glowered at him. Nash took a defensive stance behind the investigator.

"You could never give back what the aliens have taken," Laura exclaimed. "They have raped my mind and my body and stolen my innocence and destroyed my life. You cannot give that back."

"Well, of course not," Schipper said, "but we gave you back some of the parts of yourself that they took. We gave you back your memory. We've made you whole again and devoid of alien influence."

"I will never be whole, not ever." Laura took a breath. In the void left by her pause Richard spoke.

"What do you mean? I mean, exactly what have you done?"

Schipper turned to look at Nash, who took a deep breath. "It is rather complicated," the doctor began, "but essentially we removed the implants, all of them, and using some experimental techniques that would take a very long time to explain we restored your memories."

"I have time," Richard said, almost in a growl.

"Yes, well," Nash hesitated, "I'm sure that you do. But it's not so simple."

"Try me."

"Look," Shipper interjected, "we will tell you anything you want to know. But now is not the time. It is a complicated procedure and there are more pressing matters." He looked from Richard to Laura. Richard was peering at him angrily.

Laura stood silently, moving her hand through her hair. She fingered the bandage on her ear. Tears flowed from her eyes and down her cheeks. She sniffed and shuddered involuntarily. Richard turned to her.

"Laura?"

"Richard," Laura moaned, "I don't want to remember."

Richard moved towards her in an effort to embrace her. She acted like she was going to embrace him but then stepped back and avoided him.

"I DON'T WANT TO REMEMBER!" She screamed the words so loud it startled all of the others in the room. "I don't want to know! God damn you!" She took a wild swing with her right hand at Shipper which he easily avoided and caught her arm. He didn't see her left hand coming and before he could react Laura slapped him forcefully on the right side of his head with her open palm. The blow threw him off balance and he stumbled. His right hand flew up in a defensive punch and halted within an inch of Laura's face. Then he caught her left wrist and held it, along with her right wrist, in his vice-like grip.

"Calm down!" Schipper's voice boomed. "This will not accomplish anything!" He looked over his shoulder at Nash, "For God sake, Nash, get a damn sedative or something!"

Nash disappeared and was back a second later holding a syringe and a medicine vile. As he pressed the needle into the top of the vile Laura froze and became still.

"No," she said quietly, "no, no needles." She took a deep breath. "I am ok. I will be ok. No needles." She grew limp in Schipper's grasp.

"Let her go," Richard said, taking a step towards Schipper. "Now!" His posture clearly indicated he was ready to take a swing at Schipper himself. Richard glanced briefly at the doctor. Nash took a step

backwards. He obviously didn't have the stomach for conflict. Quickly Richard's gaze returned to the investigator.

Schipper's grip relaxed and Laura withdrew her hands. There were marks around her wrists from where Schipper had grasped them. She rubbed them attempting to restore full circulation to her fingers. Richard turned to examine her wrists.

"I'm sorry," Schipper said. "There's no need for us to fight. It will accomplish nothing. Ms. Bright, I have no idea what you must be going through. But I think you will come to thank us."

"I doubt it," Laura muttered.

"Maybe not. In any case, it is done." He paused, "I'm sorry. But it was necessary. It was all necessary."

"Screw you," Laura muttered.

"If you will get dressed, Ms. Bright, we will all go to the lounge and discuss what comes next."

"You do not own us, Schipper," Richard said, looking over his shoulder at the investigator.

"Don't be stupid, Cleveland," Schipper said, "and don't take too long." With that he and Nash abruptly left the room.

Laura was suddenly painfully aware again that she was naked beneath the hospital gown. She grasped the back of the gown with her left hand and reached for her clothes with her right. She'd spotted them folded and lying on a chair. "I will be out in a minute, Richard."

Richard looked at her puzzled for a moment, then his eyebrows lifted. "Oh, yeah, right," he said, stepping backwards toward the door, "right, I'll just wait out here." With one final step backwards he was in the hall pulling the door closed.

Richard could not believe how fast Laura got dressed. She opened the door and stepped into the hallway. "OK," she said, "let's see what they are up to now."

Richard turned and walked down the hall in the direction he remembered the lounge to be. Laura followed close behind him. When he walked into the lounge he smelled coffee. Nash sat dejectedly in an over-stuffed chair and Schipper stood beside a large coffee pot which sat on a small table in the corner of the room.

"Would either of you like some coffee?"

"No," Laura said meekly.

Richard nodded. "Let's get this stuff going," he growled. He motioned for Laura to sit at one end of a love seat. He took a seat at the other end.

Schipper shrugged and walked to a chair across from where the disturbed pair sat. Nash was sitting to one side and had not looked up since Richard and Laura had entered the room. Shipper settled into the chair and turned to face Richard.

"So what's next?" Richard glared at the investigator.

Schipper slid to the edge of the chair. His knees were bent and his feet tucked up underneath him. He looked like he was about to spring from the chair. Instead, he turned slowly and picked up the foam cup he'd sat on a table beside the chair, took a sip, then pushed himself back into the chair. At last he spoke. "There are many things I might say, things like I'm sorry to have taken you like I did, or we did, I'm sorry for your situation, all those platitudes. But the truth is I'm not sorry for having taken you and since I had nothing to do with your being abducted I'm not particularly sorry for that either." He paused but briefly and started again before Richard could respond. "I know that sounds cold and perhaps I am cold. But then there is no time for niceties or sentiment. In fact, there's no time for anything. Now that we have you here, with your full memories, almost full memories, we have to act now." He took a deep breath and sipped the coffee.

"I realize how grandiose it sounds but we here in this room hold the future of the world in our hands." Schipper paused as if for effect. "It is all just too fantastic. I know it is. But it is true. Now that we have restored your memories I do not have to tell you how powerful and dangerous the alien presence on this planet is." Schipper stood and paced the room. "It is all insane," he said, "and bizarre beyond words. To the world the existence of these aliens is a joke. It can't be true, people think. It's just too ridiculous. It's just the stuff of late-night radio shows and half-baked TV investigations and it is all Science Fiction."

Richard grew impatient. "Get to the damn point, Shipper."

"The point is," Schipper said, spinning on a heel and looking into Richard's eyes, "the point is that even with everything we have, with you and Ms. Bright, with absolutely irrefutable evidence, it may not matter." He was panting. "God Dammit to hell this whole damn thing is just too incredible! Will it work? Are we already defeated?" He turned again and looked at a painting on the wall absently. "I hope not. I sure as hell hope not. But," he turned to Richard again, "this is our one and only shot."

"I know what you are saying, Schipper," Richard said, "but get to the point. What are you going to do?"

"I can't tell you." Schipper spoke the words quietly with his face turned again towards the painting and away from Richard.

For a moment Richard absorbed Shipper's statement and then exploded. "What? What the hell do you mean you can't tell us!"

"He means," Laura spoke, "that he can't risk us knowing." She was looking at Schipper with an understanding but still hostile gaze.

Richard blinked. He looked at Laura as if she was a stranger for a second. He'd almost forgotten she was sitting there. "Huh?"

"You are absolutely correct," Schipper said. "We are almost convinced that that we have removed every vestige of alien technology from you. We have restored your memories using techniques Nash developed from studying hundreds of abductees. But," he paused, "I am not one hundred percent sure. So I can't tell you. I do not know very much myself, anyway."

"What do you mean?" Richard looked at him with disbelief.

"I mean that someone else is responsible for the particulars. When the time comes they will notify me and I will bring you. That is all I know. I don't know where, yet, and I don't know when." He was interrupted by a buzzer sounding through the office suite. "Oh," he exclaimed, "that must be lunch." He turned towards Nash who remained in his chair in an almost trance-like state. "Doctor, will you get the food?" He turned back to the other two in the room. "I hope you like pizza."

"I'm not hungry," Laura muttered. Richard just stared at Schipper with a look of incredulity.

"It would be a good idea for you to eat," Schipper said, ignoring Richard's glare. "Doctor?"

"Oh, yeah," Nash said at last, pushing himself sluggishly out of his chair. He disappeared out the door.

"I know this is all rather enigmatic. These precautions are necessary. But the future of...."

"...the earth rests in our hands," Richard finished his sentence. "Somehow I just can't get my mind around that idea. It is hard to believe that the future of mankind hangs on the testimony of the two of us." Richard paced the floor now. "There has to be more to it than that." He walked up to the painting Schipper had been glaring at. Suddenly he leaned close to the painting. "Is this real?" He reached out a hand and ran it over the name written in the corner of the painting. "I mean, or, is it a copy."

"Yes, it is authentic," Schipper said.

"Damn," Richard muttered, "a real Monet. Must be worth a fortune."

"It is," Schipper said, standing and walking towards the painting himself.

The priceless painting suddenly made Richard aware of how powerful and influential members of Schipper's organization must be. And how wealthy.

"Forget the damn painting," Laura said suddenly, "what's with the painting? Good Lord would you two make some sense!" Her words were a demand, not a question. "Forget the painting!" She leaped to her feet. "I mean, hell, this is too ridiculous. All this shit," she moved her hand over the bandage on her head, "all this, all the things that are going on, and you two are going on about a damned painting."

"Laura," Richard cooed, turning towards her. Whatever else he was going to say was cut off by the abrupt entrance of Nash carrying two large pizza boxes.

"Here it is," Nash announced. He walked across the room and dropped the pizza boxes on the table beside the coffee pot. "Eat." With that last word he returned to his chosen chair and fell into it as if exhausted. Richard and Laura looked at him puzzled.

"What's with him?" Richard looked at the doctor for a long moment as he addressed his question to Schipper.

"He's finished," Schipper said. He gave no explanation.

"Finished?"

"Right," Schipper said, then changed the subject, "here, have some pizza." The investigator flipped the box open and lifted a slice of pizza from it. He bit the point off of the slice and stood looking at Richard as he chewed it. "It's not bad," he said with a muffled voice.

"AAAahhhhh!" Laura exclaimed and stomped her foot. "This is all insane! Let's have pizza and talk about some fucking painting while the world is invaded!" Her face was almost in a spasm trying to reflect the emotions that were bubbling beneath the surface. "Good God!" She looked from Richard to Schipper and back. Then she cast a long glance at Nash who was sitting quietly in his chair looking like he'd just lost his best friend. "And what's with him?"

"Laura," Richard started. She interrupted him.

"Damn, Richard, this is just too screwy. Even with what has been going on in my life all these years, THIS takes the cake!" Her hands were shaking and she stood slightly hunched.

Schipper continued to eat his slice of pizza and looked on indifferently as Laura appeared to be suffering a break down. "Ms. Bright," he spoke at last, "you have suffered at the hands of these alien bastards your whole life and now that there is a chance we can stop them and put an end to all that they have been doing you seem to be becoming hysterical. Don't you want to stop them?"

Laura straightened and looked at Schipper. Then she walked slowly to the table where the pizza box lay and pushed back the top of the box. Carefully she pulled apart a slice of pizza and lifted it towards her mouth. Just before she bit into it she mumbled, "they're not so bad."

The eyes of all three men were quickly upon her. Richard cocked his head to the side and his face showed a puzzled expression. Schipper looked at her with an intensity that made her uneasy. Nash looked at her with some interest. They all seemed to be waiting for Laura to finish her statement.

"What," she said with a mouth full of pizza. Then she swallowed. "What? Well, I mean, not everything is so bad. I mean," she looked from one face to the other, "hell, I don't know what I mean. I just don't want them..." she paused to think, "don't want them hurt."

"What?" Richard and Schipper exclaimed in unison. "What do you mean, Laura?" Richard looked at his friend as if she was a stranger.

"God, Richard, I don't know," she said, turning and walking across the floor. "This is good pizza," she exclaimed, and took another bite from the slice in her hands. Then before she finished the bite she said, "It is not easy to explain. I don't know." She looked at Richard. "I just don't know!" Her voice was full of exasperation. "Look, they may have taken the implants out but they didn't take the thoughts the little assholes put in my head. Maybe I'm not thinking clearly." She spun and re-traced her steps. "Listen, Richard, I do remember everything now. Yes, they violated me and yes, they did all kinds of experiments, and some of them hurt. Yes, all that. But," she paused, recalling something, "but they are not mean. They do not have an evil purpose. What they are doing is for the best. I mean, for us. For the best for the human race."

"Bullshit," Schipper exclaimed. "I know what you are saying and it is all a crock. It is the line those bastards feed all abductees. For the good of the race my ass." Schipper was angry now. "Ms. Bright I think you will be less useful than I thought. If you can buy in to that bullshit they fed you even now, even as you know what they did, then...." He withheld whatever he was going to say.

"Laura," Richard purred, "do you really believe that?" He walked towards the pizza box himself. Then he turned abruptly and walked up to Laura and looked her full in the face. "Do you?"

Laura shrank a bit under his gaze. "Well, I don't know, Richard. It is difficult. This is difficult. I have all these thoughts, memories, things, in my head." She looked into his eyes and then her gaze grew clouded. She lowered her brow and closed her eyes, remembering something. Then she opened her eyes wide, looking at him with terror and sorrow. "Oh, no, God no," she whispered.

Richard blinked. Her gaze frightened him more than anything else had to this point. "What?"

"Oh, he couldn't. They couldn't."

The buzzer that had sounded previously when the pizza had arrived sounded again. Laura jumped. Then she shrank away to a corner of the room. Richard started to follow her.

"It is time," Schipper said flatly.

"Time?" Richard looked at him worriedly.

"Yes, for the next phase." He looked at Nash who stood and left the room.

"What?" Richard turned away from Laura who barely cast a glance at the investigator.

"Wait here." Schipper left the room and closed the door behind him.

"What of that?" Laura took a step towards the door. "Richard, what is going on, do you have any idea?"

"Schipper wants to stop the aliens. He will do whatever he thinks will work and he don't care what it takes."

"Do you think he can?"

"I don't know." Richard was eying the pizza trying to decide if he wanted some or not.

"What's that funny smell?" Laura looked instinctively at the air vent above their head.

Richard jerked his head backwards and looked up at the vent. "Son of a bitch," he muttered, "they are doing it again." He already felt himself sagging to the floor as he said the words.

Chapter Nineteen

The first sensation Richard felt was a painful tingling in his neck. As he slowly fought his way back to consciousness and opened his eyes he realized he was slumped in the back seat of a car. "Ughh," he muttered, pushing himself up and straightening his neck. The effort sent sharp stabs of pain down his neck and along his shoulders. He'd apparently been sitting slumped over for some time. Looking around he realized he was in a Chevy Suburban. The windows were heavily tinted and blocked most of the dim light coming in from outside. Richard didn't know if the light was artificial or if it was dusk. Or dawn. As his head cleared he suddenly remembered Laura. He sat up quickly sending new spasms along the tops of his shoulders.

In the dim light Richard could make out something on the floor of the vehicle. He moved toward that something and found it was Laura curled up on the floorboard. Quickly he searched for a pulse and found one. He breathed a sigh of relief. She stirred and groaned. He gently pulled her to a sitting position.

"Richard?" She was squinting. Richard helped her climb onto the seat. "Richard, what's going on?"

"I don't know, Laura." Richard's eyes continued to adjust to the darkness.

"What are we doing here?" She shook her head and then winced. "What happened?"

"That bastard drugged us again," Richard muttered. He looked into the front seat of the vehicle where he could make out a man behind the steering wheel. The man was leaning unnaturally backwards. "I think something happened," Richard said at last.

"What?"

"I think we didn't make it to wherever Schipper was taking us." Richard tried reached across Laura who sat behind the unconscious driver and felt for a pulse. "He's out. Or," he didn't finish. He frowned. Then he pulled on the door handle beside him and the door came unlatched. He pushed it but it would only open a couple of inches. Something on the outside was blocking it.

Laura's eyes were stricken with horror. "Dead?"

Richard only nodded.

"Are we trapped?" Laura pressed the button that was supposed to open the window but nothing happened.

"There's no power," Richard said. "Damned thing is all electric." Laura pulled the handle beside her. That door opened. As she pushed it outward a tree limb swung down and into the door opening.

"Where are we?"

There wasn't much light outside. Richard's senses told him it was dusk. As the minutes passed and the light grew dimmer he was sure it was dusk. "We have to get out of here," he said, feeling an urgency but not knowing why. He stuck his head out of the door and pushed tree limbs back. "We are in some woods. I think maybe the car ran off the road."

"We're not in Dallas, then."

"No, not in Dallas." Richard followed Laura out the door and stood. He felt the soft floor of a forest beneath his feet and smelled the musky odor of decaying leaves. In the near darkness now he could barely make out a trail behind the car, apparently made by the suburban as it slid down a hill. He looked towards the front of the car and saw that its slide had been halted by a tree. "Looks like we slid down a hill."

"What about the driver?"

"The car hit the tree pretty hard. Front is all smashed."

"He'd have had an airbag, wouldn't he?"

"Maybe," Richard said.

"Where are we, Richard?"

"Beats me," he said. He began to make his way through thick foliage around the car to the drivers' side. He saw that a tree trunk was inches away from the door he'd tried to open on the passenger's side. He moved on to the drivers' door and pulled on the handle. There was a loud creaking noise. Richard had to pull hard on the door but it eventually gave way. Inside he saw that the vehicle had had an air bag. It lay deflated on the lap of the driver. Richard then leaned over and looked in. Then he smelled the sickly odor of blood. Gritting his teeth he looked closer.

The man was no one he recognized. He was in his mid-twenties, heavy build, short cropped hair and a smooth shave. He wore an expensive looking suit and Richard thought he looked like one of those secret service agents. He had a hole in his forehead just above his right eye. Blood oozed out the hole and trickled down the man's face. The eyes were open and fixed. When Richard saw the bullet wound he jerked his head back and bumped it against the door frame. Then he pushed himself back away from the car.

"Richard?"

"Eech," Richard exclaimed. "He's been shot."

"Shot?" There was hint of panic in Laura's voice.

"Yes, dead," Richard muttered. He stepped back and closed the door as much as he could. Then he examined the windshield. He saw the bullet hole. "Damn," he muttered.

"What is it, Richard?"

"Just a minute," Richard said. He did not want to tell her what he'd found until he was by her side. He clamored around the car through the brush in the near darkness. "It's getting dark fast," he muttered.

"It is."

"Laura," Richard said quietly. He moved up beside her. He couldn't make out her face very well in the darkness. "Laura, the man's been shot in the head. It's a wonder it didn't get you on the way out." Richard shuddered impulsively. "There are several more bullet holes across the hood." He moved his hand across the top of the suburban above where they had been. He felt two more holes. "Damn miracle that we weren't hit too."

"What?" She stiffened. "Why?" The question was a general one, summing up the questions in their head.

"Who the hell knows?" Richard was sure it had something to do with Schipper's plans, but what? Had he been found out? Would the aliens use a gun? Not likely. It occurred to him he had no clue what the aliens would do but still it seemed preposterous that such an advanced race would use something as primitive as a firearm. But then who knew what the aliens were capable of? And why not just take the car? Aliens have taken many cars, from what he'd heard. Why this way? Richard's head hurt as much from confusion as from the bump on it. He rubbed his forehead. He must have gotten the bump from the crash.

"Where are we, Richard?"

"Ah, um," Laura's question had startled him. "Well," he sniffed, "I would say probably somewhere in East Texas. Possibly southwestern Oklahoma. Depends on how long we were out. I smell pine, for sure. And this is a deep woodland. We used to drive down to a few lakes in East Texas." Richard looked around. "We better get out of here."

"Are there," Laura stammered, "Is anything dangerous in these woods?"

"Not unless you count skunks. But there could be snakes, maybe. Just not a good idea to stay here." Richard took Laura's hand and plunged through the undergrowth along the path the car had taken into the woods.

"Richard?"

"Yes?"

"Isn't it strange that there has been no traffic? I mean, we had to come off of a highway, didn't we? But there's not been any cars at all, has there? And we've been awake now for a while."

"It is a bit odd," Richard agreed. A few minutes later at the top of the incline they broke into a clearing. Richard felt gravel underfoot. He suddenly realized that the suburban had been traveling down a gravel road, not a highway. That explained the lack of traffic. "I don't like this," Richard muttered.

"I don't understand," Laura said.

"We are on a gravel road. A private road, probably. We were fired on from above." Richard looked upwards. Stars were now clearly visible along the gap in the tree line above the road.

"But, I don't understand," she repeated. "I mean, if they were after us, why just let the car run down the hill and leave it. Wouldn't they have come for us? What is it all about?"

"I don't know, Laura," Richard said, "I have no clue." He stuck his hands in his pockets dejectedly. "I wish I had my cell phone."

"Here," Laura said, handing him a phone.

"Well, hell, where'd you get this?"

"I forgot," she said sheepishly, "I found it while I was bumbling around in the car trying to get out. Stuck it in my pocket and then forgot it."

"How the hell can you forget a phone?"

"I don't know, hell, I'm all screwed up."

"Well, ok." He looked at the phone. It wasn't his. "This your phone?"

"Nope." She looked at it. "Think it will work?"

"Hmmm," Richard looked at it. It was a different model than his. He pressed a button and the small screen lit up. "Looks like it."

"Is it getting a signal?"

Richard looked at the unfamiliar screen and finally figured out that it was picking up a tower very well. "Looks like a strong signal."

"Good. Call the police."

Richard punched 911 and started to press the "send" button but then he stopped. "And what do we tell them?"

"That we're stuck in the woods and there's a dead guy in the car and we are lost. Of course."

"Do you know where we are?"

"Of course not."

"Neither do I." Richard tapped his chin with the phone. "So we can't tell them where we are. They might find us with GPS, but maybe not. And then how will we explain ourselves. We look like crap, we have bandages on our heads, and we lived while the driver didn't."

"Well...."

"And what do we say? 'Officer, we were kidnapped by a guy who is trying to use us to expose an alien threat.'"

"Well...."

"Right. I think we better just find a way and get the hell out of here."

"We have to call someone."

"Who?"

Laura thought for a moment. "I don't know."

Richard stared into the near darkness. "I wish I knew which way to go."

"Me too," Laura said.

"I suppose," Richard said, shrugging his shoulders, "we just start walking." He looked the phone's small keypad over and figured out how to turn it off. Then he slipped it into his pocket. "I can't think of anyone to call either." He started walking along the road, gravel crunching under his feet. Laura followed.

"Maybe we should call Schipper."

"Would that be a good idea?" Richard was following the center of the road. He could just make out the roadway since the gravel was slightly lighter in color than the dirt of the ditches and there was the open sky above the roadway.

"At least he should know where we are. Do you remember his cell phone?"

Richard thought. "No." Then he felt for his wallet. "Wait," he said, pulling his wallet out and opening it up. "Damn, it's dark. I can't see. I think I have his card in my wallet." Richard held the wallet close to his face and thumbed through it. Then he pulled the phone out and felt the buttons on it and turned it on. The screen glowed brightly in the dark. "Hey," he said, "This might work." He held the phone so that the light from the screen shown on his wallet. He managed to locate the card Schipper had given him and pulled it out. He stuffed his wallet back in his pocket and held the card so he could read it by the light of the phone. "Cool," he muttered. "I can read the number." He read the number aloud several times and then put the card in his shirt pocket. Then he punched the number into the phone.

"Schipper here," a voice said on the phone.

"Schipper?"

"That's me. Who is this?"

"This is Richard Cleveland," Richard said. He was uneasy. The voice did not sound like Schipper.

There was a pause on the other end and then the voice said, "Oh, yeah, we were worried about you when you didn't check in. I mean, didn't arrive. Where are you?"

Richard was sure the voice was not Schipper. "We are in Dallas, on Mockingbird lane."

"In Dallas? Well, good, give me your address and I'll pick you up."

Richard gave the address of a restaurant he often went to and hung up. "Something's wrong."

"What the hell did you do?! Are you kidding? We're in the middle of nowhere and our driver has been shot and we've been drugged and we're lost and you say there's something wrong? Why did you tell him we're in Dallas?"

"Well, yeah," Richard said, shaking his head, "I mean, that wasn't Schipper."

"What do you mean it wasn't him?"

"I know his voice. That wasn't him."

"Is that why you gave a Dallas address?"

"Yeah, it was." Richard tapped his chin with the phone again. "Whoever it was had Schipper's phone."

"What do you think it means?"

"Dunno. Not good, whatever it is."

"You are probably right."

"Well, let's walk." Richard took a step and stopped. "Oh shit," he muttered. "Shit!" He took the phone from his pocket, fiddled with it until he got the back open, and pulled the battery out.

"What?"

"Now they know what phone we were using," he said. "And if they have any power at all they can figure out what tower, where we are, for real. Maybe. Goddamn GPS phones! Shit." He considered tossing phone and battery but thought better of the idea. They might need the phone. He dropped the phone in one pocket and the battery in another. "Alright. Let's get on down the road."

"OK," Laura said, shrugging her shoulders, a response that was lost in the darkness. She started down the road in the direction they had been walking.

The two stumbled along in the darkness on the rough gravel road for what seemed like hours. Richard knew it was probably less than an hour. They followed the road around several curves until they saw a light directly in front of them. It looked like the window of a house.

"Look, a house!" Laura started to hurry towards the house. Richard caught her and grabbed her shirt, pulling her to a halt.

"Laura!" Richard exclaimed in a heavy whisper.

"What?" She did not speak in a whisper.

"We don't know whose house that is. Remember, we were being taken down this road you know. And somebody on this road shot that guy back there." He took a breath. "Or above it. Whatever."

"Oh, yeah," she said thoughtfully. "Right."

"Right," Richard said. "We should be cautious."

"OK, yeah, you are right."

"I'll go down and see what I can see in the window. You wait on the road. If I yell or anything sounds or looks disturbing, run like hell. Got it?"

"I got it. But...."

"What?"

"Richard, I should go with you."

"No," he was emphatic, "besides, all I am going to do is check things out."

"You be careful then."

"I will." He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her gently on the lips. "See ya," he muttered and walked towards the house.

As Richard approached he noticed the structure looked like a hunting cabin. It was small, not exactly ramshackle but not well built. When he got close he saw two dark sedans in the shadows, hidden from the view of the road. The cabin looked to have one room, or maybe two. The windows were smallish and square with four panes. Richard slid his feet along the ground slowly and carefully, trying not to make any sound. There were weeds and tall grass about the place. He pushed his feet through the weeds barely lifting them from the ground for fear of kicking something that would make a sound. He went slowly. As he came within a dozen feet of the house the light from the single window on the side he was approaching lit his path and he could move a bit faster. The window was high and he could not see in until he was right next to the wall. Carefully he eased up beside the window and peaked slowly around the sill and into the room.

Richard could see that the cabin was a two-room affair. He was looking in on what must be the kitchen and living room. The room was lit by a single electric bulb on the ceiling in the center of the room. There were two unmatched couches, an old dining table with odd chairs around it, and a few folding chairs sitting about the room. One corner was a kitchen area with an old gas stove, a small refrigerator, a short counter with a double sink in it. Then Richard sucked in a breath. On the floor in the center of the room was a body, prostrate and in a contorted position. There was a large puddle of blood beneath it.

Chapter Twenty

"There's somebody there. Shot. Dead." Richard wheezed as he slipped up to Laura who had been standing in the middle of the road. He was out of breath more from excitement than from exertion.

"Dead?"

"Dead, I think so." Richard panted. Laura looked at him but could not make out his features in the dark. "He is lying in the middle of the floor. Don't know who. The cabin has two rooms. I looked in. It looks like a hunting cabin or something. The guy is in the middle of the floor. There's blood all around. Looks like he's been shot."

"What's going on, Richard?"

"I don't know."

"Look!" Laura's gaze was riveted on the cabin's small window. A shadow moved across it. "Maybe he wasn't dead. Somebody is in there!"

"I see," Richard said. "Stay here."

"Richard," Laura barked, "wait!"

"Shshshshsh," Richard hissed, "quiet. I'll be right back." He re-traced his steps back to the cabin, being careful not to make any sound. He peered carefully around the windowsill again and saw Schipper perched on the edge of one of the couches. He could see Schipper clearly. The investigator was shirtless and had a large dark bruise above his breastbone. Richard watched as the investigator lifted a flask and took a sip from it and winced from the effort. He moved stiffly. "Well, well," Richard muttered to himself, "Looks like Schipper got walloped."

Being careful not to make any noise, Richard slipped around the cabin until he came to the door. The path to the door was grown up and obviously not used often. Not having any idea what he would do next Richard twisted the doorknob a little, found it unlocked, twisted it some more and pushed the door inward.

Schipper looked up rapidly and then stood as Richard stepped into the doorway.

"What the...." Schipper exclaimed, "Where did you come from?" He looked stunned. When he took a step towards Richard and moved his arms he winced and hunched over, "Damn!" he muttered.

"What happened?"

"What does it look like? We were shot."

"I see him. What about you?"

Schipper tried to straighten himself. "I was shot." He frowned as if he was answering a stupid question. Then He nodded his head towards a window on the wall opposite the door. Richard hadn't noticed that window was shattered. Seeing the look on Richard's face Schipper explained, "I had on a vest."

"You were wearing a bullet-proof vest?"

"I always wear a vest. That's what this bruise is, where the bullet hit. Hurts like hell." His voice was strained.

"I can imagine," Richard said. But he could not imagine being shot, with or without a vest. He stepped into the room. "Who shot you?"

"I don't know. It came through the window."

"Why?"

"Because the door was locked? What's with the stupid questions?"

"I mean, why did someone shoot you?"

"You," Schipper said.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. I have no idea why they didn't wait until you got here." Schipper straightened again with some effort. "Where did you come from, anyway? I didn't hear a car? You should have been here hours ago."

"Our driver was shot." Richard walked to the body and wondered if he should check for a pulse or something.

"He's dead," Schipper said as if reading Richard's mind. "Never had a chance. Your driver was shot?"

"Yes," Richard said, leaning over the body and examining it. There was a strong odor, a sickly-sweet smell mixed with that of feces. "God, I didn't know dead people smelled so." He stepped back.

"Of course," Schipper said, "now what happened?"

"Hello?" Laura's voice came from the door. She sucked in a breath and put her left hand over her mouth when she saw the body.

"Laura," Richard said, walking to her, "He is dead."

Laura hid her face in Richard's shoulder, "this is bad," she muttered. She was shaking.

"Enough of this, umpf," Schipper said, wincing from the pain in his chest, "now let's figure out what is going on."

"You tell me." Richard walked towards the kitchen area, tugging Laura along. He went to the sink and turned the knob. Brackish looking water flowed from the faucet. He waited for it to clear but it didn't. He looked around for some kind of towel and saw none so he just wet his hand, shook it, and gently rubbed Laura's face. There were tears running down her cheeks. She looked up into his eyes searchingly.

"Somebody got wind of what we are trying to do," Schipper said, "the little bastards are just too damn smart."

"Why would aliens use a gun? Wouldn't they have some kind of ray gun or laser or something? Why not just zap you and abduct you?" Richard led Laura to the dining table and pulled out a chair. She sat and he pulled another one beside her and sat. "This makes no sense."

"The Grays don't have offensive weapons," Schipper said, moving towards the table and sitting carefully in another chair. "At least, they've never revealed any. And they can't get close to us as long as we have the little boxes."

"Little boxes?"

"Yeah, devices we've cooked up to block their electronics."

"If those things work so well why didn't the one you gave me keep them away?"

"No idea, Cleveland," he paused and looked at Laura, "are you ok? Do you want a soda? Maybe a shot of bourbon? You don't look good."

"I'll be fine," Laura said flatly.

"Here," Schipper said, pulling a flask from his hip pocket. It was the one Richard had seen him drink from earlier.

"No thanks," Laura said.

"Schipper," Richard insisted, "Forget that. Go on."

"Anyway," he said, shrugging and sticking the flask back into his pocket, "umpf," he groaned, "damn, that hurts." He slumped his shoulders forward. "We have managed to tweak the things since they got past them to you. Has worked so far, anyway." He wasn't telling everything. Richard knew it but did not know why he knew it.

"If they don't have offensive weapons and can't approach you, as you say, who shot you?" Richard stood and walked to the window that was shattered. He looked out but only saw darkness. A shiver ran along his spine and he pulled at a curtain hanging limply beside the window. It had only been covering part of the window. He made sure it covered all of the window. Then he walked to the window he had been peering in and pulled a curtain over it. He was careful to steer clear of the body. "I don't want to

give anyone else a good shot," he muttered when he saw Laura and Schipper looking at him. His remark brought a look of fear to Laura's eyes. Schipper just nodded.

"Suppose that is a good idea," Schipper said. "I'm not thinking as clearly as I usually do." He stood, pulled the flask from his pocket, took a sip, replaced it, and then paced the room. "What about you?"

"We woke up in the car. It slid down a hill from the road. The driver was dead. Shot in the head. The shot came through the windshield." Richard took a breath. "There was a row of shots along the hood, windshield, and the top. It was a miracle we weren't killed ourselves."

"I didn't know how you were coming. Or when. Nobody knows everything, Cleveland. We left you with some contacts in Dallas. They were to set up some kind of ruse to throw the aliens off the trail. Yeah," he said, pacing again, "We must have been compromised. What did the driver look like?"

Richard described the driver as best he could. "And he had a neat hole in his forehead," he concluded.

"Damn," Schipper said, "too bad." He paced. Suddenly he stopped and straightened and winced from the effort. "But why didn't they make sure you were dead?" He shivered. Goose bumps ran up his bare arms and along his shoulders. Suddenly conscious that he was shirtless he walked towards the door that led to another room. "I don't get it," he said as he stepped through the door. Whatever else he said was muffled and unintelligible. When he came out he was buttoning up a red flannel shirt over a Kevlar vest.

"Maybe they thought we weren't in it," Richard muttered.

"What makes you think that?"

"I tried to call you. Only you didn't answer, someone else did."

"You called? When? How?" Schipper looked worried.

"After we got out of the car."

"How?"

"I found a phone in the car," Laura interjected.

"Cell phone?"

"Yes. I used it to call your cell phone but someone else answered," Richard explained.

"Damn," Schipper said, stepping into the other room briefly and returning with a cell phone.

"Damn," he repeated. He pressed a button on the phone and held it to his ear. "Damn," he said again and tossed the phone on the couch he'd been sitting on earlier.

"What?" Richard didn't like the way Schipper was acting.

"They have captured my phone."

"What?"

"Programmed another phone to answer my number instead of my phone."

"They can do that? And who is they?"

"Yeah, they can do damn well anything they want to do."

"Who?" Richard was impatient.

"The goddamned government."

"Government?" Laura and Richard looked at him with unbelief.

Schipper took a deep breath, winced, and spoke. "Listen, there's a hell of a lot going on that you don't know. A lot I don't know. But we've suspected. We've believed for some time that the Grays have an alliance with Washington. Of course we could never prove it. But then it makes sense. Just consider what has happened. Who else would have the reach to find us here? And my phone." He jerked his head and pierced Richard with his vision. "SHIT," he exclaimed, "you called and spoke to some one?"

"Yeah," Richard said. "I told them I was in Dallas. They are supposed to be sending someone to pick me up. Said they were worried when we didn't 'arrive'." Richard grinned. "They never knew I knew I was not speaking to you. But I knew. I know your voice. The one on the phone was close, but not you."

"Crap," Schipper walked towards them, "you have to get the hell out of here. They will trace that phone."

"How?"

"It sends out a signal, you know, keeps in contact with the nearest cell tower. No problem to find where it is. Damn, they will be here soon, I will bet."

"But I took the battery out of it."

"I don't have time for this, Cleveland!" Schipper tossed Richard a set of keys. "Listen, these guys aren't stupid. And they have access to whatever they want. That phone, here, give it here," he held out his hand, "it's like a beacon. They already know we are here. Close enough. You have to get the hell out of here. Take that car," Schipper nodded. "It's the black one. I'll take the other one and try to shake them off your trail."

"Where do we go?"

"Go to Houston, KKTU TV, call from a pay phone in town, wait till you get in town, and ask for Samuel Stafford. Hell," Schipper disappeared again into the other room and returned carrying a bag. "It won't do for you to walk around looking like yourself." He pulled his wallet out and pulled some money

from it. "We don't have time, just don't have time," he muttered, shoving the money in Richard's hand and handing Laura the bag. "Remember, Samuel Stafford, maybe you should write that down."

"I'll remember," Richard said, "What's this?" He held up the money.

"You'll need money. Don't use any credit cards or any other of your identity. In fact, you should get rid of it. That is my kit, for disguises," he nodded towards the bag Laura held. "Change the way you look. Don't look like yourself. Get Stafford alone before you tell him. Make up some story, get him alone."

"Tell him what?"

"Tell him you are with the Project. Got that? The Project. Mention my name and say you are with the project." He cocked his ear, "Damn, go, go, now!" He grabbed Laura's hand and pulled her as he pushed Richard ahead of him. "I hear a chopper."

"I don't hear anything," Richard said.

"I do, I know these things, get the hell out of here! That way!" He pointed down the road. "Shit, I forgot," Schipper raced back into the cabin and in a second came running back, "keep these things with you all the time. And for God sake make sure the batteries are good." He shoved a couple of odd-looking electronic devices into Laura's hands as she got into the car. Richard got in the driver's side and clumsily tried to start the car. "Go, don't look back, don't come back, get the hell out of here!"

Richard threw the car in reverse as he searched for the headlight switch. Instantly he slammed on the brakes as he looked in the mirror and saw a tree right behind the car. Frantically he worked the wheel and managed to get the car backed into the road. He pulled the car into gear and sped away down the road, spinning the tires and stirring up a dust storm.

He flew down the road struggling to keep the car out of the ditches. Twice he went into a skid on the gravel road and recovered. His eyes were locked on the road ahead and he could think of nothing other than to get away from that cabin. Then suddenly he hit the brakes and slid to a halt, turning the lights off as he did so.

"What?" Laura blurted.

"God, how stupid!"

"What?!"

"If whoever came after us is in a damn helicopter I just made it easy. I've been kicking up a hell of a cloud of dust and my lights just light up the night."

"Hell, Richard, do you...."

"I don't know. Shit. You know, the government has night vision goggles. This car would glow like the sun in infrared."

"They would have caught us by now, wouldn't they?"

"I don't know." He was breathing hard, "I don't know." A strange thunk sound came from the front of the car. "What the hell?" Richard leaned forward and then realized what that sound was. He pulled on the headlights and shot down the road in the car.

"Richard!" Laura screamed. "What is going on?"

"That thunk was a bullet hitting the hood," Richard exclaimed. As he finished speaking another loud bang echoed through the car. A bullet passed through the top of the sedan between Richard and Laura and buried itself in the carpet. "Damn!"

"Go, Richard!"

Suddenly the gravel road exited onto a two-lane paved road. Richard almost hit a tree on the opposite side of the road before he managed to point the car down the paved road. He turned off the lights and steered a path down the center of the highway, relying on the stripes he could make out down the center of the roadway to guide him. The car was going faster than Richard had ever driven before.

"I didn't hear any helicopter or anything," Laura said through clenched teeth. She was gripping the seat with both hands and holding on as tightly as she could.

"Me neither," Richard said, wondering how Schipper had. He leaned forward and squinted, trying to make out the center-line of the highway. Two more bullets plinked into the car, one on a fender and another buried itself in the back seat. Up ahead Richard saw some lights and headed for them. It was a convenience store. "I'll bet they won't follow us into that store," he said. "They want to stay secret and flying up shooting at a car is not very discreet."

"I hope you are right."

Richard slid the car to a halt and had the driver door open before it stopped moving. He and Laura ran from the car carrying the things Schipper had given them. They were inside the store in seconds.

A clerk looked up startled as they came crashing through the front door. Richard ran up to the counter and threw out his hands to halt his movement. He grabbed the counter and slammed against it with his waist, knocking boxes of candy over. Laura came to an abrupt halt right behind him. "Look," Richard said to the clerk, "we have a problem."

The clerk was young, maybe eighteen. He wore a soiled apron over a t-shirt and jeans. He had a ring in his left ear and his hair was short and spiked. He looked at Richard but didn't respond. He looked frightened.

"Look," Richard said, a little more calmly, "my brother-in-law is nuts. See, crazy, I mean. The stupid son-of-a-bitch saw me with Laura, this is Laura," he nodded to Laura, "and well, Laura isn't my wife. See? You know these rednecks, huh? He said he was going to kill me for running around on his sister. Like it is crazy, I know. But he will be in that door any minute and so we have to go out the back door. OK? Where is it?"

"Uh," the clerk muttered, stunned, "Um, that way," he pointed. "But it's not supposed to be opened at night," he said, watching Richard and Laura rush around the counter and through a door into the back. "An alarm will sound." The last sentence he said rather matter-of-factly since he saw Richard running towards the door at full tilt.

Richard pushed on the red bar on the door that had big letters which read: "Alarm will sound if door opened." The alarm sounded. He pushed on the door with Laura right behind him.

Chapter Twenty-One

The blast was the last thing Richard had expected. He was gritting his teeth at the thought they would run into a hail of bullets just outside the door or find some kind of Swat team waiting on them. A tiny part of him was hoping they would escape. But he had not expected the explosion that ripped through the store. He was slammed against the open door at first by the concussion and then by Laura. He fell headlong onto the gravel drive behind the store where he hit the ground and rolled until he was halted by a dumpster. Laura followed right behind him.

Before he could get his breath a second explosion erupted from the front of the store and the heat from that blast burned Richard and Laura's exposed skin. It also sent pieces of the store in all directions. Shards of wood, metal, and Richard didn't know what else slammed against them and then rained from the sky. Instinctively he threw himself over Laura and in the process was pelted by several large pieces of wood and refuse.

The heat from the fire now rapidly consumed the destroyed store. It singed the hair on Richard's head. He pulled himself up and then tugged on Laura. She didn't move. He turned her over and her face was pale. "Laura!" He shook her. Slowly she opened her eyes but they were blank. She must have been knocked out by the blast, Richard thought to himself. He refused to think anything worse. He half lifted her to his shoulders and drug her a safe distance from the burning store. He was in the edge of a wooded area behind the store. Laura groaned as he eased her down and onto thick grass.

"Laura," Richard whispered. He gently lifted her head in his palm and leaned down beside her. "Laura, wake up."

Laura stirred. Her head moved from side to side and her eyes opened. Then she winced and lifted her right hand to her temple. "Oh, God, my head!"

"I know, sweetheart, I know, the store blew up." He brushed her cheeks and without a second thought pressed his lips against hers. Then he kissed her cheeks and moved back to look her in the eyes.

"Blew up?"

"Yeah."

"But the boy," she said, referring to the clerk.

Richard shook his head, "I know." He looked up at the store and back at her.

"Do you think...?"

"Yeah, I do," Richard answered her unasked question. "They will apparently stop at nothing."

"How will they explain this?" She nodded towards the burning store.

"Who knows," he said, "maybe they don't care anymore." Richard rocked back on his haunches and then flopped down on his back beside Laura. "It is all making a bit more sense now, maybe. It's not just that the aliens don't want to be exposed. No, the government has a stake in them staying hidden. And it's not just the panic and stuff that will break out. They could handle that. No, it's the technology exchange. They would stand to lose a bundle."

"Do you think they saw us come out the back?"

Richard sat up abruptly, "no, or they would have shot at us." He looked around and decided they should retreat further into the woods. "Come on," he said, tugging gently on Laura's left hand, "let's hide better."

As they moved deeper into the cover of the trees an assortment of sirens could be heard approaching.

"The fire department is coming now," Laura said, "maybe we should talk to them."

"I don't think so," Richard said, "I don't think we can trust anybody." He looked upwards into the night sky. There were many stars but no moon. "I'll bet they are watching," he muttered.

"They probably are," Laura said. She was now sitting slumped against a tree trunk. "The things, the electronic things," she muttered, nodding her head.

"Damn, and that bag, too."

"I had them," she said. "In my hand when I heard a boom and everything went black."

"You were knocked out by the blast." Richard put a hand over his eyes and peered towards the back of the store where the door had been. There was now simply a hole in the wall with fire beyond. The back wall of the store was cinder blocks and there was no overhang so besides the heat from the door the area immediately behind the store was not in the glow of the fire. "We have to get them," he said at last.

"They are probably burned."

"Maybe not," he said. "You stay here." Richard knew he took a risk by moving out from under the trees but he figured they were as good as dead if he didn't. He rushed, hunched over, towards the store and crouched behind the dumpster which shielded him from the intense heat of the fire. He looked around and saw the bag and one of the devices not far off, apparently tossed by the blast. Crouching like a runner he leaped out from behind the dumpster and ran to grab the bag and device. Just before he reached them something exploded in the store and he hit the ground flat on his face. With a struggle

he got on his hands and knees, grabbed the bag, then the device and ran for cover of the trees. He dropped his burdens and fell into the grass beside Laura.

"Richard!" Laura looked at him, "You are bleeding!"

"Huh?" He looked down at himself, "What?" He was shaking and panting heavily. Feeling something wet running down the left side of his face he lifted his left arm and wiped his head. Then he looked and found blood on his arm and hand. "I guess I am."

"You are!" Laura reached out as if she was going to touch his head and then pulled back, looking around for something. "Damn," she said helplessly, "here, hold your hand on it. You are bleeding bad." She took his left hand and placed it over the wound on Richard's head. As she did she noticed dozens of cuts along his arm. She pulled on his right arm and found it was equally cut and bruised. "You look like hell."

"You are a bit mussed up yourself," Richard muttered.

Laura looked down at herself. "I guess we are both a mess."

"Yeah. But we are alive."

They sat resting and picking at the pieces of wood and other materials stuck into and on them. Soon the building was surrounded by emergency crews and firemen dragging hoses. They moved farther into the woods. In an hour the building had burned down and the firemen were close to extinguishing it. Neither spoke for a long time.

"What do we do now, Richard?" Laura was lying on her back looking up through the trees. The fire was out and in the distance they could hear firemen poking around in the ruins. The only lights were the flashing of emergency lights on a couple of fire trucks, the trucks' headlights and flashlights the firemen were using. They could hear muffled voices but could not make out what was being said.

"I'm not sure," Richard said, sitting up and looking towards the store. Through the trees he saw that only a cleanup crew remained. "Try to get to Houston, I suppose."

"Where are we?"

"I have no idea." Richard stood and looked down at Laura. He could make out her figure but not any details. She stood with some effort and clutched his arm. He turned and slipped his arms around her waist and brought his lips down to hers. After a long kiss he pulled her to him. "Good God, Laura, is this all a dream? Is it real? I'm so lost."

"Me to," Laura muttered into his shoulder. She leaned back a little, kissed him briefly and then pushed back to search his face. She couldn't see much in the darkness. "I think we look like hell."

"I think we do."

"We can't go anywhere looking like this."

"Nope."

"What do we do?"

"I think we have to go back to that cabin." Richard didn't like that idea but he could think of no other. They couldn't strike out down the road looking like they did. "I don't know what else to do. At least maybe we can get cleaned up there and figure out where we are."

"What if we just struck out down the road?"

"Looking the way we do? There's no way to explain our being so torn up." He ran his fingers through his hair, which was full of debris and stuck together with blood from the wound on his head.

"It has to be ten miles down to that cabin," Laura said.

"I know."

"I don't think I can make it."

"Well, we have to get away from here. In the morning investigators will be here and they might see our tracks. Maybe we can get down the highway some and get back off into the woods and rest."

"I think I like that idea less."

"There's nothing in these woods that would hurt you. I told you that."

"Still," she said, "I don't like the idea."

In spite of himself Richard let out a slight chuckle. "City girl."

"Like you aren't," she said, poking at him.

"I'm not a girl," he said, poking back at her.

They laughed briefly and for a second forgot everything. But it came back too rapidly and Laura threw her arms around Richard. "Richard," she said softly, "that boy was killed in there."

"I know," Richard said, placing his hand on the back of Laura's head. "I know." He released her, kissed her, and turned, taking her hand in his. He was comforted in having her with him and at the same time worried and terrified that she was and that she was in danger. But she has been in danger all her life, he thought. He could not even fathom the life she had lived with the aliens taking her so often. But then she didn't know, did she? Not until Matchett had brought it out. Feelings he had no name for surged up inside him and he turned and pulled her to him, kissed her and then held her closely.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The first sensation Richard felt was pain. More pain than he'd ever felt. He hurt all over, from his head to his feet and a dozen places in between. His back hurt and his head hurt and his arms and neck were burning from the blisters on them. Added to that were a couple dozen small splinter wounds from the debris of the explosion. And on top of everything a tall blade of grass was tickling his left ear. He moved, trying to evade the grass and only managed to bring a few more blades to bear on his neck. With some effort he sat up.

A few feet distant Richard saw Laura, lying in the deep grass as he had been. She was motionless. Sounds and the taste of the air told him it was not long after dawn. He looked around and determined that they were lying in a grassy clearing surrounded by forest. The air was chill and he shivered. He had no idea which way they had come from. It was easy enough to figure out which way was East since the sun was rising but he had no clue of their whereabouts. He had not noticed directions in relation to compass headings the evening before when they had crawled out of the suburban and after the sun went down the moonless night gave no hint. He struggled to turn and pull himself onto his knees. Then he went to Laura and shook her gently.

"Hey," he whispered near her ear. "Laura."

She moaned and rolled onto her back. Her eyes opened into slits and then clamped shut. She had the same red burns on her skin as Richard did. Her burns were not as severe, though. "Oh, Richard, I ache."

"I know, sweetheart, me too. But I think we need to go."

"Uhohummmmm," she moaned. "I suppose so." She took Richard's hand and slowly pulled herself up. She moaned. "Do you have any idea where we are?" She shivered and her teeth clattered.

"Not the slightest," Richard said. He stood unsteadily on his feet. "I've never felt this crummy before," he muttered.

"Know what you mean," Laura replied. She turned in a circle, surveying her surroundings. "Where shall we go?"

Richard kicked around in the grass and looked for signs of their footprints. He remembered finding this clearing and their laying down in it but he could not figure where they had come from. Finally he

found their tracks. "Here," he said, pointing, "we came from that direction, I think." He backtracked the prints for a ways, "Yeah, I'm sure of it. The road must be that way."

"Good," Laura said. She followed behind Richard who was moving towards the tree line. "I don't know if that was rest or torture."

"Me either," he grumbled.

Within thirty minutes they had located the gravel road where it intersected with the paved road. He looked both ways and scratched his head. Then he shrugged and started walking east. He remembered turning left, which would be north, from the road.

"Is that the way?"

"I think so," he said. He wasn't as sure as he let on, though. It just felt right.

"OK," Laura muttered and followed him.

The sun was well up in the sky by the time Richard made it around a final turn and came upon the cabin suddenly. It looked different in the daylight but he was sure it was the one. He didn't really want to look inside, not sure what he might see, but he forced himself to walk up to the window he'd looked in the night before. Inside was dark. He pressed his face against the glass and shielded his eyes from the sun. Through the crack beside the curtain he'd pulled the night before there was no sign of Schipper. The body was no longer on the floor. There was a dark stain on the old linoleum where it had been. He jumped when he felt Laura's fingers run up his back. "Ugh," he yelped, "why don't you just yell boo!"

"Sorry," she said.

Richard's stern expression softened and he kissed her. With a nod he directed her around the side of the cabin. She stepped back and followed him. Behind the cabin Richard saw there was an old pickup truck sitting in tall grass.

"I wonder if that thing runs," he said.

"Who knows."

"We'll have to find out, maybe." He pushed the unlocked cabin door back and stepped inside. There was a smell that caused him to gag slightly and he stepped backwards and into Laura who was following close on his heels.

"What?"

"Smell," he said, "awful."

"I smell it," she said, curling her nose.

"If all those death-by-the-dozen movies revealed what death smelled like they wouldn't be so popular." He stepped deeper into the room trying to breathe through his mouth and not through his nose.

"You are right," Laura agreed.

"We need some new clothes," Richard muttered and walked into the other room of the cabin. He couldn't see in the room very well because there was little light coming in through the single small, square window set in the wall opposite the door. He could make out two double bunks against the wall and what looked like a closet in a far corner. He felt around the wall beside the door for a light switch and found one. When he flipped it on he immediately squinted from the light coming from a single bulb in a simple fixture centered in the ceiling. Once his eyes adjusted he noted that the bunk beds were bare of any sheets or pillows. Except for one small table and a folding chair beside it the room was devoid of any other furnishings. Richard walked to the corner where he had at first thought he'd seen a closet. On closer inspection he noted that it wasn't a true closet, only an alcove with a bar for hanging clothes. The bar was empty. There were no clothes in the room. In another corner a small door led into a minuscule bathroom built onto the back of the cabin as an afterthought. Richard stepped into the restroom and turned up his nose at the dirty and disgusting facility. But it was the only facility around so he closed the door and took advantage of it. Ten minutes later he walked back into the living area. Laura wasn't there so he went outside.

Laura was walking around the old truck. She looked up when Richard approached.

"Went to the can," he muttered.

"Figured that out," she said. Her gaze had dropped to the truck and she did not look up again to speak. "there's no key but it's an old truck so if it runs we can hot-wire it."

"Ever done that before?"

"Yeah, right, like I drive hot cars all the time."

"Thought I'd ask."

"Well, figure it out," she said, "I have to use the ladies room." She walked towards the cabin.

"It's not very nice," he said.

"Such is life," she shot back over her shoulder and disappeared through the cabin door.

Richard opened the driver door of the truck and slid beneath the wheel. The truck was at least thirty years old. It had been built when vehicles were simpler. The thought ran through his mind that taking this truck meant he was committing theft and that thought left a dry taste in his mouth. He'd

never done anything close to this before. "Desperate times call for desperate measures," he muttered aloud.

"What?"

Richard jumped when he heard Laura's voice. He'd not expected her to be anywhere close. "Back so soon?"

"You were right about the 'not nice' part. I didn't stick around to play solitaire."

"I suppose not." With a shrug Richard twisted the key slot on the truck's steering column. To his surprise a little effort was all it took to turn the ignition without the key being in it. Richard blinked as instruments came to life before him. "I'll be damn." He twisted a little more and the truck roared to life. "This is too weird," he muttered. He checked the fuel gauge. The truck had half a tank.

"Thank heavens for small favors," Laura said. "I take it you didn't find any clothes." She pulled the passenger door open and slid inside.

"Nope." He looked at her, "where's the bag and that electronic thing?"

"Oh, yeah," Laura said, sliding out of the seat and walking back to the cabin. She picked up the bag and electronic device they'd been carrying and had dropped beside the door of the cabin. "Here," she said, slipping into the cab again and pulling the door closed. It took two tries to get it to latch properly.

Richard picked up the electronic device. He'd not taken the time to examine it before. It looked like a high school kid's electronics project. There was a simple switch, three LED lights, and what looked like a speaker opening in the end. It was the size of a shoe box. "Looks simple enough," he said softly, turning it over in his hands. "How do we know if it is on?"

"I guess the red light," Laura said, pointing. The LED lights were three colors, red, green, and white.

"Wouldn't green mean it is on?" Richard flipped the switch. It was a three-position switch. With each position another LED light came on.

"Well," Laura said, "is there any markings on it?" She took the device and examined it. "There," she said, pointing to a scratched 'x' near the switch. "I think that means on." She flipped the switch in the direction of the 'x' and the red light came on. "Makes sense to me."

"I suppose so," Richard shrugged, "fine then, shall we go?"

"Where?"

"Houston," he said. The truck's column shift leaver was loose and wobbly but worked sufficiently for him to pull the truck into reverse. It moved sluggishly backwards, sputtering. Pulling the truck into drive, Richard turned in a circle and pulled up to the gravel road. "Which way?"

"Well," Laura thought, "that way is where that store is that burned. So maybe we should go the other way."

"But that way goes to a paved road. This way may not."

"True," Laura said. "I don't know, then. Choose."

As Richard pointed the truck down the gravel road in a direction opposite the one they had gone the night before he had two major worries. One was that they might find themselves at a dead end and out of gas and the other was that the owner of this truck would spot them and chase them down. Then his memory clicked and he realized he was going along the road back towards where the suburban had run off the road. The driver had been taking them to the cabin so this direction must lead somewhere.

"We should find that car we were in," Richard said, "has to be up here somewhere."

"Yes, it should be," Laura said. "But then it was way down in the woods. We might not be able to see it from the road."

Richard nodded. He watched the sides of the road as he drove along. Laura looked like she was watching too. Neither saw anything. Within ten minutes Richard came upon a wide highway.

"Looks like a main highway," he said.

"Which way?"

"Well, we're headed to Houston, aren't we?"

"I suppose so."

"South it is," he said, making a right turn onto the roadway. A few minutes later Richard passed a sign that told him what highway he was on. "Damn," he exclaimed, "I know where we are now."

"You do?"

"Yes, I do. Yes," he peered over the wheel and down the road, "yes, I recognize this. There is a lake up there, not far, and beyond that we'll run into a major highway that will take us right on to Houston. We're only a few hours from there."

"I'm glad you know," Laura said. "I may as well be on the moon."

"Well, never you mind, little lady," Richard cooed, "Richard will save you."

Richard drove for a few more miles and the road indeed ran past a lake. A quarter of an hour later the highway had wound its way around and taken them to U.S. 59. Richard turned south. In another half an hour they came to a town. Richard pulled off the highway and into a fast food parking lot. "I'm starving to death," he said, pushing the shift lever upwards into park. "Let's eat. And I need some coffee!"

"Sounds like a plan," Laura said. "And look there," she pointed, "we can get some clothes in that department store."

"Yep." Richard slid out of the seat of the truck and was suddenly aware of his appearance. "What do you think people will say about the way we look?"

"Who cares," Laura said. She was out of the truck now and was slamming the truck door for the second time. "This thing is contrary."

"Think so," Richard said. "Let's eat."

"After you, sir," Laura said, slipping her left hand under his right arm. Richard led them into the restaurant ignoring the stares of people nearby.

Half an hour later the pair left the restaurant and went across the street to the department store where they picked out a couple suits of clothes each. As they walked to the register to pay Richard looked into his wallet, frowning. "The money Schipper gave me is going fast."

"How much do we have left?"

"A hundred, maybe."

"Maybe we should just get some of these things?"

"No," Richard shook his head, "we get all of them." He pulled a credit card from his wallet and held it up.

"But," Laura said, "they can trace it."

"Who cares," Richard said, "besides, we'll be long gone if they do. And I don't give a damn." He handed the card to an absent-minded clerk who scanned it and handed him a slip to sign. Laura picked up their bags and he led her out of the store, stuffing the card back into his wallet.

"Might not have been a good idea," Laura said.

"They will only know where we have been," Richard said, "not where we are. I'll use the card one more time here and we shouldn't need it for a while." He nodded to an automated teller machine across the parking lot. He went towards it while Laura returned to the truck with their purchases. Richard stuck his card in the machine and withdrew the maximum cash it would allow. A few minutes later he was climbing into the drivers' seat of the old truck again.

"Hi," Laura said, smiling at him.

"Hi," he returned, leaning over and kissing her. "We should be fine for a few days."

"Good."

"Now we go." Richard pulled the shift lever and backed out of the parking slot.

The sun was falling into the afternoon sky when they arrived in Houston. "We have to stop and change, and get cleaned up," he said.

"Yeah, and I'm exhausted."

"I suppose we need to get some kind of room."

"Yeah."

"It'll have to be a dump. Something cheap."

"Better anyway. Those kind of places take cash and keep their mouth shut."

"That's what I hear." Richard took an exit and ran along the service road leading into the city. He passed a couple of motels before he settled on a small motel that advertised a ridiculously cheap rate on their marquee.

"This looks like a wonderful place."

"They probably have a good by-the-hour rate, too," Laura said, grinning.

"Well," Richard took a deep breath, "I'll go see what they have."

"Be sure you tell them you need a room only."

"What?"

Laura nodded in the direction of a girl who stood leaning against the outside wall of the motel. The girl's short, tight skirt, thin top, high heels and general appearance indicated she was probably available. "You already have someone to keep you warm."

Richard grinned, "right," he said, and winked. Then he slid out of the seat and walked towards the office. He made up a name and signed the registration card. He paid for the room with cash. The desk clerk handed him a key and never asked for an ID.

"That was easy enough." Richard got into the truck.

"I can't wait to see the room." Laura smiled at him.

"I know," Richard said, smiling at her. He backed the truck up and drove around to the side of the motel. "There it is," he said, nodding, "room twelve."

"Wonderful," Laura said. She began gathering their things and opened the door as soon as the truck came to a stop.

The room met their expectations. The bed sagged towards its center, the furniture was tattered, the television was at least ten years old, and the dresser drawers were missing their handles. The room's walls were ancient dark wood paneling covered with scratches and stains. Richard closed the door behind them and turned the lock. Laura walked into the bathroom.

"Lovely."

"Isn't it?" Richard fell onto the bed and decided that it may be old but it was soft. He stood and walked across the room and turned a knob on the ancient television. He flipped through channels and settled on a news broadcast. Laura disappeared into the bathroom.

The phone book in the tattered drawer beneath the ancient phone was torn and stained. Richard managed to find the number to the television station and dialed. He asked for Samuel Stafford. He was transferred to a voice mail. He hung up and called again and was told the man would not be in until the next day. The station said it was policy not to give out home numbers. Richard thanked them and hung up.

The shower had been running as he called. When he heard the water stop running Richard spoke through the door. "Laura."

"Yes?" Her voice was muffled but understandable.

"That guy at the TV station, not there till tomorrow."

"No? Can you get his home?"

"No, they won't give it out. I thought it best not to act like it was an emergency. What will we do?"

The door opened a crack. "Whew, it's hot in here. I suppose we'll just have to stay the night. I am beat, anyway."

"Yeah," Richard muttered. He felt as if he was being pricked by a million needles, his skin covered with goose bumps. The sensation didn't help the cuts and bruises. "Maybe so. I just hate the idea."

"What?"

"I hate to have to wait."

"I know, but we have no choice." She opened the door a bit more and peeped around it, only her head showing. A towel was wrapped around it. "You are always impatient." She disappeared again behind the closed door.

He settled back onto the bed and fell backwards onto his elbows. Then an image on the television startled him and he sat upright. "Laura," he said loudly, "See this!"

On the screen was a picture of a burning convenience store. It was the one they had been in, had to be. He turned up the sound.

"...INVESTIGATORS HAVE DETERMINED THAT THE DRIVER OF THE CAR THAT STRUCK THIS CONVENIENCE STORE IN RURAL EAST TEXAS HAD BEEN DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE. THE DRIVER HAD BEEN SPOTTED SWERVING ERRATICLY AS HE TRAVELED ALONG THE ROADWAY BY OFFICER MICHAEL STERLING, A DPS TROOPER. ACCORDING TO OFFICER STERLING THE VEHICLE SPED AWAY WHEN HE TRIED TO PULL THE DRIVER OVER ON SUSPICION OF DRUNK DRIVING. STERLING SAID THE

VEHICLE SWERVED FROM SIDE TO SIDE AND THEN CRASHED INTO THE FRONT OF THE STORE, HITTING THE GAS PUMPS. THE STORE THEN ERUPTED INTO FLAMES, SAYS OFFICER STERLING. AN INVESTIGATION CONTINUES INTO THIS INCIDENT....”

Richard stood and turned the sound down on the set.

“What do you make of that?”

“That’s not what happened,” Laura said.

“No kidding.” Richard was stunned. Whoever had been after them had one hell of a reach to concoct a story like that and make it stick. “They blew that store up trying to....” The words stuck in his throat.

“Trying to kill us.” Laura walked towards him from where she had stood in the bathroom door. “But they did kill that poor kid.”

Richard stood and slipped his arms around Laura’s waist. “I know. This is insane.”

“It is.” She looked up into his face. “I’m afraid.”

“Me too,” Richard said. He leaned over and kissed her gently. Then he pulled her close and kissed her passionately. She responded by clinging to him and kissing him back forcefully. Then she pushed him away and turned toward the window. She was wrapped in a thin, worn towel underneath which she was only wearing her underclothes.

Richard looked at her as she stood facing away from him. She was peeking out a small crack beside the stained curtain. He felt his face flush and emotions rushed through him. He stood and stepped towards her. She lifted her hand, sensing his movement. “No, Richard,” she said, “I have to tell you something.”

He stopped. “I love you, Laura.” He moved towards her again and again she held a hand up.

“No, Richard, you have to know something.” She faced him now. Her eyes were full of tears. “I remembered. I haven’t had the time, they drugged us, all this,” she turned, sweeping a hand in the air. Her back was to him now. He looked out the window beyond her. Then he focused on her shoulders, drooped and shaking. She was sobbing. Again he started towards her. “No, don’t, Richard, listen, there’s something you should know.” She sucked in a deep breath, turned, swept around him in an arc that kept him apart from her and went to the bed where she sat, slumped forward. When she looked up there was more pain in her expression that Richard had never seen on anyone.

“What?” He stood and stared, suddenly afraid of what she was going to say.

“It’s my fault,” she stammered. Then she burst into tears again.

“What? What are you saying, what do you mean? Your fault for what?”

"That you are mixed up in this. All this." She looked upwards. The plaster on the ceiling was cracked, dirty, covered with stains that matched the rest of the room. Her eyes focused on a circle above the bed, a black sooty-looking spot where someone must have held a lighter until the ceiling was smudged.

"What are you talking about?" Richard settled onto the bed beside her. He tried to put his arm around her but she moved away.

"No, listen to me," she said in a scolding voice, "just a minute. A minute." She drew another long breath and wiped her eyes. "You will hate me when you find out."

Richard's eyes softened. "Never. Never would I hate you. Nothing could make me hate you. Not ever."

"This could."

"Nothing," he repeated. They sat motionless, only a few inches apart. Richard felt like those few inches were a chasm wider than the universe. He moved his hand upward, furtively. She pulled back. He extended his forefinger and moved a strand of hair from before her right eye.

She exhaled so forcefully Richard thought she might collapse like a balloon losing air. She fell against him and clutched him. "Oh, God," she said into his shoulder. Her voice was trembling. "Charlie did it."

"Charlie?"

"You remember. I told you about Charlie."

Richard thought a minute. Then he remembered her telling him about a man. No not a man, a hybrid, she said, part human and part alien. He looked at her without speaking.

"He," she paused, her face contorted in emotions Richard could not fathom, "He abducted you."

"What?" Richard squinted at her out of curiosity. "You told me he'd disappeared."

The sun was down now and the only light in the room came from the dim television screen and a sliver of streetlight that came through the crack of curtain and fell across Laura's face at an odd angle, making her look almost other-worldly. "Well, he came back. Listen, Richard, your abduction was not random. And it was not," she breathed fitfully, "part of the plan. It was a personal thing. Charlie. Charlie did it."

Richard stood, exasperated. "Are you alright? Have you hit your head or something? What the hell are you talking about." His voice rose in volume and the frustration in it was obvious. "I was abducted by aliens. I have an unbelievably hard time comprehending that but it happened. Aliens. Little devils with big eyes. I know. I remember. All of it I remember. So what are you going on about?"

"You don't understand," Laura sputtered. She stood and walked to the window again. Pulling the curtain aside some more she looked upward. No stars were visible. City lights blanked them out as if they didn't exist. "Charlie is responsible."

Richard sank onto the bed, his knees suddenly weak. Every time he thought nothing would surprise him, every time he thought the situation could not get any more bizarre, it did. He sat, looking at her, unable to speak. She went on.

"I understand," she said. "No, I don't. No, I keep saying these things. We keep saying them. Over and over, understand, comprehend, no, I don't, don't know how you feel, how I feel, what is going on, really going on, out there." She looked out the window. "I can't stand it, there's too much." She closed her eyes and lowered her head against the window. In a few seconds she seemed to pull strength from somewhere. She turned to Richard. She looked resolved. She moved and sat beside Richard, taking his hands in hers and holding them in her lap as she turned to face him.

Richard felt the bare coolness of her thighs against his hands. He felt her shudder. When he looked into her eyes he saw a woman pained and suffering, a person with knowledge beyond her ability to comprehend.

Richard opened his mouth to say something but didn't know what to say. He sat, foolishly, with his mouth open, listening.

"Charlie is a product of whatever the Grays are trying to do, are doing, but he is very human. And he has emotions. And..." she paused, "he loves me. I may love him, too. No, I don't. Not like that. I like him. Like him like a brother...."

"A brother you...."

"I know, it sounds stupid. Yes, one who I made love to. Had sex with. Whatever." She stood and paced. "There's a lot, a whole lot more I will tell you, when I can, if you want to listen. But what I'm trying to tell you is that somehow Charlie managed to get you included in the second phase of a program the Grays have going, something new they are doing. What, I don't know. It's just new. New abductees. He wanted," she said, turning to Richard now, "to make me happy. To give me what I wanted."

"What you wanted?" Richard looked confused now.

"You, Richard, you. I have loved you for, I don't know, when I took the job with the company and met you, you were so different. So... kind. I fell for you. You didn't know?"

Richard looked at her, tried to remember. But that was such another life, another lifetime ago to him now. "I... "

"He knew it. He arranged things. Somehow, he arranged all kinds of things. And here you are."

"This is crazy," Richard said, standing. He walked towards her. "It is crazy. You are saying some half-breed alien got me abducted so you and I could be together? It's absurd. What makes you think so? Maybe you did have some alien lover." He shook himself at the idea. "Maybe, and maybe, he, but, I mean, it's preposterous."

"It's true," she said, looking up into Richard's eyes. "He told me." She turned and stepped to the window again. As she raised a hand to pull the curtain back Richard saw that her hand was trembling. He walked to her. "After you were abducted, I was with him, they come to me all the time you know. They communicate with their eyes, telepathically somehow. He told me."

"What did he tell you?" Richard took her shoulders gently and turned her to him. "What?"

She leaned her head down and moved close to him, staring into his eyes with such intensity he was mesmerized. He thought he heard her voice in his head but her lips didn't move. Richard's eyes grew wide in shock. "How did you do that?"

"I can only whisper," she said, breaking the gaze. "Charlie can shout. They all, the Grays and the tall ones and all of them, they can speak right into your mind." She started to move away but Richard pulled her to him. She resisted but then softened and fell against him. "He told me, he said, 'I am getting you what you want.' I've learned to look past his words and see his meaning, somehow, and I knew, he was talking about you. I knew." Her voice was muffled now, her face was buried in his shoulder.

Richard began to understand the meaning of what she had said. He realized how Laura must have struggled with her feelings for him, knowing he was married and out of reach. He also realized how much he had come to love her too, for some time. He would never admit it to himself. Maybe it was a reflection of her feelings. He clutched her tightly to him. "But," he said, "there was Pamela, is Pamela, he could not have...."

She shook her head up and down, "he could. He did. They know things, find out things, I don't know how. And they are unbelievable manipulators. So you are here, alone, false pretenses, it is wrong, wrong," she pushed back, searching his face, "it is entirely wrong!"

Some time passed before Richard was able to speak. His vocal cords would not respond, hindered as they were by the emotions coursing through him. "Laura," he said, his voice scratchy, "My relationship with Pam ended the day Robert died. I don't know if your, um, companion, did anything or not or if you've just come up with this in your mind. I don't know. I don't know what will happen tomorrow. We may die. The world may change forever. It already has. For me it has. Nothing will

ever, ever be the same. All I care about," he leaned to look into her eyes, "all I care about just now is you. All I have is you. I love you." He kissed her.

Suddenly their emotions over flowed and they fell upon the bed together.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Good morning.” Laura followed her words with a gentle kiss on Richard’s cheek.

“Morning,” Richard smiled, looking down at her. Her head rested on his arm and her hair flowed about her face. She is beautiful, he thought to himself. They lay together in the center of the bed. The sagging mattress rose up around them like the sides of a cereal bowl. Richard leaned over and pressed his lips firmly against Laura’s and they embraced. “I love you,” he whispered in her ear.

“I know,” she said. “Me too.”

“I think we have to go.” Richard struggled to roll towards the edge of the bed but found himself rolling back to the center.

” It’s like lying in a bowl, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” Richard said, trying again. This time he clutched the edge of the bed and managed to swing his feet over it. He sat there rubbing his eyes.

“My turn,” Laura said. Richard felt the bed shaking and he turned to see Laura’s slender frame moving to the opposite side of the bed. She was naked, as he was. When she managed to perch on the edge of the bed she turned and smiled at him. She did not seem self-conscious. He did. He pulled at the sheet to wrap around his waist. “Shy?”

“Sort of,” Richard grinned sheepishly.

She tugged the spread and wrapped it around her. She walked around the bed and bent down to kiss him. “I love you,” she whispered.

He stood and they embraced. He felt Laura’s hands slide around his waist. She stood behind him, clutching him tightly. He’d left the sheet on the bed and he felt her warmth, knowing she had dropped the spread.

She turned her head and pressed it against his back. “I hope you don’t regret anything.”

“Regret?” He gently pulled her hands apart and turned to face her. “Regret?” Then he looked into her eyes and understood what she meant. “No, I don’t. I know,” he took a deep breath, “I should. Maybe I should. I don’t.” He cupped her chin in his hand and pulled her face upwards. “I love you. Whatever the hell tomorrow brings, that will not change.”

“Still,” she said, moving back and then turning away from him. She walked towards the restroom, then stopped and turned, “still you are....”

Richard answered her unfinished statement with a shrug. "I don't regret anything. I love you. We made love and it was wonderful. Whatever Pam and I ever had is gone now and we've not been intimate in a very long time."

Laura walked back to Richard and kissed him softly. "But, it has all been...."

"You don't know that. You don't."

"OK. We had better go."

"Yeah, we better." He stepped past her and hurried to the restroom, closing the door behind him. From outside he heard Laura tapping on the door.

"Hey," her muffled voice said, "what ever happened to 'ladies first?'" He chuckled.

Half an hour later a blast of fresh air entered the room as Richard opened the door to their motel room. The two of them walked to the truck. He got behind the wheel. "I suppose the truck hasn't been reported stolen," he said, looking at Laura as she got in and closed the door.

"Hope not," she said. "I doubt it."

"Me too." Before he started the truck he pulled a yellow piece of paper from his pocket. It was a page from the yellow pages in the room; the page that had the numbers of the local TV stations. "We'll move on closer to the station before we call that guy."

"OK."

Richard drove down the service road of the freeway and turned up a side street. He drove for a dozen blocks and pulled into a dollar store parking lot. Laura stayed in the truck while he walked into the store. He returned with a bag full of stuff.

"Here," he said, handing her the bag. "Food, drink."

Laura took the bag and peered in. She extracted a cheap cell phone and handed it to Richard. "You eat that, I'll take the rest. I'm starved!"

He laughed. "Delish," he said, taking the phone. "Remember the old days, when a quarter and a pay phone was all you needed?"

"Ahh, the old days," she said. "Here." She handed him an opened can of soda.

"Thought you were keeping it all."

"I'll share."

"Very sweet of you." He took the can and set it on the dash. Then he tore at the phone wrapping. "They should provide a free saw to get these open." Finally he got the phone out, plugged in the adapter, plugged the adapter into the lighter socket, and turned on the phone. "Well, that works." He programmed the phone as they shared chips, crackers and sodas.

"We are in business," Richard said at last. "What a pain. So, Shall I call?"

He still had no idea what exactly he was going to say. "Samuel Stafford," Richard said to himself, "what to say?" He lifted the phone and read the number to the television station and punched it in the phone. After three rings a voice mail system answered. He pressed zero and an operator came on. He asked for Stafford and was placed on hold.

"This is Stafford," a deep voice said.

"Samuel Stafford?"

"Yes, how can I help you?" There was a hint of impatience in the man's voice.

"This is, ah," Richard almost gave his name. Then he thought better of that idea and tried to come up with something else. "Never mind, I mean," he paused, unable to come up with anything.

"Look, whoever you are...."

"No, just a second." Richard felt a coldness sweep up his back. He hated being rushed and he hated feeling desperate. "OK, so here it is," he said resolutely, "Schipper sent us. We are with the Project."

"Damn," the man's voice sounded startled and he spoke in a hushed tone, "why don't you send up a fucking flare!"

"Well...."

"Never mind. It's about time you called. Look, I'll meet you in three hours." He gave Richard an address and hung up.

Richard repeated the address over and over in his mind until he could fish a pen from his pocket and write it down on the page from the phone book.

"So?" Laura looked at him questioningly.

"So," Richard repeated, pulling the truck door closed. "We are going to meet him. I guess we are."

"Where?"

"Here," Richard handed her the paper with the address.

"Know where this is?"

"Nope." He took a breath. "But we have three hours to find it." He opened the truck door again. "I suppose I better get a map."

The address wasn't very far from where Richard and Laura were, they found out, after looking over the map Richard bought. "We have some time to kill," Laura said.

"Suppose so." He looked at her. He could not get used to her new hair color. It was red. With the make up she looked very different. But still beautiful. "I can't get used to your hair."

"What about you?" She reached up to run her hands through his hair, now dyed a very deep black.

"I don't think this does much to make us unrecognizable, anyway."

"Me either. It was probably silly."

"Oh well, it's a change."

"You still look beautiful."

"You are nuts," she said, whacking him gently on the arm with her fist. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"I think it might be a good idea to check out this meeting place before this guy gets there. And even watch him show up."

"That's very clever of you," Richard said. "Do you think we'll recognize him?"

"Yeah, how are we supposed to know?" Laura sat back against the truck door and put her left knee in the seat. She looked at Richard, puzzled.

"I don't know," he said, "that was pretty stupid, wasn't it?" He grinned at her.

"From what you told me he didn't give you any time."

"That's right. He didn't. But how will we know him?"

"Guess we'll figure it out when we get there." She stared out the window. "Or maybe he was counting on seeing us first."

Neither of them liked what that could mean.

Richard shrugged and put the truck in gear. He made three turns and was on the street where they were to meet Stafford. They followed the numbers on the buildings until they had located the address. It was a bar. Richard parked the truck across the street and they sat.

After a while, Laura spoke. "Richard."

"Yes?"

"I want you to know," she paused, apparently searching for words, "I just hope you understand...."

"What?"

"I am sorry."

Richard looked at her. "I love you," he said and moved towards her. She held up a hand to stop him.

"No, just a minute," she said. She held her chin out and took a couple deep breaths. "Whatever happens," she said, looking him in the eyes with some intensity, "whatever goes on after today, always know that I love you."

Richard looked deep into her eyes but could not decipher the meaning behind her words. "I don't like the way you say that."

"I don't mean to, I mean," she paused, then nodded her head, "look, there."

Richard turned and his eyes followed her gaze. A man was walking down the sidewalk wearing a blue jacket with a logo on the back: KKTU TV. "You don't think?"

"Well, could be."

"And he said I should send up a flare."

"It's not three hours."

"Maybe it was his intention to watch us arrive." Richard looked back at Laura. "This is all too cloak and dagger for me. I'm a simple guy, an office manager, what in the hell am I doing here?" He felt something gripping his stomach.

"We should go in." Laura's gaze was solid and serious.

"OK, maybe so." He opened the door of the truck, cringing from the loud clanging it made. He felt like he should tip-toe across the street. He felt oddly disconnected like his mind was floating above his body and looking down. He didn't like the sensation and wondered why it had come upon him now. Maybe it was what Laura had said. Or the way she had said it. He'd gotten past being shot at and the burning store. He'd even somehow come to grips with the power of the forces trying to stop them. He shook his head and stood beside the truck. Laura came around the front of the truck and took his arm. Over her shoulder was a black bag which held the device Schipper had given them. They walked into the bar arm in arm.

They didn't look directly at the man in the blue jacket nor did they approach him. Instead they took a table in the back corner of the room. After a while a waitress approached.

"How can I help you?" The waitress was young, maybe twenty-five, but looked as if she'd lived a difficult life. Her hair was bleached except for the roots which were dark. She wore a tight skirt and a t-shirt, the bottom half of which had been torn off. Her tan was too dark, obvious even in the dark bar, and looked unnatural.

"I'll have a beer," Richard said, "whatever is on tap."

"I'm not sure," Laura said. She opened her mouth to say something else but was interrupted.

"Let me suggest," a man's voice behind her spoke, "the margaritas. They are very good here." The voice was deep but not loud. "A friend of mine, Craig Schipper, has said they are the best."

Richard and Laura turned to see the man in the blue jacket standing nearby. He was tall, very tall, at least six foot six. He was also large, muscular, with arms the size of hams covered with dark red hair.

His face was wide and flat with a slit of a mouth and a wide nose. His eyes were dark and brooding. Dark red hair fell onto his brow, long and curly.

"Margaritas, huh?" Laura looked from the tall man to the waitress. "Sure, that will be fine."

The waitress just nodded and returned to the bar.

"I know a Schipper," Richard said nonchalantly.

"Indeed," the man said in a matter of fact tone. He took a chair at their table and leaned forward.

"Where have you been?"

"Right," Richard said, leaning back, "and who are you?"

"We don't have time to play stupid games," the man said.

"Listen," Richard blurted, a little too loudly. He lowered his voice. "Listen, I don't play games. And unless you can tell me who you are and what you want you may return to your table." Richard's words were stronger than he felt inside. This man was intimidating. But Richard was angry. People seemed to be making assumptions and tried to push him around and he'd had about all he would take.

"Fine," the man said, holding his hands up, "fine. But perhaps we should not speak so loudly."

"Right," Richard said, "you told me to be discreet and you walk in here with that jacket on."

"I often meet contacts in here," the big man said, "they know me and they won't talk. I am Samuel Stafford." He gave his name as an afterthought.

Richard felt slightly foolish on insisting the man give his name. "Fine, Stafford, so what now?"

"Now?" Stafford looked from Richard to Laura and smiled, "now, we talk about the weather and the Houston Texans." He leaned forward and put a business card on the table, careful to make sure no one saw him do it. His eyes darted down to the card and back to Richard.

Suddenly Richard felt like a schoolboy playing spy adventures. He wanted to say everything was just too silly and simply pick up the card and slip it into his pocket. But then an image of the burning store popped into his memory, along with the sounds of bullets hitting that car. He scooted his chair up to the table and the other two followed suit. First he placed his elbows on the table with his chin on his hands, then in a few more movements he managed to move the card from the table to his hip pocket.

The waitress brought the drinks, a beer for Richard, a margarita in a salt-rimmed glass for Laura and a mug of dark ale for Stafford. For half an hour they talked of trivial and unimportant things and then Stafford stood. He extended his hand to Richard.

Richard shook the man's hand. "This has been interesting," he muttered, not sure what else to say.

"You've been very helpful," Stafford said. He turned to Laura and shook her hand. "Thank you both. I must get back to the station. Have a nice day." He turned and was out the door so fast that Richard stood wondering how the man could move so fast without appearing to rush.

"Well," Richard turned to Laura, "was the drink good?"

Laura looked at him quizzically. "Oh, it was ok," she said at last.

"Shall we go?" Richard stood.

"We shall." Laura stood. Richard left several bills on the table to cover the drinks and tip. It occurred to him then that once they had been served the bar tender and the waitress had made themselves scarce. He left the bar and Laura followed.

Neither spoke as they got in the truck. Richard pulled away from the curb and drove down the street, made a turn, drove three blocks and made another turn onto a residential street. He pulled up to the curb in front of a red brick house.

"Who lives here?"

"Funny," Richard said flatly, placing the truck in park. He pulled the card from his pocket. "This is all just too weird."

"It is, isn't it?" Laura grinned, "but it's almost fun, isn't it?"

"Almost," he muttered, "not quite." He looked at the card. It was the big man's business card. He turned it over. There was a phone number. "Looks like we're playing cat and mouse," he said.

"Yeah," Laura said, taking the card. She looked at both sides and handed it back.

Richard picked up the cell phone from the seat and called the number. He frowned when he heard the message on the phone. It was a canned message.

"2154 CARGHILL, 2100 HOURS. DO NOT BE LATE. DO NOT APPROACH THE ADDRESS BEFORE DARK UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES. BE PREPARED TO STAY FOR AN EXTENDED PERIOD."

Richard repeated the address and the time to himself until he could write it down on the card.

"This is getting ridiculous."

"What?"

"It was a machine. Gave an address, a time, and said don't be late or early. Strange. Yeah, like all of this isn't strange?"

"That's all?"

"No," he turned to her, "it said 'be prepared to stay for an extended period.' What the hell does that mean?"

"Oh good, a sleep over," Laura said flatly.

"You know," Richard said, looking straight ahead with his hands at ten and two on the steering wheel, "I would just like to turn this truck around and drive right back to Dallas and crawl right back into my life."

"I know," Laura purred, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Not your fault. You are just as much a victim or whatever you call it as I am." He took a deep breath, "I suppose we have to go through with this now. But I'll be honest. I'm going through the motions and it's almost like I'm watching myself from above. Nothing is real. And I can't get a handle on this 'save the world' shit." He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to meet Laura's gaze.

"It's real, Richard," Laura said. Her gaze had a kind of hardness to it that made Richard blink. "It's real, they, they are real, as real as you and I and something has to be done. I had to do something. I mean, we have to do something."

He looked at her for a long moment. "I know," he said at last, "I know we do." He looked at his watch. "We have some time. What do you want to do?"

Laura leaned back and looked up at the inside of the truck. "I know. Let's do something normal. Something ordinary. Life may never be normal or ordinary again, you know. Not for us. Not for any human on this planet."

"Like what?"

"I know," she said suddenly, "Let's go see a movie."

"What?"

"Yeah, a movie." She bounced in her seat like a teenager, "some silly love story kind of movie. Let's do that before the world changes forever."

Richard could not grasp the concept of the world changing but he could think of no reason to protest so he pulled out into the street and started driving and looking for a movie theater. He remembered passing a shopping mall so he re-traced his route. Sure enough he found the mall and drove around it to discover a cinema. He parked and they got out and walked towards the theater. Neither had spoken. He had the idea that Laura had something on her mind so he let her alone.

After reviewing the posters and checking movie times they picked a film neither knew anything about. Richard bought the tickets.

"Popcorn?"

"Yes," Laura said, an odd look on her face, "that would be nice. Lots of butter. And sodas. And," she paused, finger on her chin, "and a pickle."

"A what?"

"You know, a pickle. Pickle. Didn't you eat pickles at the theater when you were a kid?"

"Sure," Richard said, looking at her and shaking his head, "it'll make you sick."

"Nah," she said, "anyway, I don't care."

"All right," he said, lifting his eyebrows, "whatever." He went to the counter and bought the popcorn, sodas and a cellophane-encased pickle. Laura stood looking at posters. Carrying the food in a cardboard tray he walked up to her and said, "ready?"

She jumped and turned to him. Her eyes were moist.

"Must be a damn sad movie, if you are crying before it starts."

"Oh, crap," she said, wiping her eyes, "damned allergies." She sniffed and smiled at him. Then she looked at the tray and frowned. "Awe, look at that." She plucked the pickle from the tray. It was sealed in plastic suspended in pickle juice. "That's terrible." She held it up.

"What?"

"It's in a package!"

"Of course."

"No, no, remember? When we were kids they pulled them out of a huge jar. Now look. So...," she sighed, "impersonal."

"That's silly."

"It's not silly. It is sentimental. You old fuddy duddy." She shrugged and walked towards a trash can. Carefully she held the package over the can and tore the plastic, then squeezed the juice into the can. Then she walked to the concession counter and pulled a hand full of napkins from a dispenser.

"We can go now," she smiled.

There was no joy in the smile. It just hung on her face, out of place. He nodded and led the way along a corridor and into the theater.

The film was nothing special, a simple love story, a teen-oriented movie that was boring to Richard. Laura seemed to enjoy it, though. She clung to him as if he were her first date. When the film ended and they were walking out Laura Pulled at Richard's arm and looked up into his eyes. "Richard?"

"Yes?"

"I do love you."

"I know, sweetheart."

"Don't forget, ok?"

"Forget?" It was an odd thing to say, he thought. "I'll never forget."

"Good." She squeezed his arm and followed him out of the theater.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Richard studied the map of Houston and eventually figured out where the place he was supposed to go should be. He was extremely apprehensive about the whole thing and became more so when he turned onto the street and found that the location was an old warehouse among other old warehouses. It looked like the kind of place for drug deals and gang wars. When they pulled into the parking lot there were only two other vehicles in sight. One was a dark sedan that looked like an unmarked police car. The other was a late model SUV. Richard looked across at Laura. In the dim glow of the instrument panel he could barely make out her features.

"This is spooky."

"It is."

He sat for a moment, then killed the engine. "I suppose this is it."

"Yeah."

At least five minutes more passed. They just sat there quietly. Richard finally got his resolve and pushed the door open. The clanking of the old door echoed between the buildings and Richard cursed under his breath. Neither he nor Laura closed the doors all the way because they didn't want to make the noise such actions would make. They met at the front of the truck and walked up the sidewalk together. Richard had the weird notion that she was walking him to the gallows. Just before he pulled the door open, Laura grabbed his arm.

"I love you, Richard." She then kissed him passionately on the mouth. Before Richard could respond she pulled the door open.

As they stepped through the door they discovered an abandoned office complex. There were no furnishings. The floor was littered with loose papers and trash, as well as mouse droppings. The walls were tattered and had wires hanging out of them at regular intervals, the ends of phone lines that were once connected to phones or computers. Many of the tiles in the ceiling were gone. The air smelled of mildew and rot. The room wasn't lighted except for a glow coming through a door in the far wall.

"Nice place."

"Isn't it." Laura stepped carefully, trying to avoid things on the floor she didn't want to step on.

"That way, I guess," Richard said, nodding towards the lighted doorway. "They could have sent a greeter or something." As he spoke they heard a shuffling. A figure was suddenly silhouetted in the doorway.

"Cleveland," a familiar voice said. The voice reverberated in the empty room. "You sure took your time."

"Schipper," Richard exclaimed, "we thought you were...."

"Not yet. Come this way."

The two followed Schipper down a hallway and through another door. What they found when they entered the room behind Schipper was the opposite of the first room they'd entered in the building. They stood in a modern, plush office with an expensive set of furnishings, an oak desk, a large bookshelf on one wall and a cabinet on the other which held a wet bar. Sitting behind the desk was a man in his mid-fifties, Richard estimated, balding, gray headed. He was wearing dress slacks, a white shirt and tie. He looked like a doctor or lawyer. He stood when they entered the room and extended his hand.

"Hello," the man said, "I'm Doctor Milton Fox." He shook Richard's hand, smiling warmly. "I'm glad you came." The greeting seemed totally incongruous.

Richard shook the man's hand and made an attempt at returning his smile. He thought to himself that he had little choice in being there. He said nothing.

The doctor then shook Laura's hand and a look was exchanged that puzzled Richard. He shrugged it off as his growing paranoia. Laura only said, "doctor," and nodded.

"Sit, please," the doctor said. "Craig, why don't you get us all a drink? Or some coffee?" He directed his gaze to Richard and Laura.

"No, no thank you," Richard said, "really, let's get on with whatever." This extreme politeness was unnerving him.

"Me either, I mean, no thanks, I don't want anything," Laura muttered.

"Fine, then." The doctor stood, a more serious look on his face. "I have been briefed about your ordeal, Mr. Cleveland, by Craig here." He walked around his desk and settled onto the corner of it. "I'm sorry that you've had these things happen to you. With the Grays, I mean. Of course, that is why you are here, isn't it? We have to do something to stop this invasion." He stood. His voice took on a hard tone. "We have to stop the bastards." He wasn't talking to Richard or Laura now, he was simply expressing himself. "The little sons of bitches...." Suddenly he looked at Richard. "I'm sorry," he said, "let's get started." He walked back around his desk and sat down. He pulled two folders from a drawer and placed them in front of Richard and Laura.

"Before we do get started, I apologize for the late hour, and for the clandestine nature of our activities. I'm sure you understand."

"I think so." Richard nodded.

"I also want to let you know that you will be here for quite a while."

"Define 'quite a while,'" Richard said.

"Several days."

"Days?" Richard stood up. "Days? I don't know...."

"It is necessary, Mr. Cleveland," the man said. The hard tone returned to his voice. "I'm afraid the tests will take some time."

"Tests?"

"Tests. Yes, a series of exams, psychological profiles, so forth."

Richard sat uneasily on the edge of his chair. "Just exactly what is all this about?"

The doctor tossed a glance over at Schipper. "Well," he began, selecting his words, "Mr. Cleveland, you have suffered a terrible ordeal. You and your friend, here, of course. What makes your case so unique is that there is so much corroborating evidence, from so many different sources. We might be able to finally expose," he paused, "right," he put the tips of his fingers together, "...like I say, expose their activities. But before we can go public we have to cover all the bases."

"Right," Schipper continued, "you realize you will be picked apart by the media. If we don't go in prepared, exams, x-rays, psych profiles, it might all blow up in our faces." He walked up to Fox's desk and leaned against it, looking from Richard to Laura. "Stafford is prepared, once things are ready, to set up a live network feed. We'll throw everything we have at them and hope for the best."

"Sounds a bit thin," Richard said. He stood and paced the room. "But then, what choice do I have, huh? I can go back to Dallas and have the little bastards grab me again. Or live in fear and lug that stupid box around. Or just run. But they would find me, wouldn't they?"

"Yes, they would," Schipper said matter-of-factly.

"So?" Richard tossed his hands up, "let's get with it."

"Fine," the doctor said. He was all business now. "To begin, we have to know your life history. Detailed and specific. The questions in this folder are personal and may be embarrassing. The information itself will not be disclosed but I need it to begin my evaluation."

"I take it you are a shrink."

"Something like that." He pushed the folders towards them. "If you will take them, you can begin now. We have quarters here for you, and Ms. Bright. Craig will show you the way. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Well, ok," Richard said, picking up a folder. Laura stood and picked up the other one.

"This way," Schipper said. He led them through a door opposite the one they had entered. Richard was amazed at the difference. The floors were carpeted with expensive, plush carpeting. The walls were papered with expensive covering. The ceiling of drop-in tile held elaborate light fixtures.

"This is some place, Schipper," Richard exclaimed.

"Yes, well, the doctor likes it." He said nothing else. In a few moments he rounded a corner and opened a door. "This will be for you, Cleveland," he said, "the next door down, Ms. Bright, you can stay there."

The three of them stepped into what looked like a well-furnished, expensive hotel room. The only thing missing was a picture window. And a television.

"Nice," Laura said.

"It is," Richard grumbled, "for a prison." He had a feeling that he couldn't put a finger on, a feeling he didn't like. This set up was too... something. Too elaborate, for sure. Too permanent. "I don't get this," Richard said, "what the hell is this place for? I mean, it's obviously permanent and decorated rather elaborately. A lot of dough has been spent here. Not just for me. What is it all about?"

"OK, Cleveland, I'll tell you." Schipper sat on the edge of a desk that stood against one wall. "You remember stories of the old underground railway, the people who snuck slaves from the south to the north?"

"Yeah," Richard said. He was walking around the room absently, looking at the furnishings.

"Well, this is part of something like that. People who have been abducted, who want to escape. We bring them here, remove their implants, do psych work on them, help them avoid being abducted."

"Psych work?" Richard picked up on the phrase. It sounded ominous.

"Nothing drastic, you know, like deprogramming."

Richard still didn't like the way that sounded but he chose not to pursue it anymore. "Fine," he said. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"The building has a security system. If you go out you will set it off," Schipper said. "It would be advisable that you stay here. All areas of this building, except the hallway outside, have activated sensors, motion sensors, cameras. That hallway, of course, has them too, but they do not activate the alarm. There's a break room down the hall at the end with a coffee pot and some other things."

"Thought of everything, did you?" Richard understood the first part of Schipper's statement to be a warning not to leave.

"We try," Schipper said dryly. "Tomorrow." He disappeared out the door and down the hall.

For the first time Richard realized Laura had been very quiet. He looked at her now. She stood in the middle of the room, her face blank. She looked sullen. "What's up, Laura?"

For a time she didn't seem to hear. Then she looked up. "Richard," she said, "I, uh, just tired I think." She looked at him. "I'm sorry you got into this."

"What is this," Richard said, walking to her. "Why do you keep apologizing?"

"I..." she moaned, "I just..."

"Shshshsh," Richard quieted her. He embraced her and she melted against him. Then she stiffened and pushed away.

"I better go get some rest."

"You think so?"

"I think so." She tapped his lips with hers and fled down the hall leaving Richard looking after her confused. He stood there staring at the open door until his toes started to tingle because he hadn't moved. He took a look at the folder Fox had given him but couldn't think clearly enough to answer any of the questions. He did note that they were very personal, asking about his childhood, his sex life, his family, education, and a host of other things. After thumbing through the pages he closed the folder, undressed and climbed into the bed. It was soft and comfortable. Not the average hotel bed at all. He was asleep in minutes.

Chapter Twenty-Five

For the first few seconds after Richard woke he wasn't sure where he was. Then as the realization hit him it brought with it a strange nagging feeling in his stomach. Something wasn't right. He didn't know what, but something. He understood everything he had been told. He certainly wanted to expose the Grays and maybe keep them from doing what they had been doing. But would it work? If he helped tip their hand might they not just take control? Or just thumb their noses at humanity and keep on doing what they do?

And then there was the odd story Laura had told him, about half-breed aliens and him being abducted for, what, to make him into Laura's lover or something? That sounded too far out. He smirked. Far out, he thought. Right. Like his being where he was at the moment wasn't something out of the Twilight Zone.

It was all too confusing. He rose and stumbled into the bathroom. The bathroom was just as elaborate as the rest of the apartment. There were even travel size toiletries in a nice basket beside the lavatory. He reached for a cellophane-wrapped toothbrush and had that disconnected feeling again. He shook it off and brushed his teeth. After washing his face he took up a plush towel from a brass towel rack and walked into the other room. He put on his clothes and went down the hall to where Laura was supposed to have stayed. He knocked on the door, first lightly and then forcefully. When there was no answer he opened the door and stepped inside. The bed was made and the room was tidy. Laura was not there. He went further down the hall to where Schipper had said there was a break room. A fresh pot of coffee was made but there was no one there. Richard took a Styrofoam cup from a stack and poured himself a cup. As he was adding cream and sugar he heard a banging and turned to see an older woman, heavy set with gray hair in a tight bun on her head, wearing some kind of uniform with a logo he didn't recognize. She was pushing a large wheeled trash can.

"Oh, hello sir," she said.

"Hi." Richard watched as she checked a couple trash cans in the room, emptied one, and then went up the hallway.

Richard's first thought was to go looking for Laura. He wanted to have a look around the place, too. He walked toward the door and was startled by the sudden appearance of Schipper.

"Cleveland, you're up."

"Obviously," Richard said laconically.

"Have you completed the questions?"

"Well now," Richard drawled, "I rather suspect you know the answer to that question." He looked into Schipper's face and discovered he had guessed correctly. "Where is Laura?"

"She's with the doctor," the investigator said. "She's fine. But we need those questions answered so we can proceed."

"What are you up to, Schipper?" Richard tossed the question out offhanded but a look that flashed across Schipper's face worried him. The look was there and gone, so fast Richard wondered if it had been there at all. Finally he realized he had seen worry. Or fear. Not the fear that something is after you. Fear that you have been found out.

"You know damned well, Cleveland," Schipper huffed. He walked towards the door again after filling a mug with coffee. "Not the approach I would use," he mumbled, "I think we should just raise hell, loud and long, until somebody believed us. But people are so stupid, they will never believe." He stopped at the door and turned back to face Richard. "What we are doing may not be my idea, and I am not sure I like it done this way, but it's the only way, I think, the only way."

Richard looked at the empty doorway after Schipper had gone. That uneasy feeling surged up inside him again. He'd had enough. He sat the cup of coffee on a table and headed up the hall towards the doctor's office. As he blasted through the door he found the room to be quite full. Fox was behind his desk, Schipper leaned against a wall, Laura sat in a chair and there were three other people in the room. One of them was Samuel Stafford. The other two he did not know. When he came to a halt in the middle of the room another person burst in from the other door.

Before Richard could say anything the person who came into the room after him turned to Fox. "I tried," the man said breathlessly, "to tell you. He just came up the hallway too fast. I buzzed your phone but you didn't answer."

"It's my fault," Schipper said, "I forgot to secure the door."

"Forgot?" Fox looked at Schipper with a quizzical expression. "You? Forgot?"

Schipper ignored the remark. Fox turned his gaze to Richard. "This might be for the better," he said. "Maybe it is for the better." He settled back in his chair. "Have a seat, Mr. Cleveland."

"But if he knows we'll be right back to square one," Stafford said.

"Maybe," Fox cooed. He was obviously the one in charge. He had an air of authority about him and he was the one behind the large, oak desk. "But then," he continued, "we may already be there. There were those complications, anyway, weren't there?"

Before anyone could answer Richard heard a familiar voice coming from somewhere beyond the door that led to the outside. But he couldn't place it. "No, I don't give a damn," the voice was saying, "I have to get this stuff to Fox." The door burst open and Benjamin Nash stood in the doorway looking around at the faces in the room.

"Damn," Schipper exclaimed.

"Well, Ben, you have picked an inopportune time to show up." Fox apparently could not be perturbed. His voice was calm and smooth. There was only the slightest hint of annoyance.

Richard exploded. "What the hell is going on?"

Laura's face was ashen. "I'm sorry, Richard," was all she was able to say. She pushed her knuckles against her mouth with such force Richard thought she might make them bleed.

"You keep saying that. Why? What for?" He looked up. "Somebody sure as hell better start talking or I'm out that door."

"That wouldn't be a smart idea," Schipper said.

"Yeah, well, I never said I was very smart," Richard said, stepping towards the outer door. Schipper stepped in his way.

Tension filled the room. Richard wanted to scream and stomp and hit things and people. He was reaching the end of his ability to control himself. Even Laura was keeping things from him. He struggled to control his emotions. He was losing the battle.

"You are, of course," Fox began, standing to his feet, "entitled to an explanation, at least. Whatever elements that might have remained in your case that we could salvage have most likely gone out the window." He walked around his desk and settled onto a corner of it. "And we have," he paused, "other avenues available to us now." His look and his tone took on that of a kind grandfather. "Chris, Noel, I think we're finished for the time being," he said, nodding to the two people Richard hadn't recognized. The one who had tried to announce his coming into the office was long gone. "Richard. May I call you Richard?" Fox directed his gaze back at Richard. Richard shrugged. This man was so patronizing Richard had the urge to smack him in the face. "Good. Now then. We will let you in. But you must understand that what you will hear may be hard to believe. And accept. And I'm quite sure you won't like it." Fox paused for his words to settle. "Do you want me to proceed?"

"You're damned right I do," Richard barked. He walked towards the cabinet with the wet bar and took up a defensive stance against it. "Something smells and I'm beginning to feel like a guinea pig." He folded his arms over his chest. "I'm positive I won't like what you say. But you sure as hell better tell

me.” His gaze caught Laura’s eyes. There were clouds behind them. He felt a pain deep in his stomach, a twisting pain.

“It’s really very simple. Well, not that simple, but not so complicated,” Fox began. The rest of the people in the room settled down to listen. “First of all, we are all a part of an organization that has been around for about ten years now.”

“Laura?” He shot a look at his friend.

“No, not Laura, though she has been a major part of this operation. I think you have heard our organization referred to as The Project.”

“I have heard.”

“Perhaps to keep things straight in your mind you can call us that. But the title would not be entirely accurate. Those who actually call themselves The Project are only a division of the organization. Even I am not sure of the size of our organization. It is very compartmentalized. I am commander of the south-central area.”

“Commander? That sounds military.”

“Well, in a way. We are, how shall I say it, a covert United Nations? That is rather crude, but it will suffice. The organization is a combined public and private effort. Though our government, the U. S., and most other major governments are unaware of our existence. At least, we believe they are. Or were. Our goal is to find out what the aliens are up to and then find ways to stop them.”

“Not to expose them?” Richard queried.

“It’s a naïve notion, Richard, to think that the public can be, what’s the word, ‘informed?’” Fox smiled softly, “I don’t want to say people are stupid, but to say so would be accurate. People believe what they want to believe. And there is certainly enough evidence now to prove the existence of the aliens. Look at the books, magazine articles, television interviews. Like the book you read, Richard, by Howard Stansfall. No, sadly, for all he is trying to do, I’m afraid Stansfall will never get anywhere. He is sincere, though, and we work with him. But he is so vocal, so well known, he only serves in a very limited way.” Fox paused, turned, and went back around his desk. “But I digress.” He settled into his plush executive chair. “We are a large organization, Richard, international. As I said. But we did not form overnight, and we have not been a united front more than about a year. Evading the aliens is extremely difficult.”

“Then how did you manage it?”

“We owe our existence to the aliens themselves.”

“How’s that?” Richard was interested in spite of himself.

"Well, not them directly, of course. But on the defection, if that is the word, of some of their hybrids."

"What?"

"Many of us have known for a long time, some of us more than ten, twenty years, or more, about what the aliens were doing. Not why, understand, but what. They have not been capturing humans and performing experiments out of curiosity. No, they have been developing a hybrid race, part human and part alien. For what purpose we have yet to find out. Whether it's an attempt to improve the human race, a benevolent activity, or to create a superior race in order to take over this earth, not so benevolent, we don't know. But they are not only researching our physical bodies, developing genetic hybrids and so forth. They are also intensely interested in our emotions, feelings, things that as far as we can tell they do not possess. They bring couples together, encourage mating, bonding, love, then separate them. They take women and impregnate them, then later remove the fetus. Later still they introduce the mother to the child in a controlled setting." He paused, leaned forward, and said, "We know what they are doing, but not why!" There was frustration in his voice.

Richard sat silently. Everything Laura had told him about her companion, as she'd called him, Charlie, flooded into his memory. Charlie, he thought, a screwy name for an alien. Fox continued.

"About five years ago several of these hybrids managed to elude their creators, made contact with myself and a few others who were working in the field of abductions, and provided us with technology that allowed us to keep the aliens at bay. Since that time quite a few more hybrids have joined us. It would seem that these beings have keen emotions and find their creators, the aliens, as sterile, cold, even foreboding. They are the greatest victims in this hideous nightmare. So we formed an alliance. But while they have access to the technology, they have no more idea what the aliens are trying to accomplish than we do. It is very puzzling. Quite." Fox grew quiet.

"None of us know," Schipper said suddenly. "They use us, they manipulate our feelings and give us mates and take them from us with no reason."

Richard blinked. He looked at Schipper. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," Schipper said, "that I am one of those, what Fox here is calling a hybrid. I find the word distasteful, though."

Schipper's words were too incredible for Richard to believe. "Yeah, right. And I'm from Mars."

"You are not from Mars," Fox said calmly, "but Craig is as he says." The man lifted an eyebrow. "From what we've learned his roots, at least partially, go back to a planet in the Zeta Reticuli system."

"Horse shit," Richard blurted. "This is absurd."

"Of course, Cleveland," Schipper said, "but it is true." He walked up to Richard and stood in front of him. Then he leaned forward until his face was only inches from Richard's.

Richard at first was startled and uneasy about Schipper being so close. Then he looked into Schipper's eyes and in an instant let out a yelp. What Richard saw deep in Schipper's eyes was entirely unexplainable. But more than what he saw, Richard was overwhelmed by a sound, a noise of sorts, inside his head. He felt as if ice water had been poured down his back. He heard Schipper's voice inside his head. "It is true," the voice said. With some force Richard shoved Schipper backwards and spun, as if looking for an exit. Then he took control of himself and looked at Schipper. "God!" he yelled, "what are you?"

Every muscle in Richard's body tensed. He shook and his face was almost purple. Nothing brought home the reality of what Fox was saying like that look into Schipper's eyes. Schipper was not human. Filled with indecision and fear, Richard stood half-crouched looking at the people in the room. Fox's gaze was steady. The others looked on expectantly. Except Laura. She was looking at her feet and her cheeks were streaked with tears. She was sobbing. As the tension drained from Richard's body he felt weak. He sank into a chair.

"I don't agree with Craig's methods, but you get the point." Fox leaned back in his chair, stretched, and then leaned forward again.

"What did you do?" Richard looked at Schipper, then at Fox, "what did he do?"

"Grays are telepathic. Hybrids, like Craig, are marginally so."

Richard felt violated. "You read my mind?" He looked at Schipper with loathing.

"No," Schipper said, "I am not able to do that. I am only able to sense base emotions, feelings, not thoughts. I am also able to project feelings. And words. But it is not easy and I have to be close."

Richard stood. "You stay the hell out of my head!"

"I assure you Craig will not be in your head." Fox's voice was unnaturally smooth. His words had a calming effect unlike anyone else Richard had ever known. "Let me continue, if you will," he motioned for Richard to sit. "It's like this. We know precisely what the aliens are doing. We have volumes of information on their activities. Far, far more than has come to light in the public. We are still no closer to understanding why, however. It is obvious to all that the aliens treat humans much as scientists treat laboratory rats. But with even less concern and more disdain. We can never truly get anywhere until we know why they are doing what they are doing."

We have tried. Through the hybrids we have obtained a host of alien technology. We have developed means to shield our facilities from them, keeping them from simply using their

interdimensional and for lack of a better word stealth technology to take us and our equipment. We have even developed our own implants which work in the same way as theirs does, except it serves as a shield instead of a beacon.”

“I don’t understand,” Richard muttered. “I don’t get it. If you have all this, why can’t you do something?”

“Because,” Fox said, “our resources are extremely limited. We can protect ourselves, to some extent, but we can’t protect the world. If we act before we understand their agenda we risk losing everything and leaving the earth at their mercy.” He stood, moved around his desk and settled onto the corner of it like a professor would in a classroom. Richard got the feeling that this man enjoyed what he was involved in.

“It’s not money we lack. Not at all. But it’s the ability to counteract anything the aliens might do. It’s technology. The hybrids are given little access to the central workings of the ships. And it’s knowledge. But if we can discover their purpose maybe we can carry out tactical activities to thwart their plans. We are a very tiny David against a giant the likes of which we can’t fully comprehend. And we have only a handful of stones. We must use them wisely.”

“This is all fantastic,” Richard said, shaking his head. “It is intriguing. I cannot comprehend everything you say.” Richard stood and paced.

Through the long, rambling speech Richard grew increasingly uneasy at something Fox had said at the very first. He’d called the public stupid and said exposure would never work. The question worked its way through Richard’s brain as Fox continued to ramble that the entire story he’d been fed from Nash and Schipper and the others had been a lie. They did not need Craig’s case to go public because they were not going public. The thought gnawed at him until he could no longer contain himself. He blurted, “So where in the hell do I fit into this?”

“It is what may be in your head, Richard, that we need. Information. Vital information.”

“Information?”

“That’s right.”

“Explain.”

“Your abduction was not a random event.”

“What do you mean?” Richard wondered if they were going to corroborate what Laura had told him.

“Me, Richard, it was because of me!” Laura leaped to her feet. “They were going to give you to me!” She burst into tears.

"You said that," Richard returned, looking at her. "And I told you, how could you know? It makes no sense."

"I know!" She sat shaking as if with a chill.

"Laura is a long-term abductee," Fox continued. "Lifetime abductee. She's not a hybrid but we believe that her birth may have been manipulated. DNA tests have shown that the man she believed to be her natural father wasn't. And there was no promiscuity by her mother."

"She didn't tell me that," Richard said. He turned to Laura, "you didn't tell me that."

"I didn't think you would believe me."

Richard frowned. He knew he probably wouldn't have. But he might have. And she should have told him, he thought.

"At an early age she was paired with a hybrid. An ordinary activity."

"Charlie," Richard said flatly.

"Ah, yes, Charlie," Fox said. "This is where everything becomes convoluted."

"go on," Richard said, directing his words to Fox but keeping his gaze on Laura. "As if anything could be more convoluted than it already is," he said to himself.

"Laura discovered what, um, Charlie had done, that you had been abducted. She discussed this with her therapist. That's how we got wind of it. We contacted her and convinced her to work with us."

"Matchett is part of your organization?"

"Hardly, the putz," Schipper blurted.

Fox shot Schipper a stern look. "No, Richard, he is only a little man fascinated with the stranger things in life. No, we found out because like most therapists' offices we have his under surveillance."

"You have offices bugged?"

"We are in a war," Fox said, with consternation, "we do what we must do."

"Richard," Laura said, "I would give anything to keep what has been happening to me from happening to other people. It's horrible. I'm a puppet, a thing, an experiment. All my life. I hate the bastards. They have used me. It is horrible."

"You see, Richard, the aliens can manipulate a human mind like we can a computer hard drive. They can read thoughts, change thoughts, selectively create or block memories. We have developed some of that technology too. Or more accurately, captured it. But I get ahead of myself." He paused, slipping back around his desk and sitting on the edge of his chair.

Richard thought to himself that Fox earned his name and was the smoothest talker he'd ever encountered. "What's in my head?"

"Whatever is in your mind beyond that, what did you call it, flash of light? The thing you can't remember in hypnosis. The part of the abduction experience you can't recall."

"That is right," Richard walked around listlessly. He would have stared out a window had there been one. He so wanted one. He felt claustrophobic. Instead he walked to a wall and focused on a painting hanging there. It was a naturalist work depicting a scene of serenity and peace.

"We have had a few others who have had that block but the minute they chose to cooperate with us and submit to the examination something switched their brain off. We could never get into it." Fox waived his hand in front of his face. "But we're getting ahead." He seemed perturbed that he could not keep things flowing as he wanted them to.

"Laura agreed to help us get you to where we could find out what you knew. Charlie only managed to get you included in a list of victims, sorry, my term, list of subjects the aliens are picking up and implanting with information. This is not their normal abduction program. His plan was to get you on the ship and, who knows, make you love Laura or some such. But it didn't work. You were picked up, for sure, and the information was implanted. That went according to the aliens' plans. He was not able to get to you, though. We have learned that another ship picked you up, not the one Charlie was on. It would seem that hybrids," Fox paused and nodded at Schipper, "Sorry Craig," he turned back to Richard, "hybrids are not endowed with the brilliant minds that the aliens appear to have. They are smart but are subject to the same foibles any human would be subject to."

Fox answered the question in Richard's eyes. "Love, Mr. Cleveland. Love." Fox stood. He paced, almost nervously. "When Charlie discovered what happened he escaped from the aliens using his own devices. He took it upon himself to split you and your wife up and maneuver you and Laura together."

The room grew quiet. "I don't know," Richard began, "I really don't. I mean, no Hollywood script writer could come up with such a bizarre story." He took a breath. "Let me get this straight. My friend, Laura here," he motioned towards her as she sat slumped, "had this long-time lover half-breed alien freak who loved her so much he wanted to give me to her, as some kind of present. He somehow managed to get me included in some kind of end-of-the-world program the alien bastards were conducting just so he could, what, zap my mind and make me fall in love with Laura?" Richard paced. "But his plans screwed up. So he jumped ship, got Pamela a transfer and pushed Laura into my arms?" Richard stepped to Fox and looked him square on. "Is that what you are telling me?"

"Precisely," Fox cooed.

Shaking his head, Richard exploded in laughter. "If that isn't the most cockamamie thing I've ever heard. Absolutely. Stupid. What do you take me for?" His laughter had no joy in it. It was bitter, painful, the laughter of a man who has seen his own death and laughs to keep from crying.

"It is true," Fox said. "Absurd? Of course. But the truth is always more... bizarre, than fiction. Always." Fox returned to his chair. He seemed to have gotten a second wind. "Our plans had been simple. We were going to hypnotize you, get what information we could, and see how much we couldn't. Then we were going to fly you and Ms. Bright down to Houston, here, and get you into our," he paused, searching the air for the correct word, "device, and find out the rest." Fox exhaled. "But things did not go as planned. Charlie," the name was spoken with contempt, "somehow cracked our organization. The aliens were watching him, probably out of sheer curiosity, and through him got to us. Laura," he nodded at her, "did not know this part until this morning. We were forced to abandon our offices in Dallas, remove you from there in a hurry, and try to re-group."

"So, best laid plans," Richard said, "our little run through the country was not planned?"

"Hardly," Schipper barked. Fox shot him a sideways glance.

"No." Fox leaned back. "It was a contingency plan we've had in place. Charlie discovered part of it and, so to, did the aliens. The helicopter, must have been a black-ops chopper from who knows where."

"Government," Richard said flatly. "Right. I read all about those too, black ops, unmarked helicopters, and you still expect me to believe all this?" He stood again. "Our government. MY government tried to shoot me. MY government murdered an innocent boy in a store. I believe that." He slammed his fist onto Fox's desk so abruptly and with such force it caused everyone in the room to jump and knocked a paperweight over. Silence again filled the room and squeezed in upon Richard.

"Please, Richard, be seated," Fox said. "Yes, it is a branch of your government that did that. Like most everything else, we do not know much about what is going on."

"Then what the hell DO you know?" Richard crouched on the edge of his chair, ready to spring to his feet again.

"Not much," Fox said. He stood again, walked around the desk, and perched himself on the edge right in front of Richard. "In your head is the key. You are the first of these new abductees we have managed to get this far."

"This far?"

"Right. The others have been eliminated before we could get them here."

"Eliminated?"

"That is what I said."

"What made you think you could get to me," Richard said, shaken by Fox's words. "And what do you think you will find if you open my head up?"

"I'll answer your second question first." Fox took a deep breath and leaned back. "We don't open your head up, Richard. The procedure is not invasive. Be that as it is, we believe that the aliens have a definite plan, a purpose, and a timetable they are working on. In the past six months we've encountered several dozen abductees, like yourself, who have these blocks. We think they've implanted information in your head that relates to their purpose and that at some given time via some signal or cue, that information will be triggered and you will do something, go somewhere, God knows what. But if we can find out what, then maybe we have a chance."

"Like a mole."

"A what?"

"A mole," Richard said, "I can't believe you haven't heard the term. There's been movies and books about them." Richard crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not as stupid as you think I am."

Fox looked confused. Schipper spoke up. "The Russians used brainwashing techniques to plant operatives in the U.S., and at some point when they were needed they were triggered somehow to become what they were, spies and operatives."

"Yes," Nash said, "yes, exactly, like that." The red-headed doctor's exclamation signaled a change in the room.

Richard looked at Nash. "OK," he said, returning his gaze to Fox, "so why not just zap me when you had me in that clinic?"

"We have to have the device, which is here. And we did not want to set off that trigger in your head which might erase the memories or block them. Or, get you eliminated." Fox appeared to be pondering his next statement. "The clinic episode was just to rid you of the implants. We needed to get you into the clinic. We staged that accident but it went badly."

"What? You mean to say that wreck was your idea?"

"It was. But it wasn't supposed to go the way it did. We didn't anticipate the ice. Our driver lost control. He was only supposed to cause you to maybe run off the road a little."

"Run off the road a little? That guy was killed!" Richard was appalled.

"I know. It was a terrible loss." Fox's gaze remained steady. "We managed to salvage the situation, though." He took a deep breath and let it out. He was on the verge of showing some strong emotions.

Richard fidgeted in his chair. Then he stood again and paced the floor. He looked at Laura. "And you know all of this."

"I knew."

"Man, what a stupid..." he sucked in air, "idiot I've been. And a pawn! Just a damn pawn in your scheme!" His voice rose, "And Pamela, too." Lights exploded in Richard's head. "Hell, was everything a lie?" He was shouting. "It's insane. It is all insane! I just damn well don't believe it." He looked at Laura, "And you. How I must..." He didn't finish that statement. He couldn't. The pain that had started low in his stomach now surged through him, piercing his chest and setting his insides on fire. He felt foolish. He felt betrayed. He felt empty. Slowly he sank into a chair, the wind gone from him.

"Why tell me all this?" It suddenly occurred to Richard that it was not necessary for them to tell him. He now wondered why they had.

"Because, Richard, we want you to understand a few things."

"Like what a total sucker I've been?"

"No, not at all. We want you to understand why we have done what we did," he paused, "because we do care. And," now he waited longer to finish, "we want you to understand the importance of what we are doing. And what we are capable of doing."

Clearly there was a threat in that last statement. Richard looked up suddenly at Fox who held his gaze. Fox's eyes were hard, his face set. He waited until Richard understood him. Then his features softened and the kindly tone returned to his voice.

"You shouldn't blame Laura," Fox said, "remember, it was her feelings for you that got you into this in the first place. She is obviously distraught over that. None of what we've done was her idea and she protested." He paused. "Not everything was part of our plan. Certainly the abduction in your home was not planned. We almost lost you both there." Fox stood. "We had some idea that there was an alliance between the federal government and the aliens. But they have not shown their hand before now. Clearly, whatever is locked in your head is important to them. Important enough for them to take action, through the government."

Richard shook his head. He looked at Laura, who shot him a sorrowful gaze. "You used me," he said.

"I love you," Laura squeaked.

"Right," he said scornfully, but he knew she did. He just couldn't get past what he knew now.

"So what about the rest of it? Does the electronic alien repellent work? What will my future be? Can I expect to be a dupe in some galactic tug of war forever?" As he said it he realized how absurd it

sounded. "The hell with all of you. I don't give a damn." He moved towards the door that lead to the exit. Schipper stood in his way.

"Out of my way you goddamned freak," Richard barked.

Schipper's arm swung upwards as if he was going to hit Richard but he caught himself before he did.

"Mr. Cleveland," Fox said forcefully, "I know what you must be going through."

Richard whirled around and looked from one face to the other. "Bull shit you know what I'm going through! You don't have a fucking clue! What makes you think you're any better than the alien bastards?" He looked at Fox who stared back at him but gave no answer.

"There's been entirely enough of this," Schipper said. "Fox let's cut the crap. Cleveland is here and there's something in his head that we want. Let's get on with it."

"Richard looked at Schipper incredulously. "What the hell makes you think I'll go along with you now?"

The two stared each other down for a long moment. Looking closely into those alien eyes sent shivers down Richard's back but he stood his ground. He made sure, though, he was several feet from Schipper.

"You are here now, Mr. Cleveland," Fox said, "and we cannot allow you to leave. If you left it would be a simple matter for the aliens to pick you up and read your mind and our operation would be compromised. It might very well mean the end of the human race as we know it. In any case you would be taken out. You would not live another day if you went outside that door now."

"Why didn't they read Laura's mind when they took us from my house?"

"We had her switched off." That answer came from Nash.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"'Switched Off' is an oversimplification, Richard," Fox said. "Before you are examined the procedures will be explained. Suffice it to say that we have ways of turning off memories, just as the aliens do. It is their technology we use. At that point in time Laura did not remember. Everything was locked away in her memory, hidden from view, until after we picked you two up again."

It was too much. Richard felt like his head would explode. Images of the past few weeks swam before his mind. The incredible power the aliens held was overwhelming. What they could do almost entirely without detection was beyond belief. He exhaled and with the air that left his lungs went every hope he ever had. "I think we're all screwed anyway," he sighed.

"That may well be, Richard, but I shan't give up without a fight."

The room was silent for what seemed like hours to Richard. He considered bolting for the door still but what Fox had said made sense. He hated it, but it made sense. He was so angry and so hurt, and so defeated inside he could feel little else. He looked at Laura, slumped in her chair, and he could not even at that moment find the feelings he held for her. He had never felt such intensity of emotion, nor such a collection of different emotions at once. And at the same time such unbelievable emptiness. It left him weak and unsteady.

"I believe we should go ahead," Fox said quietly. "Ben, you may as well take Mr. Cleveland to the prep room and explain to him what we will do."

Nash rose from his chair obediently. He didn't speak but only stood by waiting for Richard to stand. Slowly and with some effort Richard found enough strength in his legs to get up.

"You mean to tell me, Fox, that once you do whatever you are going to do, the aliens will not be able to get into my mind and find out anything?"

"That is precisely it."

"So what you are telling me is I will remember none of this. Nothing."

Fox paused, looked down at his desk, and then back at Richard. "I'm saying that exactly."

Laura sprang from her chair and rushed to Richard. "I love you, Richard Cleveland. I love you so very much. I'm so sorry this all had to happen, so damned angry at the goddamned alien bastards and Charlie and pissed off at the whole world. I love you. Believe that, Richard, always!" She threw her arms around him and he placed his arms around her waist in a perfunctory fashion. She wept, her body shaking and her head resting on his shoulder. After her sobbing subsided he carefully pushed her away and then kissed her. It was nothing he felt but was something he thought needed to be done. As he moved back he smelled her and tasted her lips on his and he felt like he was being choked. Unable to speak he strode from the room with Nash behind him.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nash led Richard to the end of the hallway past the apartments and the break room to a doorway beyond. The door looked steel, very solid, and secured with an electronic device. Nash held his hand to a spot on the wall that to Richard looked no different than any other. The spot glowed brightly. Richard surmised Nash's hand had been scanned.

"That's pretty interesting," Richard commented, "a palm scanner secretly placed in the wall."

"Not exactly a palm reader," Nash said offhandedly, "it's a DNA scanner."

"Yeah, right," Richard muttered. Nash simply shrugged and stepped through the door which opened of its own accord.

The hallway beyond the door looked much more like a laboratory or hospital hallway than an office hallway. The floors were tiled and polished to a high sheen. The walls and ceiling were of an antiseptic white finish, paint on cement, Richard thought. Not a hospital, he considered, more like a government installation. He cracked his knuckles on the wall as he moved down the hallway and was assured they were cement.

"Is this some sort of shelter?"

"You could say that," Nash answered. He stepped through another doorway. Richard followed. What he saw in the room was nothing like what he expected. The room actually looked out of place in this section of the complex. It would have been more at home as a room next to Fox's office. The room was decorated in warm pastels. The carpet was a sculptured brown color, the walls were painted in a two-tone tan color scheme and the ceiling was sort of a beige. Furnishings included two expensive-looking hardwood tables with chairs that matched, a large over-stuffed sofa of the same brown color, and an assortment of plants and paintings on the wall.

"This looks like a therapists' room."

"It is, more or less," Nash said. "It is the preparation room. Prep room."

"I would have expected hospital gowns and gurneys and needles and tubes."

"You have an incorrect idea of what we will be doing. We are not going to operate or stick you in some kind of MRI chamber."

"Then what is the preparation for?"

"It's to establish your true history, memories, timeline."

"I don't understand."

"The questionnaires you filled out...."

"I never filled them out."

"Oh," Nash was surprised, "well, you will, then. Our operators, the ones who will complete the examination, must have clues to your memories. They serve as markers."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"No, of course you would not," Nash said. "Follow me." He led Richard through a second door and into a room that looked much more sterile, more like a hospital room. But it was not all white walls and chrome fixtures. The lights were soft and the furnishings were medical-looking but not exactly. The room was rather large with a high ceiling. In the center of the room was what looked like an x-ray machine. The machine was mounted to the ceiling and moved on rails. Beneath the machine was an odd-looking bed. Or was it a table, Richard wondered. It was a cross between a hospital's operating table and a lounge chair. There was a cradle where the patient placed his head. Richard toyed with the word patient in his head, interchanging it with victim.

"I will try to explain," Nash said, leading Richard across the room to where a marker board hung against the wall. Nash picked up a marker and drew a collection of circles. Then he connected the circles with lines. "This is certainly simplifying things to the absurd," Nash said, "but I find that this explanation works the best for most people." He turned to Richard. He looked like a college professor about to give a lecture.

"Our brain is not dissimilar to your average hard drive," Nash said. "Or perhaps more correctly, to the computer as a whole, a collection of hard drives, connected to each other by circuits." Nash turned to the board. He drew small circles inside the larger circles and connected all of them with lines which criss-crossed inside of the circles and also connected to the larger circles. "Information, memory, is stored in sectors, or pockets, whatever analogy works for you. These sectors are connected by your synapses. It is incredibly complex and we don't even fully understand it ourselves. The aliens have learned how, though, to access these pathways and read the memories, the information, in each section. They can, and now we can, move down the pathways and view your memories almost as if we are watching a movie."

"Bull," Richard said.

"It is true," Nash assured him. "Yes, it is unbelievable. But it is true. In actual fact our bodies are just electro-mechanical devices that depend on fluids and tissue to provide the wiring that controls us. This technology is far, far ahead of human technology but it is amazing in its simplicity." He pointed to

the circles, "Each episode, bit of information, in your head, and mine, is stored in these sectors." He pointed to the small circles. "The sectors are compartmentalized, sight, hearing, taste, so forth." He pointed to the larger circles. "A memory, a single moment in your life, is stored in perhaps half a dozen sectors, depending on the sensations. Say the moment you wake up, the sounds of birds, stored here," Nash pointed to a circle, "the light of the sun, here," he pointed to another one, "the smell of coffee, here," he pointed to another circle. "All are linked by synaptic pathways." He pointed to the lines he drew connecting the circles. He then led Richard around the machine to where a control panel stood beneath a wide screen.

Richard got the impression that Nash was telling him far more than he needed to know. Nash was simply fascinated with the technology and liked to talk about it. He pointed at the screen. "On this screen, we can view your life, Cleveland." He walked to the table beneath the machine and reached up into it. Slowly he pulled down what at first looked like the part of an x-ray machine that held the projector. But then the machine halted and Nash pressed a button on the side. Two tubes protruded below the square projector-box-like portion. The tubes had cushions on the ends and it was clear to Richard that they were placed against the patient's eyes. He didn't like the look of it but he said nothing.

"Access to your, or anyone's memories, are made through your eyes. At least mostly. Whoever said the eyes are the window to the soul were more right than they knew. Somehow this device uses light pulses in combination with what can only be described as an electronic mind reader, to access these links, the synaptic pathways that ties everything together." Nash looked at Richard for something, possibly approval. Richard simply stared back at him.

Disappointed that Richard had not commented, he continued. "There's more, though. Not only can we access these memories, these sectors, we can manipulate them. We can wipe them and replace them with other memories. We can create entirely new histories, if we want to." Nash walked back to the control panel. "Of course, the aliens are far better at it than we are and we suspect it may have something to do with their own telepathic abilities." He paused, looking over the panel as if he was trying to find something, "there are also residual memories that remain even if we do wipe certain memories away." He spoke almost matter-of-factly about processes that were incomprehensible to Richard. "But then, we don't really create new memories and remove the old, we create new pockets, and move the links to them instead of the old ones."

The device, there, that looks like part of an x-ray machine, it actually was at one time," he smiled, "we commandeered the machine. That device maps the brain. All the way down to the molecular level.

That way we can remove a link and leave a pocket there, unconnected, safely beyond the reach of the aliens who cannot access it without the map.”

“So you are going to use this machine to find what the aliens have stuck in my head?”

“It’s not that simple,” Nash said, walking back to the drawing. He reached up with a forefinger and wiped away some of the connecting lines. “The key is not the data, the information. It is the links. A hard drive in a computer is only as good as the connections it has to the processor. Likewise, data on the drive is only useful if it is linked to the program that uses it by a command of some sort. What the aliens do is to use portions of your brain,” he pointed to the circles, “to store information. Then they remove the links.” Nash wiped away the lines from the circle he pointed at. “They have the pattern and know where the stored information is. We don’t. Then the trigger, how the information becomes useful to them, is stored somewhere else. In your subconscious. Some sound, word, whatever, keys a subconscious memory which sends the message to your brain to construct a new link to the stored information. Bingo.”

Richard shook his head. He had that disconnected feeling sweep over him again. It was occurring very often of late. “But if it is just information,” he said, “how can it be dangerous?”

“I use the term information as a catch-all. It could be simply something you suddenly know that changes who you are or your emotions or attitudes. Or it could be a command of some sort. It could be an entirely new personality stored inside you.” Nash walked back to the prep room. Richard followed. As he pushed the door closed and motioned for Richard to be seated, he said, “there’s only one thing, we believe, that is keeping the aliens from doing whatever it is they are going to do.”

“What is that?”

“They cannot grasp our emotions. We have determined that their abduction activities and other activities are more than anything an examination of our emotions.” Nash nodded towards the room from where they just came. “That machine, as absolutely astounding as it is, cannot affect emotions. So, they may plant thoughts, ideas, instructions, but they can never be sure that the correct emotional responses are attached. And if they aren’t, then the results are... unpredictable. At best.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Think of it this way. If your brain received the instruction to punch me in the mouth, it may send the orders to raise your hand and clench your fist and take a swing. But if the emotion that surfaces with that instruction is one of love, or friendship, something is going to short circuit. That’s the great risk in monkeying around with memories. The mechanical functioning of our minds is one thing. But our emotional center is something else and it just doesn’t show up on that machine.”

Richard stood and tried to absorb what Nash had said. "So, you are telling me, even if you erase a memory, totally remove the memory of someone I know, you cannot remove the emotional links?"

"Something like that." Nash frowned, "but of course in that case you might have emotions but they have nothing to attach themselves too."

Richard thought some more. "So, what happens?"

"It depends on the person," Nash said, "some people become a little emotionally unstable. Others quite sadly go berserk."

Richard sank onto the sofa. His mind began to connect the dots and he didn't like the picture they were drawing. "Let me get this straight," he said at last, "you are telling me that because of a little quirk in our makeup, you can remove memories but not the associated emotions."

"Right."

"And so those emotions become unconnected, something like static electricity flicking around in a clothes dryer."

Nash's brow wrinkled, "well, yeah, maybe something like that."

"OK, then, so if I lie down on that bunk in there and you stick that thing to my head and remove my memories I'm going to have static electricity popping around in my head and might short out something? Or I might start laughing at a funeral or crying in the middle of making love?"

"Well," Nash moaned, "maybe. But probably not. Memory and emotion are tied together somehow. As long as the memory exists, the emotion tied to that memory exists. No matter if it is accessed or inaccessible. At least, that is what we think."

He stood. "We do not have any more time. I cannot forever lecture you on these things and besides, it will not matter to you because you will not remember." Nash's attitude changed abruptly. "Finish the questionnaires, Cleveland."

As if on cue one of the two men Richard had seen in Fox's office entered with the folder Richard had been given the night before. Richard looked around for the cameras he knew had to be somewhere. He could not spot them so he shrugged and opened the folder.

Two hours later he leaned back, stretched, and closed the folder. He stood and stretched. Almost immediately the same person who had brought him the folder returned.

"I don't know why in the hell I'm going through this," Richard barked, irritated, "you can read my mind from anywhere."

"You closed the book," the man said. The man was average height, very thin, almost wispy. His voice was soft and effeminate. His features were round and pleasant except that his eyes were set too

far apart, his nose too small, and he had virtually no lips. His hair was thin. It looked like a child's hair. Richard thought that the man looked like pictures of people who had undergone chemotherapy. Or had some childhood disease.

"I am your examiner," the man purred. "My name is Christopher Parks." His voice was soft and smooth.

Richard for some reason felt repelled by this person without knowing why. He considered that it could be that the man's manners indicated a particular sexual orientation but he didn't think that was it. Whatever the cause of the feeling it was strong. He did not take the proffered hand which was extended for a handshake. Instead he turned away and walked to a painting.

"Please, sit down, Mr. Cleveland," Parks said softly. "We should begin."

Reluctantly Richard took a seat opposite the man and looked at him. Suddenly he knew exactly why he felt the way he did. "You are a hybrid!"

"Yes, I am."

Richard leaned back in his chair and examined Park's features more closely. "Of course," he said. "But why do you look so much less human?" When he said it Richard realized the man was probably insulted by his remark. The man's features were clearly a mixture of human and alien features.

"I am of an earlier generation," the man said.

"Earlier generation," Richard said flatly.

"Yes, my genetic makeup is closer to my parent race."

Park's reference to the aliens as a parent race was not lost on Richard. "Parent race?"

"Yes, the aliens."

"Doesn't sound like you have as much animosity towards them as Schipper."

"I don't."

"Then why are you here?"

"I was rejected."

"Rejected?"

"Yes, I have genetic imperfections that proved me undesirable as a mate. I was given tasks to do that were beneath my abilities."

"Well, I'll be damn," Richard muttered, "that's one very human trait."

"What?" Parks looked confused.

"Prejudice."

"It was not a matter of prejudice, it was a matter of usefulness."

"Right," Richard said, nodding his head, "If you say so."

"Let's begin," Parks said, opening the folder Richard had completed. He seemed uneasy under Richard's glare.

The interview was the most intense Richard had ever undergone. Parks scrutinized every answer and appeared to catalog everything Richard said in his mind. Towards the end of the interview Richard tilted his head in a quizzical fashion and looked at Parks.

"Are you telepathic?"

"I am, mostly."

"Then why don't you just read my mind instead of grilling me like I committed a crime or something?"

"Telepathy isn't as simple as you assume," Parks said. "It is the ability to read and interpret brain waves. It is not the ability to enter your mind, travel down your synaptic pathways and withdraw memories. I have in fact been reading your mind."

"What?" Richard stood, "How."

"I do not know how," Parks purred, "I just do it. As you would relate an answer to a question, I have examined your thoughts on that answer, sensed your emotions, so forth."

"I don't think I like that."

"I am sorry," Parks said sincerely, "it is my job."

Richard did not understand why he felt such an urge to smash his fist into Park's face. Parks had been entirely polite and considerate, more so than any others. It must have been the syrupy voice and the alien features that become more pronounced the more he looked at Parks. Parks was too kind, too something. It annoyed Richard a great deal.

"We are finished," Parks said. "Would you like to shred these papers?"

"I don't care," Richard said, "do whatever. I don't care."

Parks rose and took up the folder. "I will shred them for you. I believe we will be able to process you now."

"You make it sound like I'm a pig for slaughter," Richard said.

"Nothing of the kind," Parks purred, "the process is entirely painless."

"Like I would remember, right?" Richard looked coldly at the hybrid, "you are going to suck my brains out anyway."

"You are correct," Parks answered, "you will not remember." He walked to the door and turned just before stepping through it. "And you should know that the feelings you have towards me are entirely normal. I for some reason cause hostility in humans. Do not let it worry you."

"I won't," Richard muttered sheepishly, "anyway, you'll suck that out too."

Parks simply nodded and left the room. As he did the other person Richard had seen in Fox's office entered. He was an opposite of Parks in appearance. He looked to be the same age, mid-twenties, he had broad shoulders, chiseled features, thick brown hair, deep set, brown eyes, a large nose and thick lips. None the less Richard barked at him, "Are you a goddamned alien too?"

"No sir, I'm one hundred percent American," the man said. "My name's Noel Halstead." The man's accent left no doubt in Richard's mind that this member of the Project was certainly human and no doubt Texan. Richard felt as easy around this man as he had felt uncomfortable with Parks. Halstead did not offer a hand. Richard was glad. He kept his hands in his pockets.

"What are you going to do, give me a rectal exam?"

"Hardly," Halstead smiled, "I'm the machine operator. I handle the nuts and bolts of the thing. Chris does the mind-bending part."

"Mind bending?"

"Oh, not to worry," Halstead said, walking towards the door that led to the machine, "it's only a private joke."

"Sure," Richard muttered, "I'm laughing."

Halstead held the door for Richard. Richard approached warily. He looked at his hands. They were shaking. He had the feeling that his head was caught in a huge vice. No, he corrected himself, more like between the thumb and forefinger of a giant and he was being squeezed. Images of his head popping and a seed squirting out the top like a grape moved through his mind. Then he wondered if such imaginings would be viewable by the machine. Suddenly he wanted to run. He looked around him. He was only a few steps inside the machine room. Even the thought 'machine room' was ominous. He didn't want to lose his memories. He didn't want to forget. He wanted to run. He wanted to run badly. His stomach rose up and choked him. He couldn't breathe.

Suddenly he turned and bolted for the door. He took only a few more long steps and was out in the hallway. But as he rounded the turn in the corridor he felt a mist upon his face. His knees buckled and he fell, twisting, onto the floor. As he twisted around he saw Schipper standing where he could not have been seen before Richard turned the corner. Schipper held a small device in his hand that looked like a spray bottle. The floor came up and met Richard and he hit hard.

The next thing Richard knew he was lying on his back looking up at an x-ray machine. The x-ray table was very soft, he thought. Then he realized that he was not under an x-ray machine, he was under the mind reading machine. He started to move but found his hands and feet were bound. His head, too, was bound, held down in the cradle by a padded restraint across his forehead. He tried to cry out, to speak, but his tongue wagged in his mouth and he could only make unintelligible sounds. He resorted to wheezing cries, forcing air from deep in his lungs through his vocal cords. The sounds were otherworldly in their tone, horrible and full of pain. But he felt no pain. Only fear. Such fear he'd never experienced. Then a mist drifted down onto his face and he felt himself relax. At least his body relaxed. His mind was very active.

"Richard," Fox's voice drifted towards him, "I am sorry that you have had to endure this. I truly am. But you will not remember. And you will be fine."

Richard's mind was screaming, "I want to remember!" But only the telepath in the room knew it.

Above Richard's head a bright light shined down onto his face. In the shadows he could see several figures. Most of what he saw was through peripheral vision. He thought he saw Laura but he wasn't sure. It was hard to make out the features.

Whatever drug they had administered to him through the mist was beginning to take effect in earnest. The cries in his mind subsided. Then he heard a voice, a whisper, beside him.

"I love you, Richard Cleveland. I love you forever."

The fear subsided as the drug continued to push him down into a darkness. An image of Laura's face floated above him. He wasn't sure if it was a real image or a memory. "I love you, too, Laura, I love you too."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Richard walked slowly along the beach feeling the sand on his feet. Something was buzzing. He smiled. He listened to the surf, inhaled the stiff salt air, felt the warmth of the morning sunshine on his face. Sea gulls overhead squawked at him with glee. The buzzing grew louder. It was very annoying. He was happy. He saw a woman in the distance. Beyond the woman he saw a small beach house. Buzzing. He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the sound. Buzzing. Slowly the sky grew dark, then darker, and darker still till he was engulfed in blackness.

"Richard," a voice said, "turn the darn thing off."

He turned his head and saw Pamela lying next to him. She looked at him strangely. He looked around. He wasn't on a beach. He wasn't in Galveston. He was at home in Rockwall. He pushed himself up on his elbows.

"Richard?"

"Yes, dear," he said.

"Turn the alarm off, please?"

Richard wrinkled his features in confusion, "Hmm? Oh, yeah." He reached a handout and pressed the snooze button on the top of the clock that sat on his bedside stand.

"Ah," she said.

"What day is this?" He scratched his head.

"I don't know." She purred, holding the last syllable of know out. "The twenty..., oh, Christmas almost here." She sat upright on the edge of the bed. Her silk gown flowed out from her in waves.

Waves, Richard thought, recalling his dream. He smiled. "We should do it?"

"Do what?"

"Get a little house on the beach, down at Galveston."

"Are you crazy? All that nasty sand and sticky yicky saltwater. Ugh. I'd as soon get a place down at the dump."

He sat upright, swinging his feet in an arc. They found his house shoes and automatically slipped into them.

"I meant what day of the week is it?" He felt confused. Disjointed.

"Monday."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

"Time you got back to work, lazy boy," she said, "two weeks of rest from that little fender-bender is plenty."

"Right," he said. He sat a minute and thought about the events of the past week and a half. He remembered going into town, taking back roads to avoid ice, and some fool passing him and hitting a power pole. He stood. He felt sore. His arms were in the last stages of healing from the cuts and scrapes he'd gotten in the wreck.

Richard walked around the bed. She stood. The silk she was wearing was thin. It covered little and hid nothing.

Richard smiled, looking at her. She was beautiful. "I had the weirdest dream," he said.

She kissed him on both cheeks and then on the mouth. "I love you."

"I love you too," Richard muttered without feeling. He walked to the bedroom window. The scene outside was a wintry one. "It looks wonderful outside today."

"If you are an Eskimo," she sighed, "you and your 'I love winter!'" She shuffled towards him. Her feet were covered with pink, fuzzy house shoes. She kissed him again and then zoomed across the bedroom and vanished into her closet.

"I'm confused," he said. He still stood looking out the window. "This dream," he started to say something more, something about Pamela being there but then it struck him how silly that idea was. And he thought it could not have been Pamela. "I mean, Galveston, the beach, it was nice."

"Sure you are. Only, not right now. I have to go to work. I have to get ready!"

"I am what?"

"Confused."

"Oh, yeah, well, this dream...."

"Forget the dream, sweetness, you are not dreaming now. You are here, now, with me, and I'm so happy!" The last of her words were muffled as she disappeared into the bathroom with clothes she had gathered in the closet.

Richard went to his closet and began pulling dress clothes out. He had his shoes, slacks, and shirt on when Pamela came out of the bathroom. He was working at tying his tie.

"Richard," Pamela said, "what are you doing?"

"Tying my tie."

"No, no!" She stood in front of him, expertly tied the slippery red fabric and pulled it snug against his neck.

"Like a noose," he thought to himself.

"What?"

"Nothing." He had muttered the word "noose" aloud.

Richard picked up the remote and turned on the TV in their bedroom, flipping to the weather channel.

"It is cold," he said, turning the TV off.

"Oh, dear." Pamela hurried to the dresser where she sat and picked up a small makeup kit and started applying foundation to her cheeks. Finishing her makeup, she stood and walked to the closet. From one end of the clothes rack she pulled out a thick fur coat. "Nice, huh?"

"Yeah, nice," he said.

"Thank you sweetheart," she said, shuffling across the room.

Richard shook his head. Only Pamela could buy herself a coat and justify the expense by saying he "really" bought it. Or would if he had seen it.

She pulled the fur coat on, kissed Richard again, a short peck on the cheek, and went into the garage. Richard stepped to the door and saw her get into a new car he did not recognize. He started to yell over the engine which she was now revving unmercifully and ask where it came from. Instead he stepped back into the kitchen and closed the door. "Where's my head," he said to himself, "the rental replacement."

After starting a pot of coffee Richard walked into the living room and stood there, looking around. He heard the coffee pot sputtering, telling him the coffee was made. With a cup in his hand he settled onto the couch and turned the big TV on. He stared blankly at the screen for a couple of minutes not really hearing or seeing what was on. A bell went off in his head and told him he better get off to work. Then he remembered, he had to see the doctor first.

Traffic was not as heavy as it usually was on a Monday. He drove Pamela's car while she took the newer one. It felt like driving a tank.

Richard made it to the doctor's office, downtown near Parkland hospital, right at ten. He hurried inside, found the office, and walked to the counter. A note beside a closed receptionist's window told him to sign in and sit so he scribbled his name on the pad and sat. He'd finished almost an entire Readers' Digest by the time he was called. He followed a nurse to a station where she took his pulse, blood pressure and temperature. Then she seated him in an exam room and told him to remove his shirt and pants.

"Richard," the doctor said, walking into the exam room. "So, you think you are ready to go to work?"

"I'm afraid so." Richard looked at the man.

The doctor motioned for Richard to sit on the exam table. He examined Richard's neck and head with expert fingers. Then he checked Richard's back and listened to his chest. "You seem fine," the doctor said. "Nothing to worry about at all. You may have some excessive dizziness or headaches. That is to be expected. Nothing more, I don't think."

"Thanks, Doctor Nash." Richard looked at the physician intently. He knew he should remember something. Something.

"Something wrong?"

"No," Richard slid off the table, "nothing. It's just that, well, I am trying to remember something."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I don't know," Richard reached for his shirt. "Yeah, ok." He slipped his shirt on and picked up his pants. A brief worried look passed across Nash's features. Richard almost missed it.

"Would you like anything for pain, the headaches or dizziness?"

"What do you mean?"

"A prescription."

"Oh, no, I don't think so. I'll be fine."

"All right, but if you need something, call the office. I'll leave a prescription in your file just in case." The doctor walked to the door, opened it and dropped the file he had in his hand into a door pocket. "Sometimes headaches are severe. And you might have strange dreams or hallucinations, too. Don't let them worry you." He cocked his head back slightly. "And your memory may be a little confused, too. Don't forget what I told you about short-term memory loss."

"Dreams? Hallucinations?" Richard buckled his pants and sat to put his shoes on. "What do you mean?" Richard was puzzled. "I've already experienced the memory thing. Sometimes things just pop up. And sometimes...."

"I understand. The dreams, it's pretty common to have vivid dreams after the medications you were on for a while."

"Hallucinations?"

"Oh, nothing to worry about, you know, sometimes things seem a little weird. Perfectly common after a bump on the head like yours." He stepped into the hallway, "I'll see you, check with the nurse for an appointment." He was gone.

Richard finished dressing and walked to the receptionist's counter. He handed her an insurance card and his credit card to cover the co-pay.

"Oh, sir, I won't need that. We have your information on file." She handed the cards back to him. Then she had him sign a paper and gave him a card with his appointment date and time on it.

"Thanks," Richard said.

Richard left the doctor's office and drove towards his office. He parked in his usual place in the garage. When he stepped off the elevator and someone saw him there was a small commotion. Employees gathered around him, asking questions, saying they were glad to see him and that he looked well. He thanked them and walked to his office.

"Hello, Nancy," Richard said, walking up to his secretary's desk. She was standing because she had heard the noise from the foyer.

"It's so good to see you, Mr. Cleveland," Nancy said. She took a step towards him and lifted her arms as if to embrace him and then stopped.

"It's fine," Richard said, smiling, "I'll not tell anybody." He winked. She gave him a quick hug and retreated.

"I'm really happy you are here." Nancy settled into her chair slightly red faced.

"Hey, you." The voice came from the direction of his office door. He turned to see Laura standing in the doorway. She was smiling.

"Well," Richard said, walking up to her, "I hear you've been holding down the fort."

Laura took a step towards him. "Yeah, when I got back."

"What," Richard said with mock incredulity, "I don't rate a hug?"

"Sure," Laura said. She stepped towards him hesitantly and lifted her arms around him. Richard slipped his hands around her waist in an innocent fashion and hugged. She was stiff at first and then melted against him and held him so tightly it made him uncomfortable. But he said nothing. He heard her sniff. Releasing her he stepped back to look her in the eyes. She avoided him and instead went for a box of tissues on Nancy's desk.

"Damn nose," Laura said, "running like a mountain stream."

"Now there's a pretty picture," Richard retorted.

"Oh, blow it," she muttered through the tissue.

"Looks like you already are," he said.

She tossed the tissues in a trash receptacle beside Nancy's desk. "Follow me." She led him into his office. His office looked exactly the same. Except for an assortment of files and paperwork scattered haphazardly on his desk. He wondered to himself why he thought it would be different.

"Oh, what have you done with my desk?"

"That's nothing, dear one," Laura said, "you should see my desk." She walked around Richard's desk and fell into his chair.

"Busy?"

"Hell," she said, sitting up. "With both of us gone things went to hell in a hand basket. I still haven't gotten that stuff all straightened up. And then your work is so..." she looked up at the ceiling then back at Richard, "boring!"

"Boring?" He took a step towards her, "boring it is not. At least I don't have to put up with an office full of bitching workers and a city full of pissed off clients."

"That's true," she said, standing again, "and you'd never handle it." She smiled at him.

Richard felt comfortable with her. He felt something else, too, which he could not understand. He had to resist the urge to take her up in his arms. It was a totally unexpected feeling. From the moment he'd released her from the embrace, when he'd smelled her hair and felt her arms around him, he had been almost trembling with emotion. He slipped around her, sat in his chair and clasped his hands hoping she wouldn't notice.

"Well," Laura said, sinking into a chair in front of his desk, "have a seat."

"I did." The air in the room was thick. Richard wondered to himself if coming to work today had really been a good idea. "You can't seem to decide if you want to or not."

Laura laughed lightly. It sounded like a forced laugh. Or so Richard thought. "I'm glad you are doing better," She said.

"Me too," he returned, "I suppose." He smiled, "I mean, now I have to work."

Laura laughed, sincerely that time. "Yeah, I am afraid so."

"Sure," he said. Then he stood abruptly. "You know, I think better go. I will be here tomorrow, back at it, ok? Just now I think I'm getting one of those headaches the doctor said I would get." It was a lie. He didn't have a headache. He simply wanted to get out of the room where Laura was. The emotions that he was feeling were confusing him.

Laura walked around the desk. "I am really, really glad," she said, taking a deep breath, "to see you." She embraced him firmly and then just as quickly turned him loose. She was through the office door before Richard could respond. Richard followed. They stood facing each other.

A strand of Laura's hair had fallen down over the corner of one eye. Richard on impulse reached up and whisked it out of her eye. With some effort he restrained himself from following that up with an embrace. "Gee, I'm sorry," he said, embarrassed, "that was, um.... I don't know why I did that."

"No big deal," she said. That look was on her face again, hiding behind a contrived smile. "Nothing."

"Crap," Richard said, reaching up and holding his hand behind his head, "strange, getting whapped in the forehead you'd think that is where I'd get the headaches."

"Scrambled," she said.

"What?"

"Your brains. What little you have, they were scrambled."

"Funny girl," he said, grinning at her. He winced, faking pain. "I have to go." He reached his hand out to take hers somewhat reluctantly. He was shaking and he didn't want her to notice. She didn't say anything. As they walked together towards the elevator he turned to her. "So why were you out anyway?"

"Oh, I had to move. And I had a few things to think about."

"Move?"

"Yeah, Jeffery and I split. It's a long story. I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Fine, sure," Richard said, pressing the elevator button. "Sorry about your troubles. But I never liked the guy anyway."

Before Laura could say anything in reply the elevator in front of them opened and Jefferson Davis Callahan stepped out of it. Both of them exploded into laughter at the same moment.

Callahan looked from one of them to the other. "Well," he said, "what's so damn funny?" When he didn't get a response, he continued, "so you are back, Cleveland?"

"Yeah," Richard said, recovering his composure. The elevator doors began to close and he started to bolt for them but instead stood and watched them close.

"He'll be back tomorrow." Laura looked at Callahan coldly.

"It'll be good to have you back, Cleveland, but you may as well know if you were planning to put the moves on Laura again, she's got another fella."

Richard blinked. The comment made no sense to him. "Again?" he blurted.

"Yeah, that's what I said," Callahan turned and pressed the elevator button.

"I don't...."

Laura cut off Richard's words, "Jeffery, you are an ass."

"I know, you've told me." The elevator doors opened. He stepped inside. "You coming, Cleveland?" He held the door.

Richard noticed the up arrow was illuminated. He shook his head. Callahan let the doors closed. Richard looked at Laura. "What was he talking about?" He pressed the down button again.

"He's such an ass," she repeated. "I don't know. Well, sure, I'm seeing someone. But the rest, who knows."

"Looks like you do have a few things to tell me," Richard said. Another elevator door opened, this time with no one inside.

"I will," Laura said, "but it's nothing. And I'm not really seeing someone. Not really. It's to keep that ass off my back."

"Oh," Richard said. He was holding the elevator. "Well, you can tell me." He smiled and let the door close. As it did he watched her expression freeze on her face as if she was a manikin. The elevator sank towards the garage floor. He struggled to understand the things that were going through his head. What difference does it make who Laura is seeing, he asked himself. Nothing, he answered. Then why did he seem so relieved when she said she wasn't really seeing anyone? It was all too much for him and by the time he was backing out of his parking spot he was getting a headache for real.

Before he pulled onto the freeway to head home he had a thought. Quickly he zipped across two lanes to the right. Cars honked. He pulled into a service station parking lot and lifted his cell phone.

"Mrs. Cleveland's office," a voice said. Richard puffed his lower lip. He had expected Pamela to answer. "This is Richard Clev...."

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry," the voice cut him off, "she will be right with you." Immediately the phone clicked and Richard sat listening to music. He held the phone for more than a minute and was about to hang up and call again when Pamela came on the line.

"Yes, Richard," she said.

"Who answered?"

"My secretary."

"Your what?"

"Secretary."

"Bull."

"I have a secretary now, I got a promotion. Don't you remember?" There was a pause.

"Hmm, yeah, maybe I do," he said. He didn't.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Did you get my things out of my car?"

"Your things?"

"Yes, you know the things I keep in my car. My umbrella, tool kit, the cup holder?"

"You don't need an umbrella, it's sunny."

"No, I mean, did you get it? Where is my stuff?"

"I don't know. No, I didn't get it."

"Damn." Richard frowned. "OK, well, I'll try to track the car down. Did you see it?"

"Your umbrella?"

"No, the car."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you see it after the wreck?"

"Oh, no, the insurance company had it towed." There was a voice and shuffling sounds in the background, "I have to go, Richard. See you tonight?"

"Sure, tonight," he said.

"Bye, Richard," there was a pause, "I love you."

"You too," he said and pressed the off button.

Four phone calls later he found out where his car should be. He drove to the scrap yard where he'd been told it was taken.

A fat, balding man with a crooked nose, missing teeth and scruffy beard sat behind an old government desk in the dilapidated shack that served for an office at the wrecking yard. Richard asked about his car and the man turned and flipped through a box of index cards while Richard stood by him. His hands were black from grease and grime. His tattered t-shirt and pants matched his hands. "I don't see," he paused, flipping, "Oh, here, yeah, no, we still have it." He stood. "Now, let me think. What kind of car was it?"

Richard described his car, make and model, and color. "And the front is smashed," he added.

"Of course," the man said, "goes to figure it would be." The man tapped his forehead with his finger. "Oh, yeah, sure, I remember that car. And I know where it is. Sure. The acid did a number on the front of it."

"Acid?"

"Yeah, from the transformer."

"Oh, yeah," Richard said. "Where is it?"

The man gave him directions. "But be careful out there," he concluded, "wreckin' yards are dangerous places."

"I will," Richard said. "This way?" He pointed to a door in the side of the building in which they stood.

"Yeah, dat way." The man's voice sounded like he needed to cough badly.

Richard walked towards the door and pushed it open with one finger. The door, as with the entire building inside, was dusty and covered with grime. It smelled of old motor oil and sweat. He was glad to be outside. The odor outside wasn't much better, though. He walked along rows of wrecked cars, some with bent fenders or curled bumpers, others in such shape that Richard was certain someone had died inside them. At first he didn't recognize his own car. It was indeed smashed. He looked the damage over and tried to remember what happened. All he could recall was a flash and a bang. Even that memory wasn't clear. He walked to the drivers' side door. It was not latched. He pulled on it and with some effort it came open.

"Look at this," he muttered, picking the bag up. White powder instantly covered his hands. He dropped the bag. He reached to the center of the car to get his cup holder where it lay on the floor and saw something glint. He couldn't get to it from the drivers' side so he went around and pulled the passenger door open. He reached down and picked up an earring. It was a large earring, gold, a clasp with a dangling gold charm attached. It was an unusual piece of jewelry. It was definitely not Pamela's. But who's? Then he remembered. Laura. He'd seen her wear it. He was sure he had. But how had it gotten into his car? A strange knot of emotion turned in his stomach at the thought. He dropped the earring into his pocket.

The keys were still in the ignition so he pulled them out, took the ignition key from the key fob, and walked to the trunk and opened it. He removed his umbrella, tool kit, flashlight, and jumper cables. Then he closed the trunk, tossed the key in the car on the seat and walked out of the wrecking yard. He put the items in Pamela's car and drove home.

That night Pamela arrived with Chinese food in square paper cartons. They ate and talked. Pamela went on about her promotion and secretary and how she had spent the few days in Houston and saved the company a fortune. Richard mentioned the reaction of folks at work to his return, his quick exit with a headache and his getting his things from the car. He didn't mention the part about the earring.

The next morning Richard got up with anticipation. He dressed and had coffee and headed for the city. It felt good to step from the elevator and walk to his office.

"Good morning, Mr. Cleveland," Nancy said, smiling at him. "It sure is nice to be saying that."

"It is nice to be hearing you say it," Richard said, "and I'm sure glad to be back."

"Miss Bright will be in late today," Nancy said, "she said to say she was sorry but she had to get some things done. She said she left some notes on your desk and some other things and that you could catch up on a few things before she got here. She said she'd fill you in when she did."

Richard wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed of the news that Laura wouldn't be in until later. At least he could get some composure and get used to his office again before trying to figure out what was going on in his head. "That's disappointing," he said, "I was looking forward to having her fill me in on what's been going on."

"Oh, sure, Mr. Cleveland." Nancy smiled at him. "Oh, well, she'll be here and you'll get to see her later."

Richard was sure Nancy winked at him. And he was sure he or the world was really going nuts. He looked around as he sat behind his desk. The chairs, coat rack, paintings, everything, so familiar. And yet so foreign. Two stacks of folders stood neatly on his desk. Laura had straightened things up. Between them in the center of the desk was a yellow pad. At the top of the pad he saw "Richard, welcome back" written in Laura's attractive swirled handwriting. Beneath the greeting she spelled out the basics of what had been going on in the office. Richard read with some interest. He read the note and then re-read it. He wasn't sure if it was the information or the author that he appreciated. Laura's handwriting was artistic. He had told her on several occasions she should be a calligrapher. She'd only shrugged and said he was "full of it."

Finished at last with Laura's note, Richard pulled the drawers of his desk out. He wasn't sure why, just to remind him what was in them. In his center drawer he found two paperback books. One was a mystery novel he remembered buying and growing bored with. The other he had never seen before. Soon he was deep into reading the book and forgot about the time and the folders on his desk.

"Hey, you going to eat lunch?" Laura stood in the doorway of his office.

Richard jumped. He'd not heard her walk up to his opened door. "Hmm, you spooked me," he said, smiling at her. Suddenly the emotional rush hit him again. He felt stupid.

"Sorry," she muttered. "I just got here and thought you'd be at lunch." She sank into a chair in front of his desk.

"Oh," he said, looking at his watch. "Geeze, look, it's a quarter of one."

"Yeah, it is," she said sarcastically. "Where have you been?"

"I dunno," he frowned. He stood. He started to walk around the desk towards her but decided against it. Instead he stepped up to the window. He never got tired of looking out that window at the

city beyond. He wanted to avoid Laura's eyes, too. "I suppose I'm being a bit lackadaisical. I'm afraid I haven't looked in a single folder." He tossed a glance at her over his shoulder. She was looking at him. He looked out the window again.

"And what have you been doing on the company's time?"

"Reading a book," he said. Then he took a deep breath. "Laura," he said without looking at her, "you know, I mean, do you think having a bump on the head can screw up your emotions?"

"I don't know, what do you mean?"

Now he felt like he'd painted himself into a corner. The feelings and emotions he was wondering about were focused on her. "I mean, you know, just weird stuff. Feelings. I'm really all jelly inside."

"Well," she stood, "I don't know about inside but you're getting a little jello around the middle." The joke fell flat.

Richard heard her approaching him. He took a step hoping she wouldn't think he was avoiding her. He was. He heard her stop. A quick glance and he saw her looking out the window. "What is it you are always looking at out there?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing in particular," he said, happy to have the subject changed. "I just love this city."

"Oh, sure, traffic congestion, smog, rundown buildings, look, there," she pointed, "if you look closely you can see the paint peeling off the walls inside that dump."

"You are so funny," he said.

"I know. Laugh a minute. So what were you reading?"

"A book." He turned towards her. "Is it yours? I don't remember it. Here," he picked up the paperback. The title read **IN THE DARK OF NIGHT**.

Laura took the paperback and stared at the cover. "Oh, yeah, mine."

"It is a weird book. All about alien stuff. You read stuff like that?"

"Sometimes," she said, flipping through it as if looking for something. "I think it's interesting."

"You don't think any of it is true, do you?"

"Oh," she said, turning to look out the window again, "no, not really. I think what you see is what you get." She pointed to the sky. "Clouds, sun, stars at night. No UFO's, nothing like that. It's really too screwy to be true, you know. Aliens jerking people out of their homes and stuff."

"It sounded very convincing." A strange sensation crept up the back of Richard's head. He felt like there was a bug in his hair. Along with the sensation he felt a buzzing in his ear. He'd had the sensation several times in the past few days. Once at the doctor's office when he saw Dr. Nash, and now. "Hah, most crazy people have rocks in their head," he mumbled, "I have bees."

"What?"

"Oh," Richard said sheepishly, "I didn't know I said that out loud." He smiled at her. The smile she returned threw him off guard. "See, I'm nuts," he said at last.

"Of course you are," she smiled more. "I'm sorry for leaving my book in here," she said. "I'll get it out of your way."

"No," Richard said, "no, really, can I finish it?"

"Sure." She handed it back to him. "Pretty interesting fiction."

"Is it?"

"Sure," she said.

When Richard reached for the book he suddenly found himself holding Laura's hand. He looked into her eyes, deeply. It took every bit of restraint to keep from doing more than taking her hand. A tear escaped from the corner of her eye. She sniffed and then broke the gaze. "Damn, this flu will get the best of me." She wiped her face on her sleeve. When she took a breath Richard heard a catch in it. He felt a lump rise in his own throat. He shook his head as if to clear it and turned back to his desk. Laura quickly moved around to the chair she'd been sitting in. But instead of sitting down she stood behind it, clutching the back. Her knuckles were white.

"I have to tell you something, Richard." She was struggling with some emotion.

"What?"

"I was out talking to an employer this morning. I'm afraid I have to, I mean, I'm going to give you my resignation."

"Why?" The lump rose until Richard struggled to breathe.

"I just can't," she stammered, "work with..." she stammered, "Jeffery. I mean, it's been hard, you know, but I held things together for you. Now that you are back, you know, I have to, um, go." She sniffed.

Richard was positive for a minute she would cry. But she didn't. "I don't understand. I mean, now that I'm back you'll not even have to work with him."

"It won't work," she said. "I'll tell you when I can, but I have to go now, damn cold," she wiped her nose with her sleeve again, "we had it out. I mean, a fight. It was not pleasant." Her words were nasal now and she sniffed. "I better go blow my nose before my sleeve is sticky."

"That's a pleasant thought," Richard said, smiling. He stood and reached out to take her hand. She gave it reluctantly. "What will I do without you?"

"You'll do fine. You have Pamela and everything now, and all."

"Pamela?"

"Pamela? Oh, hell, see, this cold has sucked my brains out. I meant Nancy, you know, your secretary, and Harry, he's good. He'd be the one I'd recommend to take my place." She pulled her hand away. Richard had been clutching it tightly.

"Sorry."

"Oh, no, it's fine. I just have to go to the restroom." She took a step backwards.

"Well," Richard said. He had that feeling of being apart from himself again. He hated it. And the tingling on the back of his head and the buzzing in his ear were in tune with the pounding of his chest. He sank into his chair. "Geeze, maybe I'm still not better." He shook his head. Then he stood. "I'll be fine." He swallowed the lump in his throat several times and with an effort concentrated on Laura's face instead of the buzzing. But that made the buzzing worse and the thumping in his chest louder. He turned to the solace of the window. In a moment he turned back to say something else to Laura but she was gone.

For a few minutes Richard stood trying to get hold of his emotions. He grew angry at something and he didn't know what or why. He stuck his hands in his pockets and when he felt the earring he remembered what he was going to ask. It would wait till later, he said to himself. Slowly he eased back into his chair. He picked up the paperback but the cover was blurry. His eyes were full of tears. His nose was running now, too. "Damn," he said aloud, "I'm getting a cold too." He pulled open a desk drawer and withdrew a box of tissue. He blew his nose. Then he stood again and turned to the window. He watched a cluster of beautiful clouds drift across an unbelievably blue sky. But he felt none of the joy he usually felt when he stood in that spot next to the window looking out onto the city he loved. Time slipped away as he stood, looking, his hands holding the earring he'd pulled from his pocket.

About the Author

H.J. Ted Gresham is a writer and craftsman living in Lufkin, TX. He's a rideshare driver, mostly for Uber, in Houston several days a week. He's married with two grown children. He's self-published three novels and has a good number of articles published online, primarily on the Texas travel website TexasExplorer.com.

Ted was a home-parent for more than a decade. He cared for foster kids and then his adopted children. He has an unusually diverse work history, from truck driving to welfare casework, restaurant management to radio announcer to Air Conditioning technician. Ted has a BA in history from Corpus Christi State University and attended Stephen F. Austin State University, Angelina College and Del Mar College. He studied a wide spectrum of subjects, from government and a bit of pre-law to counseling and writing. Ted has also completed Air Conditioning and Refrigeration Tech School in the Air Force and Truck Driver Training at Northeast Texas Community College.

Ted's interests are as diverse as his background. He tries to keep up with space exploration, science, and government. He's a fan of Science Fiction. He's also a fan of American classic authors and Shakespeare. Ted loves the outdoors, often doing his writing or working on his website sitting outside. When he can he gets away on road trips, camping or fishing.

Ted thanks you for reading this novel and hopes you enjoyed it. Please check out his other works.