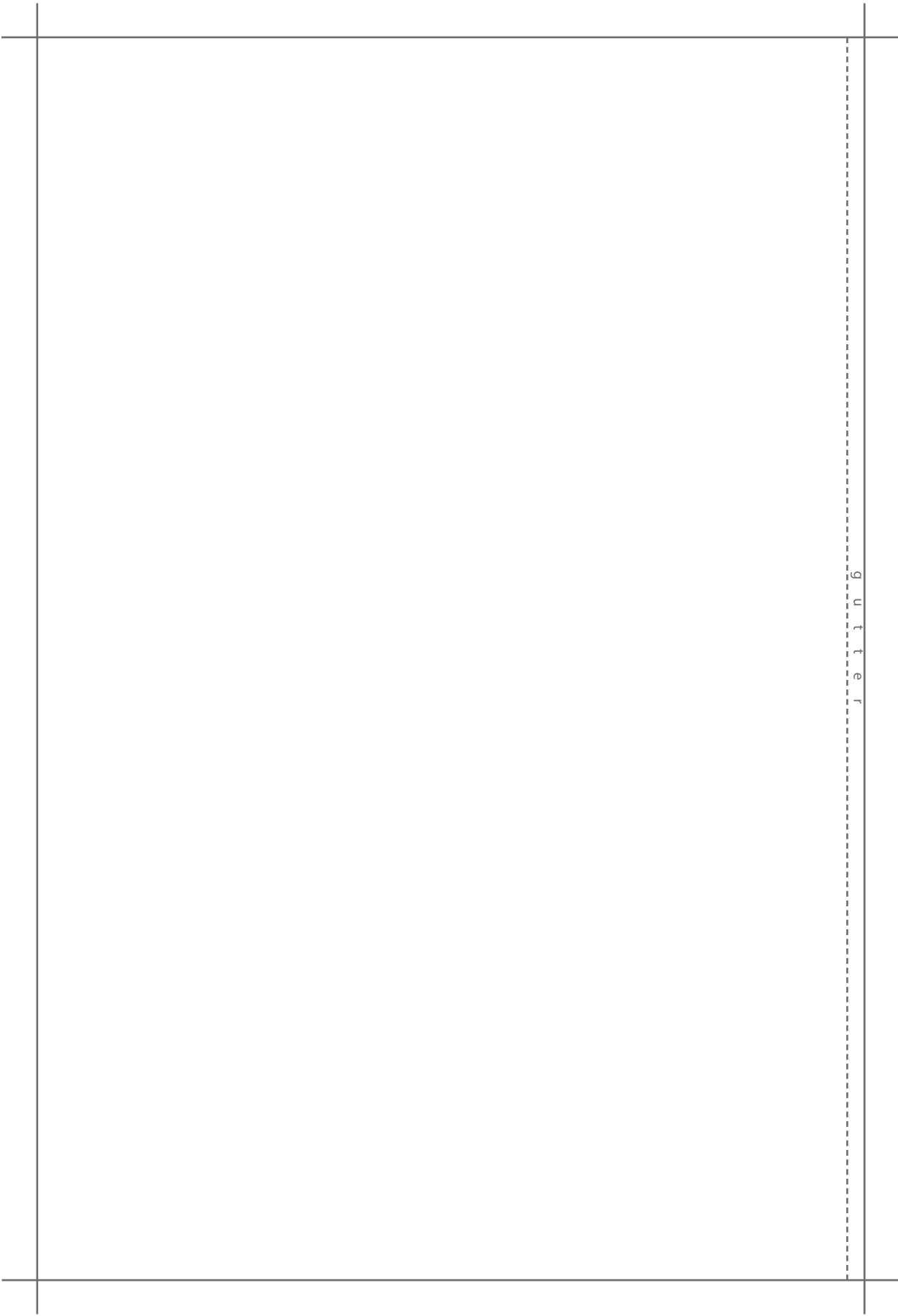


g u t t e r



# Destiny's Wildest Dream

*The Second Chronicle of Chthon*



Kevin L. Smith



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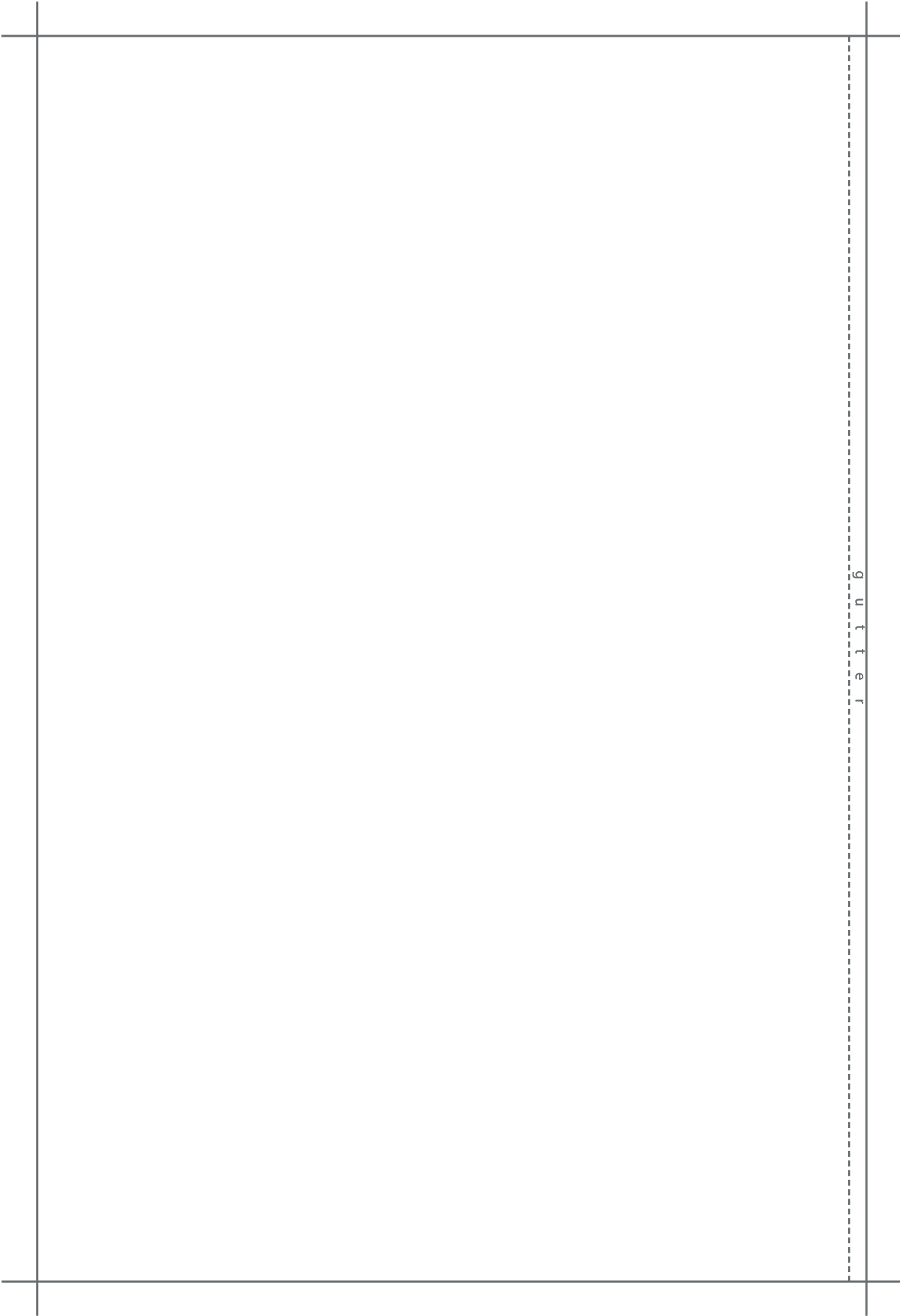


## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to J. Randall Harris who passed tragically before his due time. He was a beloved son, brother, uncle, husband, father, and friend, and he continues to live on in the hearts of many.

This work is his as much as anyone's.

His farsightedness and sense of adventure made him uniquely heroic!



quitter



## PROLOG

The second of Lantis' two suns was moments from vanishing below the watery horizon. Brendellin, or Bren as he preferred to be called, watched intently from his spartan office quarters some eighteen levels from ground floor. The currently-transparent crystalline panel before him was set to maximum clarity as he gazed with an unobstructed view toward one of Lantis' many oceans. Bren wondered why the natural occurrence of a sun setting fascinated him so, only to dismiss the thought as it began. He wondered though if atmospheric conditions would be right to display the occasional split-second flash of concentrated light that sometimes appeared as Cetiri, Lantis' larger sun, sank out of view. Nothing happened. Bren wasn't surprised; the phenomenon was rare, which made it all the more intriguing and yet beautiful.

But then, beauty on Lantis was no rare commodity. The world was brimming with both natural and artificial wonders that never ceased to amaze him. The seven-sextillion-ton planet was eighty-five percent oceans, fresh water lakes, and rivers, and fifteen percent well watered, well tended land. Bren was an inhabitant of the largest of Lantis' three main cities, Teralandra. This city served as planet capital, and Bren's presence was appropriate as well as expected as chief member of the Council of Seven, Lantis' council of oversight. Bren was a medium-framed man, blessed with a well structured body that he held erect. His light wavy hair crowned the strong, kind face of someone that appeared in their late thirties.

To Bren, his seven hundred and thirty three years of service as

council overseer had seemed an almost redundant responsibility – until today! Often he found himself longing for the challenging duties of the ocean tenders or the land preservers, though even those casual, albeit important chores were accomplished without any measure of creativity. Bren was well-aware, as were all Lantians, that their biomechanical construct limited their ability to be innovative. Not that Lantians were mere automatons. The “Makers”, who had originally referred to themselves as Primarians, had designed the biomechanical race some nineteen hundred years earlier.

These had accepted the name Lantians out of love for their home world. They were made to be genuinely self-aware, with a fabulously complex auto-updating algorithm based conscience and a strong self-preservation instinct program. They loved, enjoyed, found pleasure, grieved, and feared, all of the emotions and feelings of the Primarians, their “Makers”.

Creativity was still a problem, and all Lantians knew why. Simply put, they had no imagination. Bren never ceased marveling at the ability of his fellows to maintain and even duplicate the wondrous beauty of Lantis and its magnificent cities, parks, and exquisite gardens. But nothing new – really new – ever appeared. The jewel-encrusted spires of Teralandra city had been erected at the behest of the Primarians. The luxuriant land gardens as well. The technology, the land and water vehicles, the great space cruisers, the power generators, were all the creations of the Primarians; the “Makers”, the originals that had also made the biomechanical race known as Lantians.

Bren’s mind automatically computed a list of pros and cons between the two species. The fact that topped his mental list was the inherent frailty of the Primarians. Their biochemical makeup was the reason they no longer existed on Lantis.

Eighteen hundred and twenty-six years earlier the “Others” had appeared in ships from an unknown origin. Their arrival, obviously malevolent, was met with strong opposition on the part of all the inhabitants of Lantis. The great space battles lasted less than ten days after the arrival of the “Others”, and then they were forced back, but not before the alien aggressors launched a final unexpected attack. A series of miniature virus-filled and undetectable missiles were fired at all the landmasses. The attack was successful, their presence unnoticed



until it was too late. Though short-lived, the virus was highly effective. The Primarians lasted less than thirty days after the unwarranted attack, leaving only the Lantians to attend to, repair, and maintain that which the inhabitants of Lantis had built millennia prior.

But nothing new!

This was a serious problem, considering the evidence which indicated the return of the “Others” after more than eighteen hundred years. Little was known of these aliens other than the fact that their technology appeared closely matched to that of Lantis’ inhabitants. That is, as of almost eighteen centuries past. And now, as then, they wanted what the Lantians had.

The chimes that sounded softly throughout the room announced the presence of Tarala, council woman, a member of the seven. Tarala’s responsibilities centered on monitoring and overseeing off-world activities. Her arrival reminded Bren of the meeting he would soon oversee; a meeting that was weighing heavier on his mind than any other he had ever attended. It seemed the fate and future of all he knew was at stake, and he couldn’t begin to imagine what to do.

Tarala had the appearance and beauty of a thirty-five year old woman, with long straight black hair draping down the sides of her face. The fine lavender gauze gown clinging to her body enhanced her hourglass figure. Her face exhibited beautifully-high cheekbones, bright gray blue eyes that turned slightly upward at the end in an almond shape and full, pouting lips. Bren enjoyed her deportment and company. Her appearance, of course, had never deteriorated though she was one of the four original members of the Council of Seven founded after the demise of the Primarians. The “Makers” had originally intended on providing the Lantians with longevity, beauty, and reparability. Granted, accidents happened; functional deaths, circuit and programming aberrations, and equipment failures. And most could be repaired, but no one was perfect.

Bren greeted Tarala cordially, “I’m happy to see you. Is all well?”

“Indeed,” she responded. “Are you ready for the meeting?”

“No, but I’ll do my best. Are there any new reports from the border space stations, any news that will shed light on our situation?”

Tarala’s response was measured, in an effort to be precise without

being an alarmist, “Possibly. We’ve had two additional contacts, but both from such a distance that the data is fragmented.”

“Reconnaissance; that is what it is referred to as.”

“Be that as it may, from what we can gather the ships seem to have a similar shape to the original alien ships of millennia ago, but much larger and with much greater energy signatures. Telemetry indicates greater speed as well, but our analysis is limited at this time.”

Bren’s comment now placed a spotlight on his chief concern, “Logic dictates that the aliens would have made significant technological advancement after almost two millennia.”

“I share your concern, but many questions remain unanswered. It would be unwise to form a negative conclusion just yet.”

“Can we obtain more information?” It was that exact question Tarala expected Bren to ask, and she had prepared her response.

“All long range sensors are currently focused on the specific area of previous sightings. I hope to be able to provide a more detailed report for the council very soon. If you will excuse me, I’ll check to see if anything new has been learned. I’ll see you soon at the council meeting.”

“Thank you.”

It was all Bren could say for now. He turned gazing out the window. Noting the rapidly darkening sky he hoped that it didn’t prophesy ill-fate for his world.

The Council of Seven had been a seven-member group since before the arrival of the first Lantian synthetic beings; and as far as all knew the council had always been such. Always there were five female members and two male members. Bren had always believed that the council was configured this way due to the female’s ability to balance emotion with logic – to use intuition in conjunction with facts. He may be the chairman of the council, but the females held sway. He and Anock, the only other male member, recognized this fact with respect. Each member had a specific set of assigned duties on a non-rotational basis, and each was very good at what they did – especially since they had been doing it for hundreds of years. The only occasion a council member was replaced occurred when they could no longer fulfill their

assignments. Such didn't happen very often.

As the seven members congregated in the elegant and beautifully-appointed council hall, formalities were kept to a minimum. All sat around a large oval conference table composed of obsidian-black metal, polished to a high gloss. Before each member sat a semi-transparent panel which flashed relevant data directly to him or her. This meeting was far from a regularly-scheduled review of mundane activities. Something was happening that threatened everything they knew; their way of life, and the lives of everyone in the world. Therefore, Bren was quick to call the meeting, fulfilling his first responsibility.

"Friends, members of the council; We are all aware of the reason we have gathered. It appears that our fears have been realized. The appearance of the invading "Others", as we have always known them, is no longer hypothetical. Evidence indicates that they do exist, and their interest is in Lantis."

"You mean their *renewed* interest. This is the same enemy our planet faced before, and last time we fared none too well," injected Anock promptly.

Anock would know – he served as council historian. But Anock's job description was more than that of an archivist. His duties included bringing the history forward; applying history to present-day. Learning from the past was key! So his next comment was poignant.

"History, current events, and logic dictate that our end may be near!"

Bren was taken aback, as were all present. Anock said what all considered possible, but were hesitant to speak. Therefore, Bren attempted to temper the ill prophecy.

"It appears that we have at least a small amount of time to coordinate our efforts into a defense. We should consider all alternatives. Tarala has compiled some critical facts from our outer space reconnaissance stations."

"I wish I could offer some good news," began Tarala, "however, Anock may be correct in his assessment. Evidence indicates a buildup of what can only be regarded as enemy forces – a fleet, if you will. If they were other than hostile there would be some communication in response to our challenges. The buildup is at the boundary of our sensors' ranges so we are unable to determine the armada size, but I can

assure you it is formidable.”

Cheri, the council-woman responsible for all matters regarding technical and technological advances decided that now was the time to articulate that which, as far as she was concerned, was the critical factor to their eventual failures, “Our problem is essentially this; in the centuries of our existence we have made no technical advancements. We have a formidable fleet of quality ships – currently eighty-three vessels. But they are essentially the same ships we had eighteen hundred years ago. If Anock is correct, and this is the same enemy we faced in the past, then we are indeed in trouble. At that time, we lost one third of our fleet. I assure you they have advanced in all that time, have prepared accordingly and are sure they will succeed or else they would not be here. I see no reason to doubt that they are correct. What alternatives have we but to try our best and be defeated?”

Anock stood, sensing the growing anxiety in the council room. He spoke, “Friends, though our situation is obviously dire, I do offer hope, small though it might be. What we need right now is a source of creative thinking, some imaginative direction. I believe I know where to acquire it.”

The council was somewhat stunned as Anock resumed his seat. But Bren was quick to encourage the exploration of any positive line of thought or alternative.

“Please my friend, you have our undivided attention, continue.”

“My alternative is to take advantage of the “Seedling” project.”

A quiet murmur developed in the council room as the seven members exchanged whispered comments and questioning glances. Anock waited a sufficient amount of time for anticipation to build, knowing that most, if not all the council members, were unaware of any such project. Now was the opportune time to draw attention to what he believed was not only the sole hope for deliverance from their current dilemma, but the only salvation for all Lantis’ future.

Anock continued, “I’ve sent the relevant data to each of your displays. You will note that the “Seedling” project was one of the many explorative projects initiated by the Primarians approximately nineteen hundred years ago at the time surrounding the “Great Expansion.” As you all well know, this was when research into our creation began, as

well as when our other world outposts were discovered and occupied. It was shortly after this that the Primarians discovered a world of beings much like themselves, although much less advanced technologically. An outpost was established there to monitor and direct the advancement of that civilization surreptitiously. It was named after our home world. They called it Et'Lantis or "of Lantis." However, with the attack on Lantis over eighteen hundred years ago, all Primarians were recalled back home and we know what that resulted in. Before the demise of the Council, Kentish –who was the chairman at that time – succeeded in placing Et'Lantis on standby alert. He had a Renok-Torlan prepared for use on that world just in case the worst came true, as it did. I believe the entire project is working as Kentish originally anticipated."

"Why place a Renok-Torlan on that primitive world?" asked one of the council members.

"Though we do not need or use such memory recordation and insertion devices due to our intrinsic makeup, the Primarians and humans like them find such devices invaluable. The integrated intelligence on Terra, as the world is called, has been searching for a unique mind – a special personality – a human with the same makeup as the Primarians to step in and..." Anock thought carefully, trying to decide upon the best description of this individual's purpose, "...augment our existence. Kentish and the council anticipated the need."

Cheri was intrigued. The very concept of such a long-term, carefully conceived plan seemed fabulously fortunate. Certainly the Primarians had been intelligent. But to see them as so farsighted as well, impressed the councilwoman.

Her next question demanded, "Has such a human been found?"

The council had been dismissed, each member relegated to their respective duties. The populace of Lantis was now aware of the threat that loomed over their existence; a threat that had been verified by an attack on one of Lantis' isolated outposts by an invading space cruiser. The assault had been surgical, quick, and thorough. In and out, it was a simple test of strength, technologies, and perhaps resolve.

The invading cruiser had learned all it needed to know; Lantis

was practically theirs already. The outpost, called Cardin-Lee by the Lantians, had offered its best defense. An asteroid-based station, Cardin-Lee was equipped with full shielding capabilities which had lasted only a few hours under the invaders onslaught. All particle beam and projectile weaponry proved ineffectual, and the single interloping space-cruiser was able to fend off all forms of attack while sustaining minimal damage. The station, however, indeed the entire asteroid, no longer existed.

It was only a matter of time before the gathering enemy fleet carried out its devastating intentions.

All outposts were fully-manned and monitoring sensors for data that would indicate the enemy status. All personnel were at battle alert. All ships were recalled and in formation to protect Lantis and if possible repel invasion. And it was all for not, as far as Bren could see. Based on everything they had gleaned from surveillance, test attacks, and subterfuge, once the enemy implemented their battle strategy Lantis would be overrun in short order. Bren wasn't sure how he knew this to be fact, but all the evidence was irrefutable as far as he was concerned. His concern had been replaced by abject fear. He didn't know what to do. What he did know was that if he, as head of the council, felt this way, then certainly all Lantis shared the demoralizing emotion. He recalled Anock's reference to Terra and potential assistance. Yet here, too, he saw no opportunity nor value to the recommendation. It wasn't his desire to minimize or dismiss what Anock had proffered, but he had included no specifics, details, or anything relevant to the crisis at hand. Anock had simply made an obscure reference to a recall – an appeal to someone. But to whom? If all Lantis could not fend off this insurgence, then how could a lone Terran be of any assistance? What possible purpose could contacting a distant abandoned outpost serve?

Then there was his friend Anock. Did he know more than he was telling the counsel, or was he basing his conjecture on some historical snippet? These were all good questions without an answer, and Bren saw no practical value in making contact. On the other hand, he could find no legitimate reason to ignore the possibility. In Bren's mind he was facing a no-win scenario anyway. The only other alternative available was to surrender his world and people. However, past evidence indicated that this choice was equivalent with self-annihilation, and

that was not an option because all Lantians wanted to live. They loved living. He could consider the matter forever but the fact remained unchanged; he simply had nothing to lose.

Et'Lantis would be contacted. Of course, any modulated signal would be detected as it traversed the distance between Lantis and Terra, and secrecy was essential in this matter. Additionally, if this attempt were to be of any value it must be done as quickly as possible. Time was precious. Every quiet hour that passed was a blessed reprieve from what Bren knew to be the inevitable demise of all that he knew and loved. With all this in mind, Bren recommended to the council that a single Star-Dancer class scout vessel be dispatched immediately to Terra. The small vessel would hardly make a difference in the outcome of any conflict that might occur, and it might just be insignificant enough to slip past enemy sentries unnoticed.

With that decided, the scout vessel Safril and its compliment of three crew members was dispatched to Terra.

Like all the scout craft built by the Lantians, the Safril was a small vessel of about seventy-five feet. But size was not a factor with respect to its ability to traverse distances in space. Its commander was supremely confident in the ship's ability to slip away undetected. After attaining a speed of about fifteen thousand miles per hour, she would simply slip into a dimensional portal –a doorway into another space – the space Lantians referred to as the “nothing.” One would travel through what appeared to be nothing, and then slip back out into regular space. The entire exchange occurred in the briefest of moments. However, now they would be several light years from the original position. The Star-Dancer Safril would then crawl along at its sluggish fifteen thousand miles per hour for twenty minutes while the ship recharged the dimension door generator. Then the process would begin again, and again, and again. And so it would continue for seventy plus hours, the ship making almost two hundred jumps through space until she reached her destination; Terra of the system known as Sol.

The navigation computers made all the safe calculations controlling entry and exit points in space. Short jumps were safe. Longer jumps, however, had always proved more dangerous. The further the dimension door projected a ship forward in space, the

proportionally greater the risk of exiting into gravitational fields like suns, or worse.

What Anock had kept to himself was information that he felt was non-essential in making the decision of sending emissaries to Terra. It needed to be done. If he had revealed all he knew, it might divert their attention away from the preliminary matters that had to be handled immediately. Certainly, if he had told them that Et'Lantis had already awakened Daedalus some thirty plus years in the past and begun his training, they would be distracted. And just imagine the reaction if it was discovered that Et'Lantis was not a mere outpost. Indeed, the key point Anock had wisely withheld was that the confidential project coined "Seedling" by the original Primarian Council of Seven was considered of priority importance. No expense had been spared for the most powerful and largest starship ever built by Primarians; it had been constructed to serve as much more than just a long-range outpost. The unique ship, coined a "Citidel" class cruiser, was a battle-ready city, fort, research station, and space station all in one. Measuring over two miles long and just over one-half mile wide, she was equipped with an onboard state of the art quantatronic intelligence, which happened to be the prototype of all existing Lantians. Et'Lantis could carry out almost any function, and she was one of a kind.

With the demise of all great Citidel Et'Lantis' engineers, there she sat. Their crowning achievement – the most sophisticated piece of technology any inhabitant of Lantis had ever produced – was parked patiently, untiringly waiting in the Pacific Ocean, just a little over one-hundred feet below the surface of the chilly, calm waters near the southern California coast. It was a great ship, containing three hundred power generators, each a compact mechanical construct approximately two feet by one foot by six feet. Small, considering the massive power each unit produced. Placed strategically around the ship, these generators provided a constant stream of virtually unlimited power. As power demands rose, miniature portals within the system opened into dimensions of pure energy allowing required amounts to be bled off. When the demands were met, the doorway closed. This is how the process aboard Et'Lantis had continued for the past eighteen hundred years. Matter/antimatter annihilation engines remained cold and unused. Power generators provided just the bare minimum



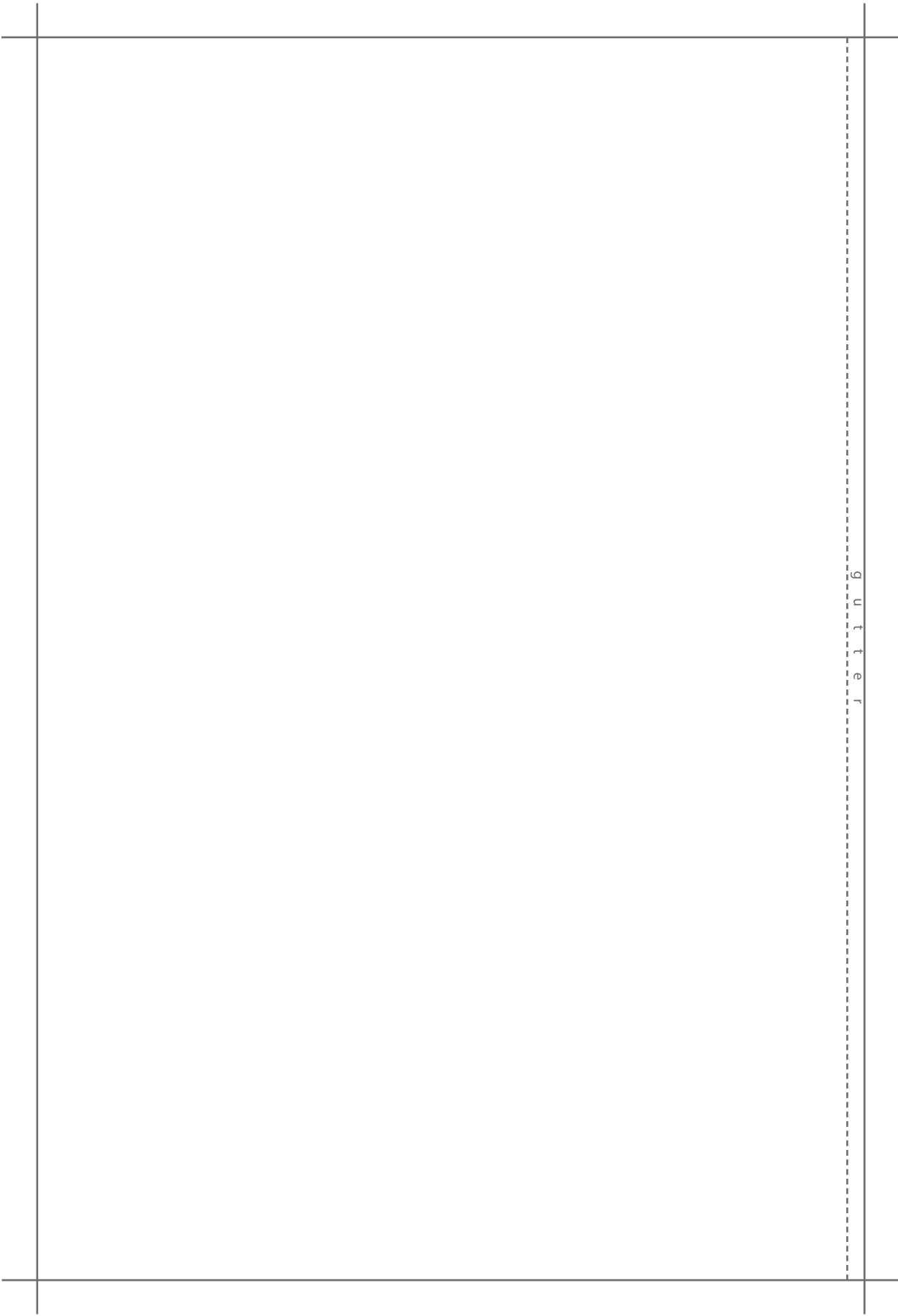
amount of energy needed to sustain the ship and its intelligence. The quantatronic Lantian mind was as active as it had always been; monitoring, learning, recording, and storing data. It regularly accessed the mind of a unique human being, caring for him in an amazing way. All without his knowledge.

In this manner, she waited.

The wait was over!

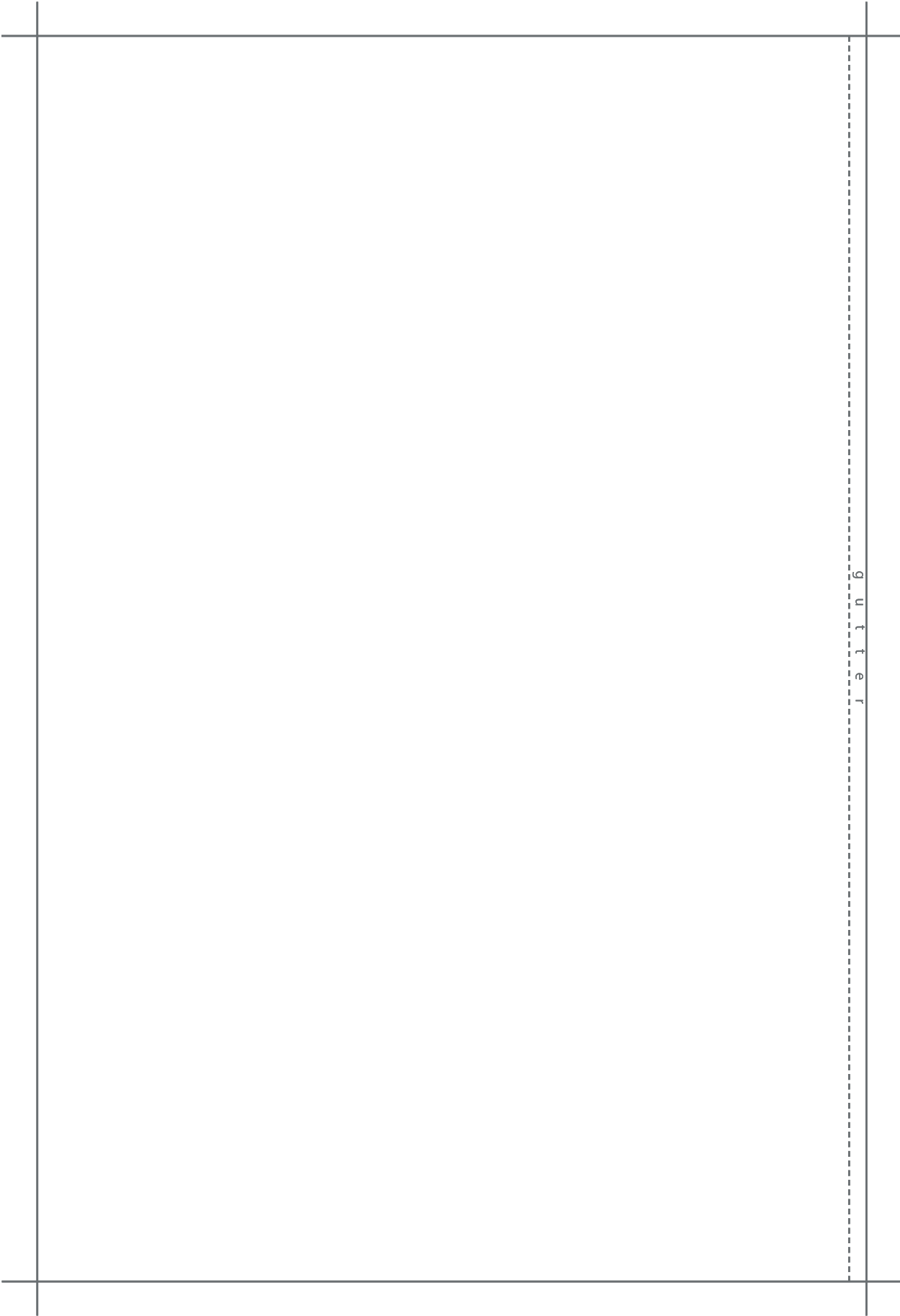
The signal Et'Lantis received from the Star-Dancer ship Safril, while still some distance from Earth, activated the mighty cruiser like a metropolitan city that powers up in the middle of the night after enduring a full-scale blackout. All systems were either activated or placed on standby. The engines and anti-gravity motors began running diagnostics and maintenance programs. The exterior hulls of the sleek ship began cleaning itself, shedding layers of crustaceans and growth that had been permitted to propagate over the eons as a form of protective camouflage.

It was time to get ready!



g u t t e r

BOOK I  
(1958)



quitter



## CHAPTER ONE

The party was only hours from their drop off. As Brad Cade looked out over the vast expanse of Wyoming below, he was reminded of the first time he'd ridden in a private aircraft, much like the Beechcraft they were in now. Though the sleek, state-of-the-art Beechcraft Baron was by no means the smallest private plane made; the twin prop beauty was a lightweight compared to commercial aircraft. There was always that sensation of feeling exposed, defenseless, or at the whim of some great raw force of nature. It was a reconstituted reality, something unique and exciting that occurred for him every time he became a passenger in the undersized private plane.

Cade glanced across his lap to the seat next to him. His son was also gazing out toward the panorama stretched before them. The child's eyes, while pointed at the ground beneath, held that distant look of one whose thoughts were elsewhere. He must be thinking of the great adventure ahead, mused his father.

"Say, Jake. How far do you figure in air time until our destination?"

"At this rate, I'd say about two and a half hours," the pilot responded. "What'd you say to a cup of that coffee back there?"

"You're not sleepy, are you?" Cade replied, tongue firmly in cheek. "I wouldn't want my son to get the wrong idea about corporate pilots."

"Hardly, it's just that while I'm a man of few vices, caffeine just happens to be one of the lucky few. Heaven help us if your pilot got

*Kevin L. Smith*

withdrawal symptoms at ten thousand feet.”

“It appears you have me over the proverbial barrel. Coffee coming up.”

Kevin, even at eight years of age, had no trouble seeing the enjoyment the two adults were having over the good-natured interchange. Jake was one of the fortunate ones who looked forward to getting up in the morning and going to work. As pilot for the corporation, Buckley reveled in the prestige and generous salary commensurate with the position; a position Buckley held in the firm for almost five years, ever since his discharge from the good old U.S. Air Force. There wasn’t a day that went by in which Jake Buckley didn’t remind himself of the vast improvement his current employment held over his tour of duty in the Korean theater, as the brass of his era had referred to it. Getting shot at all day just didn’t have the same basic appeal of flying over friendly skies. And that was only part of it.

There was a fringe benefit not listed on his official job description, one that rated high on Jake’s list of employment related pluses. Simply, the close rapport enjoyed from the very beginning with Bradley Cade. Buckley had had quite his fill of obnoxious order barking – mentally shortchanged superiors from his years in the Force – and he wasn’t about to voluntarily attach himself to another one. Their initial dealings with each other, pleasant enough at face value, grew warmly over the years. Their friendship became something special to both men.

“Here you are, Jake. Don’t say I never gave you anything.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Cade.”

“Oh brother,” Cade winced. “You’re not going to pull that old “sir” and “Mr.” crap, are you? I get enough of that whenever I go into the office. “

“I just didn’t want you to get homesick for all that apple polishing, brown nosing I know you’re so fond of.”

“I thought as much,” Cade said, trying not to laugh. Pointing to the ground, he turned back to Buckley. “Say, isn’t that Yellowstone right beneath us?”

“Yep. And in an hour or so, we’ll be cruising over the Canadian border into Alberta. Mind if I ask you a question?”

“Shoot,” Cade replied.

“This is the first time you’ve ever ventured this far north, unless of

course you're moonlighting on me. Is there any reason in particular?"

"Well," Cade paused. "Let's just say I wanted to make my first trip with Kevin here a memorable one, something special."

"One thing's for sure," Buckley injected. "You've picked the right time of year. This has just got to be about the prettiest month there is for the place we're going."

"Dad," young Kevin jumped in. "Is it true there are even grizzly bears where we're going?" The boy was making no effort to harness his excitement.

"My, my. You have been doing your homework, son. I must admit this is their part of the world. But there aren't that many of them. I wouldn't lose much sleep over it. You're not afraid, are you?"

"Oh, no. I think it would be swell if we saw one."

The older Cade could only smile. This really was going to be a kick, he thought to himself.

"What other kinds of animals will we find there?" the boy asked.

"Oh, probably everything from moose to chipmunks," his father replied with a knowing grin. "But why do I have a feeling you already knew that? In fact, I have a feeling you already know a lot of things, young man."

Bradley hadn't been a father eight years for nothing. And he'd always learned to expect the unexpected from Kevin. That was part of the fun.

"Brad," Buckley interrupted. "I don't mean to alarm anybody, but those clear skies we had as a forecast are looking strangely unclear. Take a look for yourself." Cade glanced in a northwesterly direction. "That just so happens to be where we're headed."

"Hmm," Brad nodded. "But we're only a couple of hours from touchdown. What does the radio say, anything on where we're going?"

"Not much," the pilot offered. "They're reporting some light drizzle, but nothing heavy."

"I know one thing," Cade volunteered determinedly. "Nothing is going to dampen my enthusiasm – and please excuse the pun."

All three chuckled, sliding back into their respective degrees of anticipation of what lay ahead. The continuous hum of the Baron,

*Kevin L. Smith*

with its twin fuel-injected engines, acted much like a tranquilizer. Soon Bradley was sleeping restfully. And though young Kevin would have needed an elephant tranquilizer to put him under, he was nonetheless peacefully gazing into the afternoon's horizon. Meanwhile, Jake Buckley, continued to monitor both the plane's controls as well as radio transmission for any change in the weather.

They crossed into Canada, with the skies looking no clearer, and the so-called "harmless drizzle" looking much less so. Confirmation finally came in on the radio. There was a small front, and they were headed right through it.

"Big deal," Buckley muttered to himself.

No point in getting everybody's tail in an uproar. He'd flown in a whole lot worse than this without an ounce of problem. After all, they were getting close to that private plane facility chosen for their landing. Just another one hundred miles to go. Less than an hour away. No sweat.

Fifteen minutes later it happened.

Jake Buckley had been through it all, from being shot at, to running out of fuel, and even suffering landing gear failure.

Everything, that is, but a direct hit by sixty million volts of lightning.

The force absorbed by the small aircraft was like nothing anyone on the aircraft had ever encountered. Immediately, both engines shut down and all electrical instrumentation became instantly and totally inoperative. Buckley, normally cool, lost all color in his face. In the rear of the plane, the two passengers jolted to attention and stared in disbelief. No one spoke. With the engines stilled, an uneasy quiet fell over the aircraft. Without power, the plane began to lose ground in its losing battle with gravity.

Stunned, Buckley recovered and sprang into action with every bit of grit and experience he could muster. This pilot had no delusions of their chances of survival. Those odds, slim at best, would dwindle to zero if he didn't keep the plane level, regardless of the terrain below. Buckley also knew that, with the exception of a pure nosedive, there was going to be more than one point of crash impact, even if he did keep it straight. The angle of collision might well decide if they all walked away or not. More than thirty degrees and one might as well



kiss himself goodbye.

Just keep it level, he told himself. And hope for a clearing. If he could just do that, then they might have a chance. The human body was a remarkable mechanism when it came to surviving times like this. Buckley's old Air Force studies came back to him in vivid detail; adrenaline did wonders with one's memory.

"WHILE MOST CRASHED AIRCRAFT EXPERIENCE A DECELERATION OF PLUS/MINUS TWENTY-FIVE G FORCES, OFTEN HUMANS HAVE SURVIVED UNPROTECTED FALLS OF FIFTY TO ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY FEET, WITH ONE REPORTED CASE OF THREE HUNDRED AND TWENTY FEET, WITH IMPACT VELOCITIES UP TO SIXTY MPH, AND PEAK DECELERATION OF ONE HUNDRED AND FORTY TO TWO HUNDRED G1, OFTEN EXPERIENCING ONLY MINOR INJURIES WITHOUT LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, IN SPITE OF STRIKING SUCH OBJECTS AS WOODEN ROOFS, TWO-BY-FOURS, METAL T-BARS, METAL SCREENS, AUTOMOBILE HOODS, AND SKYLIGHTS."

Buckley clung to those words, knowing they only told part of the story. He knew fully that in those cases of surviving without serious hurt, the decelerating force against the human body must be well distributed rather than localized. The force must be brief, and the objects striking the body must yield under heavy impact. And lastly, and most importantly, the aircraft must not disintegrate.

All this data paraded itself across Buckley's consciousness.

"Damn it, we're going down," said the pilot. Trying not to sound redundant, he continued, "You better make sure both of you have your seats buckled. When I give the word, tuck your heads between your legs."

"Is there anything else?"

"You might say a prayer. We'll need all the help we can get."

Cade nodded in agreement. He was starting to settle into the grim resignation, knowing there wasn't a thing he could do except wait and hope. As for Kevin, the boy was filled with excitement and shielded by his youthful naiveté. He wasn't frightened, only anxious.

The altimeter would have read nine thousand feet, had the instrument worked. Not much consolation with eight thousand foot

*Kevin L. Smith*

peaks staring at them from below. Their predicament appeared without warning. There was no time for the luxury of wallowing in fear and dread. Only time to register the heavy knot in the pit of the stomach and ride the wave of adrenaline through thousands of stored memories. They say when facing death, your whole life flashes before your eyes. For Kevin, death was just a word. Sitting next to him with hands shaking and head tucked between his knees, those words rang true for Cade. In but a flash of time, the father was himself a child once more, cuddled in his mother's arms so many, many, many years ago...

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## CHAPTER TWO

His name was Cade; Bradley Theodore Cade. With a definite lofty air, the three words sounded more like a title than a name. They were meant to. They reflected a woman's heart full of hope, and a head full of dreams. His adopted immigrant mother was not one to mince her dreams, not where Bradley was concerned. And why not? Dreams were plentiful then. Turn of the century America was a land of dreams. Everyone owned at least one. And the grander the dreams, the lighter they were to carry. Even though everyone knew that dreams seldom traded their home in someone's mind for the reality of the city streets, people felt richer for having them.

Yet with Cade, the dreams came true.

Brad Cade became a man of aggressive intelligence. If he was not overly handsome, he made up for it with a certain curb appeal. He wasted little time in his hike up the ladder of achievement. Armed with little more than a winning smile and uncanny sense of timing, Cade embarked upon the Wall Street method of escalating one's net worth. His failures were minor. His successes, though small at first, grew meteorically until the man owned blue chip stock valued in excess of two million dollars. It was an impressive feat, but not unheard of during those tumultuous years in the roaring '20s. In fact, quite a few acquired sizable fortunes. With little or no money of their own, enterprising individuals possessing exceptional entrepreneurial spirit used the resources and capital of others – along with a good deal of pie-in-the-sky economics – to amass a fortune.

*Kevin L. Smith*

What made Bradley Cade unique was how he used his fortunes. Rather than continuing to play the Market, the man converted his holdings into western real estate in 1928. Thus, while former business confederates were jumping out of twentieth story windows the following year, Cade was up to his ears in cattle and thousands of Texas acres. And yet, why Texas? That was the question on everyone's mind.

Naturally, when oil was discovered on those same sprawling acres, they all thought it was sheer luck. Whether from luck, skill, or a timely bird whispering in his ear, Bradley Cade was quickly developing a reputation for being at the right place at the right time. And that was only the beginning.

Endowed with a commodity so financially liquid as oil during the Great Depression put Cade in the driver's seat with plenty of cold, hard cash when nearly everyone else was penniless. As an added bonus, those same dollars grew drastically in buying power as the depression brought its full weight to bear on the country and its economic institutions. If the average person on the block could buy several bags of groceries with but a few of those green government coupons, think what Cade might do with hundreds of thousands of them.

Ten years later, the man was worth two hundred million dollars.

But then he got restless. Aging accomplished men do that sometimes. They don't have to have a reason, at least one that makes any sense. With Bradley Cade, it started as a tiny itch, and grew steadily with each passing season. Finally, as if a thick fog had been lifted, he understood.

He had no family.

And he wasn't certain what he was going to do about it. His social life was practically nonexistent. Business had always come first. Now and then some well-meaning associate would introduce him to a friend; some of whom were attractive, and one or two of whom were even intelligent. Still, he never dated the same one twice. A pleasant meal with candles and violins was one thing. Permanent ties were quite another.

So he stepped up his efforts, and it was no time at all before the semi-recluse millionaire inadvertently found himself on Houston's "most eligible" list. Designed to feed society's rumor mill, the list was served little by the inclusion of Cade's name, for he seldom attended the

social functions designed to generate material for local gossip columns. Hunting for a suitable mate was hard enough without the flashbulbs. Even so, the more he searched, the more discouraged he became. That is, until he met Jaimie. She was the answer.

Jaimie was the kid sister of Will Stockard, a cigar-chewing maverick of an engineer employed for several years by one of Cade's corporations. Jaimie was a quiet, long-legged, red-haired woman in her late twenties, possessing a delicate, finely chiseled beauty. But her strength and charm, Cade discovered, lay in her intelligent wit and candid humor.

These were qualities long admired by her brother's employer. Bradley soon found more and more time in his executive schedule to pursue the woman. While totally out of character, Cade just couldn't seem to help himself. She above all others made Bradley's eyes twinkle with glee from a mere remark. It was Jaimie who demonstrated an uncanny knack for lifting Cade out of the darkest mood simply by walking into the same room.

Jaimie eventually succumbed to Cade's engaging ways and determined affections. Within six months of their first meeting, the two were engaged.

Jaimie was not a simple woman. Her decision to wed Brad Cade was a complex one, involving many tiny reasons all blended together. A large ingredient in that potpourri was the calm, stable future – one with security for her and any children forthcoming. Cade meant far more than a bank account, however. She sensed in him a certain "unflappable-ness", an unspoken talent for dealing with the unexpected. She reasoned, and correctly so, that Cade could not have achieved so much and be otherwise. This was no small matter to the woman.

All her charm notwithstanding, there was a darker side to her; a fragile underlining. This Achilles' heel in Jaimie's makeup dated back twenty years. Her father and mother had perished in a devastating fire that incinerated the family home and with it, a carefree childhood world. The young girl suffered severe emotional trauma for days, and not even her brother was able to pierce her near-catatonic barricade.

Regardless, time does tend to heal even the most severe of wounds. Though the scar remained, the trauma of her childhood tragedy was behind her. The important thing was her future; hers and Bradley's.

*Kevin L. Smith*

They really did love each other. Not so much the hot-blooded kind, but rather the warm, deeply-rooted affection that only happens when two people care as much for the other's concerns as they do their own.

He was a man who appeared to be about forty-five, and she was thirty when they married. The year was 1950.

Cade's pace of life had decelerated before his marriage, but the tempo relaxed even more so afterward – especially when the infant arrived. To say that Bradley loved his blue-eyed, fair-haired offspring was an understatement. He viewed his child in the same terms as a pearl of great worth, something to treasure above all other possessions. At last there was a wholeness about the man, something added that gave him a new inner focus. Jaimie was the first to notice the subtle change in her husband of two years.

Cade's decision to semi-retire – opting to leave the day-to-day operations and corporate management in the capable hands of several committees – marked his complete shift in personality and priorities. There was much speculation as to the real purpose behind the move. Many wondered if this was just another demonstration of financial genius; the preliminaries to some far-sighted plan to expand his already enormous wealth.

In truth, there were two reasons. One, he craved more time with his wife and son. From the dawn of the world of commerce, successful executives had never been regarded as devoted husbands and fathers. Second, accumulating more wealth didn't fascinate Bradley Cade the way it once had. He grew weary of the treadmill; enough was enough. He began to look around and explore other interests. He studied the arts, sciences, and even sports. What really grabbed his attention was the social and economic changes enveloping the world around him. Brad Cade may have been rich beyond anyone's wildest dreams, but he still put one pant leg on at a time just like everyone else. And like everyone else, he was a victim of his own tunnel vision. He never looked past his own little world, and never gave a glance at the total picture of his life and time. When he finally did look, he was staggered.

As Cade gave serious thought to the different facets of society, the full weight of twentieth century reality splashed on his face like ice water. What Cade was starting to feel was later described in a book by a man named Toffler as "future shock", namely, the effect upon an

individual when society around him changes too rapidly for his mental and emotional abilities to handle. Not that the rest of mankind wasn't becoming nervous about one thing or another in postwar '50s, the decade blending optimism with doom. Whether the A-bomb, Cold War, communism, or McCarthyism, Cade was convinced he could flow with the punches, just as he had dealt with the Great Depression, World War II, and everything else in the past half-century of his life. What really bothered him was something more basic, and what he believed to be even more insidious and threatening.

Cade worried about the degree to which modern man was becoming dependent upon the technical environment he designed. What would happen, Cade's keen mind probed, if all that technology was instantly yanked out from under them? What happened if the streetlights went out? What if there was no food on the grocery store shelves, or electric current magically waiting inside each household wall plug? His mind whirled. Cade understood that all the wealth in the world wouldn't protect him or anyone else from that kind of vulnerability. Take any man in the western world, place him in a primitive setting – a setting where all those delightful conveniences no longer existed – and, most likely, Cade concluded, they would die.

That kind of helplessness unnerved the graying millionaire. It didn't matter that the odds were against him or anyone else faced with such a predicament. Yes it still bothered him, nagging at the roots of his being. The lingering irritation eventually prompted his extensive study of diet, physical endurance and conditioning, and even wilderness survival training. If nothing else resulted, he reasoned, good old Bradley Theodore Cade would become a symbolic example of the socio-emancipated man, honed with the skills, knowledge, and physical stamina to live without modern technology if necessary. It wasn't as though he hadn't done it before, but here was a chance to take it to a whole new level.

His so-called friends, who came to view him as a man obsessed, chided Cade. Nevertheless, he stuck to his guns. Whenever he wasn't overburdened with the corporation or enjoying the company of his wife and son, Cade busied himself in his new pastime. He even hired experts in the field of wilderness survival to accompany him on month-long wilderness expeditions. Each new excursion filled him with increased

*Kevin L. Smith*

delight. He had discovered a whole new world, and Cade behaved like a child with a new plaything.

It was just a matter of time before Cade approached Jaimie on the subject of participating in his new hobby. While convinced he would have to really sell the idea to his wife, Cade was quite surprised and disappointed when nothing he could do or say would persuade her to venture off into the “wild blue,” as she called it. The whole idea just didn’t feel right to her, and as time revealed, never would. As for their son, perhaps when he was a bit older...

The years passed quickly – too fast for Brad Cade. He lied and told everyone that he was fifty-seven, not that he looked it. Everyone who knew him thought Cade didn’t appear a day over forty. They were quite correct. His last few years of conscious effort to improve his physical condition had produced its fruitage. His five-foot eleven-inch frame held his one hundred and seventy-five pounds of bone and muscle compactly and in proper proportion. The only noticeable sign of age was the few gray strands in his full head of hair. With any luck, Cade would live to a ripe and very old age.

Cade finally retired that year. Little by little the financial wizard sold his shares and controlling interest in all his companies, keeping mere pseudo-honorary positions on the individual board of directors of those legal entities. The man just seemed to be enjoying life all too much to squander the smallest portion of time on what he reckoned as non-essentials. Cade didn’t want to embrace the life of other self-absorbed and overworked businessmen.

The most important aspect of his life was fast approaching his eighth year. When his mother finally surrendered to her husband’s persuasions, both father and son were excited beyond words in taking their first excursion Kevin would finally see the magnificent wonders of nature in the raw. The chance to go on such an outing was a thought too wonderful to imagine for the boy.

The enthusiastic youngster had known about their trip for nearly two months. To surprise and please his father, Kevin worked diligently to learn as much as possible on forestry and backpacking. The last thing that must happen, Kevin determined, would be for his father to come to regard his own son as a nuisance, or worse, dead weight. Naturally, this kind of heavy-duty research represented an impossible



undertaking for the average eight year old, especially since such books and reference data often dealt with their respective topics in somewhat technical terms.

What made all this possible was the unique teaching methods adopted by his parents. Utilizing techniques still considered revolutionary thirty years later, young freckle-faced Kevin learned the alphabet in the crib, basic arithmetic at two years, and abstract concepts by the age of three. Private tutors and the efforts of his committed parents spent hours each day waving flash cards and teaching phonetics to the child. The result was a child whose capacity for learning was comparable to a junior high school student – and all this by Kevin's sixth year. The only drawback, if one could call it such, was that the child's interests were often channeled in directions much different from that of other children his age. This, and his status as an only child, hindered the boy from interacting with his own age group. This in turn triggered an ever-increasing hunger for his father's companionship.

When the opportunity arose to apply Kevin's primed mind, the child had little trouble acquiring what he needed in the way of information, at least to a point. Books only told a person so much. The rest came first hand. Yet Kevin determined to prepare as best he could, to gratify his father with his basic grasp of general backpacking. Sure enough, the eager student absorbed heaps of information into his absorbent, thirsty mind, anxiously awaiting the time when he would unfold his learning, as if an elaborately wrapped present, before his surprised father.

As for Cade himself, he was involved in his own form of preparation for the big event. This was not to be confused with the kind of "outing" made famous by so many nature lovers; the ones climbing fearlessly into their Winnebagos, stocked to their roof-mounted air conditioners with provisions which included everything from frozen TV dinners to the TV itself. These delightful cubicles of the middle-aged bourgeoisie generally found themselves no closer to the wilderness than a mobile campground in Yosemite National Park, sandwiched merrily between at least sixty other trailers on the average weekend. Most of those people were like children playing pretend games in their backyards, the only difference being the size of the playground.

Bradley Cade was a veteran packer, and he entered the mountains

*Kevin L. Smith*

with only that which could be carried on his back. He was secure in his intimate knowledge of the wild, and consumed by the desire to leave civilization behind – not wrap it in foil and take it with him. He was a man prepared, or so he thought.

Cade's mind jerked itself to the present.

"So this is what it all comes down to," he muttered under his breath. "A one-in-a-million chance collision with a crippling jolt of raw energy, nine thousand feet in the air, and everything goes down the toilet like sewage."

Cade lifted his head for a moment and looked over to his eight-year-old son. There was the real tragedy; his life had been a very, very long and full one. But Kevin... poor, dear Kevin...

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## CHAPTER THREE

Within seconds the strong headwinds forced the craft to weave through the mountains that had once been safely below; now were at eye level as they carefully maneuvered into the valleys and corridors between the peaks, hoping beyond hope for a glimmer of open field. Too bad the radio was out cold, Buckley thought. There was no way to communicate their position, and they were fifty miles from any help.

Soon the craft was sixty feet above the fall line, mercilessly buffeted by the currents and sinking fast. To those inside the plane, it felt like monstrous claws were raking the hull of the aircraft as it connected with the first line of trees. But instead of going down, the Beechcraft lunged upward thirty feet into the air. It was as if the plane were using its last few ounces of strength to stay aloft, to somehow save its passengers from the disaster awaiting them. The upward climb was short-lived however, and those buckled inside braced themselves for the next collision. The second impact was the final one. Trees caught both wings, ripping them cleanly from the fuselage. The remainder of the plane nose dived into the pines and locked into a near-vertical position.

With disasters of this kind, everything occurs within seconds. Poor souls caught up in the devastating whirlwind of high-impact crashes seldom know what hits them. Jake Buckley was no exception. Despite his shoulder harness, he was hurled from the cockpit through the windshield, his limp form landing forty feet from the up-ended aircraft – or what was left of it. Bradley, also thrown from the plane,

*Kevin L. Smith*

was injured severely, but still alive. Kevin, wedged between the front seat and foot space of the rear seating, was scraped, bruised, and unconscious, yet miraculously without serious injury. The child had Buckley to thank for that. The level of the aircraft was a cool fourteen degrees upon final collision. If there had been an open field, all three would have walked away.

An hour elapsed before Kevin regained consciousness. Partly crawling and partly falling out of the upturned fuselage, the disoriented child fumbled and tripped his way towards his father. What the youngster saw would have frightened most young boys into hysteria.

Bradley Cade, crumpled into a disheveled heap, lay quietly in a pool of his own blood that oozed from a deep gash in his left side. He was still breathing, but did so with great labor. The blood loss was considerable, yet the real damage was what the boy could not plainly see. Kevin hunched over his father, eyeing him disconcertedly as one might stare at a Picasso. What the boy couldn't see were the massive internal injuries, their only indication the tiny red trickle seeping from the man's mouth.

As his son inched closer, Cade, through the dimly lit twilight of his fading vision, focused on the youngster and reached out to grasp his hand. Too weak to talk, he managed only a feeble embrace. A moment later, Kevin felt his father relax, and the boy gently pulled away. Looking into those orbs, the boy only produced a blank stare. A lone tear worked its way slowly down the discolored cheek of a dead man.

Dusk approached, and the boy shuddered from the evening chill as the cool mountain air flowed into the lower elevations for its nightly sojourn. Clothed only in his flannel shirt and blue jeans, Kevin Cade huddled close to his father's slowly cooling body for comfort and warmth. After a few moments, the child was carried away into that never-never land of deep slumber. It had been a strength-robbing afternoon.

By four p.m., the Canadian equivalent of the FAA, the Transport Canada Civil Aviation (TCCA), made their confirmation call to the control office of the minor Canadian airport that had been the Cade

party's destination. Like so many small community facilities, this one was not much more than a carved-out runway with a makeshift building all imbued with a warm glow of casual informality. The location was manned frugally by a crew of two; the owner/operator and his part time mechanic. Their combined routines concentrated on two objectives, (1) overseeing the occasional arrivals and departures of their limited clientele and of equal, or perhaps even greater importance, (2) making sure the coffee machine performed properly.

The airport was typically a casual operation that afforded the owner, a retired Canadian Air Force radioman and recreational pilot sporting the name of Jasper Fitzsimons, an opportunity to feel useful in his "out-to-pasture" years. The enterprise also kept the old man near airplanes, the great love of his life.

Fitzsimons, a lanky, hayseed sort of fellow who appeared as if he just stepped out of a Norman Rockwell painting, was on his fourth cup of coffee of the afternoon when the call came in.

"Mr. Fitzsimons, please."

"You got him."

"Mr. Fitzsimons, we are confirming the arrival of Mr. Cade's party from the 'States, scheduled for a three o'clock arrival."

It had been a while since Jasper had handled a backup confirmation like the one coming in, though he had a fair idea what the request meant. Either somebody goofed up, or somebody was in serious trouble.

In parallel fashion to the FAA regulations within the United States regarding flight plans, all Canadian-bound aircraft initiating such must notify officials immediately upon their arrival. Reminiscent of childhood, this formality seemed childish. If FAA officials had a dollar for every flight plan left open by a pilot who arrived at his destination, parked his plane, and calmly walked away without notifying the FAA, those same officials would have long since retired to some condominium on Waikiki Beach.

That is why one of the first things done by the FAA whenever a plane fails to report in on schedule is to promptly notify ARRC (Aerospace Rescue & Recovery Center), specifically the one closest to the geographical area in question. The ARRC then proceeds to make a thorough communications audit, verifying all FAA checkpoints

*Kevin L. Smith*

along the registered flight path, as well as nearby airfields. In the event of crossing the border of the United States into another country, an additional plan must be registered with international officials. Thus, in order to complete a search, personnel from both countries would have to work together to mount any kind of inquiry.

"Wish I could help ya," Fitzsimons replied. "But the fact is, they haven't showed up just yet."

"Has there been any radio communication with your facility?"

"Nope. But then again, I don't often hear from folks until they're almost on top of me."

"Very well. We appreciate your cooperation. Please let us know if you hear anything."

"Will do, Capt'n," Fitzsimons replied, in the folksy manner that delighted some, but irritated others.

As the crusty old fellow hung up the phone, he immediately started to feel the familiar itch on the big toe of his left foot – an itch that only seemed to bother him when something wasn't quite right. Actually, Jasper hadn't felt that itch since he was in the Service. Within half an hour, Jasper received another call, this time from considerably farther away.

"Hello? Uh, I mean Fitzsimons Airport. Can I help ya?"

"I hope so," came the reply. The voice was a female's, and not unpleasant. "This is Mrs. Bradley Cade. Could you by chance tell me when my husband's party arrived? You see, he was supposed to call me as soon as he landed, though I half-expected him to forget in all the excitement."

Had Fitzsimons been more tuned-in, he would have caught the nervousness in the woman's voice.

"I wish I could help," Fitzsimons remarked with a bit more reserve than usual. "But, like I told the uppity-ups who called just a little bit ago, Mr. Cade hasn't arrived yet. I was beginning to wonder if he cancelled altogether, or at least changed airports on account of the storm we had earlier today. I sure hope they didn't get caught in that bugger." There was silence at the other end of the phone. "Say, are you still there? Hello?"

"I'm sorry," Jaimie managed to get out as her mind reeled.

She was shaking. So much, it took her three attempts to hang

up the receiver.

"No! It couldn't happen...not to my Brad...not my little baby... he wouldn't let it..." her voice trailed off.

Dazed, she collapsed to the floor, still clutching the phone. After several minutes, she dialed her brother's number. It had been a long time since Jaimie asked for the help of her older brother. With Bradley blanketing her with all the security she could ever hope to want, there had been no need. Now, with the mere buzz of a dial tone, all that changed, as if all those years of serenity never existed. The previously calm, demure woman of considerable outward poise, was, moment by moment, beginning to dissolve and crumble.

It had taken but a moment of conversation for her brother, Will, to sense the magnitude of the situation, in spite of Jaimie's garbled explanations.

"Do nothing," he told her. "Sit down and pour yourself a stiff drink. I'll be right over. Do you hear me? I said, do you hear me?"

"Please, hurry," Jaimie mumbled, trembling fiercely.

"Give me twenty minutes. Bye. Oh, wait. Jaimie, remember, everything will be fine. Okay? Just hold on until I get there."

"I'll try."

They both hung up. Stockard raced along the freeway. In the time it took him to cross town, the ARRC had contacted all of the airstrips within two hundred miles. The information gleaned from these calls was hardly helpful. It appeared as if no one had been in touch, heard from, or had any information whatsoever regarding the Cade plane. Or, for that matter, any unaccounted-for aircraft. All was as it should be, save for the lost Cade party. This information, or lack of it, was conveyed upon request to Will Stockard when his call came through to FAA headquarters in Houston.

"FAA Representative Warren speaking, May I help you?"

"Let's hope so," countered Stockard. "I'm calling about my brother-in-law. His name is Bradley Cade..."

"I'm glad you called, Mr. Stockard," interrupted the official-sounding voice at the other end. "I have the boys at the ARRC on another extension. They're compiling their standard list of information sources customary in cases like this."

"What do you mean, 'cases like this'? And who in blazes is the

*Kevin L. Smith*

ARR whatever?”

“In answer to your first question, Mr. Stockard, we’re talking cases of possible downed aircraft. As for the second, the ARRC is a rescue and recovery agency.”

“How do you know it’s down? I mean, jeez. It’s only two hours overdue.”

“Yes sir. But in the last hour, Recovery and Rescue has made contact with all airports and possible landing facilities within the area in question.”

“No show, eh?”

“No sir. That is why at approximately four-thirty p.m. Mountain Standard Time, an alert notice was signaled by ARRC. May I connect you with them now?”

“Of course.”

Normally Stockard would have exploded from the delay that forced him to wait a few minutes for a voice to come on the line. This time, he welcomed the pause as a chance to absorb the rapidly-developing events involving the only real family the man ever had since the death of his own parents.

“Mr. Stockard?” Here we go again, Will thought.

“Speaking,” Stockard replied.

“We would like to ask you a few questions, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” he said, lying.

“Isn’t that typical?” he thought to himself. “I want answers, and all I get is somebody else’s questions.”

“What we’re trying to do is get a personality profile of Mr. Cade and his pilot. You see, often in these cases there are peculiarities regarding those involved that could help us determine what might have happened. You know, flying habits, intent of the trip, that sort of thing.”

Stockard tried to fill in as many blanks as possible, knowing that at all costs, he must keep them away from Jaimie. Even if they did put her through the mill, burying her with their barrage of questions, Stockard doubted they would learn any more than he could tell them himself. After all, he was a close personal friend, a brother-in-law, and a trusted employee of long standing. Who better could draw them a profile, both personal and objective?



Thirty minutes went by, and conversation terminated with the same sort of briskness with which it began. From this conversation, Stockard learned their next step was to notify Civil Air Patrol. CAP, under the oversight and cooperation of the US Air Force, would declare a mission. That meant assigning a mission coordinator chosen for their degree of experience, as well as knowledge of the search terrain. The coordinator would have full authority to organize the search and rescue operation. Cade's case was being handled by retired Colonel Maxwell Bleeker. Working from the Civil Air Patrol wing commander headquarters at Malstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls, Montana, Colonel Bleeker was already preparing operations to begin at 2100 hours. All elements would then be put into motion. This was no small task, for the operation involved training CAP pilots, local citizen rescue teams and law enforcement personnel. All would be coordinated with the Canadians.

At least there *is* some organization to all of this, Stockard thought. With the FAA and CAP doing everything possible, brother and sister were left with nothing to do but wait and hope. Waiting was neither Will's nor Jaimie's strong suit. In fact, it was practically everything Will could manage just to keep Jaimie calmed down and reassured. Stockard had always doubted his sister's ability to handle something like this. His worst fears were soon realized. Already she was becoming unmanageable. Within hours, Jaimie's steady flow of tears had been replaced with a whimpering, shaking, near-convulsive display signaling imminent mental collapse. By midnight, Stockard knew he was out of his league.

Jaimie didn't need hand holding. She needed a doctor, maybe even a shrink.

At eight-thirty a.m. the following morning, the family physician arrived, accompanied by a specialist. Jaimie was carefully examined, administered a powerful tranquilizer, and put to bed. A nurse was then assigned for around-the-clock supervision.

With the problem of his sister put on hold, Stockard tried to stay updated on the progress of the search. It was becoming obvious to all involved that the plane was down somewhere between Laramie and Fitzsimons' runway, an area covering over eight hundred miles. It was not much to go on, but better than nothing, thought Stockard, as he

*Kevin L. Smith*

continued to pace the floor of Brad Cade's study.

About mid-morning, a call came in to Houston and relayed immediately to Stockard, informing him of a radio communication taken place approximately twelve-fifteen p.m. on the day of Cade's disappearance. The pilot of the aircraft had requested information on the forecast and outlook for their intended route. Presumably, everything was fine at that point.

"Just what exactly was the outlook, if you don't mind my asking?" Stockard deplored conversations that forced him to halt forward progress.

"One moment...yes, here it is. The National Weather Service reaffirms the information forwarded to the Cade party yesterday during that communication. Mr. Cade's pilot was evidently informed of a small, low-pressure zone working its way into their flight path."

"Why on God's green earth didn't he turn back or change course, then?"

"Our guess, Mr. Stockard, is that the front must not have looked that significant at the time, either to the Laramie radio tower or to the pilot since he did not request a change of route."

"What happens now?"

"Well, sir, based upon the data we have up to this point, the FAA is assuming the aircraft is down, and located somewhere between their destination and the point of lost communication. That places the search coordinates into a two hundred and forty mile swath, providing there was little or no variation in the presumed direction of the plane. Therefore, we are initiating a search for the missing aircraft in that area."

"What if you don't find them along that path?"

"Then we widen the imaginary line of their supposed flight path by ten miles," replied the official.

"But that's forty-eight hundred square miles! Let's cut the crap, all right? If they're not found on that beeline, what really are their chances of being found at all?"

"We are confident they will be located, Mr. Stockard. What we must remember is these things take time. We'll just have to be patient."

"Look, spare me the canned pep talk. I'm not one of your hysterical

wives or mothers slobbering over the phone, begging for some crumb of hope from you people. If you can't give it to me straight, then don't waste my time. Just tell me one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Where are you starting the search, and when?"

"Laramie, and it's already being organized. The first search parties depart in one hour."

"Thank you." Click.

It didn't take long for Stockard to decide his next move. He promptly summoned the family housekeeper.

"Mrs. Hofshmidt!" he shouted.

"I'm coming, I'm coming. I don't care if you are her only brother. I'll thank you to stop bellowing. Mrs. Cade may be sedated, but she is not comatose."

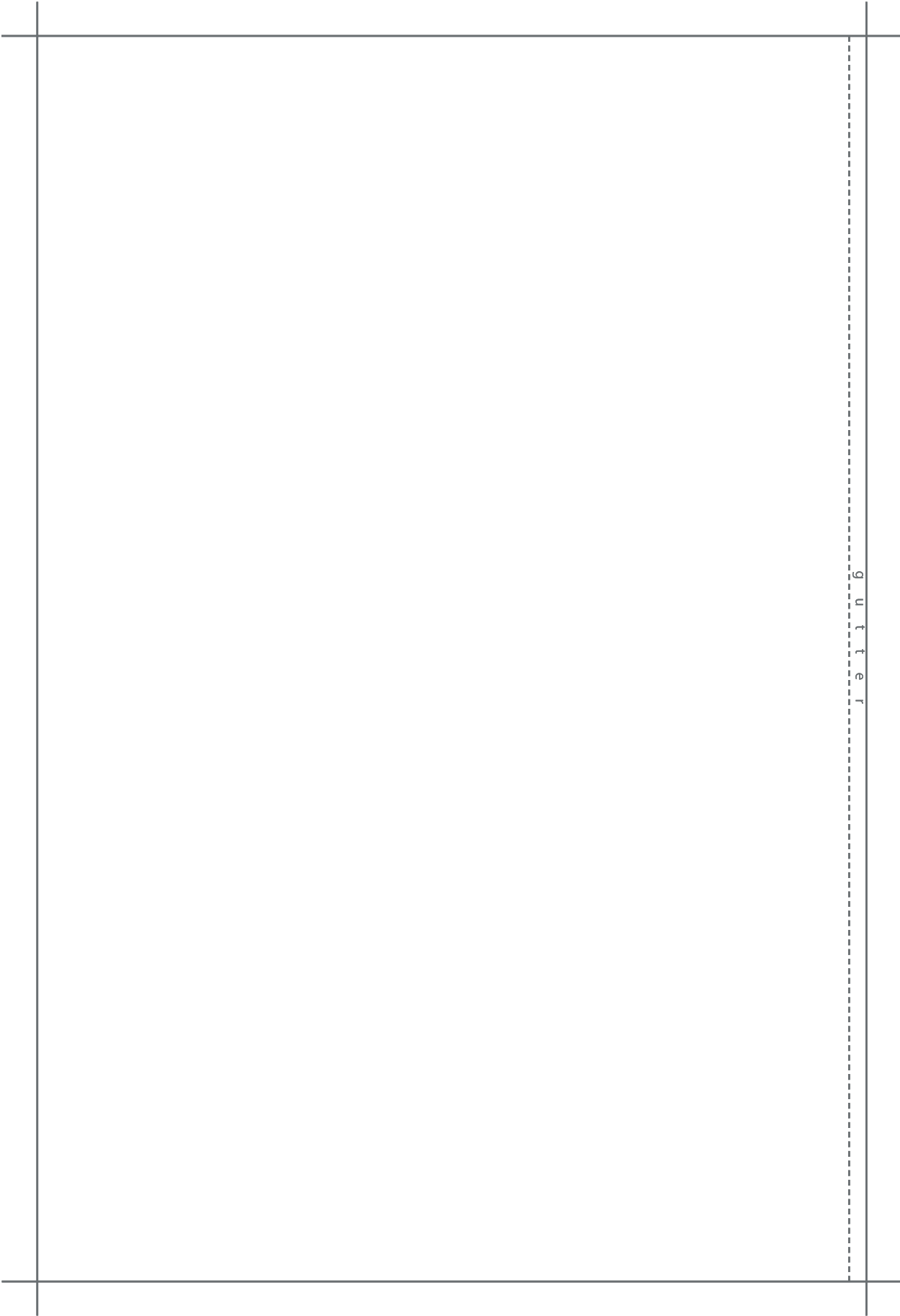
Elsa had been with the family so long, she assumed she was part of it. Whenever she felt the need, the old woman took on the role of a matriarch – along with its implied authority. Even Stockard knew when to back off from the old mother hen.

"I'm sorry, Elsa. But I'm in a bit of a hurry. I hate to leave Jamie, but I've decided to join the rescue party. Please stay close to the phone, as I will be checking in every few hours to see how things are going here. We're all counting on you." That vote of confidence by Stockard smoothed her ruffled feathers.

"Don't you worry about a thing. Me and the doctors have everything under control. Just find them, for God's sake."

She was a tough old bird, thought Stockard. But she had a heart of gold. With a brief embrace, Stockard made his exit.

Driving to the airport, Stockard could no longer ignore the uneasiness in his stomach, telling him to expect the worst.



g u t t e r



## CHAPTER FOUR

TWO hours past daybreak, Kevin Cade stirred. Fifteen hours had elapsed.

Could it all have been a dream? Yes, that's it, he thought to himself. Just a dream.

As he awakened, the first thing the child noticed as he cracked open his sleep-laden eyelashes was the dragonfly suspended on the cattail drooping lazily just inches from his nose. When the flimsy-winged insect departed from its perch, Kevin wrenched himself to full awareness, sitting up in the process. Rubbing the numbness from his face, his thoughts returned to yesterday's ordeal, with all its conspicuous evidence scattered helter-skelter around him. Turning, the boy's attention shifted to the cadaverous form of Bradley Cade.

He touched the dead man's cheek with the palm of his hand, and was startled by the cold, stiffened quality of his father's flesh. Is this what death is? He wondered. The boy remembered reading of it, but had yet to fully understand the word. Perhaps that was a blessing. The pain would surely have been greater had his father just walked away. Yet here he was, still with him. There was even some left-handed comfort in that.

Finally, his eyes turned from his father's corpse to the strange, unfamiliar world where he had spent the night. So beautiful, so exciting, and yet...frightening. The forest was everything his father had said, and more. With the dew-weighted leaves of massive oak trees glistening in the morning sun, and echoes of a thousand different

*Kevin L. Smith*

sounds enlivening the vastness around him, the boy's heart pulsed with excitement.

Standing up, the lone survivor groaned from the after-effects. There wasn't a spot on his small physique that didn't hurt or wasn't colored with bruises. Those first few steps were grim agony. Ambling his way through the debris left by the plane's destruction, Kevin unconsciously gravitated toward the only portion of the craft still recognizable, the passenger section.

For Kevin, it was important to discover what might be left inside the plane.

Slowly and painfully, the child crawled through the gaping hole that had once been a viewing window, and found himself inside the upturned fuselage. No longer a well-organized compartment, all items remaining within the cabin were scattered about in total chaos. As the youngster began fumbling through the cluttered mess, the scene took the shape of someone looking in earnest, but not knowing for what.

"Let me think," the boy mumbled, scratching his forehead in unconscious mimicry of one of his late father's mannerisms. "What would Dad want me to do first?"

Without realizing it, Kevin had, for the first time, envisioned his father in the past tense. He didn't even seem to shift gears. Children were often like that. No anguish, no paralyzing grief. They just seem to go on with life, almost as if they knew something adults did not – something that helped them deal with that graphic finality.

"Empty the plane. That's it. Put everything back together," the boy said to himself, as he took a careful look around the compartment. "But where to begin?"

Fondling first one article and then another, it wasn't long before Kevin became distracted by the alluring world beyond the wreckage. As any child might, in spite of the recent disaster, he decided to go exploring.

All the stories his father had told him were as nothing compared to the splendor before him. Eyeing a gentle slope off to his right, a thirty-degree downward incline, the child decided to take the course offering the least resistance. As the youngster reached the bottom, he discovered a small stream – a by-product of the annual runoff from the snow level, which, during this time of year, was nearly five thousand

feet above the boy's present altitude.

"Oh, boy!" he shouted, suddenly realizing how thirsty he had become.

Bending over, Kevin took several large gulps of the ice-cold water, which tasted even better than it looked. He was about to reach down for another swallow when suddenly his eye caught something moving in the stream, inches from his face. Startled, Kevin fell back on his buttocks, and stared in fascination at the seven-inch bullfrog, barely cracking the surface of the water with his bulging eyes. With a mighty kick, the frog was instantly gone, taking the magic of the moment with him and leaving Kevin to stare off in the direction of the frog's path. Again, that distant, far-away gaze, the same one that caught his father's attention not one day prior on the ill-fated plane ride. His father had been well-acquainted with the peculiar way his son had of tuning out everything around him. Brad Cade had once jokingly inquired of Kevin as to where he traveled on such occasions.

"Oh, no place," his son smiled.

The trait would follow him throughout the boy's life. Some day it would carry a great deal more significance than a child's harmless daydreaming.

Snapping back from his mind's wanderings, the boy turned his head toward the endless rows of oak, alpine larch, and white back pine; the trees were tall and majestic, especially to a child scarcely four feet tall. The living, wooden structures seemed to envelope all else. Actually, that was partly true. As anyone could easily discover upon entering a deeply-forested region, the amount of vegetation and animal life present had a direct correlation to the density of those exalted beauties. When they become too absorbing, too majestic, they choke off the sunlight, except to themselves. When there is no sunlight, there is no vegetation, injecting a serious kink in the natural chain of life, with insects on one end, and the larger mammals such as moose and bear at the other. That irrefutable fact of nature had caused many well-informed students of forestry to conclude that naturally-occurring forest fires, such as in those caused by lightning, are in reality part of some master plan by unknown forces to revitalize and recharge the precious life cycle. Interestingly, some of the most prolific locations full of life in nature are those charred forests, provided they have been

*Kevin L. Smith*

given a few years to regroup and re-foliate.

Kevin's neck was beginning to stiffen from the prolonged upward bent. Picking up a small pebble and skimming it across the stream, his mind began receiving hunger signals. Turning around, the young survivor headed back toward the crash site, all the while wondering what he was going to do about his growing appetite. When at last the boy had worked his way back up the slope, Kevin's natural inclination was to search among the bits and pieces of the wreckage for something – anything that might quell the empty feeling gnawing his insides.

*When* Will Stockard arrived at the airport in Laramie, he made a beeline for the administrative offices. After introducing himself to the head of personnel, Stockard initiated a series of questions of which a high-powered attorney would have been proud. Afterwards, Stockard compelled the coordinator of the search-and-rescue operation to assign his chartered pilot a portion of the grid. Within an hour, they were airborne, headed for their quadrant. Within two hours, they began to understand what they were up against.

Much of the terrain near Laramie was fairly easy to cover efficiently, but the search became more difficult in the north, where spotting anything as small as an aircraft was near-impossible. The North American Rockies were awesome, even from thousands of feet in the air. Eventually an armada of sixty one planes and copters became involved in the search effort; whether American or Canadian, all of them faced the same uphill battle.

Late that first afternoon, report of the crash reached the news media. The Civil Air Patrol personnel braced themselves for the customary flood of inquiries – a flood that never materialized. Unlike so many celebrities caught up in dramatic events and the subsequent news coverage – as per Will Rogers, Carole Lombard, Buddy Holly – the crash involving Bradley Cade garnered only a fraction of that customary barrage. Cade was a private person, both while he was alive, and even more so in his death. Regardless, some major newspapers did manage to inject a two-paragraph filler regarding his disappearance, usually in the financial section. In a way it was a plus, as it afforded the investigative entities more time for the actual search – time otherwise



diverted to media coverage and constant requests for updates. Things were going slow enough as it was. For a person like Will Stockard, the whole ordeal was painfully snail-paced and tedious, constantly calling to mind the proverbial search for the needle in the haystack.

As the first day's efforts wound down, there was a genuine feeling among the group that progress was being made. Checking into the only motel available in the small Montana town designated as their first pit stop, Stockard wearily dialed the number of his sister's home in Houston.

"It's going to be dark soon," thought Kevin.

How easily the child had whittled away the afternoon, his young mind occupied with sorting through all the items strewn about the cock-eyed fuselage. One by one, the youngster tossed out the window any and all items that seemed important or useful – not to mention a few that just looked interesting.

Next, he approached the "glove box," as it was called. Kevin opened its hinged door, and placed its contents carefully in his lap. They were mostly papers, and his attention gradually rested upon a small pocket-size pamphlet nearly an inch thick. The front cover, in spite of its title *Pilot's Emergency Survival*, did little to recommend the contents for worthwhile reading. Flipping through the pages, however, the boy saw numerous pictures and illustrations similar to the reference books he had laboriously read on wilderness skills. Casually, he tossed the small paperback out the window along with the other valuables. Again those hunger pangs, reminding him that he still hadn't eaten.

The knapsack! How could he have forgotten? The small tote bag was one of the first things he tossed out of the plane. Crawling out, Kevin sifted among the articles until he found it. Rummaging through its pockets, the child located what he had been after, a Baby Ruth bar and a slightly-bruised apple. Sitting down upon a rock, Kevin unwrapped the confection, devoured it handily, then started on the fruit. After a bite or two, Kevin stopped and began to cry. Not a whimper, but a sustained weeping, a deeply anguished outpouring of sadness. He wept for his father, whose death was only starting to sink in. He wept for his mother, wishing she were there. Mostly, Kevin

*Kevin L. Smith*

wept for himself, for he was alone, so terribly alone, for the first time in his life.

An only child, Kevin was used to solitude, often spending hour upon hour, playing by himself. But this – left totally in the wilderness, isolated, with no one for miles – this was a whole different game, with a different set of rules. Like the difference between being starving and just ready for supper. Adults facing Kevin's dilemma had been known to collapse into hysterical fits. At least in this respect, his youth might prove itself a valuable ally. After all, wasn't ignorance bliss? For Kevin, his youthful ignorance was at least an insulator from total despair.

With the resilience common to children, Kevin stopped his flow of tears long enough to spot a pair of binoculars hanging from the mangled armrest of the pilot's chair. Absorbed by the possibilities, Kevin retrieved them. Noticing a tall tree with low hanging branches, he walked over, threw the eyeglasses over his shoulder, and started to climb. A nimble boy, Kevin had little trouble negotiating its limbs, and soon found himself nearly sixty feet above the ground.

How glorious it all was! Soaking in the panorama provided by the forty-foot perch, Kevin decided the forest was even more beautiful than his father had said it was. He was halfway up the tree, and the altitude gained by his short climb was high enough to multiply his field of vision by several factors.

It was now close to three o'clock in the afternoon. Yet, the sun hung stubbornly in the sky. Even so, the shadows of the forest draped themselves here and there like giant curtains, placed in their respective positions simply to create an air of mystery. It was between those shadows that Kevin noticed something moving. Whatever it was became a plural, a steadily-moving mass of gray and brown, darting to and fro in overlapping arcs. They were something near the dimension of a good-sized dog, the youngster reasoned. In and out, appearing and disappearing. When once again they came into view, the boy understood. No doubt about it; they were heading in his direction, deliberately, methodically.

His little heart was beating faster now, keeping time with the pounding in his temples. What had promised to be a wonderfully new and exciting discovery soon took on a different flavor. While separated by nearly forty feet from the new arrivals, Kevin didn't need the

binoculars to see, in all its terrorizing detail, the vicious, bloodthirsty pack of timber wolves that had, in a matter of hours, smelled death hanging like a pall over the crash site. Frozen in fear, Kevin stared at the band of predators beneath him. Through the eyes of a child whose closest encounter with wild animals had been through the bars of a community zoo, nothing could have been more frightening, or fascinating, as the scene below.

Despite all the frenzied movements, there was order to this fierce group. Their leader, the Alpha – a name given by wolf behaviorists to identify the head of a wolf pack – carefully scanned the perimeters. Sniffing here and there, he at last gave his instructions. As if by some unspoken signal, the pack proceeded with great voracity to tear apart the two human bodies, piece by piece. It didn't seem to matter that they were nothing more than rotting carrion flesh. Food was food, and food hadn't been as easy to come by as in previous years. Its scarcity had reduced the number of pack members down from the normal eight or nine, to only five.

Being demonstrated before Kevin's eyes was a textbook example of the opportunistic nature of the wolf community. As a predator, wolves prefer to hunt large mammals such as whitetail deer, moose, caribou, elk, and bighorn sheep. When these animals are unobtainable, wolves will prey on smaller animals, most notably beaver, snowshoe hare, mink, muskrat, squirrels, birds, reptiles, fish, and even large insects and berries. When all else fails, they will even eat carrion. The reason for this was simple; heavy hunting and trapping robbed wolves of their normal prey.

The observer in the trees above could not have uttered a sound, so ardent was his attention. Studying first one member, then another, the boy finally settled upon the largest of the bunch, which was clearly the lead predator, the Alpha. Standing almost thirty-nine inches tall at the shoulders, this magnificent specimen was over six feet long, and weighed nearly one hundred pounds. Though sharing in the feast, the Alpha's gaze continually shifted left and right, probing and searching. This was not the casual pose of a mindless beast enjoying a good meal. The frozen stance Kevin had assumed upon spotting the pack had thus far protected him well in avoiding those roving eyes; eyes that, like the human species, are set in front of the face, and not on the sides of the

*Kevin L. Smith*

head. They are eyes that are the mark of a hunter who searches and penetrates his visual field for prey, so different from the wide set eyes of prey species who have an almost three hundred and sixty degree range of vision essential for scanning and detecting the presence of a stalking predator.

If Kevin could remain undetected until the Alpha chose to take his leave, the immediate threat to his survival would pass. On the other hand, if spotted, it would simply be a matter of time, waiting for the child to weaken from hunger, thirst, or fatigue. Even on the bright side, who could say how long the pack would remain? Kevin knew he couldn't stay safely tucked away in the branches indefinitely. All he could do was wait, and hope. As the frightened child watched, the wolves dismembered and disemboweled the corpse of his father below. His mind shut out the horror, transporting Kevin to another place...a happier time.





## CHAPTER FIVE

*After* several attempts to complete the call to his sister, Stockard finally succeeded. Informed that Jaimie was sleeping restfully from the continuous injection of sedatives, he expressed his gratitude to Elsa and hung up. The day had been a long one. With but two hours of sleep from the previous evening to get him through, the bed in the motel room felt heavenly, despite its washboard nature. Stockard could have slept on a bed of nails and it would not have mattered. His pilot, Jeffrey Orwell, would have chosen a similar way to spend the early evening, but his job dictated otherwise. The reason Orwell wasn't dozing comfortably like his client was the necessity of being debriefed via telephone by the mission coordinator at Malstrom AFB. Orwell wasn't being picked on. All participants in the air search were required to report at the end of each day until the mission was terminated. In the Civil Air Patrol organization, debriefings were never treated negatively; even a lack of clues helped them eliminate large sections of the search grid, and concentrate on more promising areas.

For Orwell, this was the part of his job he least relished. Being on a rescue mission with its built-in tension wasn't the problem per se. Rather, it was the point of being viewed as an unwanted outsider by the rest of the highly-organized and efficient CAP. A qualified pilot in his own right, Jeffrey Orwell resented being thrust into that loosely-defined label of "unskilled volunteer" in an otherwise tightly-knit cadre of air jockeys well rehearsed in the art of air search and rescue. As if that wasn't bad enough, Mission Coordinator Maxwell Bleeker disliked

*Kevin L. Smith*

the idea of allowing close relatives participate in a mission, believing those inclusions injected an air of amateurism to the rescue operation. Oh, they were polite enough, thought Orwell. But he disliked being talked down to, or patronized.

From Bleeker's point of view, neither Stockard nor Orwell paralleled themselves to previous distasteful experiences with bothersome outsiders. Even so, he was reserving judgment upon them for a time. Until then, the retired Colonel placed them neatly inside the filing cabinet of his brain, just one notch above bounty hunters. They were the worst. Only in it for the money, and usually nothing more than weekend recreational pilots anyway, they displayed precious little discipline, or common sense.

Orwell placed his call and made his report. Terminating the conversation as quickly as possible, he returned to the flea-bitten motel room for some much needed shut eye.

Had the season been autumn instead of early summer, the wolf pack would have brought their pups with them, old enough by then to begin their training period for hunting and general integration into the pack's highly-structured society. However, being only a few weeks old, the pups were left behind in a secluded place nearby, guarded by their mother. The arrangement was a practical one. Their leader was a restless sort, and did not like to remain in any one location for long. This time the pack had eaten well, but in deference to their leader's mate and offspring, food was saved to take back with them.

They left as quickly as they arrived.

The cool air had a bite to it; even more so to Kevin Cade perched in the tall evergreen, pine needles rattling in the evening breezes. When he was convinced the wolves had gone, the boy began his journey down the tree. Climbing down, Kevin discovered, was much harder than climbing up, especially when hindered by shivering. It was a wonder he was able to get down at all. Some children might have simply clung to the tree in petrified shock, regardless of the cold. But there was something in the boy's nature, something special and impossible to discern – by anyone on earth, that is. Call it grit, guts, fortitude; whatever it was, the child possessed a heaping share. Eight-



year-old Kevin could be bullied, and certainly frightened. Yet there was clarity in his thinking, a sort of pendulum of emotion that had a way of swinging back toward the middle, away from extremes. There was no panic here. Placing his foot on the lowest branch of the alpine fir, the boy landed from there to the ground with a thud.

Kevin surveyed the damage at ground zero. All of the equipment had been strewn about and gnarled around the edges. Feeling cold, tired, hungry, and lonely, Kevin stood leaning against the huge tree trunk, wondering what to do next. Putting his hands inside his pants pockets for warmth, he was reminded of the aborted candy bars absentmindedly abandoned nearly three hours before. Devouring them hungrily, he immediately felt better. He had quelled, if only temporarily, the gnawing inside. With one problem out of the way, Kevin found it much easier to think. Sitting upon a flat boulder, he tried to remember his father's stories of backpacking and survival.

"First," he recalled reading, "build a fire. A fire will warm the body and spirit."

He wasn't certain what the "spirit" part was, but warming the body was clear enough. For this, at least, Kevin had prepared. Over three months prior, Kevin begged his father to let him build the evening fire in the family den. His father thoughtfully consented, not realizing the reason behind the request. So it went, night after night.

The memory of those occasions infused in the child some sorely-needed confidence. Looking for a suitable location, he decided on a cleared patch of ground, outlined on two sides by a giant boulder. Without knowing it, Kevin had guaranteed himself a cozy evening, as the nearby mass of rock would serve to reflect and distribute the heat from the fire, provided he got it started. In the manner of his well-rehearsed practice sessions back home, young Cade accumulated the driest wood he could find, only to realize he still needed matches. It was dark now, and finding the waterproof container of matches his father packed in their gear was going to be difficult. His only hope was their being in his father's backpack, as the blackness precluded looking elsewhere. Searching among the pockets filled with a medley of articles, his nimble hands settled upon a small aluminum cylinder two and a half inches long. Unscrewing the cap, Kevin eagerly withdrew one of the wooden matches. Cupping his palms carefully to protect his efforts

*Kevin L. Smith*

from the wind, Kevin struck the match head and lowered its flame to the bits of wood chips and cotton lint gathered in a small pile at his feet. As the pile ignited, and the flames grew larger, Kevin delicately added more wood, a small portion at a time so as not to stifle the flame. Visibly consoled by the warmth and light, the lone survivor resumed scouring the wreckage site, hoping to find his own pack frame and sleeping bag attached. With the help of the fire's glow, he did find it, but almost wished he hadn't.

For no discernable reason, the wolves had singled out the child's personal belongings to vent their anger at what was decidedly another attempt by man to invade and reduce their private domain. Fortunately, his father's gear was still in fair condition. Without deliberating further, Kevin unraveled the oversized sleeping bag with its well-worn edges, instinctively depositing it between the fire and natural wall of rock. Snuggled in comfortably, the boy stared wistfully into the flames, still vibrant, but which was quickly receding amid the growing pile of coals. As the wood crackled and popped from the gasses released, Kevin huddled in his father's bedroll, soaking in the scents and aromas left behind in the cotton lining and wondered what the following day would bring. It wasn't supposed to be scary, this trip to the woods. It wasn't supposed to hurt, either. Most of all, it wasn't supposed to be lonely.

For only the second time since the crash, Kevin began to cry.

"Oh, Mother," he pleaded, "Why don't you come and get me?"

The seat of consciousness somewhere between his heart and mind couldn't fathom why he had been left alone so long.

"What...what will I do?"

Joining his hands and closing his eyes, the boy started praying, just like his mother had taught him. "Please, God. Please help me... please send my mother. Tell her where I am." He paused to think, and continued, "Don't let those ugly dogs bite me, God...like they did my... dad, amen."

Feeling better for having talked to someone, the sobbing child finally fell asleep, finding no small comfort from the fire, and his father's sleeping bag. He would sleep well tonight. He would need to.

His ordeal had only begun.



Taking their individual assignment on the search grid seriously, Will Stockard and his pilot breakfasted, refueled, and were in the air headed for their coordinates by seven a.m. Stockard was compelled to admit the program was thorough, especially in light of the constant pressure of time, and geared to one irrefutably alarming fact; chances of survival involving plane crashes in the uncharted wilderness are in direct proportion to the speed with which potential survivors are located. The figures bore out that conclusion. Of those found within the first twenty-four hours, there was an even sixty percent chance of survival. By the second day, they were almost nil. Naturally, these numbers were only averages, and they didn't tell the whole story or incorporate all the variables. For instance, the severity of the injuries and the time of year both weighed heavily on the outcome. There was a third ingredient, one no less significant than the others. This additional variable was the roll of the dice, whether the victims received good breaks or bad ones. In total, it spelled a big, fat question mark. While there was nothing anyone could do about the incongruities, the CAP would continue to faithfully plod forward with their own game plan.

"I wouldn't throw in the towel just yet," Orwell quipped. "There's a lot of ground to cover, and we've only just started. Besides, the weather has stayed out of our way so far. That's not just good news for us up here, but also for those down there, too."

Wondering if his little pep talk was doing anything to cheer up his passenger, Orwell looked casually over at Stockard. The man's body language was a peculiar set of contradictions. His body slouched nonchalantly, but one fist remained clenched. His feet were crossed comfortably, yet his jaws remained clamped. Quite a guy, Orwell thought to himself. For someone with feelings involved, Stockard was remarkably controlled. The job went a lot easier because of it.

"Who knows? Maybe we'll get lucky," the pilot thought.

Luck was what they were going to need, and buckets of it. Seeing Stockard turn his direction, Orwell forced out a light-hearted smile. That was one thing he was good at, pilot Orwell acknowledged to himself. His old poker face had never let him down.

*Kevin L. Smith*

Squirming out of the cocoon of the sleeping bag, Kevin stood erect; shaky at first, but cranking his young muscles awake with a series of stretches.

Inspecting the campsite by the light of day, he first noticed the heavy moisture coating everything exposed to the night air, including the sleeping bag and his own matted hair. He saw the fire he had built the night before and how little there was left of it. Blessed with an inquiring mind, Kevin bent down and removed, pocket-by-pocket, the contents of his father's pack starting with two aluminum kettles and a frying pan positioned in the center compartment. How splendid they looked to the boy, holding them upright to reflect the morning sun off the polished metal.

"Let's see," he said, placing the cookware to his side and returning to the rest of the contents.

Among them were several yards of nylon cord coiled tightly, a small plastic purse housing an assorted array of needles and matching nylon thread, face cloth and other toiletries, including a couple of hotel-size bars of soap, and a toothbrush. Proceeding, he soon found a scouring pad and several waterproof packets of salt and pepper.

"Now if only I had something to put it on," he sighed.

Eyeing a small pouch on the left side, Kevin reached in and pulled out what looked like a plastic handkerchief. Unfolding the thing, Kevin was amazed by its size when spread open on the ground. Yet he didn't have a clue as to the purpose of the five by seven-foot piece of plastic. It looked important, so he refolded the transparent material and laid it gently next to the scouring pad. Reaching into one of the last two pockets, Kevin removed a hand-sized mirror, several adhesive bandages and a string of safety pins all connected together in a chain. Lastly, a tiny jar of something identified by its handwritten label as "fly dope," the words informing him it was something to be smeared on the face and arms. Why, was just one more mystery.

Sitting on his backside to allow the flow of blood to return to his legs, having gone numb from crouching, Kevin ogled in wonderment at the array stacked up neatly at his feet.

Grabbing for the only pocket left to empty, Kevin lifted the flap and delighted himself with the discovery that bespoke a solution to the immediate problem, his nagging stomach. Fitted so compactly that

even his eight-year-old hands had no difficulty holding it was a scaled-down backpacker's version of fishing gear. The clear lid to the plastic box revealed hooks, flies, bits of lead, salmon eggs, floats, and fishing line wrapped neatly around a strip of cardboard. Looking down at the diminutive kit in his hands, Kevin remembered the previous summer when his father, in compensation for postponing his first real wilderness experience for another year, buffered his son's disappointment with a fishing trip. While nothing more than an overnight visit to a four-acre pond on a plot of rural acreage barely five miles from his home, the jaunt had been a grand adventure.

Recalling the two of them spending the day sitting, talking, soaking in the sun, even catching a couple of undersize catfish in reward for their patience, made him feel warmer inside. As if it were yesterday, the boy remembered in crystalline detail the fun of frying those scaled creatures with bulging eyes. He remembered his father lovingly removing most of the bones from his portion so he wouldn't choke. Maybe it was because they worked so hard to catch them. Or maybe he had just been hungry. Whatever the reason, Kevin was certain that fish was the best meal he had ever eaten. Looking into the miniature tackle box, Kevin's eyes began to cloud, and his vision blurred. Wiping the moisture from his cheeks, the child stood up. Forcing himself to think in the present, he took one more look around his immediate surroundings. Such a shame, he thought. Both tents shredded beyond repair. Satisfied he had missed nothing important, the boy headed back to the original pile of equipment accumulated from inside the wreckage.

Making his way around a boulder too large to jump and too troublesome to climb, the young mountaineer no sooner negotiated the narrow footpath to the side than his foot caught an object that caused him to trip headfirst, crashing to the ground with a heavy thud. Wiping the dirt from his face, Kevin leaped back in horror at what was plainly the mangled, decapitated head of Jake Buckley.

Stumbling away, half in a crawl, the stunned youngster hurriedly fumbled his way back to the campsite, gasping for air. With mind buzzing, he remained there motionless for several minutes. Then, as if ordered to do so, Kevin swung into action with lucid clarity.

"I can't stay here! I can't stay here!" he kept yelling over and

*Kevin L. Smith*

over.

Rolling up the sleeping bag and strapping the bundle to the frame, he checked to see if the matches were still in his pocket. Remembering that his knapsack contained a pair of socks and a set of underwear, he quickly added them to his gear. Returning all the unpacked particulars to his father's pack, Kevin struggled with the oversized bulk, doing his best to strap the adult unit onto the back of his undersized body.

Kevin did all this in a matter of minutes. The determined child, with remarkably little hesitation, left what had been his home for the last thirty-six hours. Without so much as a look over his shoulder, he took off in the direction that seemed the most hospitable, along the path of the small stream. He added one last item to his load, his eye catching sight of it on the way out. Lying face down and slightly dog-eared was the pocket-sized survival handbook. Maybe it would come in handy. Raising his brow, the boy spotted the dark cloud mass at the edge of the horizon.

"Please don't rain," he begged the distant patch of nebula.

Had the child possessed a timepiece, the face would have read ten-thirty a.m.

"*About* half through the search at day two," Stockard thought to himself, and already they were beginning the second stage.

Stage one turned up little, though the search succeeded in locating two other downed aircraft, one plane having been missing over six months, and the other two years.

"I hope it doesn't take that long to find Cade's Beechcraft," Stockard remarked between sips of his third ration of decaf; the real thing made him nervous.

Rubbing his eyes, he wondered if everyone else had headaches from looking through binoculars.

"Message received," Stockard heard Orwell acknowledge over the radio.

"What did they want?" he asked, knowing the communication came from CAP headquarters.

"Seems a good-sized storm is heading our way from the Pacific."

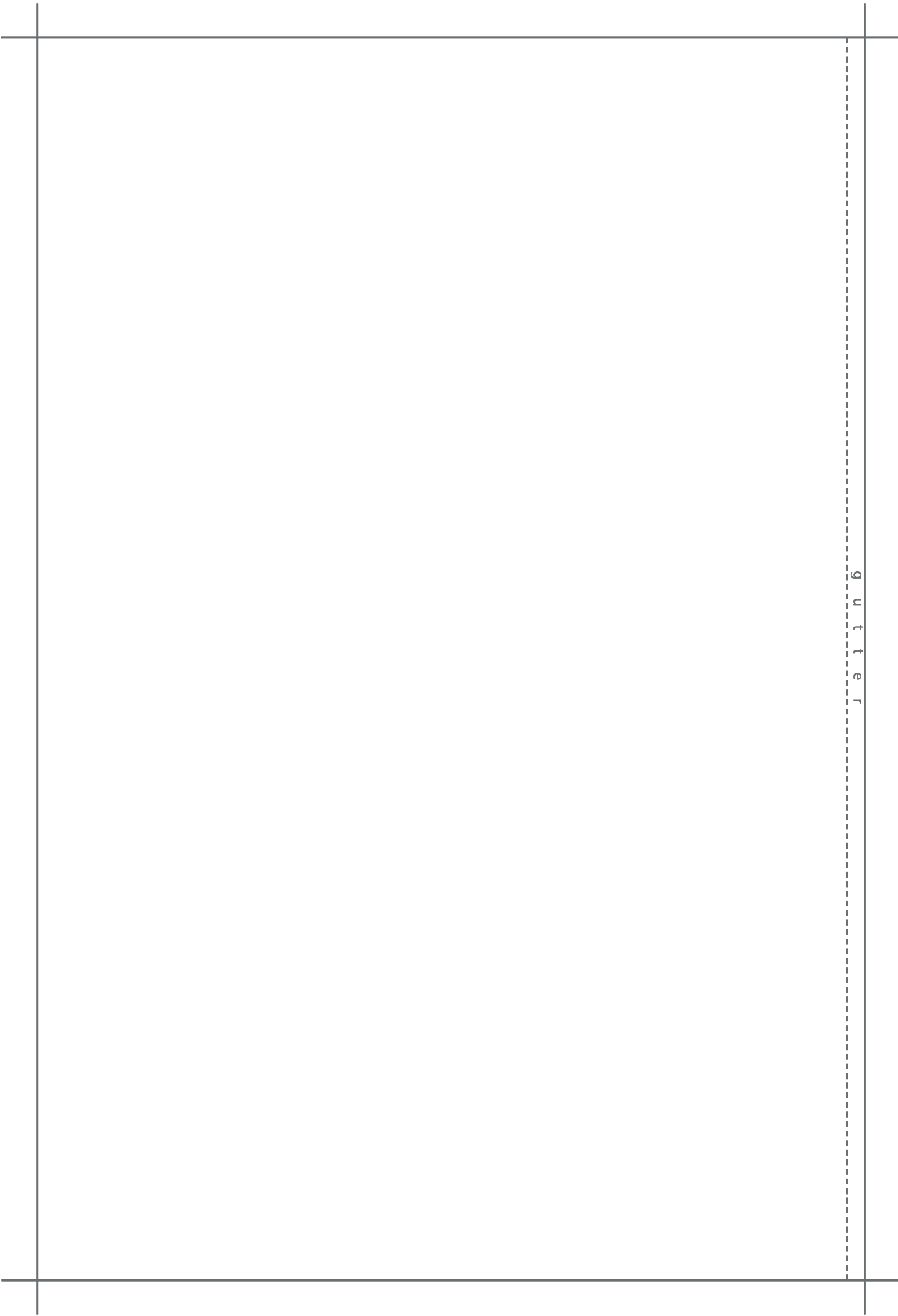
"Oh, just great. Don't bother telling me what that means; I

already have a good idea.”

With that charming bit of news, Stockard asked Orwell to try and patch him up with Ma Bell. The time had come to call home. The patch took twenty minutes, but eventually he connected up with old Hofschmidt on the other end of the line. The reception was scratchy, but the message was clear. Awakened from her medication early that morning, Jaimie accepted the news of her husband's and son's continued disappearance in the worst possible way. There was little choice, according to the physician and consulting psychiatrist, but to increase her sedation. Acknowledging the volatile nature of the woman, both decided it was better to postpone any harsh realities where she was concerned, hoping she just might not have to face them at all.

By two p.m., Stockard and Orwell were over northern Montana, reassigned for the third time that day. Still, headquarters received no positive indicators. Will Stockard wished he could remove the ants from his trousers. If there was only more he could do. He knew it was just a matter of time, and Bleeker would deep-six the operation.

And there wasn't a thing he could do about it.





## CHAPTER SIX

*Time* and unforeseen occurrences befell many people that year, not just Kevin Cade. That was the interesting thing about adversity. It was indiscriminate in its selection. You could be rich or poor, young or old, Chinese or Norwegian. It mattered not. It was like rolling the dice. Better yet, like Russian roulette. You might glide smoothly down life's eight lane freeway without so much as a bump. And just when you think you have it good, the jerk in the lane next to you picks that moment to scrutinize his Rand McNally. A second later, the two of you are careening merrily off the road and into the hundred foot ravine bordering the highway-of-life. There was no method to the madness. True, some do get more adversity than others, and others seem to dodge the bullet of misfortune nearly all their lives. Yet, just when you let your guard down...

That year, 1958, the same year Cade took his son camping was also the year the young actor James Dean died in an auto crash. It was also the year that accountant Stanley Macklin of Chicago faced going to prison for his minor role in the embezzlement scheme concocted by his superiors. Macklin was one of the subordinate wheels of the administrative machinery making up the Teamsters Local. Stanley's job as assistant to the head comptroller was neither difficult, nor high salaried. But for a green bookkeeper fresh out of college with a wife to support, he was grateful for it. He had been there two years when the FBI approached him discretely one Tuesday afternoon on his way home from work. They were about to make a serious assault on the

*Kevin L. Smith*

Local, which was actually a stepping stone to bigger fish, the national headquarters of the Brotherhood of Teamsters. The governmental gumshoes had, inch by inch, assembled a hefty stack of documented evidence. When Macklin weakly denied any wrongdoing or complicity, the operatives in no uncertain words made it plain the entire personnel staff of the Chicago branch was implicated. And when heads began to roll, his might be the first. Of course, if he cooperated...

When Macklin walked into the front door of his rented flat that evening, he wasted no time relating the conversation to his wife Dolores. She was the stronger of the pair, and less inclined to unravel. But even she was unnerved by the obvious danger. The two ate their dinner in silence, or tried to. Stanley wasn't well suited to playing hardball, and he didn't feel much like eating. He kept going over in his mind how idiotic he had been to allow this to happen to him; how utterly blind and naïve he was, especially since he had always considered himself an honest person. This book juggling wasn't his idea; he was only doing what he was told. Now it looked as if he was going to be blamed for everything.

Just then, out of nowhere, an idea began to form. What if he was hired just for this? What if he had been a walking, talking insurance policy all along, a custom made patsy to take the heat should the creative paperwork ever be discovered?

"They won't get away with it!" Stanley blurted.

Dolores stared at the veins in her husband's temples throbbing rhythmically as Stanley struggled to harness the combination of fear and anger welling up inside. With fingers trembling, he dialed the phone number given him by the FBI. The number turned out to be the Chicago headquarters of the Justice Department. The authoritative voice that answered made an appointment for Macklin on the following day, and hung up. It was all happening so fast, too fast. Stanley and Dolores settled into bed early that night. No, settled wasn't quite the word. Settled was a word the Macklins wouldn't use for years.

*Kevin* stayed close to the path of the stream, hugging its bank wherever a trail invited him. He wasn't sure why. It just seemed right, almost as if someone old and wise was leading him somewhere special. He hiked



steadily for several hours, yet the distance he traveled was relatively short; roughly two and a half miles. The man-sized backpack was a heavy burden for the child. It was a good thing his father had been the spartan sort and kept his gear lighter than most. Reaching for the waist straps harnessing the pack frame to his back, he detached the load from his tired shoulders. Relieved of the extra weight, he sat down on a sand bar and tossed a stone into the water. The glaring reflection of the sun almost prevented him from seeing the extra splash, not the one caused by the stone's entry, but by the fish's reentry. Kevin frantically pulled out the tackle.

"Now if I can just remember how to do this," he muttered.

Fingering the fishing paraphernalia, the youngster realized he had no pole.

"You can't fish without a pole."

Pulling the sheathed knife that was strapped to the aluminum frame, the young boy began searching for a tree limb of proper dimension. In a minute or two he found one. To fit the preconceived image in his mind, Kevin commenced hacking away the unwanted stems from the long, narrow pine limb. He then removed the fishing line, carefully unwound it from the cardboard, and attached one end firmly to the tapered tip of his handmade pole. Grasping the other end of the pole in his left hand, he reached back into the tackle box, and pulled out a small bit of lead for weighting the line. With his mouth taut in concentration, he fastened the weight to the end of the line opposite the pole. He paused for a moment, wrinkling up his forehead to jog his memory. In a flash of recollection, he withdrew one of the hooks and secured the tiny barb to the line several inches above the weight.

"Now the bait," he smiled, pleased with himself.

His first attempt to attach the salmon eggs to the hook failed miserably. The eggs fell apart in his fingers from the pressure applied. His second try fared better. With great care he gathered up his pole, line, bait, and hook, and channeled his way through the thicket of tall grass that had been hugging the stream for the last half mile. Anxiously, while holding the pole firmly with one hand, Kevin tossed the baited line into the gently flowing stream with the other. He knew from his limited experience that much of fishing is nothing more than waiting.

*Kevin L. Smith*

Kevin looked for a place to get comfortable. Seeing a charred stump, the object of some past rainstorm's displeasure, he crawled up and sat with legs folded under him.

There he waited, for what seemed an eternity. Hours passed. Shifting his body to a reclining position, Kevin eventually dozed off, sinking deep into dreams of all kinds of food. Even foods he couldn't stomach were gratefully received and paraded themselves proudly before his mind. It was mid-afternoon when he awakened. Brought back to reality, he pulled in his line to inspect the bait, and heaved a sigh.

"Oh, crumb."

Determined, the disappointed but undaunted youngster tossed the bait back in the water. It must have been the sudden movement of the fish egg as it entered the stream. Scarcely three seconds elapsed when a sharp tug was felt. Excitedly, but with presence of mind, the boy slowly wound in the line. Flapping energetically at the other end was a highly upset member of the catfish family. By no means a record catch, the specimen was barely eight inches long from head to tail. But it wasn't the size of the catch that made the boy's face shine; it was the symbolism behind it. Here was a beginning. If he caught one, he knew he could do it again. He held the squirming catfish with both hands. Its whiskers almost made the boy laugh. Gathering up his catch along with his equipment, he returned to the pack frame.

In short order another fire was built, and the day's prize was sizzling in the frying pan.

With the smells of partially cooked catfish saturating the air, Kevin couldn't take his eyes off the pan. Not even long enough to see the storm clouds threatening the ground beneath with a violent downpour. Satisfied his meal was properly braised, Kevin sprinkled some salt and pepper, and ravenously devoured the contents of the skillet. Although he was hardly stuffed, the whiskered repast was sufficient to stave off the hunger pains that had been haunting him. Not until he gobbled down the last morsel did Kevin look up.

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed.

He knew he must find some cover, and fast. But where? Making a sweep with his eyes, Kevin drew a bead on a pile of timber haphazardly thrown together by natural forces. What made him look twice was a

small cavity at its base – a carved-out pocket. It was ideal for his needs, save for the gaping spaces between the logs forming the ceiling. If modified, it was the answer to his prayer. With the simple ingenuity of a child, Kevin instantly understood the value of a five by seven piece of folded plastic. Swiftly, as the weather was growing nastier by the minute, he unfolded the sheet and awkwardly manipulated the plastic over and between the logs directly above the scooped-out hollow. Securing the ends of the material so the wind wouldn't undo his hard work, Kevin double checked the corners for stress points that might betray him later. Satisfied, he then set his mind to the task of moving his fire closer to his new den. It seemed to make more sense than starting up a whole new one. He began transferring several of the super heated coals to the new site, depositing them among new wood. The idea was practical, and the primitive Bivouac was constructed none too soon. The storm portended to be harsh, and the drops were already falling. Pulling all his belongings into the shelter, Kevin nestled himself in, huddled up to the fire and waited.

Not too far away from that warm den, a middle-aged man had just finished struggling with another day of fruitless wheel spinning. Will Stockard was heading back to the nearest airport. He quietly wondered how much longer this agonizing limbo would last. On the one hand, the doctors back home couldn't keep his sister drugged forever. On the other hand, this search business wouldn't continue much longer either. This storm would take care of that. All aircraft could be down for as much as three days, they predicted. Might as well be three months. The pretending was over. If only his sister was stronger. For her sake he wished the crash had happened to him rather than her husband and son. His death she could handle, but this would devastate her. Maybe permanent sedation was the ticket after all. When Will Stockard touched down for the second day, all he could think about was getting some sleep. In fact, he just might sleep through the whole damn storm.

Bright and early, eight a.m., Stanley Macklin walked into the

*Kevin L. Smith*

headquarters installed by the Federal Grand Jury Investigating Unit. No use denying it, Stanley thought to himself. You're scared out of your next three bowel movements. He tried to ignore the knocking of his knees. He quietly wondered why he couldn't be cool, calm, and steel jawed like Bogart in those gangster movies. The office he entered didn't help matters any; it was cold, empty, and sparsely furnished. He stood there for a brief moment, and then sheepishly grabbed a folding chair leaning against the wall and sat down. Whether by design or not, they managed to keep Stanley Macklin waiting awkwardly for an hour and twenty minutes. At length, Macklin was convinced his bladder would burst right there in that holding tank of an office, and he would have to explain the puddle beneath his chair to the prosecutors when they came in. Finally he was ushered into a private chamber and introduced to two rather pushy gentlemen with expressionless faces and pasty complexions.

"Just relax, Mr. Macklin," they said.

The two would repeat that useless phrase more than once during the course of their hour conversation.

"Just tell us everything you can about your work, and we'll decide what's important," the older one began. "You might start with how you landed the job in the first place. That should get the ball rolling."

The one speaking managed a smile; the kind that one sees on a used car salesman in a television commercial.

"Before I start with all of this," Stanley interjected, "I want to know what's to become of me when you're through."

"I'm not sure I understand your meaning," the older one replied.

"Well," Stanley began, trying to control his nervousness, "I mean, when I finish testifying, what's going to happen to me and my family? If what you government people say is true, then this is bigger than I ever imagined. That means that me and my wife could be in considerable danger. I mean big danger. So, are we, or are we not going to get some kind of help and protection? Let's face it...I'd rather go to jail than sign myself a death warrant."

There was an uncomfortable pause. The two FBI men didn't expect this show of backbone. The youngest of the pair, leaning back in his chair, acknowledged the question with one of his own.

"Just exactly what do you have in mind?"

"I'm not sure what I have in mind exactly. I just know that there better be something. I may be naive about certain things, but I know enough to realize my bosses are not going to take kindly to my cooperation with you fellas."

"Look, Macklin," the older one interrupted, "we won't deny there might be some modest amount of danger until the trial is over. That is why we intend to provide around-the-clock protection for you and your wife. That is also why we stressed secrecy in setting up this meeting. But when the trial is over, and your testimony is a matter of public record, your "bosses", as you call them, will be safely behind bars. Naturally, they won't break out in hip-hip-hoorays whenever your name is mentioned, but you hardly constitute a reason for perpetual vindictiveness. You're just not that close to them, or important enough to generate that kind of hatred."

Had Stanley Macklin known, really known, what he was up against, he might not have shown up that day. Unfortunately, he didn't, and the less-than-total picture painted by the FBI operatives began to make sense. After all, he thought, this was Uncle Sam speaking. Good old U.S. of A. If you can't trust "Ike" and everything he stands for, who can you trust? Besides, they were offering him total immunity.

"All right," Macklin said at last. "I'll do it. I'll cooperate."

Breathing a sigh of relief, both agents took turns shaking his hand eagerly. That was close, the senior operative contemplated to himself. Macklin had been tougher than he expected. That part finished, they could turn him over to the Justice Department and concentrate on the bits and pieces that would tie it all together. With a little luck, they would get a conviction. Things had been tough in the conviction category lately.

"These people were as slippery as greased pigs," he mumbled to his partner the day before.

Agent Brooks had never been near any kind of pig, much less a greased one. The fact that Brooks, a city dweller his entire thirty-five years, had found within his vocabulary such a rural metaphor, could no doubt be attributed to the successful saturation of television into American leisure hours. Programs such as "The Real McCoys" made overnight farm life experts of even the most confirmed urbanites.

*Kevin L. Smith*

Brooks fit that description perfectly. He loved the city life, country colloquialisms notwithstanding. He also loved his job. What he didn't love was the frustration that comes with working for an employer that wore blinders. He would never understand the official policy of the Bureau, the one assuming the position that denied the existence of organized crime, or Mafia as some called it. There was no sense to it. For decades, field agents from California to New York had rubbed elbows with various tentacles of the phantom organization. How could the Bureau deal effectively with something so obviously powerful without an official acknowledgement of its existence?

What operatives like Brooks didn't know was that the head of the Bureau, namely J. Edgar Hoover, was afraid of organized crime. Not the kind of fear that turns people into jelly, as in being caught in a dark room with a Bengal tiger. Rather, the cautious fear of consequences that might immerge should the massive forces of the Bureau be wholeheartedly and officially committed to a war against an opponent so formidable. A certifiable egomaniac, Hoover thrived on the quick, flamboyant, and successful operations that brought him so much publicity over the years. He was extremely fond of quoting to inquisitive senators impressive statistics outlining the number of stolen cars recovered and wanted criminals recaptured. His reluctance to take on the Mafia was linked to his personal view that such a war could last forever. It could bog down the Bureau, and J. Edgar himself, with chains of unending excuses and apologies for failure. For decades, Hoover had used the media to his advantage, and he wasn't about to embark on a public relations nightmare any sooner than he had to.

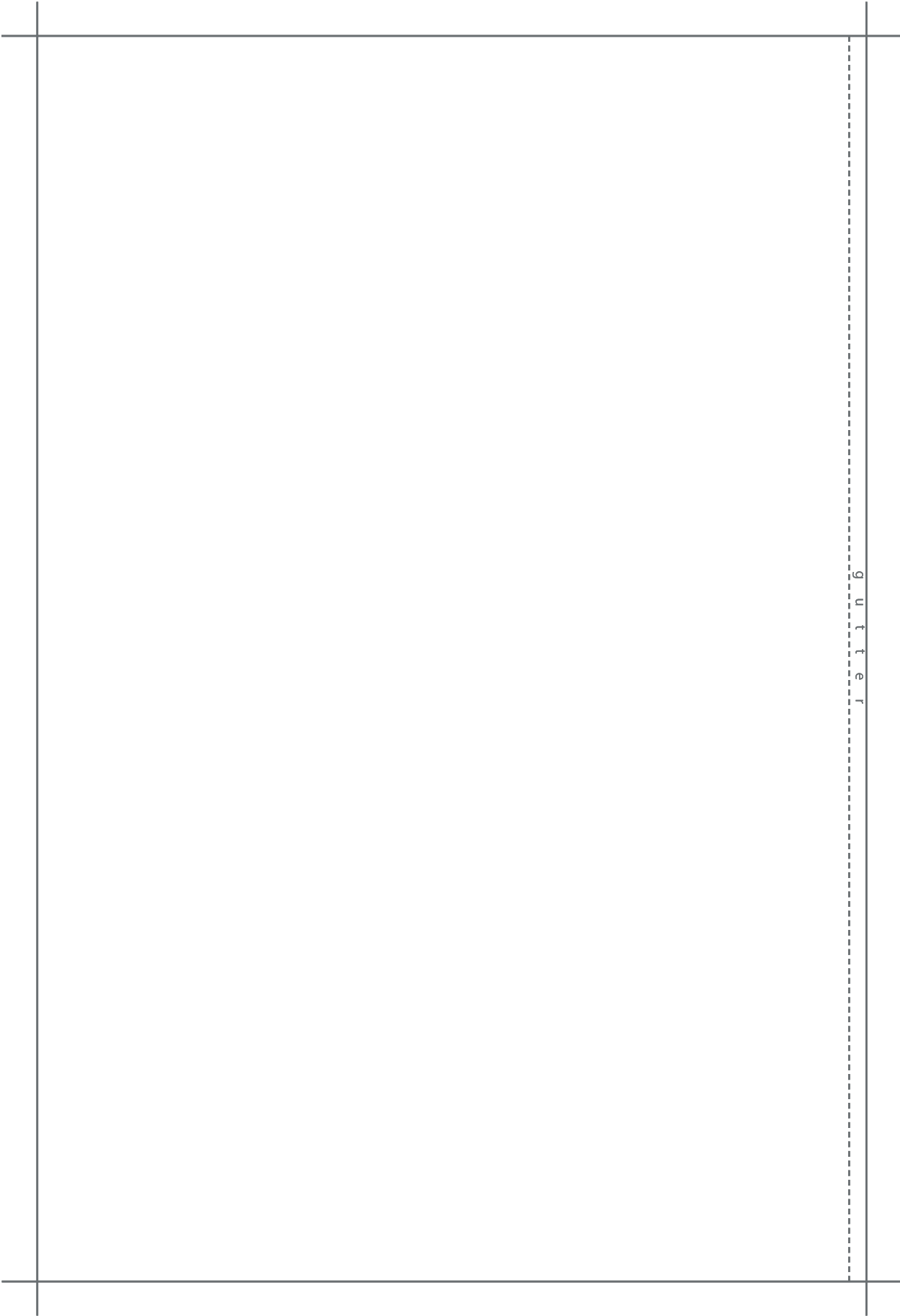
Eventually, though, in years to come, the FBI would be forced to officially address the subject of organized crime and devise techniques and methods that could deal with the challenge. The biggest single problem was their peculiar blood code of silence. All successful prosecution depended on testimony, as well as hard evidence. Without witnesses testifying who had been on the inside, there would be no prosecutions.

Unfortunately, all these developments were a long way off in 1958. The Justice Department, through the FBI, had nothing so formal to offer anyone coming forth. Hopefully for Stanley Macklin, the quintessential small potato, such precautions would not be necessary.

With glowing optimism, the Justice Department set about preparing the final touches on the case.

Meanwhile, Mr. and Mrs. Macklin simply vanished. Hustled away in the night, they were placed under protective custody by U.S. Marshals. Three weeks would pass before the accelerated trial was over, and three weeks before the Macklins would begin their slow and painful discovery that they had bitten off more than they could chew.

They might even gag if they weren't careful.







## CHAPTER SEVEN

True to forecast, the low-pressure front was massive, cloaking much of the Canadian/Montana borders. Dropping anchor, the storm settled in comfortably. Huddled under wood and tarpaulin, Kevin sat cross-legged, half out of his bag, and doodled in the smoldering ashes.

He was hungry again.

The rain had stopped, at least for the moment, so the young adventurer climbed into his boots and windbreaker and sauntered over to the tiny tributary. The water level was already a foot higher, and the current much faster. Instead of casting his line into the gurgling foam, the boy sunk his bait in a pool of water detoured by rocks and debris piled a few feet upstream. The flow was more leisurely there, and less menacing. Balanced on an extended limb wedged between two boulders, Kevin commenced fishing for his breakfast. He would have preferred to make a game of it, but the threat of downpour squelched any fun he might have had.

The nimbus vapor lay suspended just above the trees. The wispy fluffs sparked a near forgotten memory, a conversation two years earlier. The dialogue had all started with a simple, modest question.

"How high is the sky?" Kevin asked his father.

Bradley smiled, and then attempted to explain the basics of atmosphere and space. He felt rather smug until the word "infinity" fell out of his mouth. Bradley ended up stammering and fumbling through a bloated word fest until finally Kevin interrupted him.

"You mean it just goes on forever?"

*Kevin L. Smith*

When his father replied yes, sort of, Kevin said with a smile, “Oh, I understand, Dad.”

Fortunately, that was the end of that.

Two years later, trapped in a dreamy forest, with the snowy gauze almost within hand’s reach, the question of altitude density was the last thing on the child’s mind. Instead, he would have enjoyed an answer to the rumbling in his abdomen.

So there he sat, bobbing his head up and down, wondering how much longer the sky would hold together. Eventually, a small trout took the bait and was snagged.

Scooping up the trout with his two hands, he carried his meal back to camp and was soon picking his teeth with a fishbone. He was glad to have eaten, but his appetite lingered and it made him restless, so he decided to take a short walk. Strapping the hunting knife to his belt, Kevin pointed himself into the thick of the forest, swiping at limbs and jabbing at tree trunks as he went. The cold, razor sharp steel felt good in his hands, and he drew comfort from the touch of it.

After half an hour, Kevin broke through the dense timber and landed in an open meadow. He strolled into the clearing, carefully avoiding the thorny shrubs towering over him like giant umbrellas. Before he realized it, he had backed into a wall of vines. Nestled in them, in clusters large enough to sag the vine, were big, ripe blackberries. Mindful of the thorns, Kevin tore off a handful. He hesitated, then popped one into his mouth and waited for a reaction. A second or two later, his face registered unsuppressed glee as his taste buds absorbed the sweet and sour blend of flavors typical of freshly ripened wild berries. Tossing the handful into his open mouth as if it were popcorn, the youngster devoured cluster upon cluster of the tart food, stopping only when his stomach grew full. Stuffing a few more bunches in his pockets, Kevin headed back towards the churning watercourse.

Halfway back to camp, the drowsy youth knew he’d eaten a bit more than he should have. Looking up, he also discerned that if he didn’t step up the pace he would get caught in a downpour. Try as he might, Kevin wasn’t able to make it back in time, and slogged up to his sheltered reprieve doing his best impression of a drowned rat. Shivering, the soaked child gritted his teeth and tried to decide whether to get out of his drenched clothes or crank up his campfire. He chose

the latter, and reached for what was left of the pile of dried wood. That out of the way, he removed his only set of spare clothing from the pack and laid it by the coals. Soon he was out of the soaked garments and into the dry ones. Shaking, he climbed in his sleeping bag and drifted promptly off to sleep, his stomach full for the first time in four days. The storm had dampened his clothing, but not his spirits.

The following morning greeted the boy much as before, and the same could be said for the day after. Sustained by the berries, and a fish or two, Kevin might have survived indefinitely. But the rains were transforming the ground into a saturated quagmire. Regretfully, the child hoisted his pack, abandoned his shelter and moved on.

The weight of the pack bogged him down and made the going slow. As before, he stayed close to the river, which somehow contributed to his fragile sense of well being. With the memory of his teeth-chattering sprint through the woods still fresh and vivid, Kevin wisely kept one eye overhead for the first sign of rain, and the other searching for a new and better shelter. His growing experience reminded him that location was everything. Flat, high ground was critical. The wind chill, robbing him of precious body heat, also influenced Kevin's decisions. This was supposed to be the beginning of summer, the season of warm days and pleasant nights. Too bad the Rockies didn't always play by the rules. Just past noon, his eyes spotted something uphill, not sixty feet away.

What drew his attention was a great fallen oak, its exposed rootstock reminding the boy of some gnarled character in a ghost story he had read once. Intrigued, he studied it silently until a tiny light bulb went off in his head and told him his hunt was over. The elevation was perfect. Furthermore, the base of the toppled giant would block off the cold night. All that he needed was to enclose the shallow cavity beneath the uprooted trunk.

Removing his pack frame, Kevin wasted no time creating what his mind imagined. With singular zeal, the child tore, hacked, and sliced as many long limbs as his eight-year-old muscles could handle. He scavenged them from the fallen tree, and others nearby. Refreshing his mental image with a glance at the illustration in his handbook, he propped the branches at forty-five degree angles against the giant trunk. To these poles, Kevin intertwined thick stems of evergreens along with moss, loose bark, grass, and whatever else he could find

*Kevin L. Smith*

to thatch the sides and roof of his makeshift lean-to. It took him the whole afternoon, but the effort was worth it.

“Better than any fort back home,” he said, remembering the cardboard boxes and wooden crates he used to play with in the family basement. Kevin gathered up his things, and carried them into his new quarters. Soon it would be dark. Soon another day would pass. He wondered when they would find him. His mother would be so proud.

If only she knew.

The morning arrived without fanfare, either for Kevin or his uncle some one hundred and twenty miles away. He could have been a thousand miles away for all it mattered. Will Stockard and the rest of the team had been recalled. The stubborn Pacific squall that had grounded them for three days continued relentlessly. Even now there were sizable fragments of the grid unblemished with search data. Five days had elapsed since the aircraft presumably went down. With no tangible clues to shrink the proverbial haystack Mission Coordinator Bleeker flexed his bureaucratic muscles and terminated the mission.

Oddly, Stockard was almost as relieved as he was disappointed, yet he dreaded the face-to-face encounter with his sister when he arrived home. The week had been a grueling one for the engineer. He had no delusions that the next would be any better.

Nestled away in that little piece of the Rockies, the following weeks of Kevin’s life involved one new discovery after another. The loneliness clinging to the boy was slowly dissolving. There were more important things. While children back home fiddled away their summer vacations bored to the gills with hours of free time, Kevin’s every waking moment was a lesson in accountability. His battle to survive was no war of attrition – no digging in and waiting for reinforcements. Instead, he took the offensive, challenged himself, and stretched his comfort zone. He improved his meager skills, and learned some new ones. The manual helped. Its language was brief and cryptic, but he read between the lines and gleaned what he needed. He even waded through old

Indian and trapper recipes on preparing and cooking foods, using what he could and ignoring the rest.

Like the laboratory mouse groping his way through a labyrinth of unfamiliar corridors, Kevin plodded on, unfazed by the occasional dead end. Fate had shoved a journey down Kevin's throat that few but his father would even dare to contemplate. There was nowhere to go but straight ahead. If he lived long enough to reach the end, it would only mean one thing – that he had succeeded in becoming a veritable throwback of the species; an independent, self-contained unit of his own kind.

Yet, those same odds that cruelly dealt him that ghastly hand also dealt him a couple of aces. For one thing, his character made him uncommonly suited to the challenge. Kevin enjoyed a distinctive temperament, a certain abstract of mind, a clear-headed talent for breaking problems down to bite size pieces and solving them. There was something else, as well. He was the only one to survive the crash, and he avoided any serious injury. Those critical first few days afterward had been easy on him. The wolf pack had passed him by, and he managed to avoid other flesh eaters roaming the Canadian wiles, such as coyotes, cougars, and so forth. Since the crash, Kevin had been fortunate.

For Stanley Macklin, the clock stopped when he entered the courtroom. At least it seemed that way. The expensive, high-powered defense attorney did his best to earn his retainer. Beads of sweat formed at the onset of the cross examination, and the undersized and under ventilated courtroom made it worse. Sitting at arms length away from his antagonists didn't help either. God, if looks could kill, thought Macklin. Though it felt like hours, the ordeal was brief as legal testimonials go. There really wasn't that much for Macklin to tell. Still, his two cents added to the rest of the case was enough to vault the Federal prosecutors over the top in getting a conviction. The assistant District Attorney was the first to approach him as he paused outside the courtroom.

"That's all there is to it. Now that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Macklin considered silently whether or not those waxy grins were

*Kevin L. Smith*

actually standard government-issue.

"I...I don't understand," Macklin returned with a slight tremor in his voice. "Where is my bodyguard? Where's my protection? I mean, at least you could escort me back to my wife, for God's sake."

The lawyer gazed back with that same impotent smile.

"Look, let's not get all worked up. We wouldn't want to make a scene, now, would we?" Pulling him aside, the attorney spoke in a low voice. "It's like this. The Department just isn't budgeted beyond the trial. So, why don't you just go back to your own home, show up for work tomorrow, and behave as if nothing ever happened. You know, business as usual. I guarantee you have nothing to worry about. Okay?"

He stuffed his papers into his shiny leather valise.

"Listen, I'd love to stay here and chat, but I've got a lot of mop up paperwork on my hands. Thanks again, you were a big help."

He shook the accountant's hand and left.

"Yeah, sure," said Stanley as he watched him leave.

He wasn't convinced. He lingered for a moment and then turned and ambled in the opposite direction.

He had advanced twenty feet past the front steps when he glanced over his shoulder and noticed a Plymouth inching along the curb not fifty feet behind him. Trying not to let his imagination get the better of his math-oriented mind, Macklin continued to walk, but quickened his stride. The automobile behind him matched his pace. Stanley rounded the corner and covered another thirty yards when he recognized his own car, parked just where the Federal Marshall said it would be. Relieved at the sight of something familiar, Macklin groped for his keys as he calmly walked around to the curb. He was scarcely inside his six-year old Dodge Meadowbrook when the shiny blue Plymouth pulled within a foot or two of his door.

Macklin was trying so hard to be casual he almost didn't have enough time to react to the sight of the 357 magnum pointed at the small wrinkle between his eyebrows.

The first bullet passed through the passenger window and grazed the bridge of his nose as he swung down in the seat. Dazed, Stanley somehow engineered a twist of the ignition key and shifted his car into gear, all the while fighting back the urge to gag on the backed up bile

in his throat. The assailant had just climbed out of his Plymouth when Macklin punched the accelerator and left his attacker scrambling back to his own driver's seat. In the next few seconds, Macklin two-wheeled it around the following corner and disappeared.

Breaking every speed law to reach their temporary hide out, Macklin parked in the rear, stepped out of his car, and discretely vomited the entire contents of his stomach onto the driveway. He then staggered his way up to the second floor apartment, holding a handkerchief on his bleeding forehead. Relieved, he was greeted by the Federal Marshall assigned from the beginning to guard the couple. Apparently, in the bureaucratic confusion no one had bothered to reassign him. Marshall Buckwald Hicks didn't mind. He had grown quite friendly with the couple during his brief stay. When Stanley explained the dried blood on his face, the whole story caught Hicks completely by surprise. The Marshall swiftly relayed the information to his superiors, who in turn registered their own astonishment. They gratuitously instructed Hicks to stay on for another day or two.

Unwittingly, Stanley Macklin had enrolled himself in a crash course in reality – the undiluted, unsweetened kind. The vindictiveness of his old bosses, coupled with the cold-hearted bailout of the Justice Department, served up a hearty lesson.

"If they won't help us, dear, we've just got to do something ourselves," Dolores Macklin said, while she held him down and bandaged his wound.

"Yes, you're right of course. Something...we've g-got to do something."

After several tranquilizers, and a quiet hour on his back, Stanley finally calmed down. When he did, he began sifting through his options.

Hicks kept telling him his best chance was in total disappearance. To make this happen, Hicks explained, Macklin needed a whole new identity, bizarre as it sounded. Macklin was hard pressed to swallow the idea. That is, until Hicks opened the accountant's eyes to some little known minutiae of Americana.

For example, he just so happened to be living in one of the easiest countries in the world for creating aliases. In stark contrast to Europe, the United States never established a national identity card system to

*Kevin L. Smith*

keep up with its people. There is nothing even remotely resembling a standard identification, a numbered document that citizens could be required to carry to prove who they are. It even appeared deliberate on the government's part to perpetuate some obscure old American tradition that says a person should be able to leave the mistakes of his past behind, move on, take up a new name and start all over again. According to Hicks, this undeclared tradition was the key that unlocked the door to a new life, allowing a large number of Americans to change their identities and disappear every year.

Macklin harbored a lingering tad of skepticism until the bits and pieces started piling up. The Social Security Administration itself staggered Macklin with the blunt truth that each year a quarter of a million social security cards are issued to men over thirty, most of whom obtain a new number under a new name. Macklin learned something else in his crash course. Many of them employed the gimmick of making up a whole new background by using institutions whose records were destroyed by fire or other causes. While not being able to verify a bogus resume, those institutions couldn't deny them either. Still others claimed background in military intelligence. Anyone trying to verify that bit of data is promptly told such information is never disclosed, also never denied.

A picture began to form in Stanley Macklin's brain, and he felt the first inklings of a plan.

"Hicks, you've been right all along. This vanishing act is our only shot. I know you have contacts where I need them. Will you help us?"

"Unofficially?"

"Whatever way you can."

Hicks thought for a moment. Then he smiled.

"For another helping of that peach cobbler, you've got a deal."

In a matter of weeks, Macklin acquired papers and documents he never would have thought possible a month before. It was just a beginning, but it was still a chance. He looked down at the portfolio, then to his hands. They were still shaking.





## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Tranquil* was a fair word for the remote Canadian corridor Kevin Cade embraced as his own. However, the adjective didn't extend to the gentle valley five miles northwest, least of all on that particular late June morning. The relative calm greeting of the sunrise was shattered like broken crystal when the battle ensued.

As if all other living creatures sharing that valley were holding their collective breath, the only sound was the noise of combat between the two grizzlies. The old male, unpredictable as ever, tore into the female silvertip named for the whitish streak of fur outlining her shoulders. Clear out-of-the-blue he had launched the attack. It wasn't the first time a male grizzly ambushed the weaker sex, and it wouldn't be the last.

The force of logic weighed heavily against an assault on a female of his species, especially one with cubs to protect. She was a powerful foe, even to the king of the woods. The sound of their matched fury was deafening, and their combined rage shook the earth beneath them. The female fought bravely, though her opponent outweighed her by four hundred pounds. Each wielded their primary weapons, large, muscular forepaws. Those forepaws had quite a reputation. A century ago, the grizzly had served as crude entertainment on behalf of the course-edged settlers of the American west. Pitted against wild bulls and long-horned steers, the power of those grizzly shoulders became renowned. Time after time, the contest ended with the bull lying on its side, quivering, its backbone snapped like a dry twig.

Kevin L. Smith

The battle dragged on. Thirty yards away, the two cubs huddled nervously, watching, hoping. They wanted desperately to flee, yet couldn't bring themselves to move. Their anxiety mounted; they knew their mother was losing. The old male was literally beating her to a pulp.

But still she fought on. Her face was soon a bloody mass of red, and the male continued to grind his teeth into the female's nose and eyes. Resigned to her fate, the female made one last attempt to secure the safety of her offspring. Crying out with her dying breath, she ordered the cubs to run for their lives. The victor wheeled toward the fleeing cubs, which were now scurrying away from the battle zone. Subconsciously, the two broke off in separate directions. This proved to be the salvation of one, but spelled doom for the other. The gigantic *ursus horribilis* carried his fourteen hundred pounds with incredible speed, deceptively so. In seconds, the smaller of the two cubs, though running with all its might, was overtaken by that lumbering mass; the large male was pound-for-pound the most fearsome creature in North America. Fortunately for the tiny, golden-haired cub, there was no time to regret the premature termination of its young life. One stiff whack and the life force within its little body left for greener pastures. The grizzly calmly sat down and unceremoniously devoured the cub, forgetting about its brother, the larger one.

Three months old and weighing a mere thirty-five pounds, the remaining bear cub put a considerable distance between himself and his cannibal relative. He slackened only after miles of aimless wandering, so dumb-struck with fright from the attack. Half a day later the infant grizzly, tired and spent, chanced upon a hollow timber. He crawled inside and promptly fell asleep. As odds would have it, Kevin Cade perched himself on that same log to rest his tired feet from the over extended hike that morning. The boy was fatigued, but not too tired to notice the whimpering snorts echoing from the darkness beneath him.

Peering down into the hole he saw nothing. But his nose picked up the strong, gamey aroma. Whatever it was, Kevin weighed carefully, it couldn't be too large. Nothing large would ever have fit through the two-foot wide wooden orifice. With curiosity getting the better of him, Kevin grabbed a broken limb and probed.

At six or seven feet, the pole went no further. He prodded gently, pressing against the soft obstruction. There was a groan. He withdrew the limb and waited.

Moments later, out it crawled; the most perfect blend of kitten, puppy, and piglet Kevin had ever seen. Drowsily, the bear cub paused to let his eyes adjust and his legs unravel. He yawned and then, with eyes fully-opened and nostrils flared, the bear registered his new surroundings. The morning nightmare was already a fading memory. He swiveled one-hundred and eighty degrees, and his senses picked up the boy. While adult grizzlies fear nothing, experience taught many to be cautious around humans; but this yellow fluff of bear was neither adult nor experienced. Friendly nosiness replaced discretion and the cub ambled over to the boy. He stopped short a few feet away. The two eyeballed each other. The grizzly cocked his head causing Kevin to smile. Here was another lost soul, one could almost hear the other thinking. Kevin dropped to his knees and held out his hand. The cub thrust his velvety muzzle into the boy's palm and licked his fingers. A minute later they embraced, as if old friends.

Reaching inside one of his pockets, Kevin withdrew a handful of berries and offered them. It was all that was needed to cement their new fraternity. Eagerly, the bear cub slurped up the fruit. Patting the cub on the head, the boy thought about the last three-and-a-half desperate weeks alone.

"You know what, Kevin?" he said to himself. "I think maybe you've just found a friend."

The boy and bear cub remained beneath the huge fir at the meadow's edge for several hours, touching, smelling, listening, and looking at one another. There was so much to learn. When the lower half of the sun disappeared from view, Kevin finally discerned the lateness of the hour. He knew he only had a precious minute or two of daylight to make it back to camp before the boreal night trapped him in its cold, black void. He broke into a run, stumbling through the last sixty yards in pitch darkness. Kevin was angry with himself. He would enjoy no fire tonight. He long since ran out of matches, and the magnifying glass he learned to use in intensifying the sunlight and igniting dried leaves wouldn't help him either.

"Looks like a cold night, too," the child moaned.

*Kevin L. Smith*

Then the youngster remembered something his father told him months before.

“If you want to stay warm at night, don’t sleep in your clothes. Place them over your sleeping bag, and you’ll trap the warm air inside.”

Willingly, Kevin obeyed the vivid memory instructing him from the grave. He was soon asleep despite the drop in temperature and comfortably remained so for the rest of the night – mainly due to his father’s good advice, but also from the silent midnight arrival of an extra heat source in the form of thirty-five pounds of bear rug flopped at his feet.

Not until morning’s light when Kevin emerged from his familiar cocoon did he catch sight of the bear cub, still snoozing. The sight of the infant grizzly at his feet brought a grin to the boy’s face. This was going to be a fine day, he mused.

*The* full bloom of summer arrived. Though high in elevation and generously north in latitude, Kevin’s little part of Canada was not immune to the perennial onslaught of flying insects. He was haunted by mosquitoes in particular – especially the oversized variety that reveled in human fare. Fortunately, Kevin uncovered the value of the can of fly dope packed in his supplies. Every morning the young boy smeared the ointment on his face and neck, ever since that afternoon when an army of the bloodsuckers had converged on him from nowhere, leaving him with endless bumps and welts that only got worse when he scratched them.

He first applied the strange salve out of ignorance, viewing the ointment as medicinal. While it didn’t sooth his irritated skin as he had hoped, the mosquitoes, he discovered, avoided him like the plague whenever he used the stuff. The only bad part about the pasty repellent was its reeking stench. Yet the good far outweighed the bad, and it tempered his disdain for the fowl odor.

As for the grizzly cub, to him Kevin was a godsend. He was no mother, to be sure, and he was no brother, either. But he did fit somewhere in between. He was someone who cared, and he didn’t feel so homeless when the boy was with him. All other details of life the

bear cub was quite able to handle. He wasn't yet weaned, but that didn't matter. It was not uncommon to see cubs as young as three months old digging up roots or reaching for that particular berry bush with all the expertise of the oldest bear on the range. Naturally, unweaned cubs put off food gathering until the last possible moment, preferring instead to run about, lie in the warm sun, and let mother do all the work. No such luxuries for this cub. Maybe that was why Kevin felt such a kinship with him.

Week after week, confidence rose steadily in the two orphans. Often they set off exploring, pattering off in any and every direction from camp, but only as far as they could travel and return safely, always in time to build the evening's fire. As the clock of summer gradually wound down, the days grew shorter and the nights colder. By the end of the third month, Kevin began to lose his time bearings – his grasp of what was past and what was present. The memories of his pre-crash life were fogging up, growing hazy and faint. In his mind, the boy compensated for the lack of focus by relegating those remembrances to the category of make-believe, the unreal. His only reality was the here and now.

Plunging into his new world with every fiber of his being, Kevin unclothed his senses and bathed them in every detail, feature, scent, sight and sound of his new environment. Thus, when the young grizzly lapsed into an eating frenzy, consuming food stuffs way above and beyond his normal appetite, the change did not go unnoticed. However, seeing and understanding were entirely different things. The bear was eighty pounds heavier than when Kevin first found him, and he didn't have a clue as to why. He didn't waste a great deal of time worrying about it. There were other, more pressing concerns. He didn't need to be an old, grizzled mountaineer to see things were going to get a lot colder before they got any warmer. Furthermore, his makeshift dwelling wasn't going to cut it. Warmth wasn't his only problem. What was he going to do about food? Already the edible vegetation was dying off. Without food, shelter would mean nothing. The whole prospect was making him edgy.

A couple of weeks went by when one bright September day, Kevin hit upon an idea. He hadn't been able to take his eyes off the overhanging rock formations outlining a ridge of mountain near his

*Kevin L. Smith*

campsite. It became an obsession.

“What if,” the boy thought, “there might be an indent, a cave, something to shelter us, really shelter us from the brutal months ahead?”

Gathering up his hunting knife and canteen, Kevin motioned to the cub, and they headed towards the cliffs.

It took them the rest of the morning and nearly half the afternoon to reach the base of the mountain on which the cliffs rested. The vertical, bare rock was not above the fall line, despite its lofty station. Rather, it was substantiality below it. Oddly, the patch of bald cliffs didn't appear to belong with the rest of the mountain. Kevin looked upward from his closer vantage point, observing the geological curiosity. Everywhere as far as human eyes could see was forest of majestic proportions; everywhere, that is, but the gold and white rock strata hanging four hundred feet above him. In some way it reminded Kevin of the bald spot on his Uncle Will's otherwise healthy head of hair. Clutching his walking stick, the boy started up the slope.

With three months of the rugged life behind him, Kevin had little difficulty with the rarified Rocky Mountain air that was thin enough to leave the average lowlander gasping convulsively halfway up. Lithe, taunt muscles responded to command without hesitation. In no time at all, Kevin and his grizzly friend reached the rock ledge. It took them an hour to conquer the fifty-five degree vertical ascent. Soon they found themselves on a slender catwalk connecting the recesses in the cliff. Kevin trekked his way carefully from one cavity to another. Some might loosely be called caves, but most were nothing more than slight, shallow dimples in the mountain. Even the deepest of them went in only four or five feet. The rock itself was granite-hard, and gouging out one of them by hand would have been impossible without the appropriate tools.

Kevin's face mirrored his disappointment. Heaving a deep sigh, he kneeled down and took a drink from his canteen. At that height, his view of the valley was incredible. He stretched out on the flat ledge, propping his head on the canteen. As always, the pine scent permeated his nostrils, as it did everything else in the forest. He had yet to grow weary of the mountain fragrance. He almost dozed off when, without warning, a shrill, screeching noise roused him.

It came from the grizzly cub standing twenty feet away.

Kevin jumped up and ran to the bear, which was by then shaking his head from side to side and rubbing his nose with his forepaw. Kevin could see he was blistered. But how? There was nothing around but shaded rock, nothing that could possibly burn the bear's tender muzzle. He stood there, scratching his head, more confused than the bear. He patted the whimpering cub consolingly.

Moving in closer, he reached toward the wall of stone with his hand, not knowing what to expect, but determined not to suffer the same misfortune as the bear. The last thing he wanted or needed was a blistered nose, or blistered anything for that matter. His hand was but a few inches from the rock, and still no clue. No steam, no heat, nothing. Kevin pressed forward the final few inches.

"Ouch!" Sucking his forefinger, Kevin still saw nothing but inanimate stone.

Yet his finger felt as if it just made contact with the insides of a wall plug. He grabbed his hiking stick and thrust it toward the wall.

Again it happened. This time the stinging pain did not distract him. He was conscious of the faintly-vibrating hum that accompanied the contact. Poking his way across the rock wall, first one side, then the other, Kevin charted the strange phenomena and determined the effected area to be ten feet in diameter with an upward reach of seven or eight feet. Amazing, he thought. The charged portion looked identical to the rest. Who could've known?

Kevin crouched a few feet away, contorted his eyebrows, and set his mind to the puzzle. This was the latest and most bizarre thing that had happened in the last few months. Then he remembered how it had started. Sure, it was his idea to climb up there. But he might just as easily have climbed right back down as ignorant as before. He turned to the cub. Unsure whether the animal had done him a favor or not, he bent to pet him. The gesture was not particularly calculated, just a friendly, spontaneous symbol of friendship.

Little did Kevin know that history was full of such trivial gestures – random details that altered the course of mankind. Stooping over, level with his knees, he saw an iridescent silver plate with a palm print emblazoned on it. It glowed, but just barely. Throwing caution to the wind, he pressed his fingers against its ultra-smooth surface.

*Kevin L. Smith*

Without a sound, the energized section of faux stone simply ceased to be, leaving a gaping hole in the wall. The black emptiness, like an oversized magnet beckoned him to enter. He had heard that curiosity killed the cat, but he was powerless to resist.

For better or worse, with one giant lunge he was inside.

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## CHAPTER NINE

Stanley Macklin and his confused wife sat quietly in the far corner of a Des Moines truck stop. Reflecting on their chosen destination, Macklin reckoned his arrival time to be three more days. It was a long way from Chicago to San Diego in more ways than one. All the couple owned was packed in the Fairlane station wagon they drove. The rest had been sold at an Illinois auction, with the proceeds sent to a P.O. Box via an FBI operative in Chicago.

Thrust suddenly into a relentless sequence of events, the two traumatized victims of American justice lingered in the Iowa truck stop until their tea turned cold.

"Why don't they ever heat these places properly?" Stanley grumbled, breaking the silence between them.

His appearance had changed over the last four months. One example was the spastic twitch of the facial muscles in his right cheek. He despised that twitch. He also despised the government for what had become of them, not to mention the criminals who wanted him dead. Most of all, he hated himself for being so god awful stupid.

He glanced at his wife furtively, not really wanting to look her in the eye. Poor thing, he thought. She was doing her best to keep his spirits up. Always cheerful, always managing to eke out a smile. Why not? She wasn't the one to stare down the barrel of a loaded revolver.

As they sat there, Dolores gathered to her breast courage of a different kind. She knew it was foolish to postpone it any longer. Her husband must be told; he would learn the truth sooner or later anyway.

*Kevin L. Smith*

Normally, the announcement of a baby on the way should've been a welcome one. But these were not normal times, and this certainly wasn't how she had always pictured the occasion.

She was about to open her mouth when Stanley abruptly motioned for his wife to return to the car. Something in his expression made her uneasy. Looking back as she walked out, she watched her husband hurriedly paying the check, fumbling over the last few loose coins given to him as change. When both were in the wagon and once again heading down the highway, she asked him what was wrong.

"Oh, nothing," he replied without convincing her. "I guess that place just kind of gave me the creeps."

No sense mentioning the two men that kept staring at him, he thought. Besides, neither followed him out the cafe door. He was starting to feel better already. Cursed imagination.

Unconsciously, Stanley reached into his coat pocket and felt for the wallet inside. Reassured by the tangible reminder of his new identity, the fugitive pulled out the leather billfold, opened it, and fingered the plastic card with his face on the front. Their new names, Phillip and Edith Barwell, were still cold and unfamiliar. They were not names randomly selected, but so chosen for the couple's physical similarities to two individuals long since deceased. This meant that not only were they able to acquire new birth certificates, Social Security cards, Drivers' Licenses, and so on, but comfort came in knowing two sets of Phillip and Edith weren't running around with the same I.D. The manila packet locked securely in the glove box also contained diplomas from a certified but appropriately burned down high school. There were other details, records, all of which formed the one bright spot in Stanley's depleted reservoir of self-esteem.

As they continued on their journey, their minds wandered. Their heads churned with thoughts of their new names, their new home, and their new lives. They were a hundred or so miles past Omaha, and the terrain was already looking foreign. Each mile chipped away at the familiar and replaced it with some new twist of landscape. In a way, the geography was symbolic, an eloquent testimony of their own metamorphosis.

Neither spoke, neither shared with the other their worst fear. Maybe if they pretended, their pretense would turn into reality.

*The* drama of the past three months fell short of preparing Kevin for the experience awaiting him. Nothing could have. Tumbling through the mysterious porthole, Kevin somersaulted into the apex of a room neither dark nor light, but bathed in a soft, soothing radiance. Aided by the ambient glow of the chamber, Kevin took in as many details as possible. Inch by inch, Kevin scrutinized the structure. Its walls were smooth, unnaturally so, with all sharp edges and corners leveled flat. Void of furnishings, a close inspection revealed recessed compartments built into the walls.

His senses registered the warmth of the enlarged cavity. He didn't even need a jacket, though the afternoon temperature was already dropping.

He smiled.

"I think I could like this place."

Then it hit him.

"The door. Where's the door?"

The porthole must have closed the moment he stepped across the threshold. The boy felt his enthusiasm wilt. What if he couldn't get out? If the world couldn't find him in three months out there in the wide open, what chance would he have inside this... whatever it was?

Stepping over to the point of entry, Kevin nervously positioned himself directly in front of what he hoped was a two-way passage. The darkened patch fluttered. An instant later, the unobstructed view of the outside world materialized. Kevin stepped backwards. Again the porthole ceased to be. Moving forward, the doorway reappeared. Cautiously, Kevin stepped forward and through the opening. As easily as he entered, he departed and stepped onto the ledge outside. Relieved, the boy repeated the entry/exit process over and over until he was at last satisfied he would not find himself a prisoner.

By now, the evening mists enshrouded the valley. Irritated with himself as he always was when the night caught him ill-prepared, Kevin sorted through his options. The cave was warm enough. Staying for the night was the logical choice. And yet, Kevin couldn't shake the uneasiness that lingered.

"Whose place is this?" he thought. "What would they do if they

*Kevin L. Smith*

found me?”

He sat down and scratched his head. Considering the decision, Kevin stepped back inside. Assiduously, he examined the cave a second time, all the while growing more comfortable with the chamber’s cozy warmth. He would stay, at least for the night.

Kevin removed his jacket and inhaled a deep breath. He leisurely perused the chamber and its recessed compartments lining the walls. The cave must belong to someone... but who? Would they return?

The first four compartments were empty. Not until he opened the fifth compartment and discovered the transparent canister was Kevin rewarded for his efforts. He let his mind entertain possibilities of what those tiny items within the container might be. All of them were neatly arranged in order of size and color, with the brightest and largest beginning in the top left corner. Some were as large as the boy’s fist and oval shaped, while others were as diminutive as his thumbnail and rectangular. Some were smooth, others coarse. Some were dark brown, others pastel gray. The fragrance given off was not unpleasant, a bit like the aroma of freshly baked bread. Kevin had not eaten for hours, and he was tempted to taste one.

“If only my stomach would quit yelling at me,” he said out loud in frustration.

He could stand it no longer. Gathering up his nerve, Kevin lifted one of the unusual tablets to his lips and extended his tongue. At first his taste buds picked up nothing.

Then suddenly his oral sensors, as if switched on by the flick of some remote lever, were engulfed and overwhelmed by not one, but dozens of culinary impressions in rapid fire, as if recording simultaneously the flavors of an eight-course meal, all with one solitary lick from the specimen. Stunned, but enchanted, Kevin was fully seduced. He popped the tablet into his mouth, slowly chewed and swallowed. Again there was a brief pause, followed by a barrage to his senses. A burst of aromas reminiscent of a Good Housekeeping Sunday buffet hit him.

And the flavors and smells were only part of the wonderment. The most extraordinary thing lay in the quenching of his appetite, instantly and thoroughly. The child actually felt stuffed, even drowsy. Curling up on the bluish tinted mattress lying on the floor thirty feet from the

entrance, his body responded to the luxuriously-padded bedding. The sleepy youngster promptly drifted off into the uncharted quadrants of his subconscious.

That night, Kevin slept soundly. In fact, he rested to a degree that was unparalleled since he last slept in his own civilized bedroom. He dreamt of fonder times with Mom, Dad, and Aunt Elsa, and the domicile they shared. Free of tension, Kevin relived those golden memories. Not until mid-morning, with the sun creeping up over the mountain ranges, did the slumbering child awaken.

Since the magical doorway shunted the world beyond, his only clue to the time of day was the sound of birds chirping happily outside. The porthole shielded the elements as well as visibility, but not the sonic vibrations which filtered into the cave. The bird noises never failed to put the child in a happy mood, a positive frame of mind for the tasks of the day.

Bouncing off the mattress much as he might have done back home, Kevin rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stepped through the porthole and into the familiar openness of the outside world. All was as it should be. The child found comfort in that sameness – the ordered routine of nature he had come to know intimately. Squatting down on a rock outside the cave's entrance, the boy let his face bask in the morning sun while he planned out the day. The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that the cave, however comfortable, was abandoned. All the signs and even his own instincts told him that. The crime, he reasoned, was clearly not in using the cave, but in letting the shelter go to waste.

"Finders, keepers!" he thought as his decision was made.

Kevin grabbed his jacket and set off to his old campsite. In all the commotion of the discovery Kevin had forgotten all about the cub. He missed the animal, and realized how much he depended on his rotund sidekick for companionship. The bear cub almost made him forget the wretched indifference of the forest, the blithe take it or leave it temperament of the wild.

By noon, the boy was back at the old camp. He could not help but compare the tree trunk with the cave. What seemed adequate before was now grossly absurd. Crawling inside the wooden dwelling, Kevin smiled when he saw the familiar mass at the foot of his bag. Left

*Kevin L. Smith*

to fend for himself, the cub sought comfort in the only appropriate place, near the familiar smells of his surrogate mother, the boy.

Kevin pounced on top of the cub, and the pair wrestled playfully in celebration of their reunion. After a time, both sensed the need for more serious pursuits. There was much to do, and limited quantities of daylight in which to do it. Gathering his gear together, Kevin loaded everything of value onto the pack frame, saving the sleeping bag for last, which he rolled up neatly, tying the nylon draw strings together and attaching it to the frame as well. Kevin slipped his arms through the padded harness and buckled his waist strap tightly.

He glanced at the sky. There was an hour to pass before dark, if he guessed right. As the autumn days grew shorter, telling time was trickier. Shouting to the cub to join him, Kevin set off for the cave. The cub was by nature inclined to follow his own dictates, and the boy gave no thought at first to the animal's lack of response. Looking back, however, he noticed something unusual in the bear's demeanor. The cub stood rigid, motionless. The boy turned around and walked over to the young grizzly. Kevin reached down to pet the cub. He was startled by the low, guttural sounds resonating deep within the grizzly's throat.

"What's the matter boy?" Kevin asked aloud.

Something was wrong, very wrong. The two had grown close, and the tension of the moment flowed from bear to boy as easily as electric current to a wall plug.

Not fifty feet away, standing erect with haunches bristled, was the Alpha.

Kevin scanned the clearing. There was no sign of the others. The wolf must be alone. His upper lip was pulled tight to reveal the jagged fangs that dripped saliva and threatened unmentionable terror. The Alpha crouched, poised to kill.

It was the boy he had sensed from afar, the boy whose aroma his keen nose detected long before his beady eyes confirmed the child's presence. The smell was good, a smell he remembered from another time – a time when the pack had followed his lead to that same smell where food was for the taking. That flesh had tasted sweet, but even while the band of wolves ate their fill that afternoon, months past, a nagging itch in the leader's brain told him something had been missed.

Time after time he had returned and found nothing. So he kept looking. And now he had found him.

The kill would be easy. He feared upright walkers, but this one was young. If only that nuisance of a bear cub wasn't there. In all his years, the Alpha had never tasted bear. Grown, Ursus had power without equal. Not even a whole pack would dare battle a single adult. Yet like the boy, this one was young, though something about him demanded caution. Still, the stakes were high. These were not the best of times, and food was as scarce as ever. If he left to retrieve the rest of the pack for help, the boy might escape his grasp. An entire summer of searching would be wasted. His tactic was simple. Disable the cub. With the cub in flight or injured, the boy would be easy pickings.

Kevin needed only a moment to draw the same conclusion, as if reading the very mind of his adversary. Not prone to panic, the boy had to shake off the paralyzing grip of terror. He wanted desperately to run. He knew the cub could probably keep the monstrous carnivore busy, but the bear was no match for the ugly flesh eater. The thought of leaving his friend alone like that nauseated him more than the bile that fear was forcing up into his throat. Besides, together they just might have a chance. The courage of the grizzly cub was rubbing off.

Then, the wolf leaped.

With fangs bared, the wolf was truly satanic. Even from a distance he could make an adversary's skin crawl. The debilitating effect was not accidental, but a developed technique perfected and enhanced by years of practice. One did not become the "Alpha" by divine right. The title was earned. Intimidation figured heavily in the arsenal necessary to procure top status among the wolf community and success in the world beyond the wolf den. As the Alpha long since understood, battles were often won before they even started.

But such was not to be this time. The cub might have been a scant one hundred and thirty pounds, but he was not the pushover he appeared, even to Kevin. Turning to jelly was not their strong suit. This time there would be no bluffing. If the wolf was to win, he must do so outright. As they collided together, the combined force sent them rolling in a tangled ball of gray and brown.

The Alpha made every effort to employ the bone crushing power of his jaws and protruding incisors, thrusting those weapons deep and

*Kevin L. Smith*

hard into the bear cub. The trouble was that the cub's body fat had tripled over the summer months. When those formidable jaws clamped down, all that the wolf got for his trouble was a mouthful of lard and fur. While painful, the injury was far from fatal.

Momentarily frustrated, the experienced warrior knew his next move. By maneuvering himself to the cub's soft underbelly, fat or no fat, nothing would prevent him from the swift disemboweling of this blubbery nuisance – the only obstacle in the way of the boy. And who knows? Perhaps grizzly would taste even better.

Kevin stood a few yards away and watched. He knew the cub to be a splendid wrestler, yet this was no friendly tussle. He must help. But how? Swiftly, the boy loosened his harness, slipped the bulky pack from his shoulders, and grabbed his blade. Clutching the hunter's knife in his right hand, he readied himself for a strike at the beast. But so entangled were the two antagonists that Kevin could not strike one without fear of hurting the other. The only thing left was to wait and pray for an opening.

Meanwhile, even without experience to guide him, the cub sensed the wolf's design. Each time the Alpha came close to his target, the bear managed to shift his weight and avoid the snapping thrusts. The game was deadly, and the cub had yet to launch any attack of his own. Kevin had never seen him fight, never seen him angry. Was he capable? The boy didn't have to wait long for an answer.

With each slash of the wolf's teeth, the cub's demeanor shifted a notch. Finally, the grizzly, with deliberate coldness, took the offensive. The subtle transformation did not go unnoticed by the boy, nor for that matter the Alpha. This was no blind rage or a lashing out in terror as if cornered. It was just an icy determination that could only come from deep within the gene pool of the species.

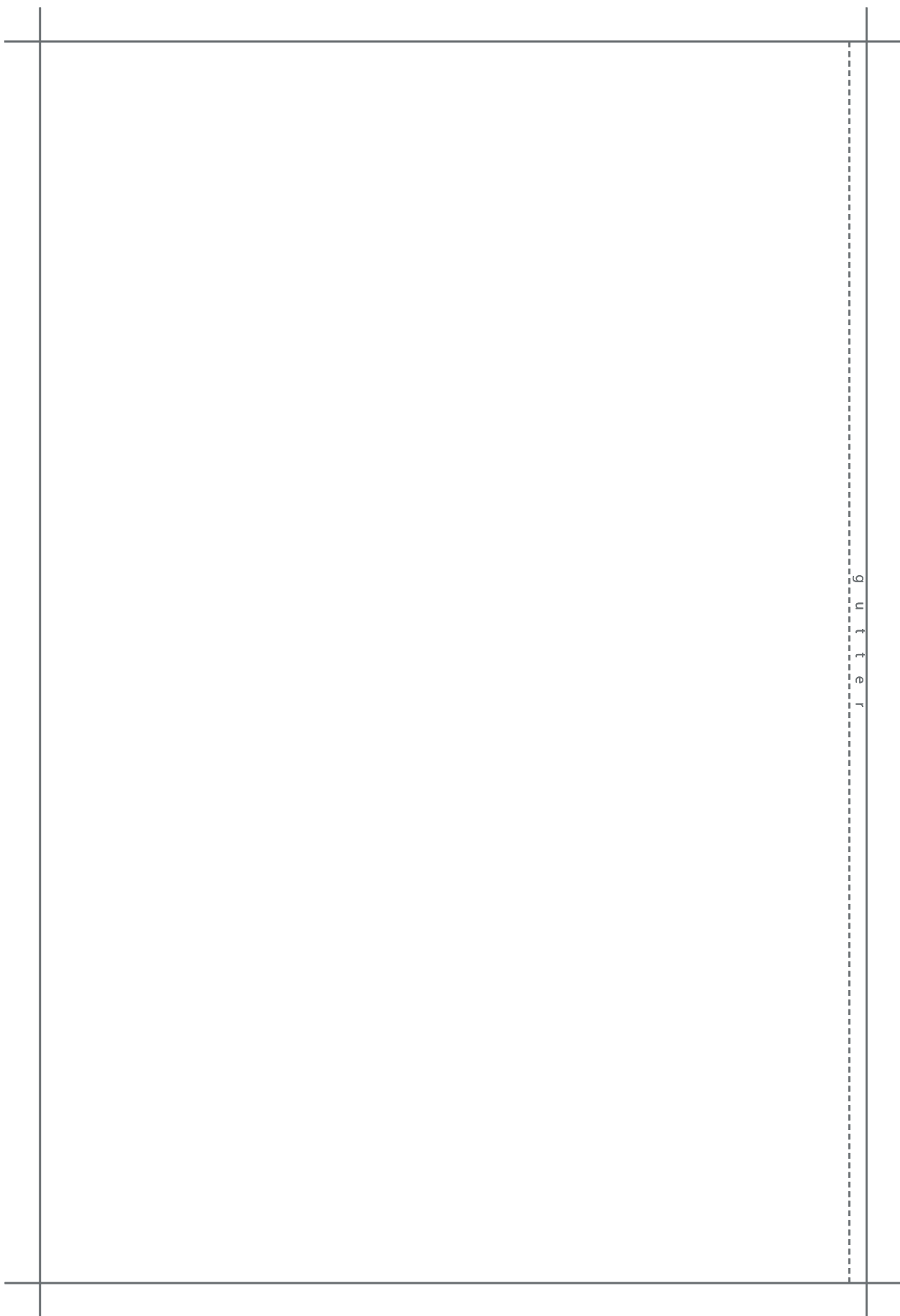
Using his back legs for balance, the cub grabbed the snarling canine, and with his massive forelegs adroitly hoisted the animal entirely off the ground. Surprised, the Alpha snapped viciously at the paws clutching his belly. Raising the wolf high over his head, the bear cub flexed his powerful shoulders and hurled the wolf to the earth with a force that left him windless and dazed. Staggering to his feet, but not fully recovered, the grayish beast was powerless to fend off the pummeling that followed. Methodically, the cub pounded the Alpha.



Another opponent might have finished him then and there, but the cub was cut from a different cloth. Perceiving the wolf no longer a threat, he stopped as curtly as he began, and ambled away with the casual air of an afternoon stroll.

Dumbfounded, Kevin watched as the cub sat down at his feet and licked his wounds. The boy looked back at the mangled attacker, who by now had garnered enough strength and presence of mind to make a hasty if wobbly retreat. The boy gave his furry companion a heartfelt hug, and the bear reciprocated with a friendly slurp across the side of Kevin's face.

The day had been a full one, Kevin thought. That bed is going to feel good tonight.





## CHAPTER TEN

*Finally* stabilized, Jaimie Cade was weaned from the tranquilizers, save for the nightly pill that attempted to put her to sleep. She settled in to a circumscribed kind of reality. By the end of the first month, Jaimie had drained her reservoir of despair, leaving her with a big, empty hole. Once cheerful and lighthearted, her countenance was drab and sullen. She resembled a zombie. Her brother tried to soften the blow and ease her through the adjustment, but nothing helped.

Shutting out the world, Jaimie never left the confines of her home and never received visitors. Beyond her brother and physician, the only person to enter the woman's isolated sphere was Elsa, the faithful family heirloom. Her days were idled away tending flowers in the garden. Her nights, despite the sedative, were spent restlessly – her sleep interrupted by aimless journeys up and down darkened hallways.

Her perfect little world was demolished, and she knew it. Her life was over. She was left with only trappings, splendid facades with nothing inside; an elaborate shell game and she didn't care.

"You've got to eat, ma'm," Elsa pleaded with mock authority. "You'll just dwindle down to nothing if you don't."

"Yes, Elsa. Whatever you say."

Jaimie would lethargically lift the spoon to her mouth and swallow whatever soup was being foisted upon her. Day after day the routine was repeated. Day after day it was always the same. She was less than forty, but looked fifty. There was no telling how old she might

*Kevin L. Smith*

look by year's end, or if she would even be around that long. Einstein was right in more ways than one; time was relative. For some there were never enough hours in the day. For others, like Jaimie, the hours, minutes, and even seconds dragged on like an eternity of endlessly marching soldiers, each looking exactly like the last, having neither beginning nor end.

Fortunately, Bradley Cade's estate was prepared for the unexpected. The endless barrage of details, decisions, and contractual considerations had been averted, sparing his disoriented widow. Those financial matters of an investment nature were automatically turned over to Will Stockard as trustee of the estate, per Cade's instructions as disclosed in his last will and testament. With such a trustee, the estate was in good hands. His brother-in-law possessed a rare combination of slow, deliberate wisdom and unswerving loyalty. The entire document was fairly cut-and-dried, including the part where Kevin was declared heir to the bulk of the estate, to assume control on his twenty-fifth birthday. Naturally Jaimie was generously provided for, as well as Elsa, and Stockard himself who received a ten percent share.

*Stanley* and Dolores Macklin never expected San Diego to be so enchanting. The climate, sinfully monotonous in its balmy moderation, seldom reached the extremes found in the Midwestern metropolis they had left behind. Row after row of palm trees, the quaint Mexican influence on the architecture, restaurants, culture and the ocean air all contributed to the passive atmosphere. Gone was the frantic, hustling pace of Chicago. The lifestyle replacing it was not hard to learn.

Enamored with its tranquil beachfront setting, the Macklins settled on a modest wood frame duplex in the Mission Beach district. Thinking back, Stanley couldn't help being impressed with his decision on where to relocate, and sight unseen at that. All things considered, he even imagined actually thanking the government for forcing him out of that urban rat race. Sitting on the back porch with her feet propped up on a chair, Dolores called to her husband through the hallway.

"Sweetheart, if you don't hurry, you'll miss the sunset. It's awfully gorgeous tonight."

She was right. There was something special about the intensity

of orange and red hues surrounding the radiating orb.

"I'll be right there," he replied, folding up the classified section of the *San Diego Union*.

Stepping through the rear doorway, Macklin bent down to gently kiss his wife before reclining on the wicker divan recently purchased at a second hand store.

"I think there might be some good job possibilities opening up. The paper listed several ads. Of course, with the lack of employment history in our new records, I know I'll have to take beginner's pay to start. But who knows? We'll see if I can get my foot in the door."

Squeezing his hand, Dolores interrupted, "I'm sure you'll do just fine. I've always been proud of you. You've been a good husband."

It was his turn to interrupt, "When we have our child, I want it to have our name. I mean our real name."

"What are you saying?" Dolores asked.

"Only that if things go as well as I think they will, there's no reason why we can't go back to our real identities in a few months. By then everything should have blown over for good. Surely you don't think anyone's going to look for us forever, do you? And it's silly to continue this charade if we don't have to."

"I suppose you're right," Dolores sighed. "But let's not think about it right now. Let's just sit here and forget about everything else except what a wonderful baby we're going to have."

"Come here," Stanley said with a grin. "That remark's going to get you another kiss."

Entwined on the divan, both continued gazing into the horizon, smelling the ocean air, and thinking to themselves how great it was to be alive.

The sun hung on longer than expected. It was a good thing. In the pitch black of night, the climb up to the cave might have been suicide. Kevin reached its entrance puffing from the exertion. Finding his new sanctuary even more hospitable the second time around, young Cade made sure his hairy sidekick felt equally at home. They had been through a great deal together, and the boy had no intention of keeping his good fortune to himself. Motivated, Kevin had already learned

*Kevin L. Smith*

in his short life that good things are better when shared, even if the recipient of the sharing had to be coaxed through the illusory doorway with the persuasive power of a swift kick in the backside. Once in, however, the bear cub relaxed.

Proving to be more than a competent tour guide, Kevin commandeered the ten-cent tour with great assurance. That accomplished, both curled up on the mattress and relaxed for the first time that entire afternoon. The image of the snarling canine still hung vividly, a giant portrait in Kevin's mental gallery of remarkable creatures of the forest. It would be a long time before that memory would fade, if ever. When his metabolism geared down from the accelerated pace of the hurried climb, the boy promptly fell asleep, this time with the cub's rump as a pillow for his head.

Morning came as it had the day before, a gentle awakening. The pair seemed eager to get the day rolling. The cub wasted little time resuming his instinctive drive to put on more weight. The boy, in turn, launched a near perimeter scouting exercise. He hoped to study the lay of the land, as it were, to get more comfortably familiar with his new surroundings. Happily, there wasn't much else the child really had to do. The growing crescendo of nervous anxiety the young boy felt as the days grew steadily colder had lost much of its bite with the advent of the insulated cave and its unusual foodstuffs.

Prior to that eleventh hour discovery, Kevin faced the technical perplexity of socking food away. He tried hard to implement the all too brief instructions in his survival guide. Yet, there was still so much he didn't understand. His attempts to smoke fish came up way short in the results department. Drying fruit was also a problem. Given more time...that was where the difficulty lay.

There was no time.

Kevin didn't need much experience, or even a calendar to know winter was coming fast. Every form of vegetation but the evergreens already billowed forth with vibrant hues of gold and brownish orange. The annual transition heralding the shift of summer to winter was an indisputable fact of life permeating every living thing in those Canadian wilds.

The discovery of the cave came just in time. The probability factor of an eight-year-old child making it through a Rocky Mountain

winter was at best astronomical. If the freezing temperatures didn't get him, then the lack of food surely would have. Not the least of his troubles was the battle for sanity accompanying the other obstacles to survival.

And yet he'd done it again. Little Kevin once more looked down the old barrel of adversity's pistol and managed to dodge the bullet. Even Audie Leon Murphy would have been impressed. It was an unbelievable string of victories.

Similar to the calm before the storm, the next few weeks came and went. By the time the first snowfall of the season hit the mountains it was late November. The cub, in strict adherence to his own built-in time clock, used the extra days wisely and put on an additional thirty pounds. Unfamiliar with the hibernation cycle of the bear species, Kevin was caught quite off guard when just days before the first storm the bear failed to return from his daily forage. Perhaps it was too warm in the cave for hibernating. Perhaps the cub, though attached to Kevin, thought of the winter ritual as a private affair. Despite their standard genetic instructions, individual grizzlies do have personalities of their own. In this bear's case, it just so happened that he felt more comfortable nestled in a place more closely resembling the one he was raised in by his mother. This meant digging out a suitable hole beneath a large tree.

But Kevin was ignorant of these facts. His affection for the cub would surely have conscripted him into a search for his pet had the heavy snow not overruled him. The winter had a mind of its own, and that year was destined to be extraordinary. That first snow did not melt or blow away as they usually did in Novembers past. Instead, the storm merely signaled the introduction to a long chain of storms that kept the ski resorts throughout western Canada pleasantly filled until April of the following year.

Consequently, Kevin became a prisoner, albeit a comfortable one, but a prisoner nonetheless. With snow eight to ten feet on the ledge outside the cave, and drifts twice that depth over the general terrain, there was no way for him to venture from his shelter beyond the six foot overhang directly outside its entrance.

How a boy passes the hours in such confinement depends largely on his imagination, especially when all he has for company is a sixty

*Kevin L. Smith*

page collection of survival tips. But if Kevin had anything, he had his imagination. He began by inventing simple games; some were physical, others mental. Occasionally Kevin daydreamed about the previous tenants, trying to imagine what they might be like, or what he would say to them if they met. He wondered if they were like the hermits he'd read about, or the Indians that lived in caves off by themselves.

But no matter what he envisioned, nothing felt right. None of the pieces fell into place. He remembered pictures of Indian dwellings, like the one in Mesa Verde in Colorado. Kevin couldn't put the feeling into words, but something deep within the child's subconscious kept sending signals. There was something too neat, too orderly, and entirely too magical about the cave. As the weeks passed by, this puzzle drove the boy into countless searches for the answer. Often he would just glide his hands along the smooth walls, hoping for a clue.

It was during such an exercise that his inquisitive fingers ferreted out another recessed compartment, though different from the others. This one swiveled in a circular movement causing an inner shelf to extend and lock into place when pressure was applied to its flush mounted face. The degree of camouflage this secretive compartment enjoyed was evidenced by the simple fact that Kevin had occupied the cave three long months and only just learned it was there.

Staring wide-eyed at the cylindrical object bolted firmly on that pivoting counter, the child let his hands run along its glistening, crystal surface. A foot and a half long, with a constant diameter of six inches, the tube was not particularly intimidating. Even so, the pulsing bluish hue radiating from it had an oddly hypnotic effect on the boy. There didn't appear to be much purpose to the light, other than maybe as an outward indicator of its lingering capacity to perform the obscure task for which it was intended.

Positioned in the center of the tubular casing was a window. Through that transparent plate a light flickered. Shifting his eyes to both ends of the cylinder, the boy took note of the grips, the metallic appendages extending on each end.

"That's for carrying it," Kevin thought to himself.

The boy sat down on his adopted mattress, eyes fixed on the inverted shelf with its fascinating cargo, and put his mind to work on this most recent enigma.



"One good thing," he admitted. "I'm going to have plenty of time to work on it."

Finally, with heavy eyelids, the child leaned back on his bedding and gradually dozed off.

Meanwhile, the cylinder continued to pulse quietly.

The following morning, Kevin climbed up off his mattress, stretched, and stepped through the porthole. Stimulated by the freezing temperatures outside, the boy relieved himself, emptying his bladder adroitly into the snow bank. Peering out to the limits of his eyesight, he wondered how much longer the snow would keep him captive. If ever a soul had cabin fever, Kevin fit the bill. Stepping back inside, the boy took a sip from the canteen of melted snow he kept by the entrance. He should've been hungry. He always woke up hungry. Instead, the granulated tablets swallowed the afternoon before easily sustained him well into the following day.

Again Kevin faced the big question. What will I do today? His thoughts gravitated back to the cylinder. Infinitely more entertaining than any game he might play, Kevin's fascination compelled him back toward the still pulsing mechanism. He wasn't even sure whether "machine" was a proper word for the thing.

"It looks like a machine," he said half out loud as he wrinkled his eyebrows. "If it is a machine, what does it do? It has to do something. All machines do something."

Letting the problem rest for a bit, he walked over to where his own possessions rested. Removing his magnifying glass, he fondled it in the palm of his hand, admiring its delicate precision. The magnifier had proven to be a valuable addition to his pack supplies. Fiddling with the glass between his thumb and forefinger, his eyes turned back to the cylinder device. What could it be? The question haunted him like a half-remembered dream. Ambling back over to the hunk of metal, Kevin let his hands rest gently on the casing. Almost as an afterthought, his fingers fell on the grips located on each end of the tube.

It was not until both hands attached themselves firmly to the protruding handles that the proverbial feces hit the revolving blades.

Instantly, a piercing white beam shot out from the pulsing cylinder, and landed squarely on the small forehead of the boy. Kevin

*Kevin L. Smith*

tried to move, but he could not. Straining every muscle, nothing he could do would free him from the beam.

He wasn't in pain, but he was scared. Frozen, suspended, Kevin was helpless to do anything but stare anxiously into the glowing cylinder. The flow of electrons through his tender torso made his skin tingle, and his scalp itch.

Then, as suddenly as it began, it stopped.

Released from the mysterious ray of light, Kevin slumped, his hands still clutching the grips. Letting go of the handles, Kevin fell to the floor.

This list of his, the one of all his trials, was growing steadily. Kevin was almost getting used to it, like riding a roller coaster over and over until you were numb. So here he was, numb and still dumbfounded. With all that had happened, he had no answers, just more questions. The glowing and pulsing had stopped. Whatever made it function before was gone. All that was left was a cold, lifeless, metallic curiosity.

The whole ordeal left him suddenly hungry. Wishing for one of Elsa's homemade breakfasts, he contented himself with another of the tablets that passed for food. Thoughts of home were occurring fewer and further between as the weeks went by. Flooded at first with those remembrances, Kevin's mind only occasionally drifted into that other world with its tender images. This was one of those times, though it didn't last long.

Strange, he never felt sleepy this time of day. Yawning, Kevin lay back down on the mattress which he had climbed off of only an hour before and fell fast asleep.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kevin's nap was anything but ordinary. This time there would be no awakening in an hour or two as one might from a noon siesta. His body temperature dropped steadily, leveling off by the third day. His breathing grew shallow and slow. His skin turned cool. He could have passed for dead. Thus he remained, suspended in a near-catatonic state, until the seventh week. Only then did all his vital signs start inching back up to normal.

Stirring, Kevin's first clue to his extended sleep was the heavy stiffness in his muscles. It was all the boy could do just to stretch. The child lay there on the bedding, unable to lift himself. Thirty minutes passed before circulation and blood flow strengthened his legs enough to stand. Shakily, Kevin stumbled around the floor of the cave. His hunger had returned.

The following weeks went by in peaceful equanimity, with the days growing longer. The magnificent snow drifts luxuriously piled up outside the cave steadily eroded, both from the March winds and the rising temperatures. The month was May. Patches of Alpine hair grass peeked through here and there. The ever intensifying solar rays finally burned off the white cover enshrouding the mountains for so many months. The warming trend was a welcome one to the pent up cave dweller.

The boy had grown in his year of adventure; he was three inches taller and weighed fifteen pounds heavier, despite the impromptu fast.

Kevin stepped outside the cave for a walk, something he had

*Kevin L. Smith*

been doing daily for a couple of weeks. Encouraged by the warmth, Kevin extended his trips farther and longer each day. That morning he was unusually energetic and hoped to make a full day of it. And perhaps this time, with a little luck, he might just run into his four-legged friend. He reasoned that the cub found his own place to bed down for the winter, not far away. He was anxious for the reunion. During their separation, the boy picked out a name for the animal, deciding that “bear” and “cub” was unworthy of their friendship.

The boy chose Fred. It seemed to fit him.

Romping to-and-fro like a frisky pup, Kevin wallowed in his freedom and the beauty of his surroundings. Catching sight of a snowshoe hare trouncing a few yards ahead, Kevin realized that he wasn't the only one feeling his oats that spring morning. This was an invigorating time of year, charmed with a veritable epidemic of fresh, living things. Seldom did anyone from the outside world enjoy the firsthand exhilaration of early spring in the Cordilleran expanse of North America. Leap-frogging the larger rocks along the rugged trail, Kevin failed to see the rattlesnake in his path.

More to frighten the boy away than to signal attack, the viper coiled up tight and shook its rattle menacingly. The boy caught his breath, and froze as his adrenaline kicked into overdrive. The veins in his temples pounded relentlessly.

This was his first confrontation with a snake, save for the three-foot garter that had made its way into his sleeping bag one cold evening. Kevin didn't need to be an expert to know that his life was threatened. He knew the rattler could kill. The boy had seen as much when witnessing an unfortunate rabbit get caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Like the rabbit, he wanted to run, but a voice inside told him the slightest move might trigger the reptile. His tongue grew parched, and his hands glistened with sweat. Kevin fought down the panic and concentrated on the snake's head and the unseen venomous fangs, hidden within.

Agonizing seconds ticked off, with neither wishing to escalate the exchange.

Suddenly, a swallow landed on a branch of the tall pine directly above them. Startled, Kevin lifted his head. In that instant, the rattler struck. The distance to Kevin's exposed arm was less than three feet. It

would take the reptile a third of a second to reach the target.

The time spent for the human brain to instruct the muscles in his arm and for the arm to respond was many times faster than the streaking serpent. However, that normal human reaction factor was always retarded drastically by the one weak link in the neural receptor chain, the command center. The brain wouldn't register the data given by the eye fast enough. The outcome was predictable and deadly for the boy.

At least, it should have been. Here was the first indicator, a blatant testimony that something special had happened to Kevin Cade, something that would one day be linked to the cave and its cylinder.

Kevin reacted in one-one-hundredth of a second, thirty times faster than the serpent whose dripping-needles were left grabbing for air. The attacker slithered hurriedly away. Kevin's heart was thumping fiercely, and he kept his eyes riveted on the reptile until it disappeared into a hole. Only then did the child let the air out of his lungs. He was still shaking.

"What did I do?"

He looked at his arm. There were no fang marks, a clean miss. He sat down, swigging some water from his canteen, and pondered for a while. Kevin recalled the times when he had accidentally touched something sharp or hot. His hand jerked away before he even thought about it. But this was different, he had thought about it. His arm didn't jerk or twitch. He moved with purpose. Kevin tried to replay the sequence over in his head. When he did, another odd thing occurred; he could see the snake springing at him, only in slow motion. He glanced back up at the bird still in the tree and then ambled off to continue his exploring, still somewhat pensive with regard to his experience.

He felt famished. The thaw came just in time, as his food supply was almost depleted. Pulling out the stored fishing tackle from his knap sack, Kevin assembled the paraphernalia in proper order and threw his line into the nearby watercourse swelled from the mountain runoff. He hadn't lost his touch. Half an hour later he snagged a twelve-inch rainbow trout. Selecting the dry and partially covered ground of the cave entrance, Kevin built his first fire of the year with nearby wood scraps.

*Kevin L. Smith*

Thus, the survival routine resumed for the young outdoorsman. Time was now on his side. A whole season lay in front of him. Next winter he would be ready. Every day Kevin dedicated himself to learning something new and useful. As each week went by, his knowledge increased. So did his confidence. It was not cockiness he felt, but a comforting sense of control over his own destiny. No longer did his mind dwell on the world left behind through no fault of his own. He had a new home, and a new world.

Kevin did think long and hard about the world outside. Someday he hoped to return to that interdependent twentieth-century human aquarium. Yet, surviving to that moment was a double or nothing proposition. Either he failed and died, or he survived and made the best of it beyond anyone's expectations, or at least almost anyone's.

As for the cave, the incredible significance of the discovery passed right over the head of the boy. Like a boy going to Disneyland for the first time, he was content with the adventure in itself, harboring no desire to question the whys and wherefores of how such fantasies were created any longer. Perhaps that was best. Regardless of how adept he proved to be at overcoming nature's obstacles, Kevin still needed to remain focused intently on that matter of survival. He was yet a child, and there was much out there that constituted bona fide threats to his survival.

Fortunately, threats were a two-edged sword when applied to the human species. The very possibility of danger was the one ingredient that sparked the child's heightening awareness. Not that he was in much of a position to pick and choose. The wheels were already set in motion.

And so it went, week after week, month after month. First one year, and then another, and then another. All the while the boy watched, listened, and learned. The animal kingdom was a giant workshop of instruction on the subject of predator versus prey, weak versus strong, cunning versus stupid, survivor versus casualty. The wolves, cougars, and even the lowly otters conducted personal seminars for the boy. And Kevin was the perfect student. He didn't just accumulate bits of knowledge. He correlated them. He cross-indexed them, absorbing a grasp of the larger picture, an overview of nature itself. Then he found his own niche in that larger picture. He ate, drank, slept, played, and

hunted right along with the rest of the creatures. When he killed, it was for food. And he suffered no remorse for the deed.

The wilderness had its way with Kevin Cade. Nature had recruited another disciple.

The way the planet was going, the more the better.

*They* hunted together most of the day. He and the grizzly were a well-matched team. While the grizzly possessed an uncanny knack for searching out berries, honey, and edible roots, the boy developed proficiency for hunting small game. Hours of practice with a handmade stone sling gave him remarkable skill in its use.

On a particular late afternoon of his fifth summer in the mountains, he and Fred had scouted quite a distance when both spotted a white-tailed buck grazing in the lower meadows. The hunters were downwind, and would not be detected as long as they remained so. Following a well rehearsed routine, Fred positioned himself beside Kevin much like a retriever. He left the assault to the man-child and waited as backup in case the deer made a run for it. Though a bit less nimble-footed than deer, grizzlies were no slouches in the dogged pursuit of wounded prey.

This time the pebble landed dead center, right between the eyes. Stunned, the buck dropped to its knees. In seconds the bear sprinted over to where the animal fell, with Kevin close behind. The boy pulled out his knife and slit the deer's throat.

Then he heard it, the unmistakable sonic salvo of another grizzly. The creature was monstrous, nearly twelve hundred pounds. He sported countless battle scars heralding a tried and tested ferocity. He was long in the tooth, but there was a lot of fight left, as evidenced by his sudden appearance and willingness to battle for fresh meat. Kevin and Fred were trespassers in the old bear's domain, and he was having none of it. The two bears stared each other down. The young grizzly next to Kevin let out his own snarl and lumbered forward. Fred was lighter than the elder grizzly by three hundred pounds, but he was also more agile.

They collided in deadly earnest. Trading blows, each pounded the other with their massive forelimbs. The old warrior's battle plan was clear enough: he wanted to make quick work of his opponent.

*Kevin L. Smith*

much as an older boxer might a younger one. He knew the longer the fight lasted, the greater the role that the stamina of each would play in the outcome, and stamina always had a way of favoring youth.

However, Fred was taking the old grizzly's best shots and returning them blow-for-blow. What a magnificent fighter, Kevin thought to himself as he watched from a safe distance. A few moments more and the old bear realized he'd torn off more than he could chew. Backing off, the scarred veteran hobbled away in retreat. Flushed with victory, Fred sauntered gingerly over to Kevin, who reached out his hand in congratulations.

In that instant, a sharp report rang out, echoing through the entire meadow. Arching back in pain, Fred wheeled around, his senses in turmoil. The child's keen ears registered the general direction of the shot. His eyes saw the blue flash of the ignited gunpowder as another lead projectile left the 30-06 rifle barrel. The second shot landed in the animal's neck, provoking further pain. Wanting to run but not sure where, the grizzly looked desperately at Kevin, pleading for help with his eyes.

Once more the gun spoke.

But this time the bullet never reached its target. Not that the lead missile was poorly aimed; whoever was responsible had chosen the bear's skull for the third shot. And that is precisely where it would have landed had the super-charged neurons within Kevin's brain not instructed the muscles in his right arm to reach out and deflect the bullet only inches before impact. He had just saved the bear's life. How he was able to register something so tiny traveling twenty-seven hundred feet per second was a question begging for an answer, but Kevin decided to ponder that matter at another time.

Instead he thought about running from the source of the shots, but something in the boy rebelled against turning tail.

Here was his chance to make contact with the outside world. He had waited five years for that chance.

"Hey there! Are you all right?" shouted the intruder from a distance.

Am I all right? Odd thing to hear from someone shooting at you, Kevin thought. The five foot, six inch, overweight stranger in the red plaid flannel shirt and silly looking cap appeared friendly despite the



attack. The man hurried down the slope toward the boy, stopping a dozen yards short. The excited weekender in his late thirties nervously eyed the huge grizzly licking his wounds.



"Don't worry; he won't hurt you," Kevin said in a matter of fact voice. "Just tell me why you were shooting at us."

"Not you, him," the man responded, pointing to the bear. "I

*Kevin L. Smith*

thought you were a goner for sure.”

“He happens to be a friend, and you almost made *him* a goner, as you call it,” said the boy making no attempt to hide his sarcasm.

“Sorry,” replied the hunter skeptically.

“Where did you come from anyway?” Kevin queried, changing the subject.

“Oh, well, you see, me and my buddy are camped some five miles from here over into the next meadow,” he answered pointing to the south while keeping his eyes on the grizzly. “How about you, son?”

“I live here.”

“I don’t think I understand. Nobody lives out here. This is government wilderness.”

“Well, I do. That is, until now.”

Despite his animosity, the boy was glad to see another person. The moment his eyes spotted the stranger, he knew deep down that a part of his life was over, a chapter concluded. The realization made him both sad and relieved.

“I guess I’ve been kind of waiting for you, or someone like you. My name is Kevin Cade, and I’ve been lost here for five summers...”

It was a long time coming, but Stanley and Dolores Macklin inched their way back to a normal life. Their two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Didi added much to that sense of normalcy. Two full years elapsed from the moment the family reverted to their real names, and it felt good to use them.

All went well until late one evening when Stanley woke up from sleep, startled to consciousness by a scream coming from next door. Looking through the bedroom shutters, he saw the flames darting out of the bottom floor windows in the cottage next to theirs. Jumping into his trousers, Macklin bolted out the front door, shouting to Dolores to call the Fire Department as he ran towards burning house. The fire, ignited by a faulty hot water heater, was rapidly engulfing the lower half of the two-story structure. Climbing to the second floor by way of a tree between the two dwellings, Macklin worked his way into the upper bedroom window.

Grabbing quickly first one child and then the other, Stanley hoisted them to an extended limb of the well positioned eucalyptus, helping them down just as the fire truck arrived.

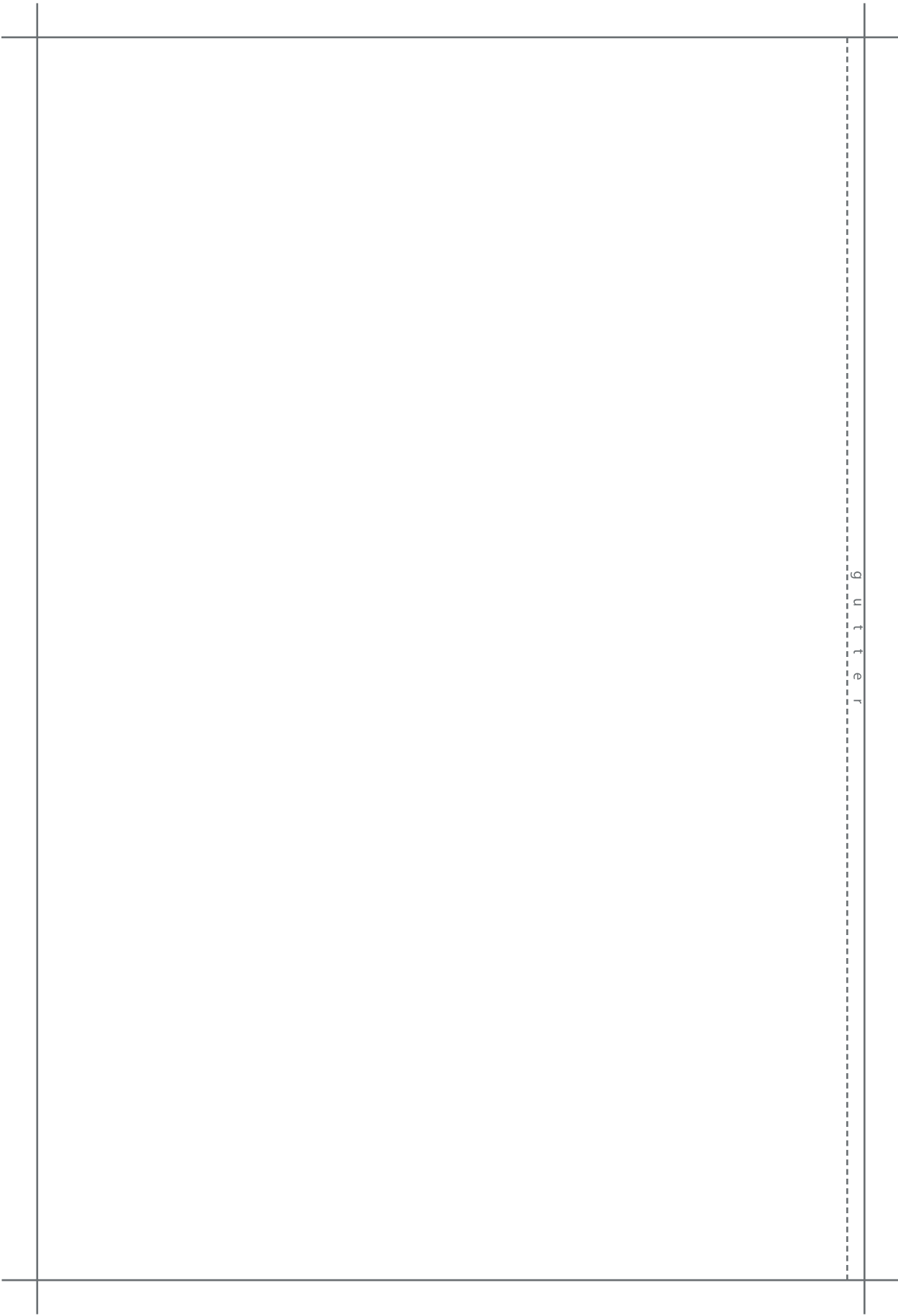
It was just one of those things. In stressful situations, people often acted without thinking, activated by the fight or flight system of the human mind. The heroic act was not premeditated or deliberate, though commendable. In fact the local news bureau was so impressed they came out to interview and photograph the local hero.

Before Macklin knew it, he was in forty newspapers around the country – including Chicago.

It was a splendid photograph, one that depicted all of Stanley's facial features with clarity. Curiously, within days of publication, the Good Samaritan and his family vanished, lock, stock, and station wagon. No one knew where. They simply packed up and left one balmy summer evening. None of the neighbors had a clue as to where they might have gone.

"Darn shame," they said. "It's hard to find good neighbors these days."

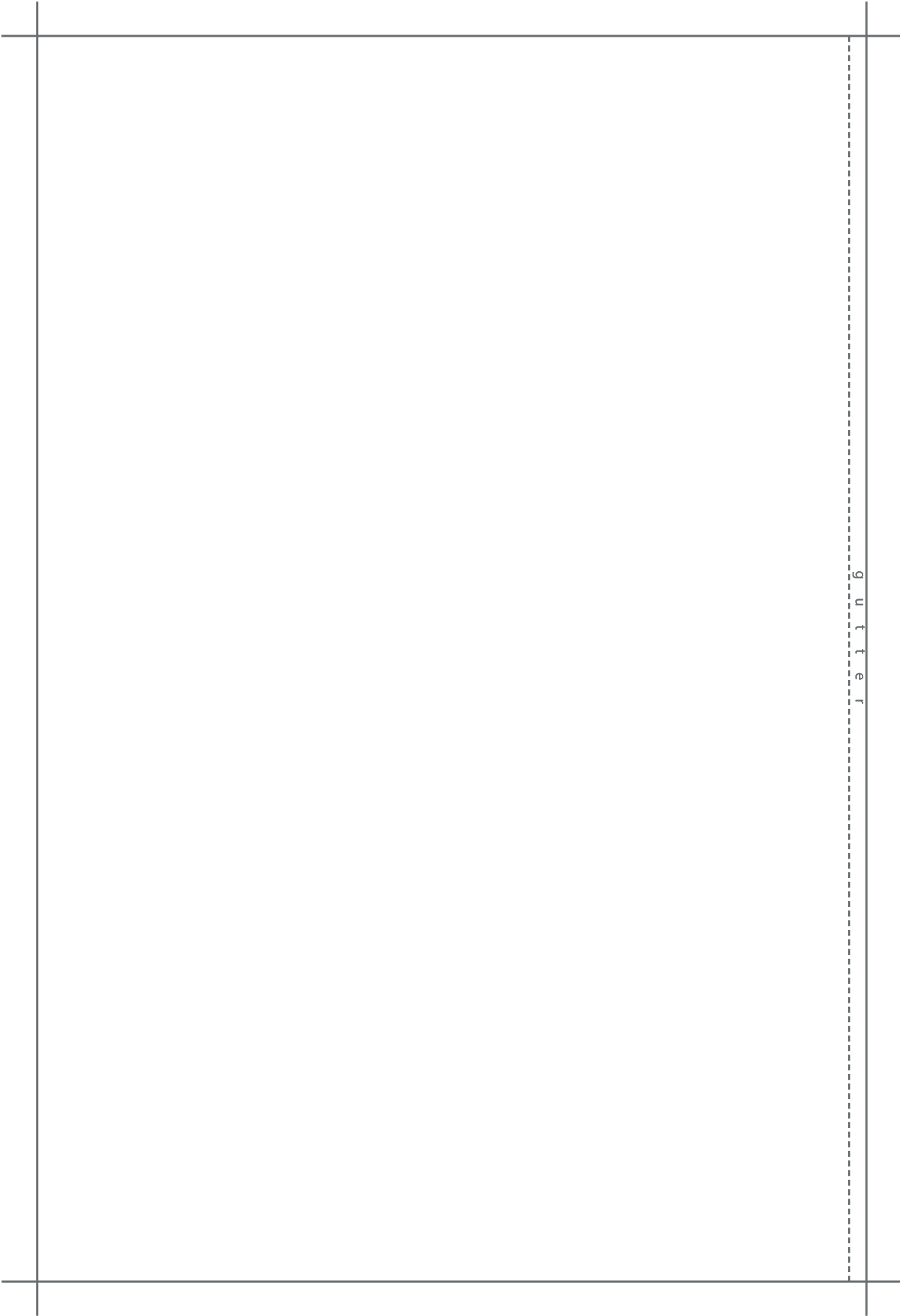
Wish they could be more help, one and all replied to the dignified gentlemen that stopped by to personally deliver a very important package.



g u t t e r

# BOOK TWO

(1986)





## CHAPTER ONE

### *Phoenix, Arizona*

*Business* as usual.

Hectic was an accurate word to describe the current time of day in Frank Braddock's office. The frenzy could be mitigated with better organization, but the self-styled reporter was a chronic foot dragger in that category.

"There *is* such a thing as too tidy!" Frank bellowed across the office to his personal secretary. "It's distracting," he continued. "Besides, do I look like a maid?"

Miss Bentley stifled an urge to laugh. He had a point. Her boss was fifty-two. His long and controversial career as a freelancer had reached that stage where manual labor was no longer necessary. Things were not always so cushy, but lately his reputation as a hardnosed, uncompromising investigator bordered on celebrity status. He enjoyed coast-to-coast syndication of his weekly column, for which he was paid handsomely. Braddock was also a recurring guest on network talk shows, as well as a regular participant in the lucrative guest speaker circuit. Braddock's swelling popularity stemmed from the giant killer label gained from his collision course with political and financial heavyweights, much as Ralph Nader had done on a consumer advocate level.

*Kevin L. Smith*

Naturally, he accumulated an unhealthy list of enemies in the bargain, not that it bothered him. Armed with the natural temperament of a pit bull terrier, Braddock discovered early in his career that the best time to let someone know they're being investigated was after it became a matter of public record. Then it was too late to do anything. Consequently, trying to put a cap on Frank Braddock was like trying to plug a leaky roof during a rainstorm. The technique was simple and effective, and it kept him alive.

Yet, all rewards aside, Braddock wasn't the young bloodhound he used to be. The pressure and the lines on his face both grew deeper with each year.

"What you need is some old fashioned R & R, sir."

"Yeah, maybe you're right, Bentley," Braddock mumbled as he gulped down his morning coffee.

"Leave it to me, Mr. B. I'll take care of all the arrangements."

"Okay, okay," her boss replied. "Just quit bugging me and dig up some of those pills you keep stashed away for your personal emergencies. And I don't mean Midol. Aspirin will do fine."

"Right away," Miss Bentley said smiling. She was cheerful to the point of nausea, especially early in the day. He reflected on his headache.

"I've got to stop buying that cheap beer," he mumbled. "By the way, where am I going on this great getaway you've cooked up, or is it a surprise?"

"Well," she began, "I know how much you enjoy fishing. About a week ago, I read about this beautiful spot in southeast Colorado, near a place called Durango, I think. And the nice part is you can get there by car in eight hours."

Braddock wrinkled his eyebrows.

"Now that you mention it, things are going to slow down a bit by the end of the week," he said rubbing his chin. "I have to admit the idea has possibilities."

Bentley could see the excitement growing in him.

"When you finalize the details, let me know," he ordered, getting up from his chair and grabbing his coat. "And if anybody calls, tell them I'm in a conference or something. I'm going to drop into that new sporting goods store down the street."



"Yes, sir."

"Oh, before I forget, how is that new girl working out?"

"I'm sure she will be fine, Mr. B, though her typing could use some work."

"Unlike you, Bentley, we all can't be Mario Andretti of the IBM set. Anyway, she's your responsibility. Just keep me posted."

He grabbed his satchel and walked out the door.

There was still a good half hour before the office shut down for the day. Evelyn returned to her own desk and poured herself one last cup of alfalfa mint tea. Her boss's departing remark hung in the air. That new girl really wasn't the best typist in the world, but she seemed to try awfully hard. What Evelyn liked and what had ultimately landed her the job was her acute attentiveness.

Evelyn glanced furtively over her tea mug to the far end of the office. At that very moment, the latest addition to the staff was dutifully up to her elbows in manila file folders. Suddenly a strange thought sifted into Evelyn's head. Could there be such a thing as too attentive? Nothing in the office escaped her. Nothing that is, but Braddock's latest covert undertaking. Over the years that Evelyn had been with the firm, several of those pet projects came and went. Never once did Braddock share the slightest detail with any of his office staff, not even Evelyn herself. No particle of his private research ever left the vault behind Braddock's desk, except to be viewed by his eyes only. Communications with independent operatives were always by telegrams addressed to Braddock personally, and then in coded language. As a consequence, the first time the employees knew of the subject was when they read about it in the papers along with everybody else.

That was fine with Evelyn. Little did the woman know just how fortunate she was in her blissful state of ignorance. If ever there was a loaded gun, Braddock's exposé into Chicago-based organized crime fit the profile. A story like that falling into the wrong hands might be disastrous, especially for Frank Braddock.

Not that choosing the underworld for subject matter was any sort of first.

On the contrary, ever since those Valachi papers came on the scene in the early sixties, the reading public glowed in fascination with the topic. Obliging, countless journalists and authors climbed on

*Kevin L. Smith*

the lucrative bandwagon, injecting their own version of an underworld exposé. Some were quite good. But most were various forms of exploitive garbage contributing few, if any, new facts to enlighten the public. The commercial potential of that garbage was just too lucrative, too tempting to ignore. Interestingly, the actual crime organizations targeted by the mass media cared little about the sensationalized drivel, at least not enough to strike back. There was no reason to, for the information was seldom threatening. Some of it even flattered them.

However, every now and then some enterprising reporter chanced upon a real find, a story with substance, one that cast new light on the cloaked world of the brotherhood. That was when an enormous necessity fell on said reporter to exercise the greatest of caution. The Mafia tiger hiding in the tall grass of society was not without teeth and claws, or the inclination to use them when the situation warranted.

The steadily growing data accumulated by Braddock represented just such a situation.

The syndicate Braddock was now investigating had invested many years, toil, and money moving their operations into legitimate business enterprises, if nothing more than to launder their tainted finances. Braddock's stack of evidence linking them with specific reputable corporations, as well as high level government appointees, constituted an undeniable threat to their hard won privacy.

Braddock understood the stakes. Whenever he found himself locked into a major league breakthrough like this one, he executed the ultimate care and discretion, even if that meant progressing at a snail's pace.

All the while, his five-person office crew of fact-finding researchers stayed busy with less sensational assignments, leaving Braddock to oversee the broader picture and concentrate on his own pet stories.

Beyond the preliminary stage, his latest project was stalled, plagued by a recent rash of dead ends. His last investigative journey had taken him all the way to Washington. His freelance field operatives were hard at work in D.C., trying to break things loose; judging by the way things were taking shape, those missing pieces might never turn up.

As the reporter cruised to his favorite watering hole, he contemplated the prospect placed in his lap by his Girl Friday.

September was perfect for fishing in the mountains, and the idea sounded intriguing.

"*What's* the latest on that plant we put in Braddock's office?"

The question held a certain terseness that demanded immediate response.

"Well, Mr. Parelli, Miss Pendergast has learned that Frank Braddock is taking a fishing trip very soon."

"This firm is not interested in Mr. Braddock's recreational itinerary."

Vincent Parelli hadn't risen to the corporate penthouse by his use of the genteel art of pleasant conversation.

"Regarding Mr. Braddock's investigation of Megatech, Inc., Mr. Parelli, nothing is new from Friday's report, except that Miss Pendergast seems to feel that something is expected to break fairly soon."

"Hmm." Parelli mumbled. "That could be. He's been studying us for some time now. Sooner or later he must be dealt with. And I don't like sitting around waiting to read about it in the papers like all his other victims."

Rosen acknowledged his superior with a nod.

"Some serious and far-reaching projects are in the works, and I will not have them jeopardized."

Parelli paused then said, "I believe it's time we send someone down there to discuss the matter with him. I'm certain he can be persuaded to our point of view. That is, with the right argument."

"My sentiments exactly, sir."

"Do you have anyone in mind, Rosen?"

"I think Mr. Jelette would be an appropriate choice for the task. There is...shall we say, a sincerity about him that comes across quite well, don't you agree?"

Parelli smiled approvingly as he spoke, "Dispatch him at once, Mr. Rosen. Inform me when he returns. I want to know the details."

Will Stockard sat comfortably in his easy chair, looking out into the garden as he lit up his favorite pipe. My, how the world kept

*Kevin L. Smith*

changing, he thought quietly; and not for the better either. His sister, Jaimie Cade, had faded away into the peaceful sleep of death just one year before Kevin's return from the wilderness, and all his surroundings reminded him of her. He missed her deeply.

His meditation was interrupted when the old, wrinkled housekeeper entered the den to ask, "Can I get you anything, sir?"

Even after forty years, Elsa continued to insist on arm's-length formality. The verbal trappings made her feel important and official.

"No, that's fine. By the way, isn't Kevin due in tonight?"

"Master Kevin is indeed, sir. He called this very morning to let us know what time to expect him."

"Where did he go this time?"

"He told me, sir, but it must've slipped my mind. Wait, now I remember. A place called Nassuh. It's one of those islands, I believe."

"Nothing wrong with your memory, Elsa. Except the place is Nassau. How do you stay so sharp and fit, if you don't mind sharing your secret with a sixty-eight year old upstart?"

"Oh, Master Will, how you do go on!"

It was true. Elsa was eighty-three, but one would never know by looking at her, or talking to her either.

"Must be in the genes," Stockard quipped.

His mind shifted to his nephew. Brad and Jaimie would have been proud of their son. He was healthy in body and mind, responsible and considerate. He was intelligent too, if the old uncle was any judge. Stockard took his responsibility as surrogate parent seriously, and he had done his best to bring up the child as his real parents would have wanted. Simply, as normal as possible. At least as normal as one could under the circumstances.

Looking back, never in those past twenty years or so did Kevin give his uncle real cause for grief. Even as a teenager, the boy resisted the turn on, drop out, flower child mentality of the turbulent sixties. In the Nixon years, while scores of college kids made headlines protesting, Kevin was never among them. Stockard's memory was triggered. He recalled a twelve year old conversation as if it was yesterday. The interchange all started with a question to the young man. Stockard yearned to know if his nephew had intentions of joining others of his generation in their defiant lifestyle.

"What's the point, Uncle Will? What would change?"

Something in the expression on the young man's face jarred the old engineer. Far from a casual remark, cynicism both intense and fatalistic underscored his words. Stockard pressed him further.

"You're saying you agree with them, but you just don't see how protesting would help, is that it?"

Kevin smiled, almost paternally. For but a brief moment their roles reversed, with Kevin assuming the fatherly posture.

Stockard continued waiting for a reply, "If not, then what are you saying?"

Finally Kevin answered, "Only that we all need to open our eyes to the world around us and see the way things really are, and not what we would like them to be. Those well-meaning peers of mine on the five o'clock news live in fantasyland. They think they can make a difference. Even if they did, it would be like rearranging the furniture and whitewashing a condemned building."

The conversation was beginning to make Stockard feel uncomfortable. The old man sensed a barrier between them he never felt before. It wasn't a generation gap. It was worse.

"You don't think much of the old red, white, and blue, do you Kevin?"

Kevin smiled again, "Why don't you ask me what you really want to know, uncle? Am I some kind of communist or closet radical, right?"

"The idea had crossed my mind, Kevin, though it's hard for me to picture you of all people falling for that old claptrap."

"Let me put you at ease. I'm neither. I just happen to have a strong feeling or two about the ineptitude of governments in general, regardless of the color of their flag. Governments, institutions; they're all the same," he said pausing for but a moment. "If only they would loosen themselves from the chains of self-interest long enough to face the real problems of this planet. If I depress you, I'm sorry. But since you asked, if it was up to me, I'd give them all their severance checks and send them home. We'd all be better off."

"Oh, I'm not so sure, Kevin. Of course, the old are never as sure as the young. I, for one, wish I knew what I thought I knew twenty years ago."

*Kevin L. Smith*

Stockard was visibly unsettled by the fatalistic flavor of his nephew's bleak perception of things.

"I don't suppose you've thought up any alternatives, have you?"

"Not really, and from where I sit, there may not be any. I do know this. I don't intend to participate in the charade. Let others play the game."

With a shrug, Will Stockard walked away, wondering silently whether he would ever get inside that mind. It wouldn't have mattered so much if the old man didn't love the boy so.

Stockard's contemplation returned to the present. His nephew had grown into a mature man with an array of fine qualities. If only those attributes could be channeled in a way that made sense. Kevin's energies weren't misdirected. They weren't directed, period. The young man possessed money, looks, intelligence, and education. And yet even now Kevin Cade hung suspended adroitly in a kind of holding pattern, like some airplane that can't find a place to land. Oh, Kevin stayed busy all right, Stockard admitted. He spent long hours in his father's library studying who-knows-what. And always he was the loner. Even his sports were loner sports. Probably a by-product of those years left to himself. Yeah, that's it, he thought. If only there was something his old uncle could do to stir his soul, to light a fire under him, something to give his life meaning.

A sound echoed from the front entrance hall. Will Stockard knew at once by the tone in Elsa's voice that his nephew had arrived. As he turned toward those sounds, Kevin stepped into view, smiling broadly with a special expression reserved for the two people sharing his otherwise solitary existence.

"How are you two?"

"No complaints, son," the old man replied. "How was your trip?"

"Quite pleasant, Uncle Will. You should join me sometime. The marine life down there is exquisite."

At six feet, two inches, Kevin Cade carried his one hundred and ninety-five pounds with a catlike grace rare in big men. Separated by several decades from his childhood ordeal, the physical and emotional residue of the experience still lingered. Not precisely physical or mental, but a blend of both, Kevin exuded an understated poise difficult to

explain. It was a charismatic quality not lost on others, including his uncle who constantly puzzled over the incongruity in his nephew's makeup. With all his subtle grace, Kevin was the classic wallflower. And there lay his weakness, the chink in his well-adjusted facade, and maybe the clue to his desire for self-fulfillment – or lack of it.

"Perhaps I might just do that sometime," Stockard said. "Oh, Kevin, once you've unpacked and washed that jet lag off, do you think you might humor your uncle with a few minutes of conversation before you turn in?"

"Be delighted, uncle. Just give me a few minutes."

Moments later, both were seated comfortably before the fireplace, sipping Elsa's homemade sassafras brew.

"I know we've had this conversation before," Stockard began. "At least, variations of it. And please don't feel like I'm coming down on you, but what in tarnation do you have planned for the rest of your life?"

"My life is not unpleasant as it is, sir, thanks to the business acumen of my late father."

Stockard could have tripped on the sarcasm in his nephew's reply.

"Would you have preferred it otherwise?" the uncle inquired.

"To answer yes would brand me an ungrateful offspring. And yet, I have a hunch my illustrious father would've laughed at all these so-called advantages."

The conversation was going in circles, as they often did with Kevin.

"Put your mind at rest, Uncle Will. When the answer to your question comes...that is, if there is an answer, you'll be the first one I tell. Until then, I'm taking things one day at a time. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough. Just one more question, if you can stand it. What in heaven's name do you do all those hours you spend cloistered up in your father's library?"

The familiar smile formed on the young man's lips.

"Think about myself," Kevin replied.

With that, he hoisted himself up and headed down the hall.

"I really do appreciate your concern, Uncle Will," he said over his shoulder. "But please, don't worry about me. I'll find my way,

*Kevin L. Smith*

somehow.”

Uncle Will wasn't convinced.

The following morning, Kevin retired into the study carrying with him a stack of videocassettes. Once inside with the door secured, he began playing them. Staring intensely at the visual images that came on the screen, he played and replayed each cassette until he was convinced his own mind had recorded those images and imbedded them in the memory engrams within his brain.

g u t t e r





## CHAPTER TWO

"DON'T worry about locking up, Bentley. I'm staying here at the office another hour or so before going home."

"Very well, Mr. Braddock. See you in the morning."

With that, Evelyn Bentley walked out, slinging her raincoat over her shoulder. Phoenix wasn't famous for its rainfall, but even the Sahara gets sprinkled on once in awhile. The last few days were characterized by late afternoon showers of short duration. A good thing the worst hot weather was over, Bentley thought to herself. Arizona desert rain showers momentarily cooled the air, but left behind an unbearable combination of heat and humidity that coerced many with weak hearts and high blood pressure to remain imprisoned inside refrigerated shelters. Well into September, the mercury hovered mercifully in the low '90s, a far cry from the 115 degrees of July.

Within minutes, she was tucked in her '78 Honda Civic and out of the parking lot. Bentley was not the kind of employee that carried her job home with her, or even out the office door. At five o'clock, an automatic switch in her head clicked and remained disengaged until she stepped across the office door threshold the next working day.

She paid no attention to the car pulling into her space, or to the two men that emerged from it. Had she been more alert, it probably would have made little difference. Nothing in their appearance gave a clue to their purpose or identity.

Inside, Frank Braddock was deeply absorbed in the Megatech file, hoping to uncover something he might have missed on the first read.

*Kevin L. Smith*

That was how it often went in his arduous investigations. Just when he felt like giving up for lack of some key piece of information, Braddock learned to his chagrin that the desired item, like some obscure piece of a jigsaw puzzle, was there in the file all along. The exercise had the feel of an Easter egg hunt. Taking a break, Braddock removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. When his hands came down, the two men were standing ominously over his desk.

“What do you have there, Mr. Braddock?” asked the most threatening of the two men.

Scooping up the pile of papers on the reporter’s desk, Jelette glanced at them and grinned sardonically.

“Well, well, what do you know...Megatech. That’s sure a coincidence. Me and my buddy here work for Megatech,” he said pausing to peruse the pages. “But you look like a smart guy. I bet you already guessed that. Isn’t that so?”

Jelette was right on both accounts. More nervous than frightened, Braddock just sat there trying to size up the situation. Who they were was obvious enough. But how had they gotten wind of him? More to the point, what did they intend to do now? From across the parking lot, they might pass for traveling salesmen, but up close, the subtleties were impossible to misread. The two were thugs, pure and simple, even if they were the space age, Brooks Brothers variety. They came to frighten, or kill. But which?

“How’s about opening up that safe of yours. I wouldn’t want to miss nothin’. We’d have to make a second trip, and I’m not much for backtracking.”

The tension, like static electricity, was building in the room. Braddock’s neck hair stood at attention. Opening the safe, Braddock removed the contents, and without a word, piled them on his desk along with the rest of his papers.

“You sure are a lot more cooperative then I expected, Braddock, old pal. You might have at least put up a show of struggle. You’re taking all the fun out of it.”

Frank Braddock continued to stare back in mute reply. He knew this would happen one day. Sooner or later it always did. It was an unavoidable hazard of his profession. He’d been successful for so long, he had almost forgotten. Now the law of averages had finally caught

up with him.

"As you know, Braddock, we do have our instructions. It's nothing personal. If I seem to enjoy what I'm doing...well, it's because I do," said Jelette as he continued grinning. "But then, I enjoy all my assignments."

With that a fist slammed into Braddock's face, followed by another one. The two men then dragged Braddock out from behind his desk and pummeled the middle-aged investigator to the edge of unconsciousness.

"Don't worry, Frank baby, we're not going to kill you...this time. We just want to impress you with our...uh, commitment. Leave Megatech alone and we'll leave you alone. That shouldn't be too hard, should it?"

Jelette's voice sounded far off, with a ringing to it. Kicking him once more, the two men gathered up the files and left.

An hour passed before Frank Braddock could successfully instruct his body to move, much less get up off the floor. Reaching for his handkerchief, Braddock dipped it in the water pitcher and wiped the blood from his face. Now he knew first hand where the expression "it only hurts when I laugh" came from. Every muscle in his face volunteered stinging reminders of their collision course with Jelette's fists. The rest of his body felt no better. He hobbled to the nearest extension and dialed. Not the police, or even an ambulance, but his secretary, Evelyn Bentley.

As she stood dripping wet from her premature exit from the shower, clutching the phone to her ear, Braddock explained what had happened and what he needed from her. Thirty minutes later she and her boss were gliding down the expressway that would take them to an all-night neighborhood clinic. Claiming to have fallen off a ladder while fixing his drainpipe, Braddock was X-rayed and subsequently bandaged. Fortunately his ribs were only bruised. His face, however, was severely lacerated, and his nose broken. They left an hour later. Both sat in silence as Bentley drove her employer home.

"You know, Bentley," Braddock began, "if ever I needed a vacation before all this, the lord knows I need one even more now."

The swelling in his face caused his words to slur.

"Yes, sir. You don't think they'll be back, do you?"

*Kevin L. Smith*

Her anxiety was undisguised.

"If I thought that, Bentley, I'd go to the police right now. No, they did what they came to do."

Now if I can just convince myself of that, he thought silently.

NOON on the following day, Jelette reported to Mr. Rosen as ordered, who then relayed the report to Mr. Parelli.

"How does it sound to you, Mr. Rosen?"

"Sir, from what Jelette tells me, they presented a convincing argument. But..." Rosen hesitated, "Braddock remained tightlipped throughout. The silence tends to make one wonder what's going on in that tenacious mind of his."

"You still have doubts. I do believe you've had more experience in these matters than I have, Mr. Rosen. And I've come to respect that intuitive sense of yours. What do you suggest?"

Rosen paused a moment before responding, "I think it would be in Megatech's best interest if we assumed a 'better safe than sorry' approach to the Braddock affair. I can't help but feel that once our inquisitive friend has time to think about everything, he may throw caution to the wind and indulge himself in some form of grandstand retaliation. He is not without a certain national forum for such an attack."

"What's the extent of his evidence on us?" Parelli interrupted.

"Incomplete," Rosen answered. "At this point, all he could do is smear us. The public relations damage would be extensive."

"Yes, go on," Parelli said.

"The only real solution I'm afraid is to eliminate the threat altogether. After all, accidents do occur from time to time, don't they? What's more, Mr. Braddock has generously provided us with a most appropriate occasion. Didn't our operative say something about a fishing vacation? Somewhere in Colorado, I believe."

"Mr. Rosen."

"Sir?"

"Your resourcefulness never ceases to be a well of inspiration to me. I congratulate you on such clarity of thought. Since Jelette is acquainted first hand with our Mr. Braddock, shouldn't we keep him

on it? He does seem responsible enough.”

“I quite agree, Mr. Parelli. I shall see to it at once.”

Jelette was a good choice. Rosen reflected silently on the hefty reputation for efficiency earned in the man’s uncharacteristically long career. Jelette had started young, in his early twenties. He was one of those people that knew right off what he wanted to do with his life. Perhaps he was a bit psychotic, Rosen admitted to himself. But maybe that’s what made Jelette so effective and extraordinarily consistent. Although work records for his profession were naturally quite vague and sketchy, from everything Rosen could determine, there was only one failed assignment in his entire profile. That particular contract was also his first one.

Relatively simple, the job was a case of score settling ordered by one of the higher ups in the old Chicago organization. Jelette was no company man then. Instead, he was more of an independent contractor recommended by a friend. Anxious to establish his reputation, Jelette expressed a fervent willingness to accept any and all contracts offered to him, no matter the risk. That first test proved more difficult than he expected.

His target had escaped.

The entire incident became a subject of monumental embarrassment to the would-be torpedo, and years passed before he lived it down. Jelette never forgot that original failure and each successive assignment represented an opportunity to make up for it.

With twenty years of successes under his belt, neither Rosen nor Parelli doubted for a minute that their man Jelette would succeed in the task given him. Satisfied that results would be forthcoming, both turned their attention to the next item on the agenda.

In spite of the years that separated Kevin from his semesters at UCLA, his memory retrieved them easily in all their discomfiting details. Those were awkward times. His teachers and fellow students perceived Kevin pretty much the way he viewed them, with a befuddled curiosity. With all the excess weight of society’s insignificant concerns sweated from him in the wilderness like so much poundage at a fat farm, how could it be otherwise? Though far removed from that lean-inducing

*Kevin L. Smith*

experience, even seven years later Kevin was ill-suited to return whole heartedly to a world where the big problem of the day was the choice of deodorant.

His studies, diverse as they were, had one aspect in common. Each in some way portended to shed light on the reason for his muscle nerve response peculiarities. After three years of formal study and five more years of mental tinkering on his own, there were still no answers forthcoming. Obviously, his uniqueness had something to do with the cylinder, the cave, and the technology behind it. He extrapolated the chain of logic to its unmistakable conclusion.

A non-earthly life source was responsible. But the mechanical, physiological, point A to point B basics of exactly what had occurred back there escaped and plagued him, regardless of the fact that his studies carried him to the zenith of mankind's state of the art grasp of neuroscience. A huge slice of the problem was the sizable and numerous gaps of acquired knowledge about the way in which the human mind and body respond to external stimuli. Inch by inch, neural scientists had pulled away much of the blanket of ignorance surrounding the command center of the human body, but they had a long, long way to go.

Kevin himself had developed some theories. But that's all they were, theories. Pouring through reams upon reams of research conducted by others, Kevin sifted out the most promising for his own use and concentrated on those. For months, he concentrated on the role of neurotransmitters, the body chemicals that bridge the synaptic gap and connect neurons to neurons. He toyed with the idea that the cylinder chemically altered those transmitters, but the evidence to support it was slim.

He became intrigued by the new light shed on the motor cortex, the part of the brain once thought to be the primary section of gray matter controlling motor activity. Recent investigations proved that the cortex was actually but a link in a cooperative effort, with several separate command centers working in tandem. Besides the motor cortex, the basal ganglia and the cerebellum appeared to throw their two cents into the picture.

The basal ganglia played a fundamental role in initiating movements, like reaching down to pick up an object. Coordinating

movements, such as touching the tip of one's nose, seem to be directed by the cerebellum. Only recently Kevin learned from papers published by heavily funded research groups that the cerebellum, the brain segment located at the top of the spinal cord, and which for years was relegated to the back seat role in the control of muscular activity, in truth was wired not only to the motor cortex, but also to the eyes, ears, and even the long nerves that alert the brain to every muscle movement of the body.

For the past few months, Kevin postulated a new hypothesis based on those studies that, unknown to him, a British scientist was also fitting together. The theory went like this; the cerebellum was in reality a kind of recording machine that taped muscular actions involved in complex and habitually used movements and that could play back those movements on command. What this meant was simply that whenever one attempted a new skill for the first time, a duel mental process occurred. The complicated, high brain centers and cerebral cortex, etc., think through and consciously command each muscle, while at the same time those consciously thought out commands are reproduced inside the cerebellum, similar to the way a ballet student mimics the steps her teacher is demonstrating. After sufficient repetition, the cerebellum circuits no longer have to watch, having the recorded program, as it were, firmly imprinted within its own neural tissue.

The tangible result of all this was in the ability of the individual to reproduce those movements without thinking, the cerebellum being commanded to play back the imprinted program, much as one might push the button to a video recorder. If this theory was valid, it meant that in Kevin's case, his modified cerebellum was able to reproduce a program sequence after only one imprint, and sometimes not even one. Of course, that would still leave him with the puzzle of how his sensory organs could generate two to three times the normal one hundred million impulses per second that one should find occurring.

Kevin needed time.

He especially needed a quiet, uninterrupted kind of time. For Kevin, that could only mean one thing; his Colorado retreat. He had built it himself some five years previous when the occasional need for serious solitude became glaringly evident.

*Kevin L. Smith*

Selecting a parcel just north of Telluride, Kevin bought fifty acres and instantly went to work. He labored nearly three full months, but the novice builder relished every minute of it. When finished, the fourteen hundred square foot log cabin contained everything needed for Kevin's emotional, intellectual, and psychological well being. There he found his peace and quiet, and, most of all, his privacy. There he maintained his enormous scientific library of technical data relative to his research, data that was gradually being transferred to the memory disks of the elaborate new computer center Kevin had installed.

The rest of the dwelling was comfortable in a spartan sort of way, equipped modestly with the most basic of furnishings. The natural surroundings were magnificent, yet uncommonly rugged. A hundred years ago, the place had been known for gold and silver mining operations, and one had but to read the historical records of those sourdough communities to understand that only the stout hearted survived. When the precious metals were exhausted, few were the ones who stayed to homestead a land so fiercely uncivil.

The location hadn't changed in one hundred years.

It was just the way Kevin Cade liked it. Just thinking about the place made him lonesome for it. Sensing that there was no time like the present, he began packing.

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## CHAPTER THREE

The scenic drive was exquisite. Still, Frank Braddock paid no attention. His mind was soldered to thoughts of Megatech, thugs, and abstract qualities like integrity, courage, and self respect, not to mention fear, and a desire to keep living. It was a hodgepodge of whirling impressions churning incessantly in that mass of gray matter between his ears. He was also slightly nauseated and had a splitting headache.

For the first time in his life, Frank Braddock was indecisive. Frank Braddock, the relentless reporter, the human bloodhound, the single-minded pursuer of stories. Riding in his car, Braddock imagined himself a runaway child in a strange town. It was all he could do to keep his car channeled in the right lane of the highway. With any luck, this little diversion might clear his mind sufficiently to make that all-important decision about Megatech. He admitted with 20/20 hindsight that the whole affair would have been easier to deal with if he hadn't found that cursed clue. After the beating he all but gave up, losing the lion's share of his investigative enthusiasm. But quite by accident, as he was flipping through his pocket notebook, the notebook Megatech's goons didn't even know existed, a chicken scratch of information jotted down months before and forgotten held the key. His operative in Washington immediately followed up on the lead Braddock supplied, and in seventy two hours the picture was complete.

It wasn't pretty.

All his professional calluses notwithstanding, Braddock was shaken. So there he was, holding in his hands the scoop of the decade,

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and trying desperately to find within himself enough guts to blow the whistle.

By four p.m. Braddock pulled into Telluride, Colorado. The community had always been colorful, ever since it had been built in the previous century to accommodate the miners. Nestled against the mountains, Telluride long since ceased to be a mining town, having undergone a subtle transformation resulting in part ski resort and part artist's retreat. More picturesque than ever, the town managed to retain much of its original flavor. The few hundred permanent residents shunned like the plague any efforts to turn their backwoods hideaway into a jet setter's paradise in mimicry of the Aspens and Tahoes of the world. But then, they didn't mind compromising in small ways, like indoor plumbing and electricity.

As with other Colorado communities, Telluride banked on the winter sports to sustain itself the rest of the year, aided by the passing summer visitors interested in soaking up the breathtaking terrain and then moving on. The modest grocery store on the north end of town was a typical example. Thus, when Braddock got out of his car, stretched, and walked into the establishment for a few supplies, the vacationing reporter was welcomed with a customary but heartfelt smile.

"I'll just need a few things," Braddock replied to the offer of assistance.

"My name is Stan," the gray-haired gentleman volunteered. "If you need anything you don't see, please yell. My daughter will be glad to help."

"Mine's Braddock," he returned, "and thanks."

"I'm Didi."

Braddock looked in her direction.

"Expect to be here long, Mr. Braddock?" the young woman asked with a cherubic smile.

"A couple of weeks or so. Enough time to clear the asphalt and monoxide cobwebs out of my head, I hope."

"Well, you've come to the right place."

Braddock was reluctantly impressed by her genuine cheerfulness. Her sincerity was both refreshing and disarming. He stared across the counter at the slender girl with the chestnut hair and blue/emerald eyes, and the salty old reporter wished he were twenty-five years younger.

Not one to cry over spilled years, Braddock grabbed the two bags of supplies under his arms and headed for the door, thanking the girl's father again on his way out. As Braddock drove away, Didi Macklin stared wistfully out through the weathered pane of glass illuminating the grocery and dry goods store that had been her home for ten years. Didi didn't mind her seclusion. At least not until lately. And despite encouragement from her parents, the comely girl deferred her higher education, if only for the time being. She elected instead to help her folks with the store.

"It's still not too late to register for the fall semester, young lady."

Didi turned to her father and smiled. Here he goes again, she thought. Where his daughter was involved, Macklin's normally dry and placid bearing became uncharacteristically animated. But today, Didi wasn't much for conversation. Seeing that, Macklin short-circuited the lecture to his daughter and shuffled back to the stockroom, muttering something about hiding one's light under a basket.

Didi was an only child, and the exclusive target of parental attention. And she enjoyed the inward sense of well being that often occurs with only children, the particular kind of security that had nothing to do with money or material possessions. Her family was a close one, and she felt no anxiety to leave it just yet. She silently wondered if it was fear of the unknown that really kept her home. There was much to be said for the slower paced rural life, but it had its drawbacks. There was little there to prepare her for what lay beyond that quiet setting. Her private thoughts ended abruptly when the bell on the front door tinkled gingerly. She turned to see two men dressed in hunting gear step through the doorway.

The first man was large, and carried his huge weight muscularly. The second was a diminished version of the first man, with little but his size to distinguish him from the other at first glance. Stepping up to the aisle reserved for canned goods, the big man nonchalantly eyed first one item and then another, as if doing nothing more than killing time.

"May I help you?" Didi asked politely.

The larger one looked up.

"Just browsing. Say, is this the only store around here?"

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"No sir," the young girl replied.

"There are two more up the street. But their selection is not near as good," Didi added with a hint of pride.

"Well, we're pretty well stocked, little lady. I just wanted to grab me an extra carton of smokes, Lucky Strikes, if you have 'em."

"There you go, sir."

Paying for them with the handful of bills in his pocket, the two started for the door.

"In case you need anything else, you know where we are," Didi offered as they were leaving.

"Thanks, missy. You're as nice as you are nice looking."

Just then Stan Macklin stepped through the curtain separating the stockroom from the main store, intent on the clipboard in his hands. The oversized weekend hunter was about to shut the door behind him when he glanced in Macklin's direction. Something in the store keeper's face made him hesitate for a split second. But he continued on, stepping off the porch and into his brown Chevy 4 x 4 Blazer. Sitting there behind the wheel, Jelette rubbed his forehead, hoping it might stimulate his memory. He knew he'd seen that face somewhere before. But where? Distracted by a doddering old geezer shuffling in his direction, Jelette paused, and then hollered at the old man.

"Hey! Do you mind telling me who runs the general store there?"

"Everybody's poor around here, Mister," said the hard-of-hearing old fellow.

"Not poor, store. Who runs the STORE?"

"Oh, well...that would be the Macklins, Stan and Dolores, I believe their names are. Nice folks, I don't mind saying."

"Thanks old man," Jelette mumbled, as a giant light bulb lit up in his head. "You know something, Merle?" Jelette mused. "I sure live a charmed life."

The elder Macklin walked toward the front of the store in time to see the late model Blazer drive away. That look on the man's face appeared sinister...reminiscent. It had been a long time, nearly forgotten. But it was one of those particles of recollection that might hide dormant for years, and then, when triggered, would bring back all sorts of images in vibrant Technicolor. The threat implied in the man's

appearance sent chills through the ex-accountant.

"Could it have been my imagination?" he thought frantically. "Surely after all these years...oh god...it's just not possible."

Macklin was not a drinking man, but he knew when he needed one, and this occasion was made to order. Staggering backwards into the stockroom, Macklin struggled his way through the darkened hallway into the apartment at the rear of the building. Pulling the bottle of brandy off the top shelf, Stanley poured himself a generous double, and slumped into his recliner. Allowing the nerve-settling quality of the alcohol to take effect, his mind wandered back to that fateful day buried decades in his past. Just then his companion of twenty-five years entered the room. She stared at her husband in disbelief at the opened bottle in his lap.

"Is there something wrong?"

"What?" Macklin returned.

His hands quivered as he brought the drink to his lips.

"Please, tell me! Is there something wrong?"

"Why should anything be wrong? I'm just taking a break. What's the good of being in business for yourself if you can't take a break when you want to, right?"

"Stan, dear Stan..." his wife said as tears welled up in her eyes.

"Just forget it, okay?"

His voiced cracked.

"Stan..."

"What?"

"I love you."

Putting down the bottle, he embraced the woman, giving her a fierce, desperate squeeze.

"I love you, too."

AS Jelette headed down the highway, he calculated the value of his chance encounter. For one thing, if handled right, he would erase what had forever been a blight on his other wise perfect record. It didn't matter that the individuals contracting the hit were dead and buried. It was a point of pride. Fate had allowed that squeal to escape, and that same fate now gave him a second chance. Unfortunately, he

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was on another assignment, one that took priority and that mustn't be jeopardized. His instincts told him to finish Braddock first. Get the job done, and leave nothing to trace back to either him or the company. Whatever happened beyond that, in Jelette's way of thinking, was strictly his own affair.

"Hand me that map of the park in the glove box, will ya, Merle?"

"Sure thing. How far did you say our cabin will be from Braddock's?"

"No more than a half mile. Real stroke of luck, I'd say, especially since it was the only one available. With the largest hunting preserve only ten miles away, our cover is perfect," Jelette began thinking out loud. "Maybe we'll just take him out while he's playing the big fisherman. We'll just pop him, nice and simple like."

Jelette pointed his finger like a pistol.

"He'll never know what hit him. Then you and I can throw the old boy in his cabin and no one will be the wiser for days. By that time we'll be long gone."

"Why do we have all this backpacking gear if we're staying in a cabin?"

"Before you blow a fuse in that powerhouse between your ears, Merle, let me remind you that I said we've rented a cabin. I didn't say we'd use it."

*Fishing* did have its rewards, Cade admitted to himself. The morning was crisp and tranquil, and ideal for fishing. Sitting in his rowboat allowed him to forget the itchy restlessness that brought him to Colorado in the first place. He was almost disappointed whenever he got a bite on the line as the commotion disturbed that tranquility. It was as if he had come home. This time of year, autumn, was always his favorite. Autumn in the Rockies was the twilight of seasons, being neither hot nor cold. It was the ideal time.

On the other hand, to a city slicker like Frank Braddock, the autumn stillness spoke in foreboding overtones. The reporter had begun to wonder if coming up to Colorado was such a good idea in the first place. Total solitude was a bit hard to take cold turkey. Sometimes one

needs a measure of social decompression, as it were. Maybe a camper's halfway house, like the den of buzzing activity a person can find in Yellowstone Park in July. There one could be surrounded by other weekend fugitives, drawing comfort from their common insecurities.

Out here alone, Frank Braddock couldn't shake the uneasiness in spite of the natural beauty, but the night spent in the cabin was easy enough to take, and the morning's light whisked him out of bed by seven a.m. The cabin lay only a hundred yards from a ten-acre lake, supposedly stocked with trout.

By seven-thirty a.m. the man was on the bank, squatting comfortably on a large flat rock, his fishing line extended into the lake's depth. The sun felt good on his face, and the more he sat on the shore the more his disposition improved. He felt even better when he spotted a fellow fisherman sitting in a boat near midway between himself and the opposite shore. Waving vigorously, Braddock cheerfully acknowledged the reciprocated hand signal. The guy seemed younger than himself, but it was hard to make out much more than that from such a distance.

"How they biting?" Braddock hollered to break the ice.

"Not bad," the floating fisherman bellowed across the water.

"Say!" Braddock shouted. "I got a thermos full of coffee here. Why not join me?"

"Don't mind if I do," the man in the boat replied.

In a few minutes, the eight-foot aluminum rowboat was anchored at the shore where the vacationing reporter stood smiling.

"I'm Braddock, Frank Braddock, from Phoenix," the visitor said extending his hand.

"Kevin Cade," the other offered.

"Where are you staying, Kevin?" he asked the tall man as he stepped out of his boat.

"My place is right up the path. I own a cabin a few hundred yards on the other side of the lake. If you had to hoof it, it probably would be a half mile from here."

Braddock handed the stranger the promised cup of coffee.

"It's nice to know somebody up here," Braddock commented off-handedly. "I'm not used to the isolation. I thought with a dozen cabins scattered around the lake, there would be more people around."

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"There are quite a few cabins, but the owners are only here every now and then, and most apparently prefer not to rent their places out."

"I see. Do you come out on the lake much?" Braddock asked.

"Mostly daybreak, for an hour or two."

"Good. While I'm up here, I'll probably see you again. I was beginning to think that it would take another trip into town just to see another face."

"Don't people usually come up here to get away from people?" Cade asked.

"Yeah, I guess so. It's just that...I...I just wasn't ready for it. This country seems to engulf a person, like it could swallow you up and not think twice."

"Oh, you'll get used to that, if you stay long enough."

"That's just it. I probably won't be here more than a week or two."

"Well, I hope you make the best of it. As for me, I've got to run. Nice to meet you, Mr. Braddock. Oh, and thanks for the coffee."

"My pleasure." Braddock replied.

Nice fellow, the reporter thought.

Braddock remained there for another hour, and then returned to his cabin to fix himself some breakfast.

At that same moment across the lake, Kevin Cade was comfortably relaxed in his library, absorbed in a report on a series of neural studies conducted in Munich, Germany. The studies were on incorporating biofeedback techniques. The material was interesting, but hardly revolutionary, nor particularly enlightening. Still, Kevin was committed to leaving no stone unturned. His mind drifted back to his encounter with Mr. Braddock. Good thing the guy was on vacation; he needed it. The man sent out brain waves with class A fear written all over them. Cade hadn't even needed to try to read his emotions. Braddock, despite his blustering manner, was worried about something. No, not worried...frightened.

Cade's talent for picking up emotional discharges from others had thus far proved to be more of a nuisance than anything else. More than once, he found himself walking away from someone, riddled with personal questions he had no business asking. Finally, in self defense,



he developed the ability to block out all input from others. It was less distracting that way, and his life was simpler. He wasn't sure why he unconsciously made an exception with Braddock, but he had, and now he was paying for it. For the remainder of the afternoon, his own thoughts kept returning to the private fears of a total stranger.

*The* next morning, Frank Braddock began his second day of vacation the same as the first, getting up with the chickens, that is, if there had been any. Though slightly underwhelmed by the fishing tally, the city dweller was perfectly content relaxing atop the same slab of stone by the water's edge. Soaking in the richness of the lake and mountain ranges on a large stone by the water was rewarding. Disconnected from all the pressures of his workaholic other world, the isolation haunting him was gone. Even as he thought about what it would be like to trade away the pressures for a simpler life, he knew full well from the deep seated, clearly drawn self image that he carried around with him, that it would only be a matter of time before the infatuation turned into disenchantment, leaving him actually longing for the life which threatened him with ulcers and migraines. For better or worse, that life was a part of him, embedded beneath his skin, and it was a waste of effort to deny it.

Nor was there any longer a doubt that Braddock would splatter Megatech's dirty linen over every newspaper from New York to Los Angeles. But all in good time. While he was here he was going to enjoy himself. His secretary was right, as usual. This trip was just what he needed to clear his head and rejuvenate his spirit.

"Another few days and I'll be as good as new," he thought with a smile.

*Jelette* was not the typical asphalt pedestrian, in more ways than one. A firm believer in not limiting one's talents, he introduced himself to camping and backpacking. Therefore, it was not particularly difficult for the professional exterminator to bivouac in the deserted hills behind the north end of the lake that bordered Braddock's cabin. Besides, the stay would not be long. The next morning, Jelette would get the job

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over with. The thought occurred to him that he owned no corner on the market for long dormant memories. Macklin might have had his circuits jarred as well. The sooner both matters were handled, the better.

That evening passed uneventfully, except for a gentle rainfall that soaked the entire valley. All was clear when morning broke and the sun came up as radiant as ever. Frank Braddock would have done himself a favor to change his routine away from the one he had settled into upon arrival. But he didn't.

It was almost too easy. Braddock came out as usual and plopped himself comfortably on his favorite rock and cast his line. Wedging the handle of his brand new fishing rod in between two other nearby stones, Braddock freed his hands momentarily to pour himself a warm cup of coffee from the thermos he always brought along. Braddock sat there looking out over the water, absorbing the vista surrounding him.

He was just about to take his second sip of coffee when the bullet entered his shoulder with a dull thud. The silencing mechanism on the assailant's rifle barrel made certain that no other sound was heard. Ripping through his polyester vest and flannel shirt beneath it, the bullet tore through his shoulder muscle like so much lettuce and exited three inches below his collarbone. The impact was enough to lift him off the rock he had been sitting on.

Braddock had barely enough time to register what had happened before the second bullet pierced his neck just below his left ear and also exited, this time through his larynx, crushing the organ in the process. By that time, Braddock understood with sparkling clarity. Fighting back his terror, the wounded and bleeding reporter scrambled for his equilibrium and stumbled toward his car and cabin. Braddock took but three steps when he was struck again, this time the bullet entered the abdomen. Dropping to his knees, Braddock clutched his waist in agony.

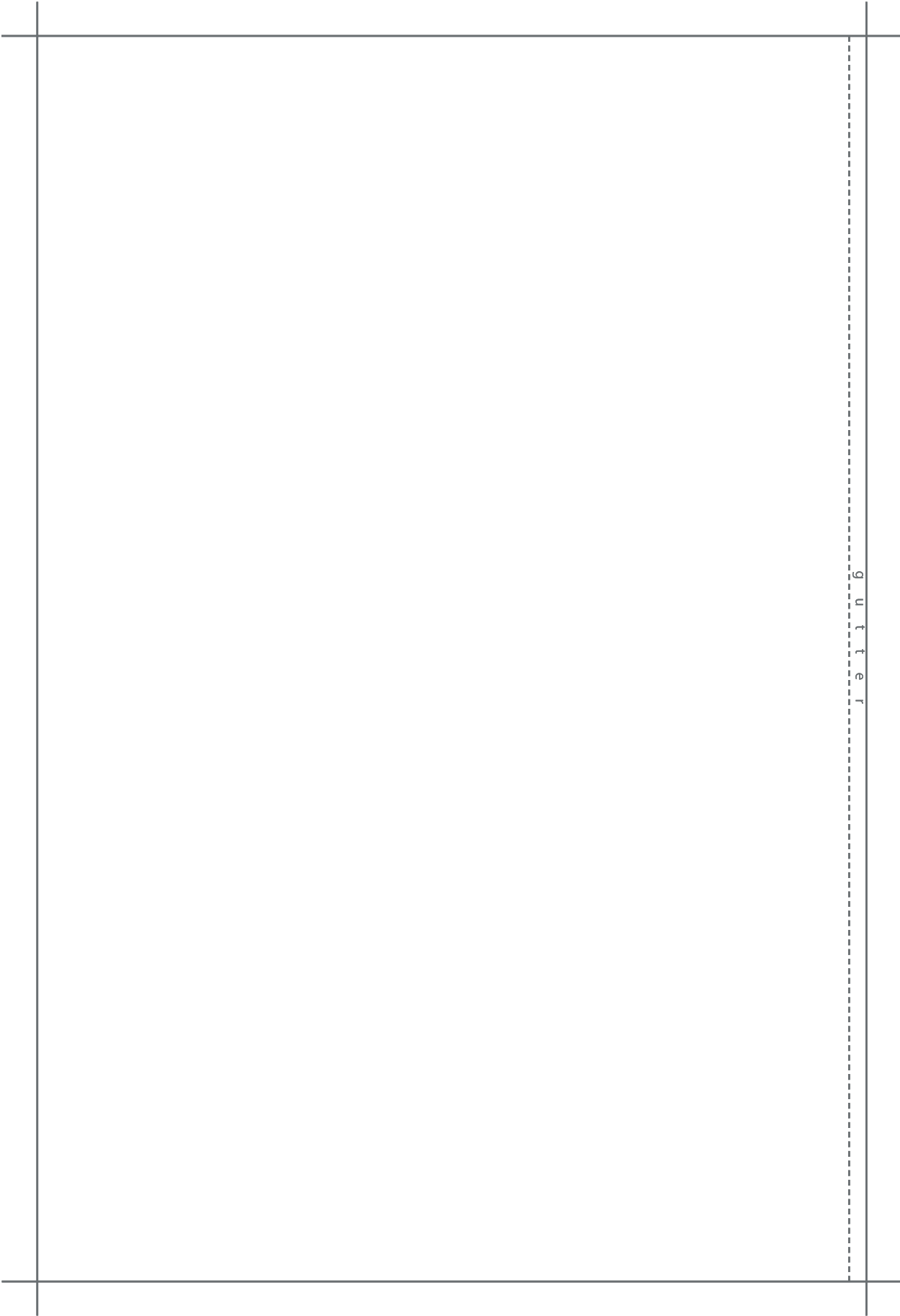
To a normal human being, the sight of Frank Braddock would have been pathetic. Crouched in pain, bleeding profusely from the punctures, he was apparently unable to move any further. Unfortunately, Jelette long ago turned in his membership card to the human race, evolving into something less than human, something cold, something

unfeeling.

Consequently, he felt no remorse, no pity, and no compassion, only a perverted and detached glow of accomplishment. Smiling, Jelette motioned to his partner and both sauntered down to the lake's edge as if nothing happened. Hoisting up the bleeding reporter, the two men carried him into his cabin and shut the door on their way out. In a matter of minutes, the pair was neatly packed and heading down the gravel road leading away from the lake and toward the main highway.

"I guess we'll have time to make the red eye flight out of Denver, eh, Jelette?"

"Not quite," he replied, still smiling. "There's one more thing. But it shouldn't take long."





## CHAPTER FOUR

The afternoon was tedious for Didi Macklin. The search for the half dozen items on her mother's errand list had squandered several hours and left her tired in the bargain. With great relief, she scratched off the last article and climbed into her '69 VW, pointing the Beetle in the direction of home.

She arrived there ten minutes later. Holding the three bags of items, Didi walked briskly up her parent's driveway towards their private apartment. Displaying an uncharacteristic eye for observation, Didi spotted the same brown Blazer belonging to the two surly customers that had entered the store the day before.

"Strange," she mumbled.

She was about to grasp the doorknob when she saw the men inside the apartment through the miniature window in the center of the door.

"Mom and Dad never have people in the back, especially total strangers," she muttered.

Crouching, Didi braced herself for another peek. This time with greater caution, the young woman peered through the star-shaped glass porthole. What she saw hurled her senses in circles, her adrenaline into overdrive, and her lungs gasping for air like a scuba diver with an empty tank.

In clear view, lying squarely on the floor of the apartment hallway lay the girl's parents. They were not merely unconscious. The large puddle of blood already forming around them testified otherwise. As

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for the two men, both poured themselves a drink from her father's bottle of brandy, slurping the liquor out of jelly glasses found in the cupboard.

Stumbling backward away from the door, the secret observer dropped the bags into the shrubs lining the sidewalk and ran to her car. The keys were still in the ignition, which was fortunate. She was in no shape to search for them in the bushes where her purse fell along with everything else. Turning the switch, the twice-rebuilt air-cooled engine mercifully cranked over. Why Jelette never heard that thrashing motor when the daughter first arrived was anybody's guess. Whatever the reason, he heard it now. The killer reached the window with just enough time to see Didi ricochet the VW down the alley. The men reacted instantly.

"Let's nail her, and fast!" Jelette barked, as he stuffed the .45 and its silencer into his leather shoulder holster.

Hurriedly, the two men leaped into the rented 4 x 4 and sped after the Volkswagen, their huge balloon tires hurling mud and rocks in all directions. She mustn't reach anyone. Bodies were already beginning to pile up a bit too high for comfort.

A moment later the two vehicles were racing down the state's two-lane road as if no one else were driving. That was because there weren't. Only a mile separated the hunter from the hunted. That safety margin would not last long. The little foreign car was sadly underpowered for such a chase. Why did she drive away from town, of all things? Now her best hope was the next town, eighteen miles away. And that was suicide. Already they were gaining. She would be doing well to log another five miles before they overtook her.

Fighting back the urge to panic, a thought occurred. The men were strangers. They couldn't possibly know the country as she knew it. With a couple of minutes head start, she might have a chance at losing them in the densely wooded area hugging state highway 145. If she was going to have those two minutes, she must act fast. A second later she saw her opening.

A quarter of a mile ahead, the narrow highway held a sharp curve. As Didi rounded the bend, she kept a firm grip on both steering wheel and stick shift. Leaving the blacktop, she slid down the right embankment, quite deliberately, and drove the VW as far as she could

before the terrain stopped her cold. Without looking back, Didi jumped out and started running. Meanwhile, up on the highway, the Blazer was just coming into view. When Jelette saw the empty highway in front of him, he instinctively slowed to a crawl, and then stopped.

"You look on the right, I'll look down the left ravine."

That took another half a minute, and by the time Merle eyed the Bug, Didi had her two minutes and then some. She had succeeded in putting a couple hundred yards between herself and her pursuers, and was still adding to it.

"Grab the rifle," Jelette ordered. "This may get tricky."

After several minutes of chase Jelette grasped the futility of trying to run her down. This was her turf, and there were so many places to hide.

"There's only one thing left. Get back to the car and dig out the map. Maybe we can guess where she might be headed."

One thing was obvious: neither of the men possessed the physical tools to chase a gazelle of a young girl through hill and dale for hours – or longer. There was far too much they didn't know about the terrain, and cross-country tracking was a phrase heard only in westerns. The one possible advantage in their favor was uncovered by a closer scrutiny of the map. To Jelette's relief, only five miles from town most of the rural land belonged to the National Park Service. That meant little, if any, private property, which also meant fewer opportunities for Didi to enlist someone's aid. In fact, the one realistic chance of that lay in the very area that Braddock and Jelette had shared that very day. Another real break, he thought to himself. At least that was the one place where he was not totally lost.

He continued squinting at the map, which sparked an idea: The lake...the guy at the lake...fishing in his boat. Most likely he was still around. He might even own a place nearby.

Turning the Blazer, the pair headed back to the lake via the dirt road that connected it to the main highway. Jelette felt decidedly better now that he wasn't shooting from the hip. Though not a man of higher intellect, Jelette prided himself in his calculated, if somewhat predictable movements. They would have to act quickly, however. Time was no ally. Every moment that went by with the problem unresolved brought them a moment closer to being discovered and implicated

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in the murders. Common sense shouted to Jelette to leave the whole matter as it was and get the hell out. The girl was the only witness, after all. But god, how he hated to leave things undone. The more he thought about it the more he realized that with all the unknowns, the daughter could have talked to anybody by now. The entire place could be buzzing with state troopers and county cops in but a few hours.

Jelette skidded the Blazer to a stop. The moment of mental debate was over. Jelette was stubborn, but not that stubborn. There would be another day.

Had Didi Macklin known in advance that she would be galloping through the woods at breakneck speed, she would have dressed accordingly. The inexpensive pair of tennis shoes she wore failed miserably in shielding her feet from the jagged rocks. The evening air was already chilling her to a slight shiver. Funny how blind fear had a way of making a person forget things like sweaters left in back seats. She stopped to rest.

Didi knew roughly where she was, but her mind was fogged. Four miles from the highway and slumped against a tall pine, she was only partially convinced that the two men were no longer chasing her. Darkness was setting in and she had to make a decision. If she worked her way back to the car, she would be obliged to do so in pitch dark, or worse, rain showers, if the newly arrived cloud cover was any indication. If she did make it back, what would she find there? Maybe that's just what the two-legged animals that slaughtered her parents expect her to do. Still, what choice did she have? Go forward? But where? Her mind was behaving like a merry-go-round stuck in gear. The lake was only a couple of miles ahead...

"That's it!" she thought.

Cabins were nearby – she struggled to remember something that she had heard just lately. That reporter fellow's up there, what's his name...starts with a "d", or was it a "b"?

Energized by the idea, Didi once more began moving down the trail that was heavily disguised from lack of use. The sun was setting on the horizon, leaving an orange glow over the western skies. Reminded that precious little daylight remained, she quickened her pace.



An hour later she was hungry and tired, too tired to notice the pile of loose timber in her path. She stumbled and fell down hard. She lay there for several minutes until the raindrops brought her back to reality. Groaning, Didi finally picked herself up off the moist earth and continued on. Rounding the last main incline, she saw the faint glimmer of moon glow bouncing off the lake. Using her altitude to the best advantage, Didi scanned the lowlands for signs of life. She was on one side of the lake, and the cabins were on the other. Her eyes strained. No light emanated from any of those structures.

But then she saw it. The direction of the distant glow was unexpected. The solitary light flickered, only five hundred yards away. Surprised, she tried to fathom whose lodging that lone cottage could be. Then she remembered. Some acres of land had been auctioned off by the state a few years back. An outsider had bought them up, she vaguely recalled. Didi, like most of the locals, assumed a developer purchased the acreage to build more rental cabins, or perhaps a lodge for tourists. And yet that was five years ago, and the only construction involved one isolated dwelling. The local crowd finally theorized the newcomer to be just another summer visitor who decided to build himself a quiet place to vacation, and retire in later years. She decided that whoever he was, he had picked a good time to sweep out the cobwebs.

Preferring not to downpour, the rain clouds nevertheless kept sprinkling. Drop by drop, the girl was getting saturated. She was also running out of steam. Nonetheless, she maneuvered through the darkness, and gradually reduced the distance between her and the cabin. She was close enough to smell the hardwood burning in the fireplace. She could already feel the toasty warmth of the hearth and the smell of hot coffee percolating in the kitchen.

"Hold up, girl," she said to herself. "This place could belong to some old hermit who hates intruders. Probably why he's way out here in the first place. I might be doing well just to get a blanket from him."

Her mind halted momentarily, drifting back to her reason for being there. Reminded of her pursuers, she also thought of her brutalized mother and father. A moment before, Didi had felt cold, but not unbearably so. Now, with the visual image of death, murder

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and personal loss filling her consciousness, Didi could hardly walk for the teeth-chattering shivers rocking her entire body. It was a battle of the psyche she was waging now. Others had gone into shock from a whole lot less.

She finally made it to the doorstep. Reaching forward, Didi attempted a feeble rap on the massive solid redwood that marked the cabin's entrance. Her remaining strength gave out and she crumbled to the ground. When the door opened, the owner was truly surprised.

"What the..." he blurted.

Quickly, he bent down and ever so gently lifted the tattered and shivering girl into his arms and carried her into his den. Spreading out a makeshift bed of blankets in front of the fire, he then laid her down. Propping her head up slightly with a down-filled pillow, the unpremeditated doer of good deeds knelt down beside the pathetic young lady and pondered the meaning of it. Her eyes opened. Through the fog, Didi looked up.

"Who...are you?"

"My name is Kevin."

He wasn't sure if she heard him clearly before she faded out again.

"Now I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage," he said.

*Jelette* had made the right decision. He was sure of it. He and his apelike sidekick boarded a Frontier airline flight out of Durango destined for Denver. After an hour of layover, they connected with a United Airlines 737 slated for Chicago, all this before the Colorado State Police ever knew a crime had been committed. Better to report a job well done than to try and explain away a screw up caused by mixing business with pleasure. The reporter was history, and without being linked to the firm, no tangible link at least. There would probably be talk, but that was all it would be, talk.

"Jelette reporting in, sir."

"Send him in," said the voice on the intercom.

The morning was crisp, with an infectious quality about it. The classic blue skies overhead contained just the right amount of billowy clouds to set off the scenic display.

"Good morning."

Didi Macklin dreamily nudged her eyelids partially open to acknowledge the voice.

"I remember you from last night. At least, I think I do."

"I trust you slept well?" said Kevin brandishing the smile he inherited from his father, the one he saved for special occasions.

She had hardly said a word, but Kevin knew as no one else the pain she felt inside – though not the cause. The girl had probably rested better than her host. For Didi, the fatigue helped her sleep some of the night. Not so for Kevin. That was twice within a week that he had allowed a stranger's thoughts to enter his own head. But somehow he didn't mind. Whatever it was that made her run to his door like a frightened rabbit was serious. Kevin wanted, no, needed to understand. Kevin, the nonpareil loner, was drawn to this woman in a way with which he was very unfamiliar, and this without even knowing her name.

"I took the liberty of fixing you some eggs and toast. I hope they're cooked to your liking," he said.

Didi stared up at her benefactor.

"Thank you," she said as she tried to sit up.

It was then that the drowsy young lady noticed that the garments she wore to the stranger's house had been removed. She was wearing nothing but a man's flannel shirt.

"Where are my clothes?" she shrieked in embarrassment.

"Oh, that. Well, you see...uh...they were so soaked," replied Kevin groping for words. "Anyway," he continued, "I hung them out to dry. I hope you aren't offended. I just couldn't put you to bed all wet like that."

The sheepish expression on Kevin's face diffused her impulse to feel indignant. Kevin looked down at the floor, unsure of what to say next.

"Look, I know you've been through a great deal. But before you do or say anything else, please eat. You'll need your strength."

Didi was hard pressed to argue with the Good Samaritan with

*Kevin L. Smith*

the dazzling blue eyes and winning smile. Silently, the girl nibbled at the food in front of her. All the while, Kevin sat on the edge of the huge bed, stealing glances from the corner of his eye as he pretended to look elsewhere.

“Do you do this for everyone that passes out on your doorstep?”

“Only the pretty ones,” he said with a grin that seemed genuine.

Seeing that she was finished, Kevin stood up.

“Let me take the tray. While I get rid of this, there are some clothes in that closet that you might make do with until yours are dry.”

“Thank you.”

As Kevin left the bedroom, his curiosity began to build. He had to remind himself that stories are sometimes painful to tell. As much as he wanted to know, she mustn't be rushed. She was feeling enough pain already. When Kevin decided that sufficient time had elapsed for the young woman to clothe herself, he returned to the room, knocking first as a matter of courtesy.

She was no longer there. Kevin walked to the opposite end of the master bedroom and through the double doors leading outside to the redwood decking. A dozen yards away, with her back toward the cabin, the mysterious woman in distress was leaning against the massive spruce that he had built around rather than bulldoze over. Softly, Kevin cupped his hands over her shoulders and turned her around to face him. Tear trails marked each cheek. What little composure she possessed up to that moment was crumbling. Instinctively, Kevin pulled her close. Her body shook with each sob. It had been a long time since Kevin had held anyone in his arms, much less an attractive young woman. He couldn't help but smell remnants of a fragrance from some lingering perfume.

Kevin wanted to speak, to comfort her. But no words came. There they remained for a time, Didi's face buried in the crook of his shoulder. Neither one of them seemed in a hurry to pull away.



## CHAPTER FIVE

*After* some time had passed, Didi pulled away from the much needed embrace, and made a half-hearted attempt at wiping her face.

"I suppose you're wondering what all this is about. You certainly deserve some kind of explanation. I'm sure the last thing you wanted was some hysterical female barging in on your privacy," she said.

Kevin stared straight into her eyes as he told her, "I find you neither hysterical nor intrusive. But yes, I am curious."

He attempted to lighten the mood.

"By the way, I've some coffee on the perk. Would you like a cup?"

Didi smiled gratefully and nodded.

"Good. Come into the kitchen with me, and while we're enjoying all that caffeine, we can formally introduce ourselves."

Following her benefactor back into his cabin, Didi reflected on her good fortune in finding someone so extraordinarily considerate. The thought hadn't even occurred to her to be wary, despite his courtesy. Here she was alone with nothing to stop this man from having his way. She was grateful for his gallantry. Emotionally, she was exhausted. The full weight of her ordeal had begun to bear down on her. She was like the worn out boxer in the final rounds. There wasn't much left with which to defend herself. All reasoning aside, Didi sensed something basic and good about the man. Didi would bet everything that she was safe with him. Perhaps that was just what she was doing. They reached the Spanish-style kitchen.

*Kevin L. Smith*

"How do you like it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your coffee."

"Oh, uh...black, thank you," she responded, her brows wrinkling. "It's Kevin, isn't it? Last night, you said your name is Kevin."

"That's right, Kevin Cade. Now the sixty-four thousand dollar question, if you don't mind my asking."

"Didi, Didi M-m-macklin." Startling herself with her uncharacteristic stutter, she continued, "I suppose now is as good a time as any to explain what brought me here. Could we sit down? This may take a while."

"Please, take all the time you need."

She took a deep breath.

"You see, it all began a couple of afternoons ago when this gruff tourist showed up with a buddy of his. I didn't think anything of it at the time. But my father was terribly shaken by his visit, and he wouldn't say why."

"Hold up a minute," Cade blurted. "You're too fast for me. You say this fellow came to your home?"

"Well, yes and no. It's like this. My parents have a small store on the end of town. Perhaps you've been there?"

Didi seemed to grow more excited with each step of the narrative. Kevin listened intently, pulling in the reins from time to time to clear up a point. Gradually, Didi managed to grind toward the conclusion.

"So I had no choice but to run like a scared deer, which led me eventually to your front porch last night. And for all I know, they might be out there right now looking for me."

"You mean the killers?"

Didi nodded, and took another breath.

"God, what a mess I'm in," She confessed wiping her tears and pushing the strands of hair from her face.

Then she shifted gears:

"The thing is, I might have endangered you by coming here. I didn't think of that last night. But now...I see what I've done," she said before pausing pensively. "Do you think maybe they're still out there?"

"Not to worry. I doubt the killers are nearby. If they were, I

would have felt their presence by now.”

Cryptic though it was, Didi was decidedly reassured by the remark. There was something in the way he said it. It was a quality beyond the words themselves, an abstract confidence that came, not just from his voice, but that seemed to exude from his very pores. Her spirits were already improving.

“But aside from that, I would be more than happy to drive you into town.”

She smiled weakly, and gazed out the bay windows illuminating the breakfast nook.

“Now it is I who am disadvantaged. I know absolutely nothing about you,” she said, her eyes bespeaking a genuine interest that went beyond polite inquiry.

“What would you like to know?”

“Anything....I mean, whatever you would like to tell me.”

That didn’t come out the way she wanted.

“Like for instance, do you stay out here often?”

“Whenever the mood hits me,” Kevin answered.

“Oh,” said Didi as she tried another approach. “Where are you from?”

“Well, my regular home is in Houston, if that’s any help.”

“I would never have guessed by your accent.”

“Accent?”

“It’s just that...you don’t seem to have any.”

She knew she wasn’t much good at small talk, and she felt like she was beginning to flounder. Kevin began to sense her discomfort and decided to try to be more social.

“I suppose that’s because I work at it. Besides, I’ve spent a lot of time in out-of-state schooling of one kind or another.”

“You appear to be doing well by yourself, Mr. Cade. Your parents must be very proud.”

The conversation had taken an unexpected turn. Didi’s eyes began to swell with tears once more.

“I’m sorry for behaving this way. It’s just...so hard to believe that Mom and Dad...”

Her voice trailed off. Taking her hand, Kevin spoke in a low, deliberate tone with no trace of patronizing in his voice.

Kevin L. Smith

"My parents are neither proud nor ashamed. Like you, I have lost them. I've been without them for quite some time. I wish I could say something nice like 'You'll get used to it.' But I can't. When you really care about someone, I don't think you ever get over the loss, especially when it's premature and avoidable. What you *can* do is learn to face the grief. At first you stay busy. You try not to think about it."

He stopped for a moment and then continued, "But there are times...times when the anguish takes over. After a while, the sorrow is replaced with an empty void that stays with you, follows you, probably right up until it's your turn to stop breathing."

He caught himself.

"I didn't mean to go on like that." Trying to be more upbeat, he looked up at Didi and asked, "What about the rest of your family? They must be worried sick about you."

"I have no other family," she said abruptly. "I can't even say I'm close to anyone. The store took up a lot of my time."

Trying to be practical, Cade broached a delicate vein.

"There are details, and the police will have some questions to ask you."

"Yes, you're right of course."

Kevin was sure he had botched it. He could tell by the look on her face.

"Please, don't think I'm trying to get rid of you. It's quite the opposite, in fact," he said faltering. "I'm probably not putting this very well. If you knew me better, you would understand that these feelings are quite out of character for me."

"Excuse me," Didi said.

Turning, she walked into the next room. Left to himself, Kevin began to understand the real picture. She didn't want to go back just yet. *Why* she didn't want to wasn't hard to understand. Facing the violent death of one's parents, not to mention all the publicity and police, was a tall order for anyone. Leaving the kitchen, Cade walked down the hall and into his study. No telephone lines connected up to his cabin, but he enjoyed the next-best thing. In a matter of seconds, Kevin was on his short wave radio and patched into the Telluride Sheriff's office. The commotion had already started. Apparently some customer wandered into the rear of the store in an effort to pay his



bill, and discovered the bodies. The sheriff was most anxious to take a statement from Didi.

"Officer, I was wondering if you might come out here to my place and talk to her. She is pretty strung-out, and the hoopla could be too much. Oh, and another thing; could you keep her whereabouts under your hat? Those fellows might still be around...Thank you very much...yes, I'll tell her...goodbye."

Putting down the mike, Kevin joined his guest.

"I've made some arrangements that will give you a break. The police are coming out here to take your statement."

Didi continued staring out the window, showing no sign that she even heard him. Suddenly she turned.

"I know I'm taking a lot for granted, but is there a chance that I might stay here a day or two longer? I promise not to be any trouble. I'll even cook for you if you like. Just please don't send me away... please," she begged as her voice trembled with a hint of desperation.

"Let's get one thing straight: this place, for what it's worth, is yours for as long as you like. In fact, I've taken the liberty of asking the sheriff to have his wife put a few of your clothes in a bag and bring them up when they come. That should be in an hour or so. Meanwhile," he continued cheerfully, "there's no use wasting this beautiful morning waiting around. Would you like to take a walk around the lake?"

Didi's face mirrored her relief.

"I...I would like that."

Soon they were walking along a path sprinkled with dried pine needles that led down to the water. The air was full of autumn aromas, and the forest was alive with the colors of the rainbow.

Something was beginning to happen – something that Cade himself would not have believed possible. Maybe, he wondered, that's how it transpires. Some unforeseen event propels two people together. He smiled. So life still retained a smattering of spontaneity and charm after all. Oh, how we fool ourselves, Kevin thought silently. Holding Didi's hand as he led her down the narrow footpath, he couldn't ignore the comfortable intimacy developing between them. They kept walking. The water's edge lay only a few dozen yards away.

The footpath faded into an open grassy meadow, which surrounded the lake on three sides. With the migratory geese flying

*Kevin L. Smith*

in V-formation overhead, the tranquil scene was complete. It wasn't difficult to see why conservationists were so emotional in their efforts to halt the spread of asphalt and power lines. If ever there was a cause that came close to stirring Kevin's slumbering social consciousness, ecology was it. The problem was that like every other moral crusade, the efforts of the sincere minority were predictably buried under the greed and shortsighted stupidity of the masses. They, in turn, were manipulated by the industrial entities and their promises of prosperity and a better life. To fight all that was to fight man himself. Heaving a sigh, the young cynic tried to push such thoughts away, to think of more pleasant things.

That was when Didi screamed and pointed to her left.

Slumped over in a pathetically contorted mass of rigid, decaying flesh, was Braddock the reporter. The stench was already becoming strong enough to bring on nausea.

"Stay back," Kevin ordered.

Holding his breath, he approached the corpse for a closer inspection. The bullet holes were readily evident.

"From the looks of things, I'd say he's been dead a little over a day," Kevin said with an odd detachment.

Didi was less objective. If Kevin had looked up at his companion, he would have seen little contrast in flesh tone between the girl and the corpse over which he was leaning. But Kevin's eyes had discovered something, a detail gripping his attention so firmly that even the sound of Didi disgorging her breakfast failed to divert him.

It wasn't easy, but Kevin managed to pry the tiny black notebook from the fingers frozen by rigor mortis. The notebook was the kind that usually held phone numbers and was made famous by bachelors. Looking down at the remains of the poor man, Cade couldn't help but feel sorry for him. There was a cold, merciless quality in his death. Whoever was responsible must be a real charmer. Suddenly he thought of something else.

Glancing to Didi, he understood with clarity that this sudden rash of deaths was all connected. After all, this wasn't New York City or even Houston where murders occurred casually and often. Interesting, he thought. Braddock was obviously killed before Didi's hapless parents. Carefully, Kevin backed away, mindful of disturbing anything

more than his intrusion had already.

"Let's get back to the cabin," Kevin said.

Didi, clutching her stomach that was still sore from retching, got to her feet and steadied herself.

"Here, let me help."

Kevin reached around her waist and nudged her along the path back up the hill.

Sitting by the huge picture window in the den, they waited for the authorities. Right on time, the 1978 Dodge Aspen with the pulsing cherry on top pulled into the roughly hewn driveway that was more at home to Jeeps and four wheelers than to squad cars.

"Come in, officers," Kevin motioned them through the wooden arches framing the doorway. "The young woman in question is waiting in the den. But I'm afraid there is more."

The two rural officers spent the greater part of that afternoon taking statements from both Kevin and Didi. They were not exactly from the Jack Webb school of information gathering. And their lack of experience in handling cases of this magnitude contributed to the snail's pace of the exercise. By nightfall, the ordeal was winding down. The police departed, having roped-off the area for state homicide detectives who were arriving the following morning. Didi waited until everyone was gone to ask the question.

"Why didn't you give them the little book, Kevin?"

"I'm not sure, really. I worry that the local sheriff would just file it away with the rest of Braddock's personal effects. Somehow it deserves more. In fact, it's probably the clue to the whole mess, including why your own parents were murdered."

"I hope you don't get offended by my saying so, but you don't strike me as particularly civic-minded. Why all the interest?" Didi asked.

"Fair question. Maybe I'm just intrigued. Or perhaps for once I'd like to do something that really counts," he said rubbing his forehead. "But I guarantee you one thing. Leave this to the police, and this book, the reports, the depositions, all of it will eventually be stuck in a drawer and forgotten. You'll never know why your parents had to die. I don't know about you, but that would bother me some. I'll tell you something else. There's a lot more to this than a couple of murders.

*Kevin L. Smith*

There is an iceberg out there somewhere...just waiting. Don't ask me how I know, I just know."

"What's in the book, anyway?" she asked.

"Not much, really. Phone numbers and a few addresses."

"Nothing else?"

"No, not that I can see. But you were there. You saw the way he was clutching the book. A savvy reporter of Braddock's caliber wouldn't waste his dying breath on a pointless gesture. It has to mean something."

"I suppose you're right," she said yawning. "I guess I'm just too tired to share your enthusiasm."

Didi's adrenaline for the day had just about run out. The effects of frayed nerves were starting to show. Kevin bent down, poked the embers in his fireplace, and added another log.

"Would you join me in a glass of port?"

"That sounds nice."

In a moment, Kevin returned with two glasses, slightly chilled.

"This should relax you even more than you already are."

He was right. Didi sat down on the Peruvian rug near the hearth. Kevin slid next to her, and they both watched the hardwood crackle and spark with each release of the methane gas within the logs. Didi, grateful for the closeness, leaned on his shoulder and nestled her chin against his chest. They stayed that way for an hour or so until the silence was broken.

"Kevin?"

"Yes?"

"Do you have anyone? I mean...someone special?"

"How would you feel if I said yes?"

Didi hesitated.

"Disappointed," she said.

"Well, I'm afraid the answer is yes, though I've only known her a short while."

Looking down at her, Kevin stared into those fawn eyes.

"In fact, I discovered her on my front porch only yesterday. By the way, do you think a day is long enough time to fall hopelessly in love?"

Didi stared back through a watery blur.

"I wouldn't have thought so yesterday," she responded dreamily.

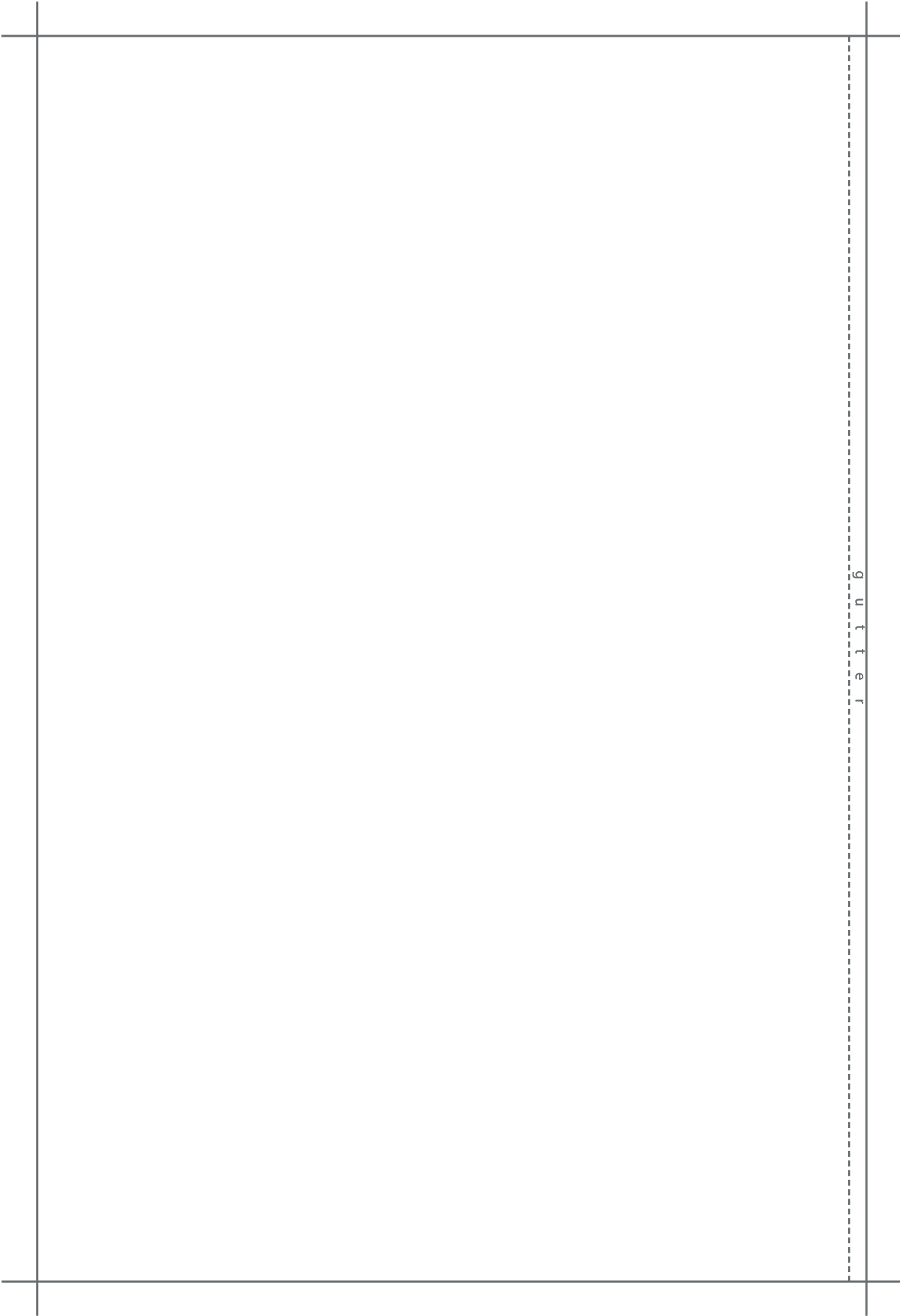
Kevin leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. There was nothing brotherly about the gesture. And yet, his touch was not as ardent as it might have been. The flaming passion was harnessed, erotic overtones subdued. The kiss, and the embrace that followed, was one of mutual need, spontaneous and innocent. Kevin could sense her vulnerability, and had no intention of taking advantage. There would be another time, a time when their bond would have a chance to grow without the cloud of grief and despair hanging over them. The sooner this murder business was resolved, the sooner Didi could put it all behind her. As she snuggled in his arms and drifted off to sleep, Kevin turned his attention to the reporter's little book. He flipped through the pages once more, only slower.

Still nothing.

Kevin tossed it down on the sofa and carefully lifted himself out from under Didi. Picking her up, he carried her to bed, pulled her shoes off, and spread the comforter over her. He had just finished when he heard a furtive rap on the front door.

He opened it, and found a man in his early forties dressed in casual camping attire. He carried an executive style leather briefcase in his left hand.

"Mr. Cade?"



g u t t e r



## CHAPTER SIX

Despite the strange events of late, Kevin was not alarmed. This stranger meant no harm, of that he was certain. This latest visitor was entirely too anxious for his own safety to be dangerous to anyone else.

"How can I help you?" Kevin asked without inviting the stranger in.

"I'm Senator Blake, Andrew Blake. I know it's late, but I've come a long way to discuss a matter of...let's say, national importance. May I please come in?"

Kevin was unimpressed, but took the bait nonetheless.

"By all means. Anyway, you won't be the first stranger at my door in the middle of the night, not even this week.

As the two sat down, an awkward silence hovered momentarily. The new arrival nervously tapped his fingers on the armrest.

"I'm not sure quite how to begin."

"Why not at the beginning?" asked Cade forcing the senator to offer a weak smile.

"I heard of Frank Braddock's death this morning over the wire service. As soon as I heard, I booked the first connection out here from Washington. It wasn't easy. This place is really off the beaten path."

Kevin was growing impatient.

"Would you mind getting to the point?"

"Yes, well...you see, I learned from the sheriff that you were the one who discovered the body. Is that true?"

"Suppose it is. How does that concern you?"

"Because I know why he was murdered."

*Kevin L. Smith*

"Why tell me? Why not that slack-tongued sheriff who was so helpful to you already?"

"That will be clear shortly. But please, answer one question. Was he dead when you found him? Did he say anything to you before he died?"

"That was two questions, but who's counting. The answer is yes to the first one, which means no to the second," replied Kevin reticently, yet he went on. "But that didn't stop him from trying to tell me something. When I found him, he was clutching this in his hand."

Cade tossed the book on the coffee table.

"Before you pick that up, I would like some answers of my own."

"Fair enough."

"What's really going on here?"

The senator took a deep breath.

"Frank was investigating the underworld connections of a huge, powerful conglomerate called Megatech. After a year of digging, Frank looked me up and told me about it."

"Why you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why were you so privileged?"

"Because I'm a senator and these people are extremely well-connected. They have a lot of friends in high places. Braddock and I went to college together. I guess he knew he could trust me. You've got to trust somebody sometime."

"I guess, go on."

"It turns out that Frank really had a bomb on his hands. Names, signatures, documents, everything needed to blow their cover wide open. When they raided his office a few days ago, a lot of useless papers were confiscated, papers Frank used to decoy them away from the real evidence, which was locked away in a bank vault. All Frank needed was the White House connection."

Cade could hardly believe his ears.

"The what?"

"When I said connected, I meant connected. Frank followed the trail right up to the President's cabinet. He knew that there was



someone in that cabinet who was bought and paid for by Megatech. That person was the one crucial piece to a giant puzzle. Without his identity, and the ability to prove his connection, the accusations wouldn't stick. That's why I'm here tonight. Three days ago, I received a key in the mail that belongs to a safety deposit box. It was from Frank. The note enclosed said that if anything should happen to him, he wanted a copy of the Megatech data to get into the right hands. He also said he had the key to the riddle. But for some unstated reason, he preferred to share it with me face to face." Blake stopped for a moment out of respect for the dead and then continued. "He 'll never have that chance now."

Satisfied, Cade motioned the senator to take the book.

"I've already looked through it. Perhaps it will mean more to you than it did to me."

The senator studied its contents, one page at a time. Kevin waited patiently until the senator had finished.

"I guess my trip across country was for nothing. The book seems to be just what it appears, a personal phone and address directory."

Blake put the book down rubbing his chin thoughtfully and then said, "But, you'd think if he was going to bother to log down addresses that he would do it accurately."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, take my address. He's got 1234 Silicon Valley, California. I happen to live in Wisconsin, for god's sake. Figure that out if you can."

Kevin sat up suddenly.

"Do you still have that key to Braddock's safety deposit box?"

"Yes. So?"

"Hmm. Maybe it's nothing. And it's just a hunch, but if I were you, I'd check the contents of that box meticulously before you do anything else, or look anywhere else."

Would you mind telling me what you're getting at?"

"Senator, are you into computers?"

"Only as much as I have to be. Those little keyboards intimidate the hell out of me. Why?"

"Like I said, it's just a guess. But if I'm right, the big secret is stashed on a computer or floppy disk somewhere. That deposit box

*Kevin L. Smith*

may tell you where.”

“If what you say is true, then it’s just possible that we’ve got access to the whole bag of worms.”

“Correction. *You* have access, and *you* have the worms. I’m just here for the conversational ride,” countered Kevin.

Blake’s shoulders dropped slightly.

“That’s too bad. Because I sure could use some help.”

“I assume that the transmitter device planted on Mr. Blake is still operational, Mr. Rosen.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fine. Have we learned anything of value?”

“Indeed we have, sir. Our idealistic senator has regretfully decided to pick up the baton for Mr. Braddock.”

“Oh, dear,” complained Parelli stroking his pet feline effeminately.

“Is he dangerous to us?” he asked, without taking his eyes off the cat.

“No question, sir. He is just about on his way to a deposit box with contents of a most delicate nature.”

“Recommendation, Mr. Rosen?”

“Well, sir, intercepting the senator is imperative. But we need more than the key. We need Blake to open the box. He’s the only one who can, and if we don’t do it soon, an executor of Braddock’s estate will do it instead.”

“Will all this be difficult?”

“Projects of this kind are never simple. But our people are close by, and they’ve already been given their instructions.”

“Where is the senator how?”

“Colorado, out where Braddock was...uh, eliminated.”

“Then if I read you correctly, the decision to move ahead should be made at once. Is there anything else pertinent I should know, Mr. Rosen?”

“Perhaps one detail, sir.”

“Yes?”

“Blake has unloaded his sorry tale to a Mr. Cade, who

coincidentally was also the one to stumble onto Braddock's remains. We are not certain at this point if Mr. Cade is going to involve himself. If so, then we may have to expand the program."

"For his sake, Mr. Rosen, let us hope that Mr. Cade doesn't take the position of responsible citizen too seriously. Whatever the case, you have a green light on the matter. Please keep me informed. That will be all."

Mr. Rosen turned and headed for the door.

"Oh, one more thing, before you go. I'd almost forgotten about Mr. Jelette. Such a foolish man. I presume our long business association is being satisfactorily terminated."

"Yes, sir, I'm glad to report that he will no longer be a concern to our company, or anyone else's for that matter."

"Good. Mr. Jelette was getting a bit long in the tooth anyway. Thank you, Mr. Rosen."

"You're welcome, sir."

Once again the vice-president of special operations headed for the exit. With any luck, he pondered silently, the project wouldn't take more than a day or two.

*Though* morning it was still quite dark. A lantern illuminated the woodshed as Kevin put everything he had into chopping the logs piled up at his feet. Whenever his mind was troubled, it always felt good to submerge himself in strenuous physical exertion. Every time he did, the result was the same: his anxieties were expunged along with the sweat, and his mind was clear again.

The problem at hand was whether or not to get involved in the high stakes exposé that found its way to his doorstep. To plunge himself headlong into underworld subterfuge was not a decision to be made casually. It wasn't fear that held him back. Kevin was hard to intimidate. The idea of giving himself over to some cause was an uncomfortable one. His independent spirit had gradually evolved over the years into a personal form of anarchy and voluntary isolation. Only of late, signs of cracks had appeared in his psychological barricade.

Through the struggle of Didi, Braddock, and now Senator Blake, he was finally acting human.

*Kevin L. Smith*

How empty his life had been...

With growing clarity, Kevin was coming to grips with the shallow nature of his existence. There were no two ways around it. Man was the consummate social animal. He was reminded of the old wolf leader who threatened him as a child. Even he, with all his power and spirit, needed the pack. Without it, the term "alpha" had no meaning. And there had been no meaning for Kevin either. Uncle Will had tried to tell him that for longer than he could remember.

There really was more happiness in giving than in receiving.

Only when his strengths and abilities were used to help others would his life have purpose. Only then would he be satisfied, happy. How stupid of him. And to think it took total strangers to make him see.

Both were resting now, Didi in bed, and Blake dozing in the den. Suddenly his head began throbbing.

"Ow!" said Kevin aloud as he pressed his fingers to his brow.

His subliminal receivers had clicked on. He was uncertain of the source, but it was out there...someone ...dangerous. He thought it best to wake the senator. Kevin put down the axe and walked back into the cabin.

"Excuse me, senator," Kevin whispered nudging Blake on the shoulder.

"Yes? What is it? Oh sorry, I must've dozed off. It's been a long day."

"No sweat, senator. I just wanted to ask you something. Does anyone know you are here, I mean, except the sheriff?"

"No, no one. Why?"

"I think we are being observed from afar. Don't ask me why. It would take too long to explain."

Kevin looked out the window.

"The sun will be up in a few hours. I suggest we wait and avoid doing anything until then. That is, unless we have to. Agreed?"

"Yes, yes...whatever you say."

The senator was eager for any advice, knowing he was way out of his league.

"They must've followed me here. But how? How could they have learned I was involved?"

"It doesn't matter now," Kevin said. "We'll just have to deal with it."

"You're using an awful lot of 'we's'. Does that mean you'll help me?"

"I suppose I really don't have much of a choice, now do I? But don't feel too bad," Kevin smiled. "I had decided to anyhow, for...uh, personal reasons."

"That's a relief," said Blake heaving a sigh. "I just want you to understand that our lives might well be in as much danger as Braddock's, at least until we get this evidence to Washington and into the President's own hands."

"Of that, I have no delusions, Senator. But it won't be the first time my life has been threatened."

"A veteran, eh?"

"Not hardly," Kevin said without further explanation. "Perhaps we should get some rest. We're going to need it."

Kevin returned to his study, and promptly stretched out on the divan. That was the nice thing about his mental receptors. He could afford the luxury of sleep, confident that the wave intensity would awaken him should those intending harm get any nearer.

He slept soundly.

He stirred only when the sun splashed its rays through the half-opened blinds. Always the deep sleeper, several minutes passed before he woke fully. As both of his guests were still retired, Cade hopped into the bathroom to shower and shave. The water was refreshing. Emerging from behind the shower curtain, Kevin groped for the towel that was no longer where he had left it.

"Here you are!" Didi said with her back to him. "I couldn't wait to freshen up, and you only have one bathroom."

"A little warning might've been nice."

"But that would've taken the fun and surprise out of it," Didi said giggling playfully.

Didi wheeled and took inventory of the man draped in terry cloth, his muscular frame still dripping wet.

"You're very handsome, do you know that?"

"Kind of you to say so, but do you think maybe we could discuss this later?" said Kevin, motioning her toward the door.

*Kevin L. Smith*

"Oh, I am embarrassing you. I'm sorry."

With a bounce in her step, Didi propelled herself out of the bathroom.

"I'll get the coffee started. How do you like your eggs?"

"Scrambled, thank you," he returned.

As Didi sauntered down the hall to the kitchen, Kevin reflected on the admittedly delightful effect the girl was having on him, despite his outward abruptness moments before. That effect seemingly was two-sided. Didi's countenance scarcely resembled the one exhibited that first night. When he was fully dressed, Cade entered the kitchen only to find Senator Blake and Didi immersed in conversation.

"I see you two have already met."

"Oh, yes," Didi said. "You didn't tell me that you had friends so important, Kevin."

Blake wisely refrained from sharing with the young lady his reasons for being there.

"You'll have to tell me what other noteworthy celebrities drop in to your place for breakfast," she said with a wink.

"That shouldn't take too long," Kevin countered.

Catching Blake's eye, Cade motioned him outside on the redwood decking.

"The senator and I will be back in a second, Didi. I'd like to show him our view of the lake."

When the two men were safely out of earshot, Kevin addressed the senator, "I think it is in everyone's best interest if we left within the hour. Whoever is out there will be making their move soon, and we've a better chance if we're not just sitting here waiting for them. Besides, I think that will prevent endangering Didi."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right. By the way, I just can't thank you enough for deciding to help out. I really didn't know where else to turn."

"Maybe it's as much a favor to me as it is to you, senator. Shall we have some breakfast?"

"I'm afraid my appetite isn't what it should be, but I'll give it my best."

The two men returned to the smell of coffee and eggs. As they finished, Kevin took Didi aside.

"Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure, but I hope it's not about the eggs. I know they were a little rubbery, but I promise to do better."

"No, no," he interrupted.

He paused, trying to find the right words.

"Something's come up, and the senator and I must leave for a few days," he said looking away. "There's no reason why you can't just stay here until I get back."

The unexpected announcement staggered her.

"But...can't I go with you? I won't be any trouble."

"I'm afraid not."

Didi caught herself.

"Of course I shouldn't go. I shouldn't even ask. I've been enough of an intrusion already," she pouted, her chin lowering. "It's just..."

Her voice quivered. Pulling her closer, Kevin gently pushed the stubborn strand of hair that fell across her face.

"I know. I'm going to miss you too. Didi, these...these feelings we have for each other...they're real. I would never have thought it possible."

Kevin's awkward attempt to express himself was mercifully cut short. Didi thrust her whole body against him, kissing him with all the fervor and passion she was capable of displaying. The full range of her emotions, the very essence of her being was brought to bear in that one act. Those emotions flowed through Kevin like an unbridled electric current. His heart pounded fiercely. He found himself embracing her with equal passion, each wishing there was more time. It took everything Kevin had to break away.

"We have to be going."

There was something she caught in his voice – an almost imperceptible hint of danger. The idea knocked her with a jolt.

"This trip, it doesn't have anything to do with the killings, does it? Because if it does, I won't let you go. I don't want revenge, especially if it means losing you," she cried as tears streamed down her face.

"Listen to me. I said, listen," Kevin said steadying her. "Whatever I'm doing has nothing to do with revenge. But it does have to do with us. Some day, all this will make some sense. Until then, just believe one thing, I *will* be back. I'm not some reporter or grocery clerk. When

*Kevin L. Smith*

someone comes after me, they'll have their hands full, and then some. And remember something else. Whatever cosmic forces brought this upon us also brought us together. We've got to see it through."

He kissed her again, but this time ever so softly.

"Trust me," he repeated for a final time.

Kevin gathered up a few things, change of clothes, etc., and joined Blake at the cabin's entrance.

"Ready?" Blake asked.

"Let's do it, senator."

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

"You don't mind if I drive, do you?" asked Cade as the two men approached the vehicle.

"Not at all," the politician responded. "Here are the keys."

Kevin caught them in mid air.

"By the way, did you pack a gun?" asked Blake.

"No," said Kevin. "Did you?"

"Yes," he said, "though I'm a little self conscious about it. I'd probably blow my foot off trying to defend myself. Seriously, wouldn't you feel better carrying one?"

"The truth is, senator, I never got used to firearms."

Great, the senator thought, just what I need, a conscientious objector.

"But what happens when we have to face whatever's out there?"

Cade said nothing.

They crossed the first mile marker from the cabin, and continued on down the winding cow path leading to the main highway. Kevin's headaches intensified. He slowed the vehicle down.

"What is it?" Blake asked. "Do you see something?"

"Don't have to, senator."

Just then, a jeep appeared in the middle of the road directly ahead of them, two hundred yards up the hill.

"What now?" Blake asked nervously.

"Good question."

Cade brought the car to a halt. Reaching back over his seat to the

*Kevin L. Smith*

rear floorboard, he grabbed something and climbed out of the vehicle.

"You stay here. If they get too close, don't ask questions. Just protect yourself."

"Where are you going? You're not going to leave me here? I mean...wouldn't we have a better chance together?"

"Senator, I learned long ago that it's better to be the hunter than the hunted."

A second later, Cade was out of sight. Blake was surprised at the speed and agility of the man. The knowledge of it made him feel better, if only a little.

Moments ticked off. The jeep up ahead did not move, but the pair inside climbed out. Blake watched closely while the duo systematically narrowed the gap between themselves and their quarry, one on the left side and other on the right. At their rate of speed, another minute or two and Blake would smell their aftershave.

"Where was Cade?" he wondered.

He could scrutinize them in detail now; big, young, clean cut, higher education written all over them. Amazing...they might be members of my own country club back home. Only these guys were coming at him with rifles. Beads of sweat glistened on his upper lip.

"You better show up soon, my friend. Or else it won't matter. Lord," he thought, "how did a member of the United States Senate find himself stuck in an old-fashioned shootout on a back road in Colorado? What could I have been thinking? I should've dumped this on somebody else, anybody."

His mind roamed. Blake fondled the cold steel in his hand, the reassuring feel of the pearl handled .38.

"I hope I remember how to use this thing..."

The seconds counted off one at a time, with a miserable pause between each of them. The ambushers were less than sixty yards away. For lack of a better idea, Blake mustered bravado and opened the car door. Aiming his pistol through the opening in the manner he remembered dramatized on television Blake crouched and yelled as loud as he could.

"Stop or I'll shoot!"

This was where they're supposed to freeze and throw up their hands, he thought. Only they did neither. The senator could almost

feel the strands of hair on his head actually turn gray as the first bullet spider webbed the windshield into a thousand separate bits of glass. The waiting was over. Mercifully, the bullet whizzed by his ear, traveled another thirty yards, and finally landed in the dirt. The next three shells, fired in rapid succession, all hit the car door. Blake shook off his fear long enough to return fire. He didn't expect to hit anything. The best he could hope for was to get close and scare them off. No, not scare. He knew they weren't the type to scare. Maybe just slow them down.

Blake always thought himself a good judge of character. He wondered if he had been wrong about this Cade fellow. He didn't have to wonder very long. The assailants were only forty feet away and their synchronized barrage had pinned Blake down to where he could barely shoot back at all. But one fact crystallized in his mind: If they wanted to kill him, he would have been dead already. That could only mean one thing.

They knew about the file, and wanted it.

And he was the only one who could get it for them.

"Why don't you put that little pea shooter down, senator?"

It was a question a cat might ask a mouse, Blake thought.

"All we want is a little friendly cooperation," the other said as his voice took on a snarl. "We don't have all day, senator. Drop it and drop it now!"

Obviously the man was used to giving orders. Blake wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He was losing the battle of wills.

With a sigh, Blake heaved the pistol into the road between them. The two men advanced toward the car. Then Kevin appeared. The stone was hurled from a distance of forty feet, landing just above the left ear of the man closest to the senator, toppling him instantly. The second assassin whirled around, aiming his weapon at the man with the sling. Cade didn't even try to reload. The trained killer squeezed the trigger as the cross hairs settled on Cade's chest.

The instant the shot was fired, the memory engrams within Kevin's head responded. To the casual observer, Kevin's eyes clouded over and his hand rose almost casually. In a blur, Kevin slapped the deadly missile away from him. It wasn't done consciously, but it was done deliberately. Kevin's subconscious took over, doing the necessary

*Kevin L. Smith*

in blinding speed.

The hired gun was dumbfounded. He wasn't supposed to miss. He checked his weapon. When he looked up again, Cade was gone. The operative ran over to Blake.

Shoving his Luger against the senator's cheekbone, he yelled, "If you want to keep your pal alive, come out with your hands..."

Before he could finish, his head was yanked back by the hair with a force that nearly cut off the air to his windpipe. Releasing his hold on the senator, the operative tried to turn his gun against the man behind him. Kevin snapped his wrist like a dry twig, and the gun fell to the ground. The operative's last thought before he blacked out was one of pure astonishment.

Cade finally asked, "Are you all right?"

"Good God, you're even smiling! Yes, of course I'm all right, thanks to you."

The senator was nearly hyperventilating from the excitement.

"Would you mind explaining what I just saw?"

"Eyes can play tricks on you."

"However you did it, I'm grateful."

"After I tie them up, help me get these men into the back seat. We'll turn them over to the local law on the way through town," Kevin said.

Bending over the one pelted by the stone, Blake looked up at Kevin and said, "I don't think you'll need to tie this one. He's dead."

"Hmm," Kevin mumbled as he picked up the other one and hoisted him into the sedan.

"You don't seem surprised," stated the Senator.

"I guess that's because I'm not, really."

"You're a cool one, Kevin. You don't even blink. I almost wet my pants, and look at this," he said as he extended his hands which were still shaking.

"And you, you act like business as usual. You know something? I had you rush-checked through a friend at the Bureau before I came out to your house last night. The computer says you're clean. But the way you act, I'm beginning to wonder."

He pulled in the reins.

"Look, you don't owe me any explanation. If anyone owes

anyone, I'm the guy in debt..."

Kevin interrupted, "Our first concern is to get out of here as quickly as possible. I'll fill you in on the road to Phoenix."

Within an hour they were in back of the police headquarters in Telluride. Cade and a deputy carried the bodies inside the station and laid them down on the floor, and the senator did his best to explain what happened without bringing up the secret documents.

"As a United States senator, sheriff, one gets to be a target for a lot of private interest groups. Mr. Braddock and I were associates of sorts, and my enemies were his enemies," the senator continued.

Blowing smoke screens for a living came in handy, Cade thought to himself as the senator poured it on as thick as southern gravy.

"Mr. Cade and I are on an important mission, a confidential one at that, sheriff."

The old sheriff stared at Blake with his head shaking vigorously.

"Look here, Senator. I don't care if the President himself sent you here, you can't just go and dump a corpse on my doorstep without a full explanation. It...it just ain't right."

"Look, sheriff, what if I promise to give you a full report as soon as the President okays it?"

"The President?"

"That's right."

The officer hesitated for a second. Then he shook his head.

"Not good enough, Senator."

"Well, how about this? Give me seventy-two hours. I promise you'll either have your report, or proper authorization to file what you do have."

"What about this fellow all tied up here? Are you at least going to file an assault charge? If you don't, I won't be able to keep him more than forty-eight hours."

"He's not a high priority, sheriff. Forty-eight hours out of my hair will do fine. Besides, there's probably plenty more where that came from."

"I got your word then, senator?" the sheriff asked.

"You have my word. Can we go now?"

"I suppose. I guess I can give you an escort to the county line, but I'm afraid that's the best I can do."

*Kevin L. Smith*

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but that's the last thing we need," replied Blake. "The quieter the better."

"Well, good luck then."

The three men shook hands. The senator and Cade quickly climbed in the car and resumed their journey minus the extra baggage. They had enough gas to get them to Durango. From there, it would be three hours to Gallup, New Mexico, and from there to Phoenix another six-and-a-half. On paper, they could be there for a late supper, but both men knew that anything could happen before then.

"Yes, send him in."

Mr. Parelli was in high spirits. His pet Persian had just won first place in a local competition.

"How does it feel to be champion, my sweets?" said Parelli purring in unison with his pet. "How are we doing this morning, Mr. Rosen?" asked the chairman without taking his eyes off the cat.

Mr. Rosen cleared his throat nervously before speaking.

"Well, sir, I believe we've experienced a temporary delay."

"You believe, Mr. Rosen?" asked Parelli, his mood shifting instantly. "What do you mean, you believe?"

"Simply this, sir: Our men were scheduled to intercept the subjects in question hours ago. We have yet to hear from them. Consequently, their status is unclear."

"What precisely are we doing about this state of uncertainty, Mr. Rosen?"

"Our backup team is zeroing in on their last reported location. They're dropping in by helicopter within the half hour, to be precise. We also have men stationed at various intervals along the proposed routes to Phoenix. They will be located, sir. I promise you."

Rosen's forehead glistened with perspiration.

"Your confidence is most reassuring."

Parelli's expression was sardonic.

"I hope for your sake that both your confidence and ours is not unfounded. The company has little tolerance for failure, as I'm sure you are well aware. Handle it quickly, won't you Mr. Rosen?"

The chairman's eyes turned back toward the Persian ball of fur

curled up in his lap. That was Rosen's cue to leave. Things were not going smoothly, Rosen thought as he walked out the door. He just barely stepped back in his own executive conclave when the humble demeanor he always assumed in the chairman's presence disappeared totally.

"Franklin, I'm putting you in charge of this mess. I want you in Phoenix by this afternoon. One of the corporate jets will fly you there. You know what has to be done. Just do it, and try not to make a splash when you do. I want reports every hour on the hour, and more often than that if developments dictate it. Understood?"

Rosen was a slight man, but there was power in his voice.

"Yes, sir. You can depend on me," said the graying forty-year-old field operative with assurance.

"I've chosen you, Franklin, because you've got that rare combination of initiative and intelligence. Get this job done right and you can write your own ticket up here. Take whatever men you'll need in addition to the operatives we already have assigned."

"Thank you, sir. You won't be disappointed."

Franklin turned in military fashion and left. Rosen slumped down in his chair and gnawed at his thumbnail. That was about all he could do, chew his nails and wait.

The blue skies over Flagstaff transformed into reds and magentas.

"I guess this is as good a place as any to fill up, senator," Kevin said as he pulled into the truck stop.

With the tank full and the attendant paid, Blake turned to his companion.

"I don't know about you, but I'm starved." He looked around. "You think it's safe to stop for a bite?"

Blake's nose had caught the none-too-subtle whiff of fried chicken and mashed potatoes floating through the air.

"Blake, you didn't look like the kind of person that lets his stomach tell him what to do. But, if you're asking me if stopping to eat in a crowded restaurant is any more dangerous than traveling down a lonely highway, I'd say no. After you, Senator."

"My stomach and I like the way you think, Kevin."

*Kevin L. Smith*

The two men walked into the roadside cafe. The food was excellent, and the senator happily ate his fill. But halfway through his chicken-fried steak, Kevin's "headaches" arrived. They were there; not in the cafe, but nearby.

"You ought to take something for those headaches, Kevin," Blake said, finishing off the last bite of apple pie. "Maybe even see a doctor about them. By the way, you know I have you to thank for this appetite of mine. By all rights, I should still be shaking in my boots. That is, if I wore boots. And looking around, maybe I should, everyone else is. Anyway, where was I? Oh yes...here I am, no more nervous than you seem to be. Is it possible that you really are nervous, but have found some mysterious way of hiding it?"

"When I'm nervous, you'll know it, Senator. Right now, what I feel is more like 'itchy.' I think we'd better go."

Cade thought better of sharing the reasons for his apprehension just yet. Who knew what the senator might do. One thing they didn't need right then was panic. As the two walked casually out of the cafe, Kevin swept the seating area with his eyes. They continued across the giant parking lot and to their car. Even from a distance it was hard to miss the four flat tires on their sedan.

"I don't get it," said the senator. "Why are they playing games with us? Why not come straight ahead like before?"

"That's easy, my friend," said Kevin. "The last time they tried that, the result wasn't quite what they had in mind. They're forcing us into a stall. They want us to stay put. It's my guess that they had a lookout posted here at the truck stop, and he's waiting for reinforcements now."

Blake frowned.

"Are you sure you don't work for these guys? You even think like them."

"That's because they're trained to hunt, and trained well, I might add. They might be college educated, groomed, and polished with the table manners of Hoyle himself, but their culture and civilized ways are only paper-thin. Deep down they're no different than your ordinary jackals, wolves or coyotes. That is why I understand them. I was raised around their furry cousins, and they taught me everything they knew. That is where our advantage is, senator. That is, if we have any."



"What's our next move then? Do we just sit here and play their game?"

"That's exactly what we don't do. Now listen carefully and do precisely what I tell you."

Cade discretely issued Blake instructions as both walked nonchalantly back toward the all night restaurant. Neither had any idea where the eyes were, those invisible eyes scrutinizing their every move. All they could do was play the hand dealt them blindsided, as if they were exhibits behind a one-way mirror. Once inside, each sat down as before. Both ordered coffee again, and waited. Before long their patience was rewarded. Kevin responded by casually lifting himself off the stool and ambling toward the men's washroom, a step or two behind a pudgy and balding middle-aged trucker. More than twenty minutes elapsed before Cade returned to his place at the cafe counter.

"Any luck?" Blake asked under his breath.

"Naturally, Senator. You'd be amazed at the persuasive power of a hundred dollar bill. That's the charm of the free enterprise system, don't you know?"

"When do we leave?"

"About five minutes from now. When a tall fellow in a gray coat and yellow windbreaker pays his tab and heads for the door, you slide into the john. Then you reverse your jacket, put on this cap I bought off one of the other jockeys, and meet me outside on the double. The two of us will wait for you at the last pump on the diesel side. Got it?"

"Are you sure this will work?"

"Well, senator, there is only one way to find out. Besides, if my hunch is right, every minute we stay here is another nail in our coffin."

Cade shifted his eyes to the restroom doorway.

"Here he comes. Now move."

Kevin was never in the army, but he had the authority of a drill sergeant when the situation called for it. Blake did as instructed, and in a minute or so the three men piled in the massive Kenworth and rolled toward freeway 17, the interstate that would take them to Phoenix. Just as they approached the on-ramp, the three men heard

*Kevin L. Smith*

the systematic thumping peculiar to helicopters resounding in the black sky overhead.

"Name's Gottsacker, gents, Hubbard Gottsacker. Most folks call me 'Sack'. What's yours?" asked the truck jockey.

As each took his hand, Gottsacker shook them heartily, all the while never taking his eyes off the road, or his other hand off the wheel. With the introductions out of the way, the trucker cranked into another gear, and then spat a wad of Wintergreen out the window.

"Ya know, fellas," Gottsacker went on. "I would've been glad to haul ya on into Phoenix for nothin'. But hell, truckin' ain't what it used to be, and you was nice enough to offer..."

"We're very grateful, Sack," Kevin said.

"Say, are you guys wanted by the 'bear'? Don't get me wrong, now. It don't much make me no never mind, but talkin' helps pass the hours."

"No," said Kevin. "We're not wanted by the police."

He chose his words carefully.

"There just happens to be some unpatriotic, unsavory sorts chasing after us."

Kevin was reading Gottsacker pretty well. Throwing up the old stars and stripes just might give the man behind the wheel some extra incentive.

"No kiddin'! Why don't you just report 'em?"

"They have too many friends, Sack, if you get my meaning."

"Say no more," returned Gottsacker. "Us nobodies got to stick together, ya know. Them big shots of the world think they're the only ones that can shoot. Well, I'm here to tell you, this old pistol still has a bullet or two."

He pounded his fist on the dashboard. Cade was right. He had played just the right tune for the old asphalt cowboy. Truckers were used to being the odd man out. The way they acted, one was never certain whether it was by choice or by force. As Gottsacker unloaded another mouthful of tobacco juice, Kevin stuck his head out the opposite window and listened for the chopper blades.

The semi glided down the highway as smooth as one of those high-speed European commuter trains. As each mile drew them closer to the desert metropolis, Kevin mulled over the magnitude of his

volunteer assignment. There was probably no end to the manpower the Corporation had at their disposal. As long as there were no more than a few at a time... His private thoughts were intercepted by the loud fog horn of Gottsacker's tractor trailer.

"What in tarnation?" blurted Gottsacker.

Directly ahead, planted firmly in the center of the darkened highway, was an old fashioned roadblock, the blackness broken only by the rotating cherry and two or three hand-waved flashlights.

"Have you ever had this happen before, Sack?" Blake asked.

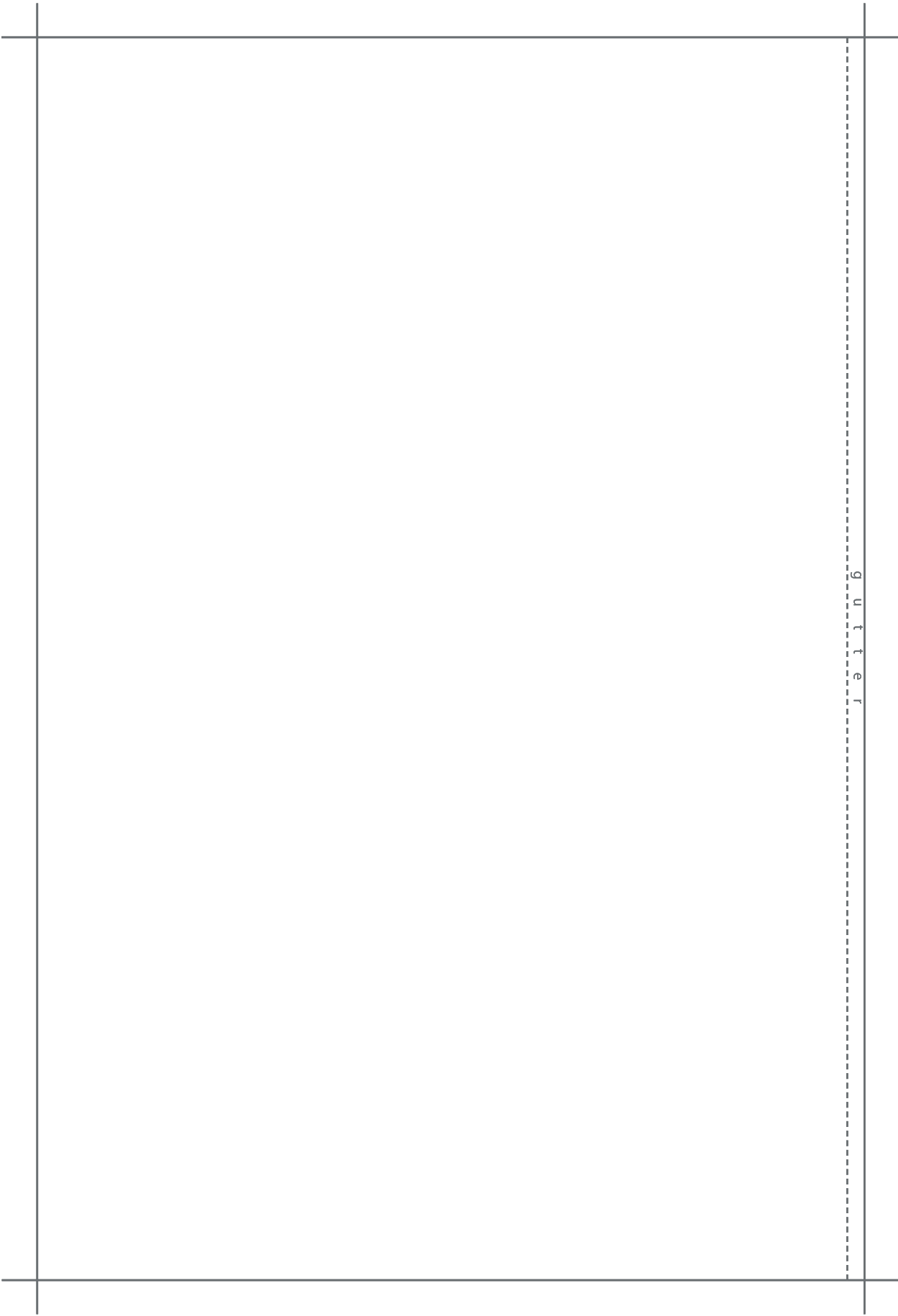
"Not on this road," replied the trucker.

"Hmmm," Kevin mumbled.

"You don't suppose they're in cahoots with whoever is after you fellas, do ya?"

"No way of telling, Sack," said Kevin.

He was lying. His head was pounding again, and he knew exactly who they were.



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## CHAPTER EIGHT

*They* mustn't lose control. Kevin wasn't sure of either of his companions. As the behemoth tractor trailer hissed and growled to a stop, the helicopter reappeared and flashed its white searchlight from the air.

"What's the trouble, officer?" Gottsacker hollered out the window of the cab.

"Would you step out, please?" came the reply.

With the searchlight beaming down on their faces, it was hard to tell how many there were.

"That's right, all of you."

The senator thought he detected a Midwestern twang to the voice behind a flashlight. The three men slowly climbed down from the elevated cab.

"Now, do you mind telling us what this is all about? I got a schedule to keep, ya know."

Gottsacker thought he belched out just the right amount of righteous indignation. Then the tempo changed.

"Turn around and assume the position, all of you."

Meanwhile the blocking squad cars were being moved to let all other traffic pass.

"You, in the middle, over here."

Blake responded cautiously, following the officer's hand signal. Kevin watched, his hands still pressed up against the trailer of the semi. Senator Blake was forced to climb inside one of the police vehicles,

*Kevin L. Smith*

which then started up and headed down the road toward Phoenix.

"Look here," said Gottsacker. "He's a friend of mine. And I'm getting pretty damn sick of all this crap..."

His vehement speech was cut short by a sharp crack on the cheekbone from the butt of a rifle. Gottsacker slumped to his knees in agony. All through this, the blinking lights made it impossible to see much of anything. It was like being in an interrogation room with the hot light bulb pressed into your face.

"All right, very carefully now, both of you step around to the other side of the trailer and keep those hands high."

By then, even Gottsacker could tell that these weren't real cops. They were now on the backside of the semi, with the trailer blocking them visually from the road. The man with the shotgun appeared to be waiting for something. Kevin understood perfectly. They were holding out for a quiet and isolated moment on the highway. Gottsacker sensed the same truth a split second later.

The phony officer watching over them was joined by another. Kevin couldn't see him, but he could hear and feel him. The silence was unnerving. In another moment, Kevin and Gottsacker would be two slumped-over piles of carrion on the side of an Arizona road, like an open range steer that wandered too close to the blacktop and bought it. Gottsacker decided not to wait. Wheeling around, he lunged for the one closest to him, grabbing the carbine in one desperate motion. Kevin ignored the activity and concentrated on the invisible man to his left. In a fluid movement, Kevin dropped to his knees, barely dodging a bullet aimed at his chest. Sliding his hand deftly inside his boot, he removed a seven-inch Bowie from a sheath strapped to his ankle. As he rose from the crouch, the surgical steel blade left his hand in a blur. A muffled thud announced its arrival.

The knife embedded itself up to its hilt between the clavicle and scapula incapacitating the henchman who screamed out in agony before falling unconscious – maybe dead – to the pavement. Kevin finished just in time to see Gottsacker take a shot point-blank through his heart. Mercifully, he hardly knew what hit him.

Instinctively Kevin slid under the trailer before a light could be trained on him. He detected two more sets of footsteps shuffling in the dirt on the opposite shoulder of the road.

"There's still one left," shouted the one nearest Kevin. "I think he's under the semi."

All three lights beamed toward the under carriage of the cab. Once under the rig, Kevin wedged himself between the drive shaft and the frame.

"He's got to be there," the original voice growled.

"He's not armed, go after him," ordered the man on the other side.

"Like hell. That's what Roger tried to do, but Roger's dead."

Kevin heard their leader step closer. Next he heard the distinct sound of the hammer on a revolver being cocked back.

"Go ahead pal, try and shoot me. One wrong puncture and the whole rig goes up in flames, and you know that."

They did know that! They also knew they couldn't wait forever on a public highway. Kevin heard them mumble across the road. The quiet that marked the stalemate was finally broken by the sound of an oncoming vehicle some distance down the highway. Kevin strained for a clear view. Wait, was he imagining things, or had that car flashed its headlights? The henchmen huddled trying to appear official.

The car was now a quarter mile away, and it decelerated. So what? Doesn't everyone slow down when they see stopped vehicles up ahead? When the vehicle had advanced to within five hundred feet, all his rationale assumed an about-face. In a flash he recognized his own Jeep Cherokee. It was the perfect diversion. Kevin slid out of his nest and on to the pavement. Never one to scrutinize a gift horse, Kevin acted, rolling out from under the trailer and toward the advancing Jeep. He knew the driver without looking.

"Would you like a lift?" she asked.

"Floor it," Kevin yelled as he landed in the bucket seat, buckshot bouncing off the roll bar. "That's twice you've dropped in on me, young lady."

Kevin leaned over and kissed his rescuer.

"I owed you one, kind sir," Didi said. "Now, would you mind telling me what you're doing here? When I heard those gunshots near the cabin this morning, all I could think of was, well, you know. I couldn't bear the thought of losing you. Well, I paced the floor for a while until I couldn't stand it any more and hopped in your jeep and

*Kevin L. Smith*

followed you. When I got into town, the Sheriff told me where you were headed, and here I am.”

“That still doesn’t tell me how you happened down this road at just the right time, but we’ll have plenty of time to talk later. Just keep the pedal down and be careful with the curves. Jeeps don’t corner very well, and they make better time right side up.”

“Where’s the Senator? I thought you two were traveling together?”

“We were, and that’s where we’re headed.”

“Is there time?” she asked intuitively.

“Maybe. I don’t think they’ll hurt him, at least until they get what they want. That means he’s fairly safe until ten a.m. tomorrow morning when the bank opens. Our only chance is intercepting them there. After that, his insurance policy expires.”

“Shouldn’t we go to the police?”

“Perhaps, but my hunch is that would only endanger him further. I kind of like the guy and I think he deserves more than a bullet in the head. Besides, if he wanted the police in on this, he’d have called them in himself. Let’s do it his way. Are you sure you’re up to this?”

“I’m sure. Don’t think you’re going to get rid of me that easily,” she said with a grin.

“I wouldn’t even try,” said Kevin. “But speaking of getting rid of someone, I want you to shake the car that will catch up to our bumper in a couple minutes if we don’t do something. The next dirt road you see, take it and cut your lights when you do.”

Didi was good at taking instructions. The ploy was a simple one, but effective. The jeep was now on the tail of the pursuing imitation patrol car, which by now had removed its flashing light.

“Like I always say, it’s better to hunt than be hunted. Don’t you agree?”

“Anything you say, darling.”

That was the first time he had ever been called that. Funny, he liked it.

*Things* could be a great deal worse, thought Franklin, as he contemplated the possible scenarios. At least they had got their hands on Blake,



their primary objective. Still, there was that unfinished business with his buddy, what's his name. Not that he was that important to the operation; it was just that he hated loose ends. It would have been a nice touch to keep Blake in line, threatening his friend's life. After all, the Senator would have no way of knowing he was already dead.

That was where the problem lay. Cade wasn't dead, which meant he could turn up anytime, anywhere. Maybe even with the local heat.

"No way around it," Franklin thought to himself. "Got to think up a new crow bar, some kind of leverage."

Threatening Blake's own life wouldn't work; both men knew they needed Blake alive to retrieve the file. In a flash of brilliance, Franklin knew what his next move would be. There would be plenty of time to carry it out. They had all night to set it up, not that it would take that long. A few phone calls and a few details, it would be simple. That was the nice thing about belonging to a big outfit, unlimited resources at your disposal.

Franklin's quiet contemplation was interrupted by the hourly beep of his Seiko Chronograph, reminding him of the need to report to the home office. Rosen, that little ferret, would be waiting like a nervous rat in a snake exhibit.

The two lovers spent the night in the jeep, uncomfortable as it was. They had parked the vehicle a block or so away from the bank the Senator had referred to in his conversation. Neither seemed to mind, they were content in each others huddled company. There was very little talking during those few hours of waiting and wondering.

"When the moment comes to move," Kevin said, breaking the silence, "I want you to stay back and away from whatever takes place, understood?"

"Understood."

"No heroics, okay?"

"Okay."

Kevin wasn't sure he believed her, but he had very little choice in the matter.

"At least this way," he thought, "I can watch her from the corner of my eye."

*Kevin L. Smith*

The two continued sitting, lapsing in and out of sleep as the sun came up. There was still several hours before the bank would open its doors.

At nine-thirty a.m., a late-model Buick four-door pulled into a parking space directly opposite the bank. The car had heavily tinted windows, and it was impossible to tell from the outside who or what was on the inside. But Kevin strongly suspected that it was the Senator, along with his newfound friends. Kevin was right again.

"How's the old head, Senator?" asked the man obviously in charge.

Making no effort to answer the question, Blake decided that he had a question of his own.

"What did you do to me?" the Senator inquired as he tried to shake off the groggy, headachy sensation he was feeling.

"You really shouldn't drink like that Senator. It could be bad for your image. Of course, not as bad as other things I could imagine. Right, Senator?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, Blake, old buddy," Franklin continued. "I'm told a picture is worth a thousand words. Let's see if that wobbly head of yours can draw a bead on this little snapshot."

What Franklin was holding up was more than a snapshot. Rather, he gingerly held in his hand an eight by ten glossy of the most exquisite detail.

"Nice, eh?" said Franklin enjoying his sense of power.

Blake could hardly believe his eyes. There before him in vivid color was an image of himself with two women – neither of whom was familiar to him – in bed together, nude and apparently involved in a "ménage et trios" of the most depraved sort. Though clearly a setup, one would be hard pressed to tell from the picture itself.

"I have no idea how you staged that little scene. But it's fake and you know it. What are you going to do now?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing, that is, providing you cooperate friendly-like. And just so you don't misunderstand, if the picture isn't insensitive enough, just remember that you're only alive now because

you can do something for us. If push comes to shove, and we've got nothing to lose, well, I don't really have to draw you a picture, do I? And if you have it in your mind to martyr out on us, this sweet little photograph will forever immortalize your post mortem reputation. Now get this straight, Senator," Franklin's voice getting even more threatening. "You and I are going in there like two good old pals comparing our life insurance policies, understand?"

Blake didn't answer.

"It's funny how you politicians always seem to have a lot to say until it really counts. Then you're all blind, deaf, and dumb. Well, we'll soon see just how much you really do understand."

Franklin inadvertently timed his little speech perfectly. The time was now ten o'clock.

"He's opening the doors now. Okay, Senator, let's move."

The two men slowly stepped out of the sedan, placing themselves in clear view of the two observers up the street. Though only one man was walking with Blake, Kevin was certain that several more were lurking close by for insurance. He continued to watch as the two men briskly walked up to the Arizona Bank's entrance and stepped inside. Kevin reasoned they wouldn't be there much more than five minutes depending on how soon they were accommodated.

It was then that Kevin began working his way carefully toward the Bank. He was a block away and drawing closer. The street was only moderately active, the rush hour having come and gone. Kevin was only partially certain of what he intended to do when he got there, that is, if he made it that far. Much of his decision depended on the number and deployment of the hired guns guarding the immediate area.

Once he had negotiated all but the last hundred yards, Kevin walked casually over to the newsstand nearby and bought himself a copy of the Arizona Republic. Shielding his face with the front page, he remained standing there for a moment while he calculated his options. All of them but one meant instant death for the Senator and not much better for himself. This was because there were at least ten men standing guard, each most likely capable of nailing him at a hundred yards – and that with one eye closed. His only choice was one made available by the single blind spot, or near blind spot, in their

*Kevin L. Smith*

defenses. In order for the plan to work, there would have to be perfect execution, timing and a better-than-average roll of the dice. Perceiving the long shot as his only choice, Kevin detoured from his path into the alleyway perpendicular to the main boulevard. Within a minute or two, he had skirted the armed guard and wound up on the opposite side of Franklin's Buick. One guard was positioned there, with the rest separated by the Buick. Kevin knew he had very little time now. If he was to move, he must do so quickly.

With a subtle whistle, Kevin tried to lure the guard from his post out of view around the corner. It took several tries, but finally the man's attention was piqued and he walked over. The hired gun might have been a seasoned pro, a green beret Vietnam veteran, but none of it mattered when he turned the corner. For whatever else Kevin was, in close quarters he was deadly if he chose to be. He was also quiet, which was equally important. After the guard slumped over, Kevin propped him against the wall next to a trashcan. Seeing the unconscious fellow lying there gave Kevin an idea.

At that moment inside the bank, the Senator and Franklin were opening the safety deposit box that had belonged to Braddock. It was a box of medium size, neither the smallest nor the largest. It contained several items, only one of which was of any importance to Franklin.

"How nice of Braddock to have two copies of his precious research," remarked Franklin quietly so as not to be heard by the attendant waiting outside.

"Let's just take it and go," said the Senator, removing just the papers from the box in one sweeping motion.

"Not so fast, Senator. Let's be thorough and just take everything, okay? I wouldn't want to trouble you for a second trip."

Franklin had a grinding quality to his voice that never failed to annoy anyone over a prolonged period of time, and in the Senator's case, the repulsion had been instantaneous.

With all of the contents placed neatly inside the satchel brought by Franklin, the two men motioned to the vault's attendant and proceeded out of the bank. Blake couldn't shake the sickening, hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach, the kind of feeling one gets as a fringe benefit to the act of buckling under psychological pressure. One could see it on his face, which was all white and sallow.

As they crossed the street, Franklin looked nervously both ways – not to avoid traffic, but to satisfy himself that there would be no interference. He then motioned to the guard closest to the Buick to get in and drive while he and Blake climbed into the back seat.

“Get on the expressway to the airport,” Franklin barked to the driver.

“Mr. Rosen will be most relieved when he hears how cooperative you’ve been, Senator. It’s almost like you’re one of the boys now,” he said with a sarcastic smile. “It’s too bad our newfound association can’t be of a more...permanent variety. But I’m afraid people like you and Braddock make my bosses just a little too nervous. People like you always seem so bent on self-destruction. Bad for company morale, don’t ya know.”

The senator was only half listening, his mind in a fog of despair and frustration. He was thinking back on his fledgling days as a public official, when his innocence and naiveté was matched only by his enthusiasm for righting wrongs and restoring integrity to his tiny niche in government machinery. That was twenty years ago, when he was fresh out of college, and flashing around his degree in political science with great pride. Naturally, with each year and each step up the political ladder, his innocence lessened and so did his naiveté. He had even come to terms with the time-tested concept that the end does justify the means. That is, to a point. Only lately Blake had been plagued with the gnawing feeling that he had gradually become just like the kind of politician he had always loathed. That inward realization was what had primed the pump, so to speak, for a favorable response to his old reporter friend’s request for help. In one grand move, Blake would purge himself of all past guilt, revive his own self image, and wipe the slate clean. Too bad things didn’t work out quite that way, he contemplated. As Franklin continued to berate him, the Senator closed his eyes and tried to block out the gravelly voice.

In a few awkwardly spent minutes, the Buick turned into the lane designated for the private jet terminals and rental hangar. As the sedan eased up alongside the huge jet hanger, Franklin snapped the satchel shut and tuned to Blake.

“Well, Senator, it’s been fun, but I do have a schedule to keep.”

Turning to the driver, he said “You and the boys take care of him,

*Kevin L. Smith*

and do it neatly. No mistakes or problems, you understand?"

As Franklin's hand reached for the door handle, the driver spoke, "You move another inch, I mean even twitch, and you'll be history, understand?"

Kevin Cade knew full well the value of intimidation. And here he was going to be the Alpha. Both men in the back seat jerked to attention as they filled with surprise.

"Let me guess," Franklin said disconcertedly. "Cade, right? I kind of wanted to meet you anyway."

The hired gun was struggling for control of the situation.

"No you didn't," Cade returned. "But you're getting your chance nevertheless. Now then, unless you share the Senator's supposed inclination toward self-destruction, you're going to do exactly as I say. In a second or two, your fellow hoods in the car behind us will be piling out and coming over the see what the hold up is. You're going to tell them that there's been a change of plans. You're going to tell them that Blake is wanted in Chicago, and you and the driver are taking him there personally. Then you're going to assign them to go guard the airport's perimeter. The three of us are going to walk briskly over to that corporate jet of yours and get in. You're going to do all this because you're smart, you want to live, and deep down that gut feeling of yours is telling you that I'm quite for real. And though I don't generally use guns, I am prepared to blow your brains all over the rear window. Now go to it, Mr. Tough Guy. Now!"

Franklin was not the type to get flustered, but there was something about this Cade fellow...he wasn't bluffing. Rolling down the window, Franklin did as Kevin demanded. Motioning his men over, he gave instructions. Once the armed entourage was positioned at a safe distance, the three men headed for the hangar. At the far end, leaning against the Lear, was the company pilot, waiting patiently for Franklin.

"Are you all right, Senator?"

It was the first chance Kevin had to talk with Blake, who still maintained the demeanor of a man-sized balloon with the air let out.

"I'll be okay, Kevin, thanks to you."

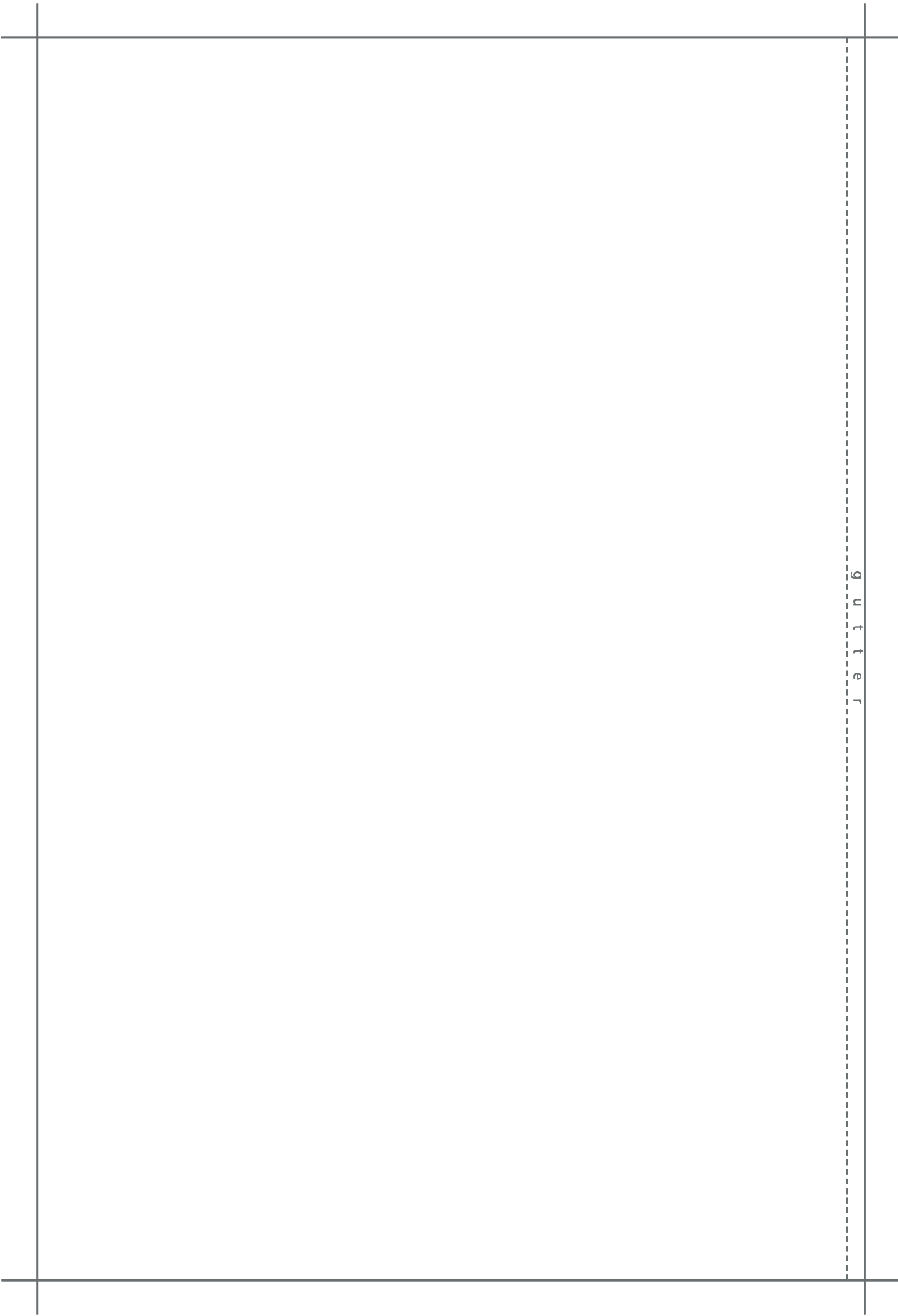
"You don't look okay. You look more like a rainbow trout I once caught."

*Destiny's Wildest Dream*

"No, really, I'm fine, or I will be fine, if I can just get to Washington with that file. I tell you, Kevin, I don't know if you've ever been totally helpless, or at the mercy of some animal like Franklin, but if not, I hope you never will be. I wouldn't wish it on anybody."

"Oh, I think I can appreciate what you're saying, Senator. And we're not out of this yet."

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## CHAPTER NINE

The men were now only yards from the aircraft. It was Franklin's turn to be nervous. He knew better than anyone that if he let them take the file out of his hands, he was dead meat. If he was to act, he would have to act soon. Wheeling around, the seasoned operative brought his hand down karate-style on Cade's gun wrist. Had the Senator not chosen that moment to stumble, such a move would have been child's play to thwart. As it was, Cade reacted instinctively, as only an enhanced Torlan-assisted mind was capable of, pulling back his arm – though a split second too slow. The gun went sailing across the concrete floor.

Franklin seized the opportunity to yell a warning to the men outside and to the pilot nearby. He was only permitted a partial scream. Cade's fist in Franklin's throat circumvented further warnings. His body was instantly upon the pilot, convincing him in no uncertain terms to cooperate as his thumb and forefinger found key pressure points in the man's throat.

Scooping up the satchel, Senator Blake followed Cade and the pilot up the accordion stairs into the jet's cabin. By then Franklin's men were running toward the commotion. Fortunately, the pilot was a very reasonable and pragmatic man. He hurriedly taxied the jet out of the hangar and onto the runway in record time, pulling away from the pursuing men and radioing for permission to takeoff in one combined motion.

"You're doing fine, Mr. Pilot," Kevin said, his vise-like grip still firmly engaged around the pilot's neck. "By the way, radio in a request

*Kevin L. Smith*

for a change of course and destination. We're headed for Houston to refuel. And just for the record, I am personally certified to fly a jet, so if you're not on your best behavior, neither the Senator nor will I have any aversion to throwing you out like so much extra cargo. Are we on the same wavelength, Mr. Pilot?"

"I read you loud and clear."

"Terrific," returned Kevin as he loosened his grip and sat back comfortably in one of the plushy padded recliners. "Now then, Senator. I recommend you take your shoes off, put your feet up, and relax. We've got quite a bit of topography to cover. Can I fix you a drink? I see a nice twelve-year-old single-malt over here."

"I think I'm going to need one, Kevin. That is, if I'm going to relax."

For some people, thought Kevin, it's easier said than done. Still, with a couple of doubles down his throat and the steady, monotonous hum of the turbines, Senator Blake finally showed signs of lassitude. Kevin didn't need the numbing effect of alcohol. He simply shut down his beta output, a talent he acquired inadvertently while doing research on certain bio-feedback effects. It was not until he had reached a semi-subliminal state of consciousness that he remembered...

"Didi!" he shouted out loud, startling the Senator. "Oh my gosh, in all the commotion, I forgot all about her!"

"Where is she now?" asked the Senator.

"That's just it, I'm not sure. She could still be back at the bank, or she could have been following close by all the way to the airport. I just don't know."

"You think she'll be all right?"

"I hope so, Senator, but either way there's not a whole lot we can do from up here. If we go back it wouldn't help, and it might make things worse. When we touch down in Houston I'll see if my uncle can help."

Blake didn't understand the part about the uncle, but he let the matter be; Kevin seemed to have things under control.

*Franklin* was still rubbing his neck when his underlings arrived.

"I'll get that piece of garbage that calls himself Cade, if it's the last

thing I do," he growled.

Just then he spotted something out of the corner of his eye, something that made him pause.

"Haven't I seen that jeep somewhere? Wait...its Cade's! After it!"

The order was a welcome one. It gave one and all a chance to forget, at least for the moment, their recent humiliation. Hurriedly three of them ran toward their own car, while the other two men fired shots at the target some one hundred and fifty yards away.

Didi, momentarily frozen by the gunshots, shook herself loose and rammed the jeep into gear, squealing the huge 'knobbies' as she pulled a doughnut in her scrambling to get clear and away. It was going to be a race now, she knew that for certain .

"How could I have been so careless?" she asked, not really expecting an answer. "Where can I go?"

Her mind raced, almost in unison with the jeep.

"Think, Didi, think!" There was no way that she could lose them, not in this top-heavy offroader.

"Only one chance," she thought to herself. "Only one place I can try. For what it's worth, a police station is as good as anything else. Now if I can only remember where I passed one."

It had been on the way, but where? She looked nervously into her rear-view mirror. They were gaining.

The hijacked Megatech jet arrived on the east coast at eight-fifteen p.m. eastern standard time. Megatech personnel were waiting anxiously for the jets arrival. The trouble was, the private jet never got to Washington. Instead, Blake and Kevin changed their destination at the last minute to Baltimore in order to avoid what they knew would be waiting for them. Touching down, they lost no time renting a car and coming into Washington the slower but safer route.

"What's our next move, Senator?" asked Kevin.

"First order of business, we've got to contact Conroe Harding, the secondary administration liaison to the President. Hopefully we can get an accelerated appointment with our chief executive."

"What are our chances of getting in to see him?"

*Kevin L. Smith*

"It's not a matter of *if*, but *when*," replied Blake. "The sooner we unload this bomb, the better off we'll be."

The two men said little else for the rest of the drive; each was content with the silence that was broken by the light drizzle falling over most of Maryland. Blake drove straight for his office and parked the sedan inside the underground parking lot.

"How are we doing, Senator?" asked a voice from behind them as they stepped out of the car.

Both men whirled around anxiously.

"Oh, it's you," said Blake with a sigh of relief.

"That's Jamison, our security guard," continued the Senator.

Blake, and even Cade, although to a lesser extent, was showing signs of fatigue and strain from the frenzied series of events.

"I'll be in my office, Jamison. Please call me up there if you notice anyone suspicious."

"Yes, sir, Senator."

Jamison, a retired sergeant on the local police force, relished the feeling of importance that the request engendered.

"By the way, Kevin, congratulations. You were right on the money. There was a computer disk in Braddock's deposit box. In all the excitement I forgot to mention it. I'm no computer whiz, but I think it looks like the kind that fits into the computer I keep in the office."

"That means we're just an elevator ride from the scoop of the decade," Kevin replied with a tired smile as the two men stopped into the elevator.

As the door was about to open to the tenth floor where Blake had his office, Kevin's advance warning went off inside his head.

"Stand back, Senator," Kevin said as he pushed Blake to the side of the elevator compartment.

When the doors finally opened, in the sluggish prolonged way common to elevators, neither man stepped out immediately. After pausing for a cautious moment Kevin finally did so, looking down each direction of the corridor. Motioning to the Senator, Kevin and Blake walked quietly down the carpeted hallway. Kevin turned to Blake.

"Here, you take this," he said, handing him the Smith & Wesson absconded from the Lear's cabin.

They were now at his office door, and Blake inserted his key into the door lock. As the locking mechanism disengaged and the door opened, two men jumped from behind the near corner of the corridor, guns poised. Instantly Kevin shoved the Senator into his office, with bullets muffled by silencers hitting the door directly where Blake had been standing. Cade himself deflected two of the bullets, but a third grazed his cheek as he let go of another one of his blades. Its target fell in one direction as Kevin was hurled back in the opposite path, straight into Blake's office doorway. The senator had by that time recovered enough to return fire, covering Kevin as he pulled him inside. So many things had gone wrong on this adventure, he thought. It was as if someone upstairs was throwing loaded dice at him and everyone he touched.

In that brief instant, Blake's luck changed. One of the bullets he had fired wildly had struck the remaining assailant square in the head, directly above the left eye, leaving a gaping hole behind the ear as it exited. As for his sidekick, the four inches of steel had been equally as effective.

Looking down at Kevin, Blake was overjoyed to discover his friend was only superficially wounded, a reddish groove on the left side of his face as evidence of his near brush with death. The senator was breathing hard and feeling quite proud of himself as Kevin came to.

"How did we do?" Kevin asked, trying to focus in spite of his blurred vision.

"We're still in the running, my good friend. Here, drink this," said the Senator, as he handed Kevin a full shot glass. "Now is as good a time as any, don't you agree?"

"For the drink or to check the disk?" asked Cade good humouredly.

"Both!"

With a quick motion and a flip of the switch, the Senator entered the password and waited for the expected flow of information to spew forth on his computer screen. Sure enough, in a moment or two, the critical data began to fill the screen.

"I wouldn't have believed it," Blake mumbled without taking his eyes away from the screen. "Him of all people."

"What is it?" Kevin asked, choosing not to overwork his

*Kevin L. Smith*

recovery.

“Secretary of State Larkens, dyed in the wool sellout. Not only hooked into Megatech and its backers, but through him, there has been significant inroads to some kind of cooperative long-term association being established between Megatech and certain radical militant Arab organizations in the middle east. Look at that...dates, signatures, the whole mess...”

Blake’s voice trailed off.

After a pause, the Senator continued. “Well, I don’t know who’s going to handle this, but I’ll leave it up to the one who appointed him.”

Picking up the phone, Blake dialed Conroe Harding’s number. He was in luck.

“Hello?” Harding’s voice was unmistakable.

“Conroe, this is Senator Blake. How would you like to save the country, the President’s reputation, and put a big feather in your own cap at the same time?”

The senator listened for a moment.

“No.” Blake was clearly interrupting. “I’ve got to see the President in person. When? How’s yesterday sound? All right, I’m in my office; I’ll be waiting for your call....Fine, goodbye.”

Blake hung the phone.

“Now all we can do is wait.”

“Fine by me,” replied Cade, who had begun to feel the effects of the double shot of Wild Turkey.

And wait they did, for nearly an hour. Then the phone rang.

“Hello? Yes, Conroe, this is Blake... Yes, yes, I know I’ll never live it down if I don’t deliver...When? Yes, we’ll be waiting out in front of the building. Goodbye.”

Phone conversations always had a jerky, cryptic quality when one only heard one side.

“What’s the score?” Cade asked when Blake put down the receiver.

“Well, we’re on our way. One of the limousines in the executive fleet will be coming by in half an hour to pick us up and shuttle us to the White House.”

“Since we don’t know what we might run into on the way, I’d

recommend we get going right now. We can wait downstairs as easily as we can up here, Senator.”

Kevin was feeling better and his vision had stabilized.

“Are you certain you’re up to it?” the Senator asked. “If you’re not, it’s okay. I think I can manage the last leg, Kevin. Thanks to you I’m still alive to try.”

“Are you crazy?” replied Kevin. “That would be like reading an Agatha Christie book and then leaving out the last chapter. No, I’ve come this far, Senator. I think I’ll play out the last hand.”

Getting up from the couch, Kevin put down his glass.

“Let’s go my friend. We mustn’t keep our commander-in-chief waiting.”

As neither man felt particularly inclined to report the death of the operatives in the hallway, or even move them from where they fell, Kevin and Blake merely stepped gingerly over them and continued on their way.

“You know, Kevin,” Blake said as they started down the first flight of stairs in the emergency stairwell. “What ever happens from all this, I want you to know that it’s been a privilege to know and work along side you.”

“The same goes for me, Senator,” Cade replied.

The natural compatibility they each had felt for the other from the first meeting had over the last forty eight hours grown to a genuinely three-dimensional quality of closeness seldom felt by men for each other, even from lifetime associations.

The truth was that both men had strong compelling reasons for doing what they had done. Those same strong reasons gave each man his charted course, and each individual road, by force of circumstances, paralleled the other. What the two men shared was more than danger, more than common enemies. They both had deep inner goals; a gnawing, consuming, moral hunger that had to be satisfied. Had either man ignored that hunger it would have been as fatal as literal starvation, only slower. Each man knew it. Each sensed it in the other. Neither of them dared speak of this inner yearning, as if doing so would have exposed such high and lofty objectives to ridicule. Kevin and Blake were quite content to bear their mutual crosses silently, privately, yet all the while each saw the candle burning in the other’s eye.

*Kevin L. Smith*

The two men were now in the lobby of the office building, with fifteen minutes on their hands until the limousine would arrive.

"I suppose discretion dictates we stay inside, wouldn't you say, Kevin?"

"Senator, if they want you, they want you. If that means coming in after you, then that's what they'll do."

Just then, two figures emerged from the opposite end of the lobby where they apparently had been waiting for their prey like mountain lions at a watering hole. They knew it was just a matter of time before the potential victims would come to them. But these two "gentleman" were unlike any they had run into yet. Their appearance was more than just strange, they were like an unmatched pair of bookends.

"They must have run out of the ivy league set," thought Kevin.

One was short, with a slight, but wiry build, while the other was of enormous proportions.

"The mammoth fellow on the left must be seven feet tall," whispered the Senator.

Without pause or hesitation, the smaller of the two lunged at the Senator with all the fury of Bruce Lee, knocking the gun from Blake's hand before he knew what hit him. The second blow yielded Blake unconscious. With equal fervor, the martial arts technician plunged in Kevin's direction, while the massive human tree seemed content to stand back, letting his small friend do the incapacitating.

"No wonder. He's quite effective," thought Kevin.

His legs and arms moved with the blinding speed of a hummingbird's wings. The instant his assailant thrust himself forward, Kevin's Torlan-enhanced defenses automatically checked into overdrive. His own conscious senses detected nothing more than a blur as the oriental deathblow came up toward his face, intending to crush and ram the small bone in his nose up into Kevin's brain.

Kevin's subconscious mind broke the blurred movements down into a series of freeze-framed stills, channeling the pertinent data through the thousands of neural connections and instantly decided what to do. Cade's left hand reached up according to the intercept program it was given, and tripped the deadly wedged palm in mid air. The next moment belonged to Cade's own deliberate consciousness. With a sharp twist, Kevin broke the man's wrist, which was signaled



by a small snapping sound followed by a loud shriek of pain from his opponent. The undersized karate master stood back for a moment, apparently trying to decide whether to make another attempt or leave Cade's demise to his monstrous companion.

"Come on," Kevin jeered, "There are several other bones I'm sure we can find. Why stop now?"

The little man glared back, and then retreated. Kevin turned to face his associate, who had a blood-curdling, sadistic smile on his face – a smile that bespoke a love for violence. From the way the huge man moved toward him, Kevin knew his lightning reflexes would serve him little in a close-up struggle with the brute. He'd have to keep away from such close proximity.

The giant made his first lunge and Kevin sidestepped. He tried once more, but again Kevin slid out of his grasp at the last moment. The oversized brute began to realize some other approach would be needed. As if an invisible light bulb, albeit a small one, went off inside that massive head, the big man's eyes widened and he turned to the Senator lying on the floor. Reaching down, the brute held Blake's chin up with one arm while raising his other fist, readying himself to strike the Senator's skull. If that didn't lure Kevin, thought the giant, nothing would.

He was right. As the arm came down, Kevin stopped its downward progress with his own arm, or rather, with both arms. Like it or not, Kevin would have to beat him at his own game, or almost. At once, the catcher's glove like hands attached themselves to Kevin's neck, lifting his six foot two frame clear off the floor. He was immediately assaulted by a gagging sensation, to which Kevin fought back with the only real device he had left - pure, undiluted, adrenaline-charged anger. With both hands prying at the man's grip, his legs kicked fiercely at his opponent's groin, which Kevin hoped was also oversized. Then, with equal fervor, Kevin tore into the hulk's eye sockets with the vengeance of a she-bear.

This counter-attack lasted for seconds, before the giant loosened his grip. Just in time, for Kevin had begun to see black.

When his vision came back, he detected a movement off to his left that could only come from the little man with the crushed wrist. He was apparently ambidextrous, for in his left hand was a glistening

*Kevin L. Smith*

six-inch shank from a switchblade. As the organ-slicing projectile left the thrower's hand, it was everything Kevin could do to fight off the big thug and dodge the knife at the same time. Kevin did the only thing he could do. He dropped. The blade missed his neck by an inch, landing instead in the big man's chest. If a sore groin and clawed eyes could loosen one's hold over another, it was nothing when compared to what a six-inch knife imbedded to the hilt could do. Like a giant redwood felled by a power saw, the big man quivered for a moment and toppled over, a look of surprise frozen on his scar-laden face.

Without the luxury of savoring the victory, Kevin wheeled around in the direction of the knife thrower, only to see him scurrying down the corridor from which he came. Lifting the Senator up carefully, Kevin splashed some cold water from a nearby drinking fountain on his face.

"Where am I?" asked Blake, still dazed.

"You're just in time, Senator. Our ride has arrived."

"Kevin," muttered Blake as his memory returned, "you don't look any the worse for wear and tear, except perhaps for those big red welts on your neck. You're just like a cat, always landing on your feet. You know something?" asked Blake as his friend helped him into the armored limousine.

"What's that, Senator?"

"You remind me of one of those Swiss Army knives, the ones that have everything from scissors to can openers on them. They always seem to have whatever you need."

"Why, thank you, Senator, though I've had quite enough of knives for one day."

"Look, officer, I think someone is trying to kill me, and all I want is for you to take me to your police station. Is that too much to ask? Well, is it?" Didi asked desperately.

Seeing the patrol car had been a godsend, if only they would help.

"Do you see them now, Miss?" asked the older officer.

"Well, no...but that doesn't mean they're not close by. Please, officer, I'm begging you. If you can, just let me ride with you down to

your headquarters.”

“Okay, okay, lady. Whatever you say. Get in.”

In a matter of minutes the squad car carrying Didi pulled into the precinct station. Once again, Didi tried desperately to convince the uniform in front of her to let her stay in police custody.

“But lady, you can’t just stay here indefinitely. You’ve got to go home sometime.”

Desk Sergeant Slater was a prim and proper, shaved and shoeshine kind of guy. His reports were always the epitome of neatness and regulation, with every “i” dotted and every “t” crossed and every blank filled in. It didn’t sit well with this hallmark of orderliness to face a nearly hysterical young woman sitting hour after hour in front of him with no apparent concern other than some imaginary carload of killers. What any carload of killers would want with the likes of her was a question the Sergeant chose to leave to smarter men.

“Why don’t you just tell us where you live and we’ll escort you there. We’ll even patrol your neighborhood every hour on the hour. How’s that?”

“That’s impossible, officer. I don’t even live in Phoenix.”

“You don’t, eh? Well suppose you just tell us where you’re from, and where you’re staying.” He made no attempt to hide the growing irritation in his voice. When Didi informed him that she was just passing through and to please not send her to some hotel, Slater just stared back. Finally, it was Didi who broke the silence.

“What do I have to do to be allowed to stay here, Officer Slater, get arrested?”

“I’m afraid miss, that you’re more or less correct. Police stations are for police and alleged criminals.”

“Just answer one more question for me, Officer Slater.”

“Anything, especially if it will resolve this situation.” replied the Sergeant.

“Is assaulting an officer an arresting offense?”

“Yes, it is,” answered the Sergeant dryly.

“That’s all I wanted to know.”

With that, Didi planted her right fist firmly in Sergeant Slater’s left eye with all the gusto she could muster, knocking the surprised officer off his stool and onto the floor.

*Kevin L. Smith*

"Now, Sergeant, what say you just fill out your little old report and lock me up."

All the other police personnel stopped their numerous duties and stared down at the upended Sergeant breaking out into hysterical laughter.

"All right, lady," the Sergeant bellowed as he dusted himself off. "You want it, you got it."

Within fifteen minutes, Didi was behind bars, along with three other women of questionable character. There she stayed for the rest of the day and all of that night. Except for the draft, and the necessity of sharing a cot with a woman named Sally who reeked of cheap perfume, cheap booze, and cheap deodorant, it wasn't too terrible. At least she was alive, which wouldn't have been the case if she had remained outside.

The following morning Didi was formally charged with assaulting an officer and bail was set. As she had no money or any real desire to leave just yet, she was promptly returned to her cell.

All night Didi had stayed awake wondering what had happened to Kevin and the Senator. All she could do was wonder, and hope. The mental exercise had not only stolen her sleep but directed her attention away from her own troubles. Didi paced the floor of the oversized cell, and forced herself to think about her pursuers. Surely they wouldn't still be waiting for her after all this time...

"I wonder what the penalty is for slugging a desk sergeant," she thought out loud. "Why does life have to be so complicated at times?"

She spoke as if she was expecting a reply from the jail cell's walls.

"I'm afraid that's the curse of the twentieth century, young lady."

Didi turned abruptly.

"Who are you?" she asked, wondering silently whether this was some sneak attempt to get at her by the killers.

"I've been sent to un-complicate your complicated life. That is, if your name is Didi Macklin."

Didi stood for a moment, saying nothing, and just stared back at the gray haired gentleman in the Harris Tweed suit.

"Perhaps you'd better stay away from me, whoever you are."

The man might look harmless enough, but who could tell.

"You know, Miss Macklin, I must admit to a great deal of curiosity about you. Anyone who could have generated such a change in Master Kevin must be very special indeed."

At the drop of Kevin's name, Didi jerked to attention.

"What did you say?"

"Miss Macklin," the old man continued with genuine warmth in his voice, "I'm Kevin's uncle, Will Stockard. He spoke with me in Houston on his way to Washington. He told me of the possible trouble you might encounter, and asked me to do what I could to help you until he returned."

Didi was listening, but still suspicious. How could she be sure?

"Oh, I almost forgot," the old man paused. "In case my personal identification didn't convince you, he told me to remind you that you really do have, hmmm...here I'm forced to repeat his exact words...the softest lips and the hardest fried eggs he's ever tasted."

Stockard had barely finished when Didi, eyes brimming with tears, reached out to him through the iron bars.

"You really are his uncle! Oh, I'm so sorry, I mean for not believing. It's just...oh..." she could hardly get the words out.

"That's quite all right, young lady. You're nearly family now, and if you can't cry around family, who can you cry around?"

With that Stockard motioned to the guard, who unlocked the jail door and slid it open. The two embraced as if they had known each other for years.

"I'm beginning to understand what Kevin sees in you, Didi. Why, if I were thirty years younger myself...well, never mind. Shall we get out of here?"

"How can I?" she sobbed. "I hit an officer last night. I think they call it a felony, or something."

"It's all been taken care of, my dear," said Stockard, with a hint of pride in his voice. "Why do you think Kevin asked his uncle of all people?"

As the girl and the old man stepped out of the building and into the crisp fresh air of an Arizona autumn morning, Didi froze in her tracks. Ten men in three-piece suits armed with barely concealed

*Kevin L. Smith*

shoulder holsters stood waiting. "Don't be alarmed, my dear. They're with me, or, shall I say, with us. With them along I don't think we'll be harmed."

With her heart out of her throat and safely back where it belonged, Didi took a deep breath. Somehow, she knew the worst was over. She was going to sleep well tonight. But then, she might not even wait that long.



g u t t e r





## CHAPTER TEN

*There* has always been a tremendous gap between what people say and what people mean, and, for that matter, what they do. Never has this fact been more evident than in the governmental political arenas. How often the average man on the street (if there really is one) picks up a newspaper, a Time magazine, or some other journal written for the public, and reads of this official or that official resigning from office? Perhaps health is given as a reason. Perhaps it is a desire to spend time with family, or to pursue some private hobby, or even write a book. The list of viable explanations is endless, and many are even true.

Some, however, fall into that delightful category of “Cover Story”. Such was the case with Secretary of State Larkens. To the unknowing public, his sudden resignation was explained away as a difference of policy direction with the President. In a way that was true. The chief executive had no desire whatsoever to share his administration with someone of divided loyalties, not to mention his distaste for crass manipulation of the worst kind.

Naturally, both the President and his Secretary of State had one thing in common – a fierce desire to keep the entire matter confidential. The chief executive knew full well the political implications to his administration, should word ever leak of his syndicate-connected former secretary.

Consequently, there was no prosecution of Larkens, merely a disappearance from the public eye. For Megatech, however, there was a different story altogether. With the full weight of the FBI, CIA, and

*Kevin L. Smith*

US Customs bearing down on them, not to mention the SEC and IRS, the economic pressure was too much to bear. Within eighteen months, the giant conglomerate was selling its subsidiaries to pay off overdue loans that rivaled Chrysler's famous indebtedness. Only this time there would be no government bail out.

When the legal and financial dust settled, the corporate entity known as Megatech simply ceased to exist. Like the rats leaving a sinking ship, numerous government personnel formerly on Megatech's payroll turned states' evidence to avoid or lessen criminal liabilities for violations of their loyalty and security oaths. Similar to a giant domino game, the seemingly unending number of Megatech pieces came crashing down one upon the other. Some quietly committed suicide to avoid further humiliation.

At least that was the official cause of death for chairman of the board, Vincent Parelli. His secretary had walked in bright and early one morning only to find his boss slumped over his desk with a bullet hole in his head along with his cat which had died in a similar manner.

"*Darling*," Didi said to her husband of eighteen months. "Can I fix you anything? You've been hunched over that microscope all morning. You must be hungry."

"What's that? Oh, no, I'm fine, really. This chemical reaction I'm tinkering with is really intriguing. I think I'll stay on it for another couple of hours. Thanks anyway," he said without looking up.

Leaning over as if to show an interest in the slide, Didi blew in his ear instead.

"Have I told you I love you today?"

Kevin turned and planted a kiss on her lips.

"Only four or five times, but I'll let you know when you've got it right," he said with a grin.

"By the way," Didi remembered. "You received a very official letter in the mail today. Want me to open it?"

"Far be it from me to stifle your curiosity. Please do."

Didi did so, reading the first of the two documents.

"Why, isn't that nice!" she remarked, with genuine delight. "You've received a commendation for service to our government. The



President himself wants to present it to you at Camp David a week from Tuesday in a private ceremony. They want to know if you can make it. RSVP.”

Kevin didn't even look up.

“I don't know. We'll see.”

Clearly he wasn't impressed. Governmental functions seldom impressed him. Though admitting to a certain satisfaction with the government for the role it had played in crushing Megatech, Kevin still nurtured certain reservations for the bureaucratic albatross that he considered all governments to be.

“There's another letter, dear. This one looks even more important. There seems to be some new, official, confidential department the President has formed. They want to speak with you about it. A White House representative will be stopping by tomorrow at ten a.m. They request you be here to meet him.”

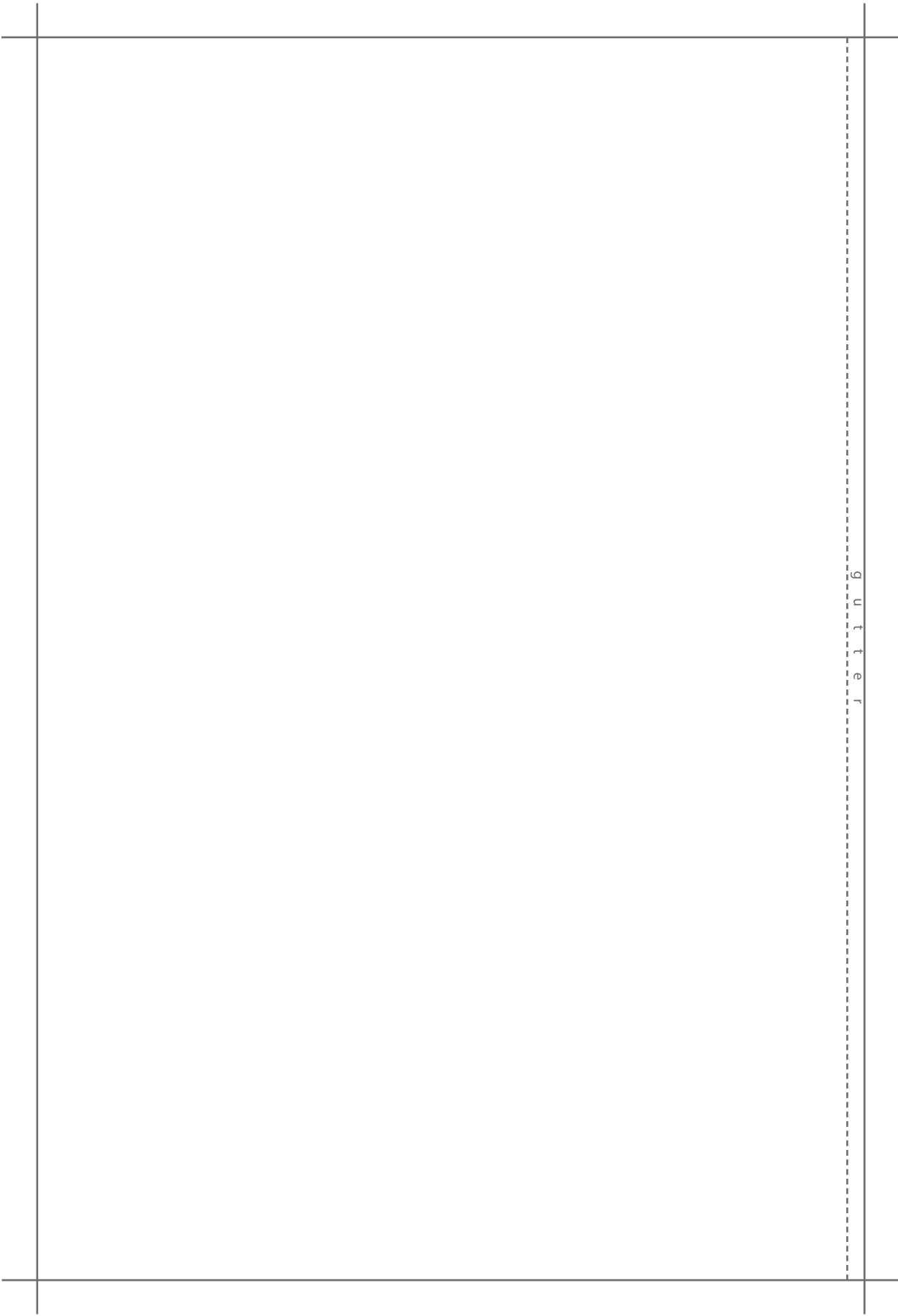
Finally Kevin did look up, lifting his eyes to the sunshine outside through his study's picture window, the study that really still belonged to his father. He felt that presence every time he occupied it.

Kevin had an idea of what the department was about. He also felt certain that he knew what they wanted from him. He had known such a day would come – a day when someone would knock at his door much like Senator Blake had done not so very long ago. Perhaps he would say yes to the man they sent. But if he did, it would be a conditional yes. There would be no mindless “my country, right or wrong” crap.

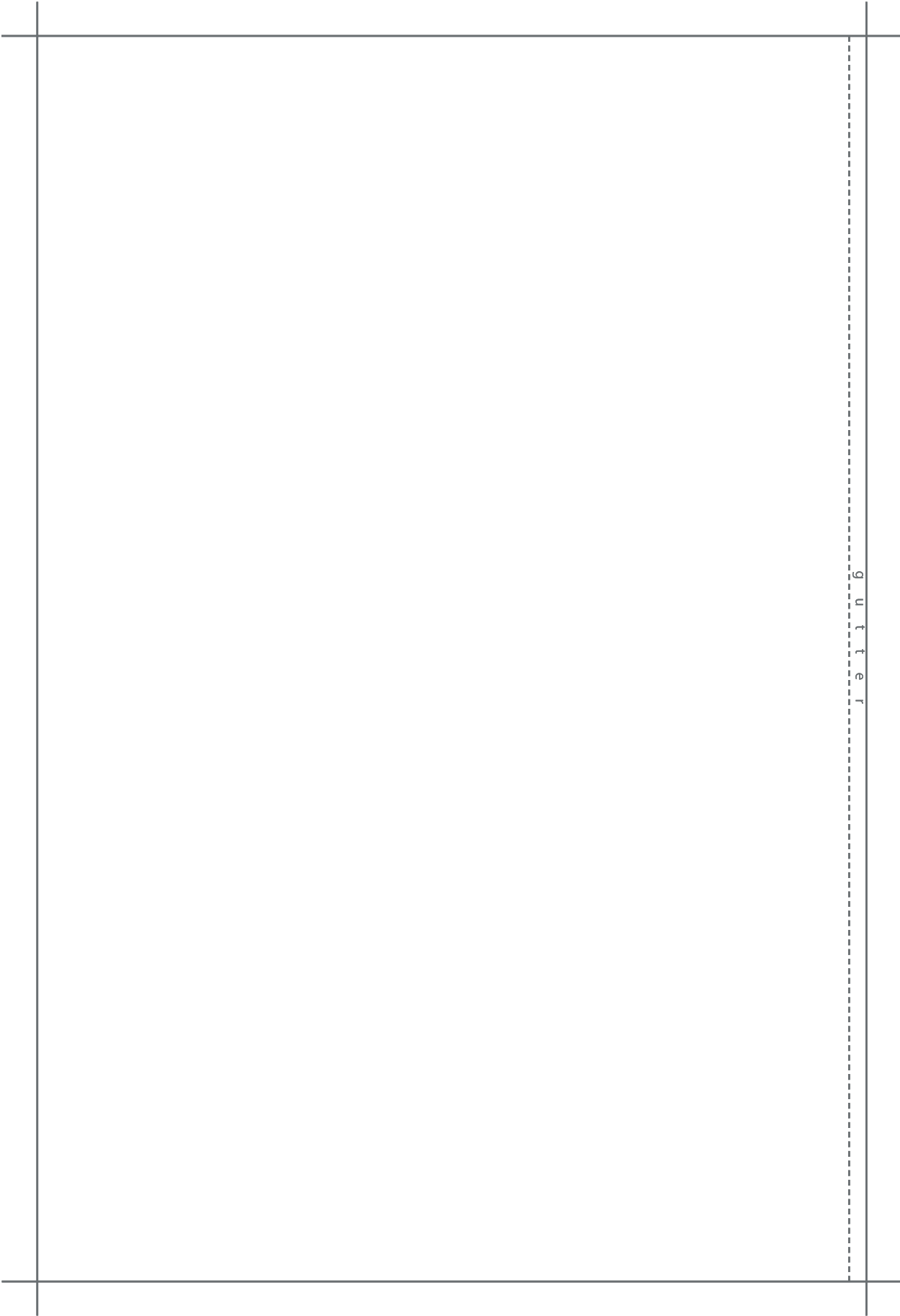
He would pick and choose. He would decide for himself what was worthy and what wasn't. After all, if he didn't owe it to himself, he owed it to the memory of his father.

That was his legacy, much more so than the millions left him. There weren't many people fortunate enough to know who they were, to come to grips with their own identity. Kevin still had a lot to learn about himself. It tended to consume his mental processes, if he let it. Yet, he wouldn't let it, and the secrets he longed to know would come in due time, for now his destiny was his own.

Or was it...



BOOK 3  
(1988)





## CHAPTER ONE

Well over a year had past since Kevin's friend Senator Blake had begged him to accept a position with his "company". It wasn't just any position with just any company. It was instead a responsible seat in an exclusive intelligence organization. Blake's success with regard to the Megatech affair had caused his political career to skyrocket, earning him an appointment to the position of director of the National Security Administration. It was a natural transition for him to follow with the expiration of his term in office as a senator. Of course, Blake realized that he deserved the credit for Megatech's downfall about as much as a bee deserves credit for a field of blooming flowers. He had participated, but without Kevin Cade he knew he would now be pushing up the proverbial daisies in that field.

However, Blake's desire to have Kevin on his team was motivated by much more than gratitude or friendship. Though it was true that the two had become close friends since their mission together, there was more to Blake's aspiration to acquire Kevin's skill sets. Blake had seen something special, something unusual in his friend while working with him. It wasn't that, as a United States senator, he hadn't seen specially trained men and women with amazing skills and abilities before. Kevin, however, was very different both in reflexes and intelligence. It was remarkable to see him in action. He even found Kevin's uncanny abilities and extreme calm under duress somewhat frightening. The bottom line was that he wanted Kevin on his team.

Yet, Kevin had repeatedly set his friend on the back burner

*Kevin L. Smith*

with respect to his offer. Constantly feigning responsibilities and obligations, he was in reality simply unsure of the direction he wanted to go with his life. In retrospect, he had used up almost half of what God offered the average man in years, and he was disillusioned with his accomplishments. He recalled a quote, without knowing the source, which indicated that people were remembered for what they did for others, not for what they did for themselves – or something to that effect. He certainly couldn't see how working for a clandestine government agency would effect any changes, help other people definitively, or provide him any fulfillment in life.

Kevin had never hidden the fact that he was dissatisfied with organized government. At best it was ineffectual, redundant, selfish, and even corrupt at some levels. It seemed that effecting any rudimentary change in the world he lived in was impossible. The world of the forest had been better. One knew where they stood in relation to all that was around him. Everything was taken at face value and it was brutally honest – but honest nonetheless.

Yet something in the back of his head, which had been there ever since he could remember and had never gone away, kept nagging him to do something, to become someone. It seemed just out of reach of his ability to discern. All Kevin could gather was that he was meant for something more and that the gift that had been given to him was not there to be wasted. One day he hoped to fully understand, to comprehend if he was what he was by accident, or by design – and if on purpose, then to what end?

In the meantime, Kevin did have something meaningful in his life now. As time had passed he had found himself more and more enthralled with the beauty that had become attached to him, and visa versa. Didi and he had been married for well over a year, and they were truly in love. Once you felt love, you really knew what it was, and it was growing at an exponential rate within him. He caught himself starting to calculate the complex mathematics that might resolve to an algorithm the explanation of his growing feelings – but stopped almost as quickly as he had started.

“What am I doing?” thought Kevin to himself. “Not very romantic or emotional, in fact not very human.”

The train of thought forced Kevin to recall the past years of his

life. It now seemed to him that it had been quite sterile in comparison to the average male. Of course he wasn't an average male, nor had he spent much time around other males or even people for that matter. This made for difficulty in making a comparative analysis, which was how the average male gauged and tuned his personality, his responses to life and who he would become in the long run.

Yet, things were changing with the advent of this beautiful young woman to his life. Didi was changing him and she wasn't even trying, and now he had acquired a new small charge to care for – Brittany. It was the reason they had flown to Tucson, Arizona in the first place.

Kevin's uncle, Will Stockard, had lost his only niece to Lymphoma. The devastating cancer had ravaged her quickly and with little warning. Her daughter was now alone, and old Will Stockard just wasn't the right man for the job of raising a twelve-year-old girl who was about to grow into a young woman. Kevin and Didi were the only other family the young girl had, despite the distance of the relationship.

Didi had not only insisted that they adopt Brittany, but she was genuinely excited about the prospect of deferred parenthood. There had been no problem in convincing the courts to grant temporary guardianship until adoption proceedings could be handled, as such things did take time. Time was good. Brittany would need time to grieve the loss of her mother, and it would give all parties an opportunity to adjust to the new circumstances. Kevin had reservations, but they were squelched by a strong sense of familial obligation. Brittany may be distant family, but she was family nonetheless, and blood was a powerful bond. Besides, he remembered only too well the time an eight year old boy had been ripped from his parents permanently. He could empathize with the child, to say the least.

Though Kevin was becoming more analytical about himself instead of the environment around him, he found that his self-indulgence would have to now be subordinated to more important things and people. Besides, he told himself, he could handle whatever life threw at him.

Who really cared anyway, he thought to himself. All I really care about is here – his wife and a young girl that needed a family. If all went well he and Didi would eventually make her their daughter. It felt disconcerting to Kevin to imagine Brittany as his daughter, but he

*Kevin L. Smith*

knew he would get used to it eventually.

Brittany was in the seat across the aisle quietly reading a magazine that they had purchased for her at the airport gift shop before boarding the airplane while Didi was curled up in her seat. She was asleep, sitting next to him in first class on a Macdonald-Douglas MD80 flying from Tucson, Arizona to Seattle, Washington's Seatac airport. The plan was to have some time alone at their Puget Sound waterfront home. It would be good for them as a new family to become acquainted with one another. Kevin had met Brittany and her mother before on several occasions, but their relationship had been far from intimate. He knew Brittany would need some time not only to get over the loss of her mother but to get used to a new family environment. Besides, Kevin thought to himself, he was always relaxed when he was near the forests and trees – like those surrounding his property and like those that had surrounded him as he had grown up alone in the forest. Yet, even then he had not been completely alone. There had been a companion, a bear, a friend. He missed that piece of his family. He wished he could go back and find that friend again. He had vowed he would try someday, but for now he had a new family, a beloved wife and a daughter that needed him. Some time together alone would be just what the old country doctor had ordered.

Kevin was staring at his sleeping beauty when it struck him like a lightning bolt – literally. His vision flashed and everything went momentarily white, then darkness, then gradually his sight returned. Yet the pain in his head persisted, refusing to vanish as readily as the light that had left him sightless. Something in his brain seemed to be screaming for attention. Instinctively, Kevin leapt from his seat and took a census of all that was around him. Everything was as it should have been, quiet and normal...except for him.

Brittany was staring at Kevin while Didi was startled out of her slumber. Her attention was now fully directed on Cade.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"Something is wrong. I'm getting one of those feelings. That might not seem so unusual, but this time it's different. It's like nothing I've ever felt before. I need to concentrate for a moment."

"What can I do to help?" Didi asked as Cade sat back in the plush seat he had just extricated himself from.



"Nothing, you just sit there and look beautiful. It's okay. Something is going on and I just don't understand...yet."

Didi disliked the patronizing comment, but instinctively knew better than to vocalize her feeling at this particular moment. Instead, she watched Kevin worriedly as he closed his eyes and allowed a slight frown to form across his lips. He recalled and implemented a simple biofeedback technique that helped him to clear his mind and calm his body. Didi remained still and silent as she continued to watch him anxiously.

Minutes later Kevin opened his eyes, his face almost expressionless, and he turned to Didi. Her worried countenance now transformed itself into one of interest, yet still she was silent. His head continued to ache as he turned and motioned to the flight attendant, who had been keeping an attentive eye on him since his outburst. He requested a scotch on ice and some aspirin before turning his full attention back to his companions to ask if they wanted anything. Brittany had returned to her magazine and Didi waved the stewardess off politely, who went away to procure the requested beverage and medicine.

"Didi," began Kevin confusedly, "someone or something is trying to contact me. The voice or pattern...whatever it is...seems almost familiar to me. I don't know who it is or why they're trying to reach me, but I need to find out. I hope you don't mind, but we're going to have to delay Seattle for a little while. I promise to make it up to you and Brittany later."

No sooner had Kevin, Didi, and Brittany disembarked than they headed for the ticket desk at the airport and booked a flight to San Diego, California. While they waited for their Alaska Airlines flight, Cade called the yacht maintenance company that cared for the ProSport 2860 twin diesel sport fisher berthed at his Coronado Cays home slip in San Diego, and instructed them to prepare and fuel the boat. Cade enjoyed fishing the bountiful Southern California waters for tuna and yellowtail from time to time. He also relished scuba diving in the intriguing kelp forests that graced the San Diego coastline so plentifully. That meant the boat would have the necessary underwater gear on board and be ready for what he knew he had to do, or find, or...maybe he didn't know. However, barring unforeseen

*Kevin L. Smith*

circumstances, he'd soon find out.

Four hours of waiting for the flight to San Diego seemed like an eternity, and Kevin couldn't help but feel a sense of urgency. Nothing could have been closer to the truth.

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## CHAPTER TWO

The sleek hulled craft Kevin Cade kept berthed at his San Diego home for occasional fishing or diving adventures was truly unique. With its black and gold fish-spotting tower and running leopard painted on each side, she stood out like a beautiful woman at a construction site. The engineering was what made her truly special. The catamaran styled water craft was capable of cruising at well over thirty knots while using very little fuel. The twin hull design afforded a stability in rough seas that was unparalleled.

Kevin had affectionately named the vessel Relentless, which tended to match his personality. As it tore through the two-foot swells which were lazily rolling toward the coastline Kevin turned around for a moment to gaze upon the receding cliffs that identified the end of Point Loma and the lighthouse marking the entrance to San Diego Bay. He was transfixed by the simple beauty of the line of land and sky disappearing into the mists of coastal vapor as his boat left an elongated trail of wake behind him. His course would take him to an isolated location almost one hundred miles straight out to sea, identified on marine navigation charts as the Cortez Banks. Though so far from the coast the bank of underwater land mounded up to the point where, at one spot called Bishops Rock, the ocean was only a few feet deep.

Kevin still didn't know why he needed to get there. What he did know was that there was no time to spare. He felt an underlying need for urgency that demanded that he get somewhere fast! It was that very lack of information that had motivated Cade to insist that Didi

*Kevin L. Smith*

and Brittany remain behind at the luxurious house sitting on the bay side of Coronado Island. Didi had resisted strongly. She had a bad feeling about the whole situation and wanted to be there to back him up should the need arise. After all, she *had* saved his life once before at a critical time! But reluctantly she had been forced to concede to Kevin's will and reason on the matter, and had relegated herself to waiting – something that neither appealed to her gut instincts nor her sense of adventure.

Kevin had been cruising at a steady twenty-six knots for just over four hours when he noticed small breaking waves in the distance ahead. A glance at the color GPS before him relayed the fact that he was rapidly approaching the location that he was sure was his intended destination: Bishops Rock.

After anchoring the boat, Kevin began donning the scuba equipment that had been placed aboard for him beginning with his seven-mil nylon two wet suit. It may have been a warm summer day but the water was still cold – in the mid sixties at the surface – and even colder at greater depths. The suit would not only insulate Cade from the chilly environment thereby preventing hypothermia, but would also provide protection from rocks and growth he would potentially encounter. The well-designed gear went on easily, comfortably, and quickly. Kevin felt aptly prepared to enter the foreign world of the watery deep. After checking the console which hung to his side like a lazy octopus arm he was satisfied that he had a full tank of air and that the computer, which measured depth, time, and any other factors necessary for monitoring the residual nitrogen in his blood, was working perfectly. He seated himself on the gunwale of the boat placing his hand on his facemask to prevent loss and then lay gently back, rolling easily into the cold blue ocean.

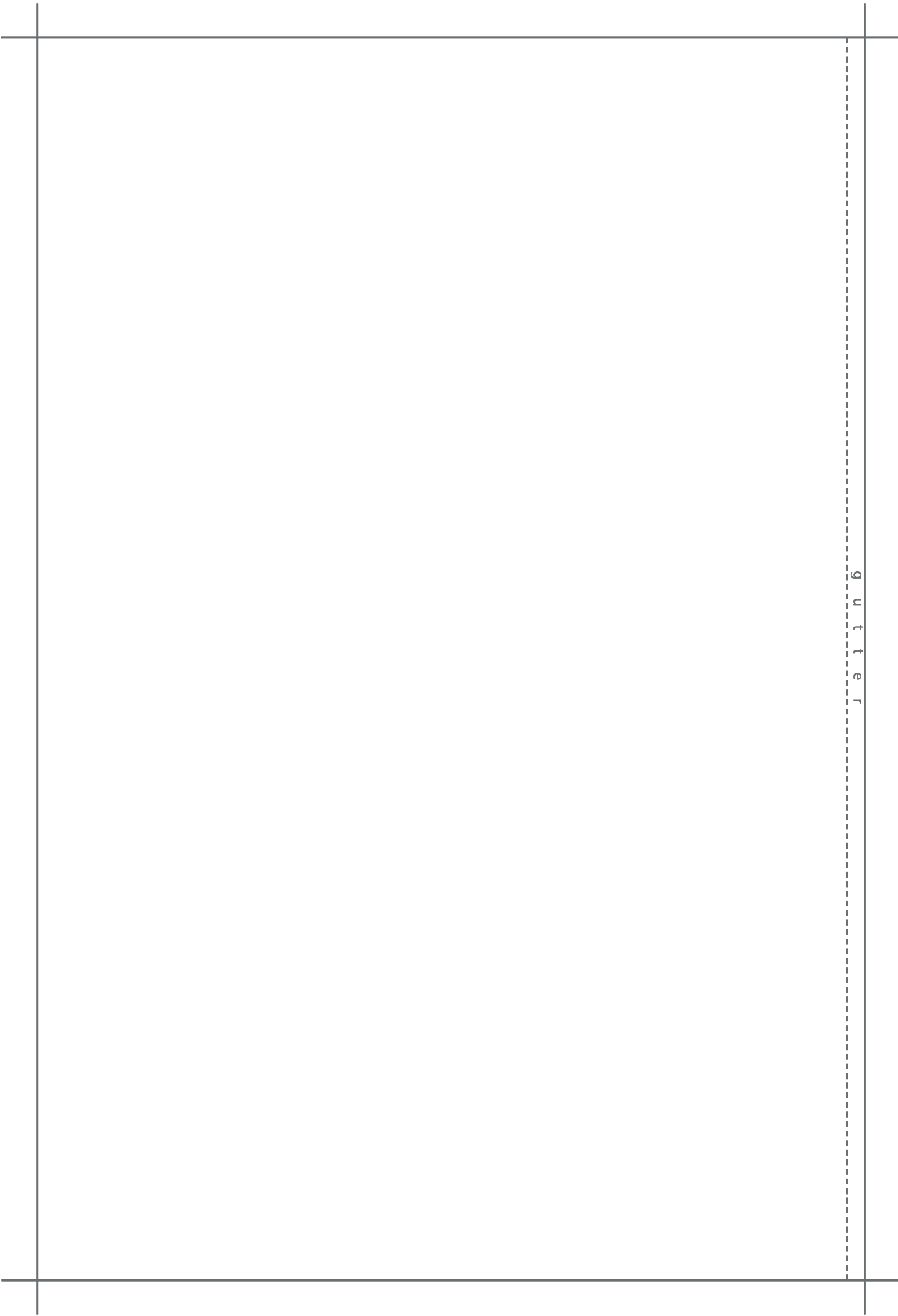
A release of confined air in his buoyancy compensator allowed Kevin to begin his decent into the watery depths. Strands of feathery kelp reached tenaciously for Kevin's scuba gear, occasionally snagging a component as if desiring to strip him of his equipment, but a small adjustment was all that was needed for Kevin to free himself each time, and he continued to maneuver down and east of the high spot he had anchored on. Cade was unable to identify what directed him, but he felt secure and confident in the leading. A quick glance at his depth

gauge confirmed what he was feeling as the water became colder and darker; he was now below one hundred feet. Kevin reminded himself that below this depth a diver using a standard air mixture would begin to feel the effects of nitrogen narcosis, an effect similar to overindulging in alcohol. Even being aware of the problem wouldn't prevent it, so as Kevin descended and began to feel a déjà vu memory he wasn't sure it was real. Recollections came flooding back of a time when an eight-year-old boy had been lost in the wilderness and threatened by the elements. He remembered, as if it were yesterday, finding a cave entrance camouflaged by, what could best be described as, a holographic barrier. Why this memory, and why now? Kevin concentrated, trying without success to negate the effects of too much nitrogen being rushed to his brain by his blood.

The water surrounding Kevin was cold yet clear. His suit was compressed due to the depth and he quickly settled to the bottom of the sea, which stirred up some of the fine silt that was settled on the ocean floor. Kevin took a moment to compose himself and allow the turbid water to clear. A glance in all directions revealed a flat, sandy, underwater prairie save one. In the distance was an underwater mound. Kevin headed for the protrusion. As he approached the rock reef he noticed that it was overly symmetric and seemingly artificial. He noted that there was no growth on it. In fact the entire area seemed devoid of sea life.

"I've either lost my mind or this is where I'm supposed to be," thought Cade. "Well, here goes nothing!"

And Kevin Cade swam at and directly into the apparently solid face of the unnatural formation.





## CHAPTER THREE

Kevin now knew how Jonah must have felt after being spat from the mouth of the biblical giant fish. He had entered the invisible door only to be thrown forcibly forward into a dry, dank, poorly lit chamber that resembled a crudely handmade grotto. As he picked himself up from the semi-smooth floor, he began to slowly extricate himself from the restrictive pieces of his scuba gear. He turned around to examine the shimmering translucent wall of free-standing water that he had just passed through, amazed for a second time in his life at whatever technology had produced the unique force field. Fascinated he touched it and received a mild shock as an exchange for his query. He shifted his attention to the chamber he had found. The ten-foot by twenty-foot room reminded him of his childhood shelter and its mysterious qualities.

He began a thorough examination of the empty walls. It took only a short time to discover the recessed opening in the far wall opposite the sparkling entrance to the grotto. This time, however, there was no cylinder to access his mind. Kevin found only a simple glossy panel with one symbol on it and the shape of a palm emblazoned on the surface just like the panel that had allowed ingress to his wilderness cave. Without hesitation Kevin placed his palm directly on the plate eliciting a bright glow from the panel. Moments later he was astonished to see what appeared to be a simple circular doorway or portal suspended in the middle of the grotto. The opening measured approximately six feet in diameter and there were no borders, or screens, no mechanisms

*Kevin L. Smith*

at all; just what looked to Cade like an opening on one side and a mirror on the back. Kevin peered through the opening and could clearly see some form of advanced complex. His initial shock at seeing the portal appear transformed itself into curiosity, and there was the strong mental pull. He knew he was where he needed to be, but still didn't know why.

Cade spoke out loud more as a source of bolstering self assurance than as an attempt to communicate, "Well, in for a penny, in for a pound."

He thought momentarily about the origin of the silly phrase he had just uttered, then without further hesitation stepped into and through the portal.

"Welcome to Et'Lantis, Kevin Cade. I am pleased to have you here in person after all these years of indirect contact. You appear in person exactly as I pictured you in my mind."

The voice was distinctly feminine and seemed to be projected from all around. Kevin could only guess that there were speakers flush mounted into the walls, or panels of the intricately designed, futuristic looking room.

"Who, what, and where?" responded Cade, "And that's just the beginning of my questions for you young lady, wherever you are."

"Patience please," the voice returned, "all this and more will be shared with you shortly. But first there is a critical need to utilize our time wisely. We have been waiting for you for some time now, and time is something we have very little of. If you will follow the directional lights in the floor I will lead you to the bridge."

Kevin's eyebrows crawled up his forehead as his lips silently mouthed in question form the word he had just heard, "Bridge?"

A door opened leading to a vast corridor of seemingly endless rows of ultra-modern beams and panels. The lights that appeared seemed laminated into the floor and invisible until they came on. They began flashing in a specific direction, which Cade followed down a well lit hall that exhibited occasional doorways marked with numbers and letters. From time to time Kevin also saw panels and monitors that appeared active. The lights eventually lead to what appeared to be an elevator door that quickly opened allowing access and then closed behind him. Movement was barely perceptible, but the indicator panel



imbedded in the wall to one side hinted that the transportation device was moving rapidly in multiple directions.

The small room came to a halt after a few moments and the doors opened before Kevin to reveal a vast circular room that was easily the size of a small banquet hall. But what he beheld was a room less designed for entertainment and more designed for science. However, the technology represented in this "bridge" was of a science that Kevin Cade had never had the opportunity to familiarize himself with. The esthetically-pleasing, deeply curved room contained many symmetrically placed consoles throughout, with futuristic ergo-metrically designed chairs before the consoles. The button-less console panels appeared to be fashioned from glass, or something similar, with symbols and schematics flashing across them and in a constant state of flux. Against the curved walls were more consoles equipped with flat panel screens of the same crystal material each displaying symbols and differing views suspended within the transparent screens. Most of the consoles in the spacious room were angled to allow the operators the ability to face a much larger theater size screen that appeared to be made up of the same material as the wall screens, except that this screen was as blank as a darkly tinted mirror.

In the exact center of the room, about twenty feet from where Kevin stood, sat two women at a console. Another woman stood behind them, looking down at the console as the two worked. When the elevator door closed behind Cade the woman who was standing turned quickly to face him. The attractive, young, athletically built woman allowed the fiery red hair that flowed freely from her head to follow her face around as she turned to look at Kevin with piercing electric green eyes. Her intent gaze studied him with, what seemed to Kevin was, much more than idle curiosity.

As she spoke her two companions glanced momentarily over their shoulder, revealing equally beautiful and youthful faces, and then they returned their attention to the activities at hand.

"I am Alleana. This is Chymere, and Aylueye, my crew. Are you Daedalus?"

Kevin knew the name from Greek mythology. It referred to a skilled artificer who had created a vast labyrinth for King Minos of Crete. The labyrinth was use to imprison the king's wife's son, Asterion,

*Kevin L. Smith*

the Minotaur. Daedalus was rewarded with imprisonment himself. He and his son were kept in a tower to prevent his knowledge of the labyrinth from ever reaching the public. However, being the cunning fabricator he was, Daedalus built for he and his son wings fashioned from feathers and wax with which to escape. After teaching his son, Icarus, to fly, Daedalus warned him not to fly too high else the heat of the sun might melt the wax of the wings, nor too low else the sea foam might wet the feathers causing them to fail to work. Icarus didn't heed the warnings and flew too close the sun, which resulted in his death.

But what Kevin didn't know was how it could in any way relate to him, so he began to respond negatively when the feminine voice he had heard earlier interceded again through hidden speakers, "He is!"

The voice then directed her attention toward Kevin.

"I am Aurora, the on-board quantatronic personality. You, Kevin Cade are aboard the vessel Et'Lantis, and you are Daedalus, the seedling prepared thousands of years ago for our people."

"Maybe I should sit down; something tells me there's a lot here to absorb. Let's start with..."

But Aurora interrupted Kevin before he could continue his line of questioning. Instead she offered an alternative.

"There is much you need to know and now that you are here it can be imparted to you directly. A Renok-Torlan, or Torlan for short, has been prepared for you. It will inform you of the details concerning our people, your purpose, and my existence."

Alleana had left momentarily through a side door and was now returning carrying a small cylindrical device, an object familiar to Kevin. It appeared to be the same type of cylinder that he had encountered in his cave habitat so many years before as a small boy.

"I've run into one of those before, what is it?" asked Cade recoiling ever so slightly as he recalled the effects associated with his contact with the alien device.

Aurora answered, "As I mentioned, it is a Renok-Torlan. It is a memory recorder and inserter. It will play back and insert thoughts and knowledge into your mind. The one you encountered years ago as a child was designed to give you certain skills and abilities that would help you survive and facilitate your training. That unit also linked you to me subliminally. It was designed to prepare you. The simple fact of

the matter is that a great need was anticipated thousands of years ago and the need has now become very real. You are the culmination of efforts to fill that need. An entire planet, a race of people, maybe even this planet needs you."

Aurora's revealing answer to Kevin's simple question took him completely by surprise. He didn't know how to respond.

All he could ask was, "How do you expect me to help? What can I do?"

Alleana laid out the plan, "You are aboard what Aurora tells me is a Citidel class spaceship. It is the first time I have ever seen anything like it. The fact is our people do not even know that it exists. But I can tell you that it is the most powerful ship I have ever seen. Our world, Lantis, is about to be attacked if that is not occurring as we speak. You and this ship are desperately needed. If we leave now we can be there in approximately seventy hours. Hopefully we will not be too late."

Kevin was stunned by the unexpected revelations and he was left not quite knowing how to respond. His mind was a blender of mixed thoughts and emotions including his past, these people and their ship. Then there was Didi and Brittany waiting for him.

Aurora's attempt to clarify matters intensified the weight upon his shoulders.

"Kevin Cade, you are Daedalus, the selected one. There have been potentials throughout time; however, there is no other at this time nor has any other matched the criteria as you have. In accord with my directives I am turning over full control of Et'Lantis to you. After you have used the Torlan I will be yours to command."

Alleana and her two shipmates exchanged shocked glances. Kevin noted that their expressions mimicked his as they turned to look at him. He had ventured here seeking closure to past innocuous questions. Granted, powerful mental forces had drawn him. He hadn't resisted though he believed he could have. But the answers that he was receiving were having an effect opposite to that which he had anticipated. Instead of lightening the mental load he had almost become used to carrying, he had just had the weight of the galaxy dumped upon his shoulders. And yet there was the tiniest hint of excitement, a sense of thrill coursing through him.

Alleana's entire countenance had changed somewhat. The air of

*Kevin L. Smith*

authority she displayed had dissolved and reconstituted itself in humble submission to the new titleholder of Et'Lantis.

The request was more pleading and less demand, "Daedalus..."

Kevin who despised formalities and ostentatious titles corrected her. "Please call me Kevin."

"Kevin Cade, please, your help and this ship are quite probably our only hope of survival. We have nothing that compares to the power of this ship in our fleet and our enemy is formidable I can assure you. We desperately require your assistance. Won't you help?"

Kevin had always had a soft spot for the damsel in distress, but this was different in so many ways.

"Aurora, tell me this; why me? Why not just take this ship and give it to the Lantians to use for their defense. What possible difference can I as one man make?"

The mind that controlled the great ship divulged the key that Kevin had waited for – the reason.

"The answer is simple Kevin. Our entire race is synthetic. We are biomechanical as opposed to bio-chemical like you. However we are not mere automatons."

Though stunned by the revelation that the women in his presence were mechanical in nature Kevin remained silent, allowing Aurora to continue.

"We emote, we have feelings and most of all we, like all sentient beings, want to survive. But what we lack is imagination, the ability to innovate. It is a unique quality inherent in beings of your nature and the nature of the Primarians. When they created us this ability was simply not there, there is no explanation. So we need you. There have been few like you during my watch, Kevin Cade. You are special. According to my criterion you have the perfect combination of alpha male instincts, together with a wide range of intelligence and adaptability, coupled with genuine selflessness and concern. The Primarians purposed that you would guide us, help us develop beyond stagnation, and in this case perhaps save us from extinction in the event of their demise."

"Stop it Aurora, I'm blushing," came Kevin's cynical retort.

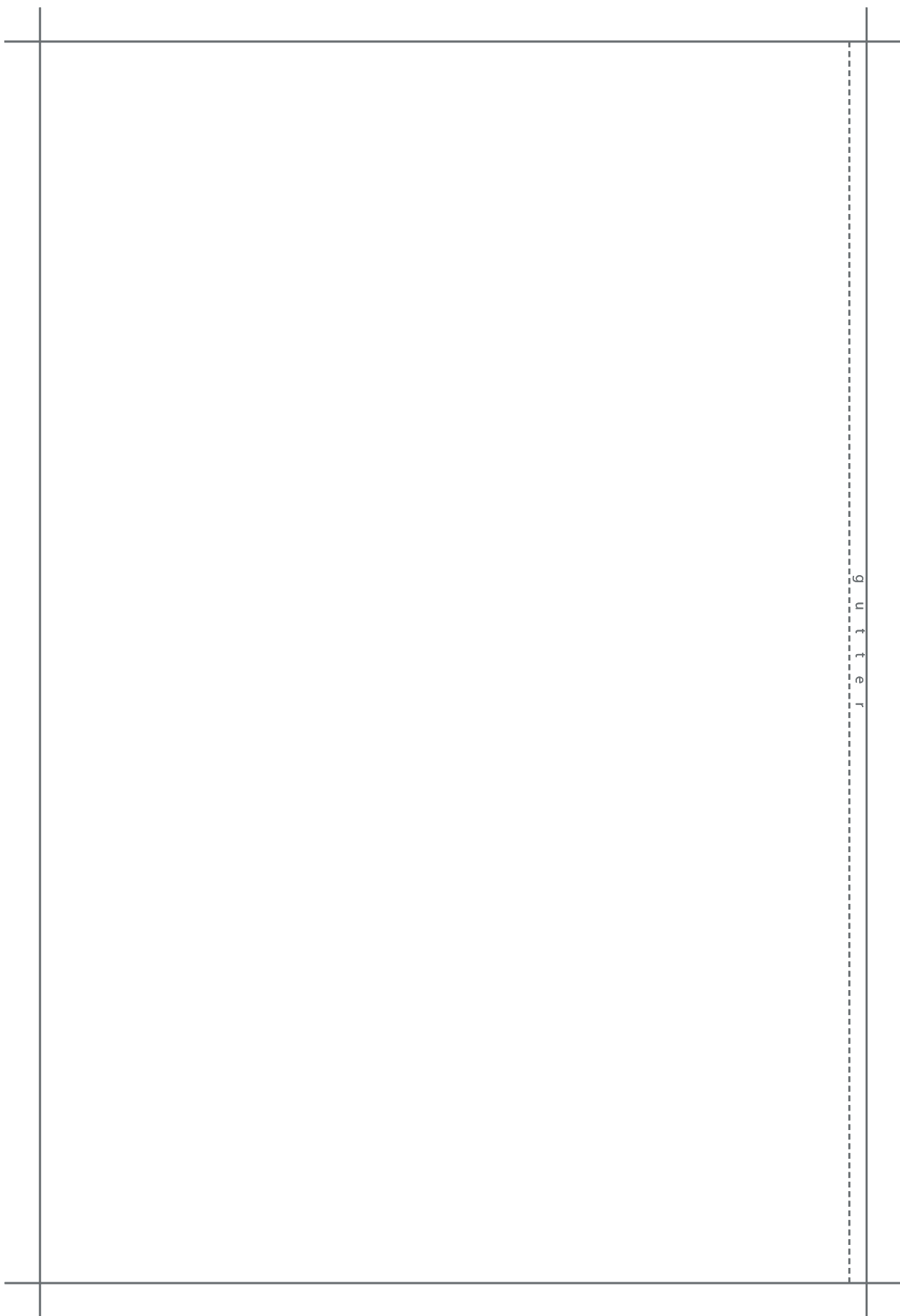
In actuality Kevin was not blushing. He knew that though extraordinary, what he had been told was simply the facts as they were known and unfolding. Though startling, all that he was learning was

beginning to make sense. Besides he doubted that Aurora was capable of insincere obsequiousness, or of being ingratiating in any way. He believed in his heart that the need was real, but still questioned his ability to fill that need or make any meaningful contribution to the problem at hand. Still he could try. The thought that he might be turning his back on people in need disturbed him.

Regardless, Kevin had always dreamed of going into space. The stars, the planets, even just the moon! It was all right there; almost close enough to touch. Many a night from his childhood alone in the wilderness to his adulthood Kevin had pondered the cosmos as he stared skyward contemplating the stars. Precious few had had the opportunity to leave the confines of Earth and go into space, and he had always wanted to be one of those few. Kevin had even applied to join NASA's astronaut training and preparation program at one time. He was still waiting; it seemed the list was long and exclusive indeed. The bottom line was this – he was looking at the chance of a lifetime, to fulfill his wildest dream and his destiny all at the same time and here it was. Besides if he could help in some way there might be great benefits in store for so many people. But what of Didi and Brittany? Although he anticipated being away from them for only a short period of time, who could know what might happen. He still owed them an explanation.

Kevin's mental deliberations had lasted only a few moments when he made up his mind.

"Alright, I'm in. We take the ship and try to save your people. But first I need to make a phone call."





## CHAPTER FOUR

*Aurora* had insured Kevin of an absolutely private and secure conversation with Didi. What she wasn't able to insure was Didi's reaction to Kevin's revelations. He described all that had transpired since their parting in San Diego and then outlined what had been purposed. Didi's response transformed itself from stunned amazement to resentment for having been left out coupled with fear over the prospect of losing the man she loved.

"We'll go with you!"

The statement was in reality a plea, but she knew the answer before it was even given.

"I wish I could take you, but it just isn't possible. Now listen, relax and don't worry about me. I'll be fine. I'll be back to you as quickly as possible. But this is something I have to do. Somehow it's all about why I am who I am, and I need to know the answer to that or I won't be any good to anybody, especially you two."

She knew to resign herself to the inevitable, and so responded with, "I love you Kevin, so be careful."

"I love you too, very much. And tell Brittany I'll bring her something special."

He meant every word of the statement. He concluded their conversation by supplying Didi with the latitude and longitude coordinates of the boat and instructions on retrieving it. He then signed off and made his way to the bridge. Walking, he remembered a time when he was eight-years-old. He remembered leaving with his father

*Kevin L. Smith*

on an adventure. As he entered the bridge he set aside the memory.

"Is everything ready? This bird hasn't exactly been run much lately. Being under sea water for a thousand years can't be good for the machinery."

Aurora responded before Alleana was able. "Et'Lantis is in perfect working order and we are ready. The ship is in full stealth mode, and course and portal points have been plotted. Estimated time till arrival is sixty eight point three hours."

"Okay then, let's light this candle."

Kevin felt the excitement mounting within himself at the prospect of leaving Earth for space and also felt a little guilty for leaving Didi. But if all went well he'd be back soon. If all went well!

The large theater style screen in the fore section of the bridge brightened, as did several of the smaller screens to either side of the main viewer. It showed the murky underwater depths, while several of the other smaller screens depicted various tactical views of Et'Lantis' position relative to her surroundings and her position on Earth. Indicators and displays all around the bridge were now coming alive with pertinent data as the tremendous vessel vibrated almost imperceptibly. A low reverberating hum began to build from deep within the ship. Kevin could feel the movement, the shiver as the ship extricated itself from its submarine cradle. The water surrounding them quickly became turbid leaving nothing visible on the main monitor. However, the tactical displays indicated that they had risen from the ocean floor and were slowly climbing to the surface. Kevin could now detect the increased throbbing of the engines as they applied more force against the Earth's gravity. He walked over to a monitor screen set into the port side wall that displayed an exact schematic or representation of Et'Lantis with all her various decks and sections. Mentally he calculated the size based on a ratio of decks and rooms he had seen to decks and rooms represented in the schematic and was shocked with his conclusion.

"Just how big is this ship Aurora?" Cade asked.

"Your calculations are very close Kevin, I measure two point two miles in length at my longest point and point six miles wide at my engine nacelles," was her response after accessing his deduction directly from his mind.

Kevin didn't know whether to be more surprised by the immense



dimensions of the vessel that was just breaking the surface of the waters around it or the fact that Aurora could so easily extract his thoughts from his mind without his knowing.

"So you can just read my mind anytime?"

"We have been linked for a long time, Kevin," explained Aurora. "It is common as well as practical for Lantians to transfer data and information mentally. Not only does it save much time but many can be reached simultaneously. Soon you will have this ability as well."

Kevin was unsure as to what that meant, but he decided to file it with the other stack of questions reserved for a time when he didn't mind if Aurora became loquacious. For now his attention was riveted to the forward screen which showed the bright sunny California day along with a horizon of sparkling bluish purple water which had been disturbed by Et'Lantis rising from it.

Kevin voiced a concern to Alleana, "Can we be seen?"

"Only by someone close, and then only vaguely. However we are invisible to all forms of electronic surveillance."

Outside, the hovering ships great engines and graviton generators could be heard by fleeing sea gulls and other waterfowl as they droned powerfully. The ocean, though no longer disturbed by the rising of the ship from the depths, began quivering tumultuously as the expenditure of power dramatically increased. A shift in that power induced forward momentum, slowly at first, but speed and altitude were increasing at a geometric rate. The main view panel showed the breathtaking scene of the ocean's horizon sinking to the bottom of the screen as the ship climbed ever upward into the clear blue sky.

"Don't I get a special chair or something," chided Kevin lightheartedly as he stared transfixed at the spectacle of Earth shrinking below him.

"We will be leaving Earth atmosphere momentarily. If you require a special chair thereafter one will be provided for you. However I would recommend that first you use a portion of our travel time to rest in an RGS chamber. Alleana will attend to you," said Aurora.

Kevin started to question the quantatronic mind but decided against it as the view before him faded from light to dark velvety black with brilliant diamond like spots of light twinkling on the upper half of the screen before him. His legs involuntarily tingled slightly, as

*Kevin L. Smith*

they did whenever he viewed from heights. The curved surface of the diminishing Earth now filled only a small portion of the lower part of the screen.

Alleana was at Kevin's side before he was able to pull his gaze from the sight of space. He had made it. He was here. And not just for an orbit like the rich, adrenaline junkies who were planning to pay ridiculous amounts of money to fly in a Russian rocket for a few hours above the Earth's atmosphere just to return with a few Polaroid snap shots and a flight jacket. This wasn't going to be a trip to the moon and back. He was going into real space, to another planet, another world. He was the first! Kevin's excited thought process did an about face as Alleana approached and he shifted his attention to her. She directed him toward one of the elevators on the bridge; a Torlan glowing with anticipation was cradled in her arms.

"Alleana, what is an RGS... or do I even want to know?" asked Kevin as he followed the girl.

"The Primarians had a propensity for acronyms. RGS stands for Recombinant Gene Sequencer. Humans such as you use them to offset the effects of gene degradation. As I understand it, the human body and mind are basically designed to function perpetually. However the DNA in your body degrades a little after each replication, which takes place approximately once each seven years. The degradation advances at a geometric rate after each duplication resulting in body and mind failure after sixty to seventy years. The RGS simply extracts sample DNA from key parts of the body and does a comparative analysis. It then interpolates genetic data and reinserts the repaired material into key physiological locations. Your body does the rest with its standard regeneration, however this time with non-flawed DNA code."

"That sounds like a description of the fountain of youth," said Kevin as they continued making their way through well lit corridors. "What can I expect it to do to me?"

"I am not sure. I have never met a Primarian or human, therefore I am not familiar with the effects personally. But I understand that you will feel positive effects quite rapidly. The Primarians believed that the RGS could cure health defects, correct physical aberrations, and even extend life perhaps a hundred fold. They did not live long enough to prove that part though."

"And the Torlan you have there; I gather that will bring me up to speed with current events."

"Yes," replied Alleana. "It will download information into your mind while you sleep giving you an in-depth briefing of the situation, and pertinent data on our people, technology, and your new ship. When you awake you should be quite familiar with your surroundings."

Kevin liked the sound of that, but restrained himself from comment. He sensed the hesitation in Alleana's voice and knew what she purposed for the vessel. He knew he couldn't imagine the emotions coursing through her – he could hardly comprehend the existence of the artificial life form at all, she seemed so human! Perhaps she was just human, simply in another form.

"Actually that's all any human is," thought Kevin as he recalled his study of neuro-transmitters in the brain. "An electric machine with organic compounds."

His thoughts trailed off as they had arrived at a door marked RGS in black letters on a silver plaque just over the door. As they approached, the door slid silently aside to allow access. The two entered an elegant, dimly-lit room with furnishings that reminded Kevin of a cross between a hotel suite and a luxury conference room. A comfortable-looking single bed was placed off to one side of the room hardly appearing like the machination that Kevin had expected. He was instantly reminded that it had been some time since he had slept and his weariness was certainly taking a toll.

"Is that the sequencer?" Kevin asked. "What am I supposed to do now?"

Wordlessly, Alleana directed him to the bed and indicated that he should lie down. Kevin peeled off the remainder of the wetsuit that he had been wearing since his arrival, leaving on his swimsuit and the chest guard he wore beneath the neoprene diving garb setting it aside, and laid down the bed. Naturally he guessed that he should also relax.

Alleana then touched a crystal panel next the bed activating the screen within. After inputting several instructions Alleana placed the Torlan into a receptacle, which caused it to glow even brighter than before. The humming that it now emitted was almost indistinguishable as the light pulsed ever so faintly. Memories of a time as a small child

*Kevin L. Smith*

in a wilderness cave came flooding back.

“Is this going to hurt?”

Without answering his question Alleana then activated a large green symbol with her touch and Kevin Cade felt himself being pulled off into a deep unconscious sleep.



g u t t e r



## CHAPTER FIVE

*Tarala* had just appeared in the council room as Bren walked in hurriedly. The room was thick with the tension that all the council members were feeling as news and reports of advancing enemy positions filtered in to them from various outposts and scout ships. Systematically, all the outlying reconnaissance that Lantis had was being eliminated. Literally hundreds of ships were closing a net around the world as they moved forward, one calculating step after another.

"We have lost our two outposts on Drendil, and that is our closest neighboring planet. There can be no doubt now as to the intentions of this enemy. When they finish with us there will be nothing left," reported *Tarala* in a harried voice. "They are currently setting up positions around our entire globe, evidently to cut off any escape."

"Have we any report from the ship sent to Terra?" asked Bren.

"None," was the expected reply.

Anock became the cool voice of reason at that moment. "Well if their intentions are obvious, and we have no further alternatives then I say let's all get on a ship and go do as much damage as possible before they take what is ours. I don't feel that they should have our world without our putting up some kind of a resistance. Let's make them earn it."

The council members were visibly stirred. They were still frightened, but a level of anger had produced a modicum of resolve that wanted to do something, anything but just sit and take what these interlopers were preparing to dish out. All agreed to doorway



*Kevin L. Smith*

to a different ship each, and offer command and moral support. They weren't going down without a fight!

The Lantians had succeeded in recalling a total of eighty-three fully armed ships of various classes. Lantian ships had never really been designed for warfare. The Lantians were a peaceful people who had not known enemies since the Primarians had fought the "Others" over eighteen hundred years past. In fact, except for Terra and the "Others", the Lantians hadn't even met any different species. So defense had been a low priority, an error Bren sorely wished he had never made.

However, the eighty-three ships they had were armed as heavily as they could be, and they had taken up stations in groups of twenty at four globe points to optimize a defense. Finally, the last three vessels were dispatched to Cariel, Lantis' largest moon, to act as watch and possibly attack in a flank position. Bren had worked the strategy out with Cheri and Anock. He knew it wasn't a complex plan promising any kind of potential victory, but it seemed practical and logical based on the resources at hand. They would do their best to retaliate, maybe even hold out for a miracle. Lantians didn't really attach themselves to the notion of miracles, other than those that occurred in nature and science, but Bren decided that today was the day for him to start.

Ship assignments had been given to all the council members, and most had already left to collect some personal items and say goodbyes before taking a doorway to their destinations. Bren and Tarala were left to themselves in the council room.

"Tarala, have I told you that I love you recently?" asked Bren pensively.

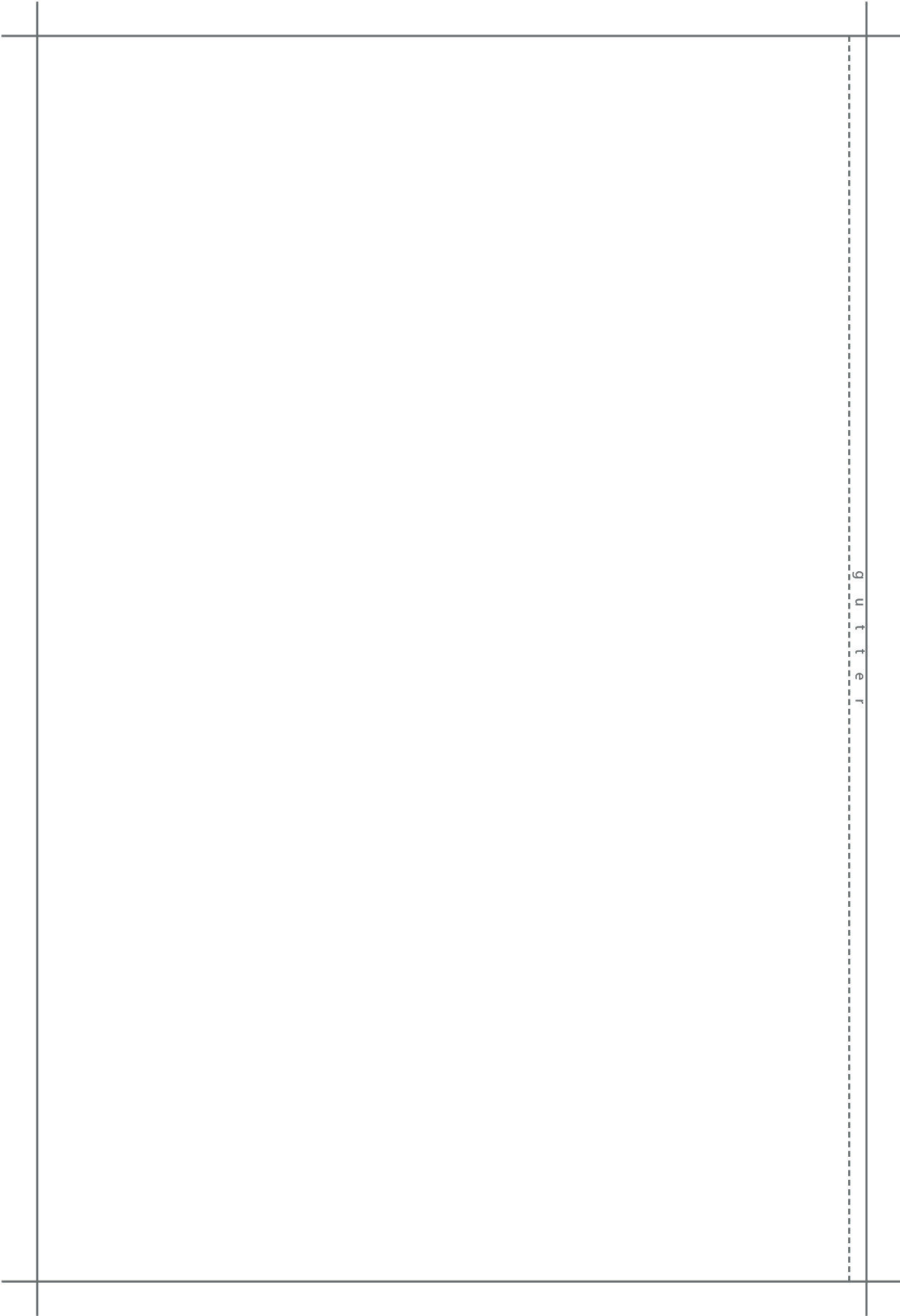
"You have never told me that you love me. I know we enjoy each other's company very much, and that when we are apart I feel less than whole. I also know that my life will be diminished if you are not in it with me."

"And just what do you think love is? Because that is exactly how I feel about you. I don't know what is going to happen in the near future, but I don't want to fear it any more. I know we will all remain linked through the Centrex processor during this, but make a private link with me before you go so that we can stay in contact personally. I need to know you're..." Bren's words stopped short.

He went to Tarala wrapping her in his arms and kissed her

mouth. Tarala returned the passion and activated the quantatronic sub-channel in her mind that would remain connected to Bren's mind even over great distance. Both would continue to access and correlate data shared in the Centrex core processor, the vast computer memory complex that connected all Lantians to each other at their individual will, and when in range. But Bren and Tarala would now be connected on a much more intimate level. They could "thought" directly to each other, sharing their feelings. Both took courage from the exchange. They separated and with one last light kiss went separate ways.

Bren thought to her as he walked away alone, "I hope I see you again soon, but you already knew that didn't you."



g u t t e r





## CHAPTER SIX

Kevin awoke feeling genuinely refreshed and energized. He went to a far corner of the room and found the alcove he expected in order to relieve himself. He wasn't sure exactly how he knew the facility would be there, but he did. In fact, as he concentrated, he found that he knew well the entire layout of Et'Lantis and was at the same time shocked and amazed by the overwhelming scale of it. It was difficult to imagine it as all his; such power at his fingertips!

But the Lantian matter was his priority thought. They had serious needs, not the least of which was rescue from a current dilemma, which he now understood to be almost hopeless. They needed this ship and, according to them, his help.

"Good god!" exclaimed Kevin out loud to no one in particular.

He had just glanced up into the mirror above the washbasin in preparation to rinse his face and body, which still smelled of wetsuit and saltwater, when what he saw made him freeze. He looked at himself closer in an effort to verify that he wasn't hallucinating. The differences in his appearance, miniscule though they may have seemed to anyone else, were obvious to someone who saw himself in the mirror every day. His face exhibited fewer wrinkles. It was just a little thinner, as if a few years had been peeled away from him.

Though thoroughly intrigued, Kevin forced himself to refocus on the matters at hand. After cleansing, and combing his hair he found suitable clothing in the alcove to the side of the chamber; something that he hadn't had since his arrival. He then decided to check into

*Kevin L. Smith*

caring for the pangs of hunger gnawing at his insides. It was a reminder of the fact that some time had passed since his coming to the ship. He wondered how long he had actually been asleep on the unusual bed.

"Aurora," he said into the air, knowing full well that her systems monitored the entire ship at all times, "how long have I been asleep?"

The response he received didn't surprise Kevin at all, "Fifty hours and twenty-three minutes. We are approximately nineteen hours away from our destination."

"Has there been any communication with Lantis?"

"Yes, it is the reason you were awakened. We have received notification that the conflict between our fleet and the invaders is beginning. Lantis is under siege and our ships stand ready to defend the planet as best they can."

Kevin cursed silently as he absorbed the full impact of the message. If everything he had been told was true there would be no way in hell the Lantians would last in a confrontation with their enemy for nineteen hours, or even nine hours for that matter!

Foregoing the food and usually mandatory morning coffee (was it even morning?) Kevin raced pell-mell for the bridge. He traced his steps expertly through the corridors not knowing quite how he had become so familiar with the layout of his massive new toy, if it was indeed his. Really how could he accept such a thing, he mused. On the other hand, he might not have it for very long the way things looked like they might go. Oh, but Kevin just couldn't help but imagine what he could accomplish if he were to slam this baby into a parking orbit around Earth. Et'Lantis would certainly get some people to sit up and take notice. His thoughts trailed off as he entered the bridge.

"Alleana, we've got to get to Lantis now! We can't afford to take the scenic tour."

Alleana pointed out what any Lantian already knew, "I assure you we are going as fast as possible. Were we to extend our jump distances we would endanger ourselves and the ship."

"I know, I know but I have a plan. Et'Lantis is equipped with a backup dimension jump generator. I want you to bring it online. How long does it take for our generators to recharge between jumps?"

Alleana glanced at Aylueye who was monitoring power levels throughout the ship.

She gestured toward a crystal panel set into one of the main consoles and after examining the panel answered, "Seventeen minutes from discharge to full standby."

Kevin nodded and then laid out his plan, "Begin charging the backup generator immediately. As soon as it's ready we'll make a long-distance jump and then use the backup generator to get us out if we run into trouble. Aurora, use all data you have on dimension jump technology to calculate the fewest possible successful jumps we can make to get us to Lantis. Forget the safety protocols; just calculate against the longest successful jumps ever made."

Alleana proffered words of warning, "Do you understand the reason for a backup generator? If we encounter failure of the main generator for any reason and the backup generator is incapacitated we would quite possibly be lost forever. We wouldn't have the supplies or the capacity to travel anywhere. That is why we have an emergency backup generator."

"Alleana, this is the emergency! If we don't get to Lantis soon, as I understand it, there won't be a home to go to for you anyway. Aurora, do you have the calculations?"

It had taken the powerful electronic mind only moments to retrieve pertinent data and make the necessary computations. The data appeared on a glass panel just to the right of the main helm controls near Aylueye.

"Theoretically, we can extend distance so as to arrive at Lantis in eleven jumps if we disable all safety measures. The data however warns that the danger factors are off the scale."

"Life is all about risk. Make the jump as soon as the backup generator is charged. By the way, do you have anything to eat onboard?"

"Sure," chimed in Alleana, "there are a variety of different tablets in that compartment over there against the wall."

Kevin remembered the unusual pills with a strange fondness. They had sustained him when he was starving to death. But though they had been satisfactory during that occasion they hardly seemed acceptable for now, so he opted to go hungry for the time being, that was the bad news. The good news was that the first six jumps through the "nothing", the name the Lantians had given to the black

*Kevin L. Smith*

area in between the entry and exit portals of a dimension jump, had been successful. The ship had seemed to exit into each new galactic destination somewhat closer to stars and stellar phenomena. But in each case the ships engines were more than capable of propelling it along a proscribed course until she was prepared for her next jump.

Kevin found himself spending most of his time on the observation deck while he waited. As Et'Lantis slipped quietly through the void of space awaiting the opportunity to make her seventh leap toward what Kevin anticipated would be a deadly struggle for survival, he couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the immensity of cold, lonely space. He was light years away from his home – his Didi – and yet in comparison to the universe his travel was inconsequential, miniscule, and insignificant. When he united that fact with the prospect of facing a threat he knew almost nothing about it was understandable that Kevin felt a fair amount of consternation. At a very young age he had learned the value of knowing in advance as much as possible about the terrain of a conflict, and the opponents in that conflict. It disturbed him that both were so absolutely alien to him.

Heading into this battle went against everything he had ever experienced, learned, or read. A book he had once read, written by Sun Tzu, focused on the art of war. It had provided counsel such as "...if the battle cannot be won, don't fight it," or "...it is best to win the battle before you even begin the fight."

Kevin had decided, well before reading such strategy, that he was no warrior. War was the epitome of foolishness, a waste of time, resources, and energies. Often Kevin had contemplated on how far mankind would have advanced to date had he not squandered his efforts in battles, skirmishes, invasions, etc. Though many would claim that science was advanced by preparations for wars, and that all the efforts of nations with respect to weapons technologies were and are basically defensive actions designed to preserve that which had been attained.

Kevin had never bought into that line of reasoning. There were alternatives if one was resourceful and intelligent enough to find and implement them. And so he was having a hard time reconciling all this with the fact that he was heading recklessly into a conflict. It isn't war, he told himself, its security. I won't be a warrior, but I will do what I

can to help protect these people; like an adult in a park protecting a child from a bully.

Deep down Kevin Cade was a hunter. His bizarre childhood had made him a good one. And it was his instincts that were demanding that he formulate a functional plan of offense. It all boiled down to that; Kevin didn't like being the hunted, he wanted, needed to be the hunter! But how? It was the nagging question that haunted his conscious thought processes. He was racking his brain for an answer to that critical question. He analyzed scenarios of battles highlighted throughout history, tried to formulate a plan that would afford some level of hope. What he needed simply wasn't there.

Kevin's train of thought was suddenly derailed as the ships communications system summoned him, "Kevin, can you come to the bridge as quickly as possible?"

He sensed a difference in the voice coming over the speakers. Alleana sounded tense and anxious. The run from the observation theater, where he had been contemplating strategy, to the bridge was a short one. He preferred sitting in the immense translucent dome staring out into wondrous space to sitting in the bridge watching the others busy themselves. The theater was a technological marvel providing unrestricted view into the universe. One could hardly tell there was a barrier between themselves and space. Kevin felt small looking out at the stars, and yet seeing it like that made him feel significant. There were all of those billions of galaxies containing billions of stars, and just one of him. If the worst was to befall him and the Lantians then at least this, his wildest dream, had come true.

Kevin rushed onto the bridge, "What's wrong Alleana?"

"It appears that we have made sufficient progress toward Lantis to put us into communication range. The Lantian council has made contact with us and advised us that the enemy attack is beginning as we speak. It appears that the attacking fleet has begun a full force advance and the Lantian ships expect to engage the enemy momentarily. The council expresses it's thanks to us for attempting to assist and promises to hold the opposing forces back for as long as possible."

Kevin addressed Aurora as though she was standing next to him, "Aurora, does the council know about you?"

"No, we simply acknowledged the message."

*Kevin L. Smith*

"So, as far as they, or anyone else eavesdropping, are concerned we are returning in a Star-Dancer. Good, let's keep it that way. We really need the element of surprise, it's the only ace we have."

Alleana glanced at him quizzically, "Ace?"

"Ace! I only wish with all my heart that I had a pair of them. Alleana, jump us to Lantis now!"

Alleana turned to Kevin, eyes widened in a mixture of fear and disbelief, "Impossible! First, the jump generator isn't fully charged. Second, that distance is simply too dangerous of a jump."

"Aurora, calculate the jump and do it now. Use the backup generator. Get us there before it's too late, or is this ship not really mine as you indicated?"

"It is yours; I will do as you say. We will jump in four minutes."

"Alleana, charge and activate shields and weapons. Get us ready for attack. As soon as we exit the dimension door bring up a tactical display of the system and everything going on in it. I'll need all the intelligence I can get, fast, so we'll have to do our reconnaissance on the fly."

Aurora piped in, "There will be several minutes of 'nothing' between the doorways. The greater the distance of the jump, the greater the space of 'nothing' between the portals."

"Why do you call it 'nothing'?"

"Because to the best of our knowledge it is simply that, 'nothing.' There are no stars, gases, light, gravity...nothing. In fact no ship lost between portals has ever been recovered, though there are only a few instances of that situation occurring."

Kevin watched in awe as the forward view screen displayed the formation of the dimensional portal leading to the Lantis system. The doorway appeared to be only a few miles ahead, a gigantic shimmering round ring surrounded by stars and filled with 'nothing.' His perspective on the ship and through the view panel made it impossible to tell exactly how far away the doorway was, but it was easy to see that they were approaching it rapidly. Very rapidly. Kevin was beginning to sense the forward momentum of the Citidel increase.

"Aurora, I thought we were already going as fast as we could. Why are we speeding up?"

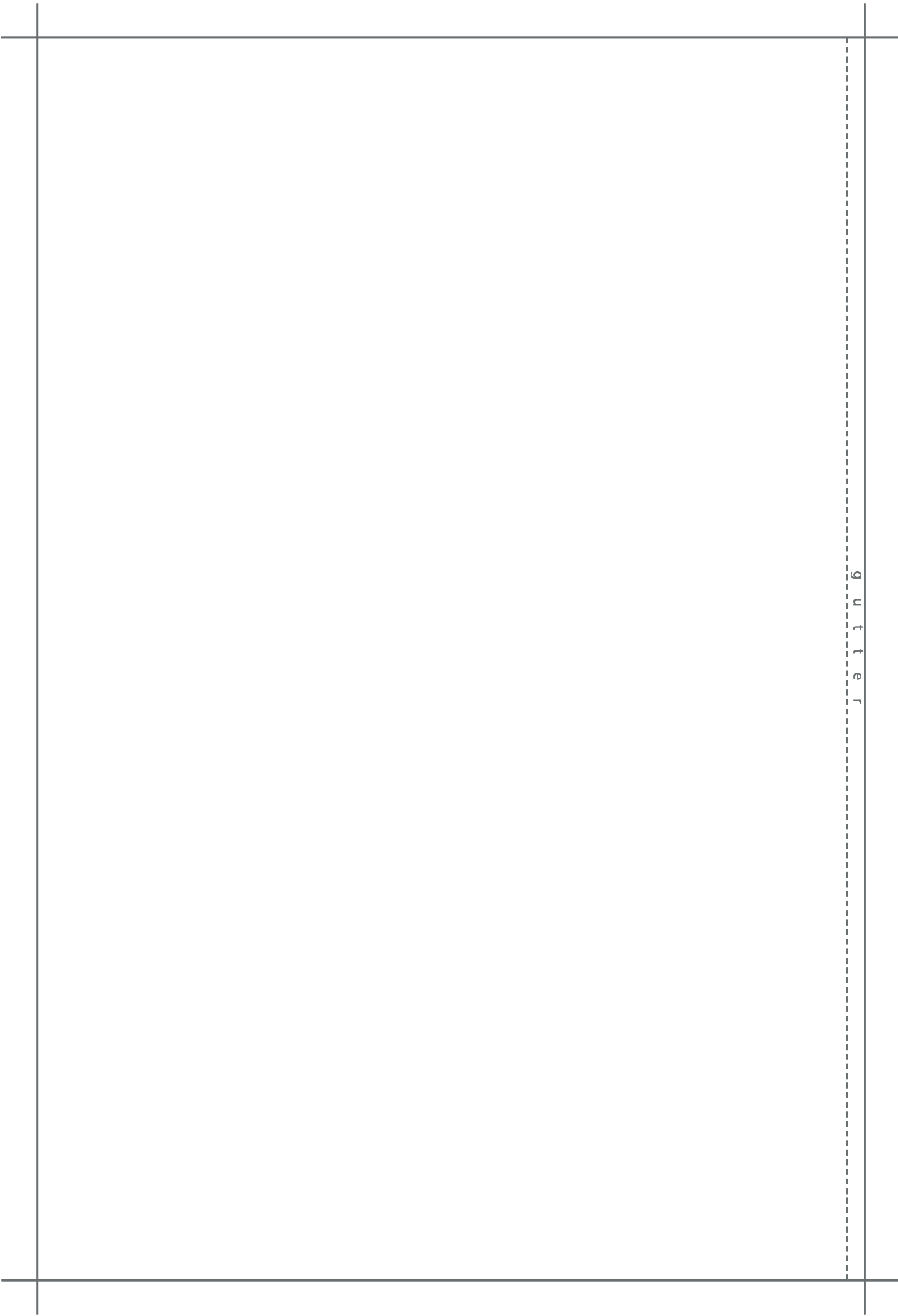
"We were. I am not responsible for the increase in speed."

*Destiny's Wildest Dream*

With a sinking feeling Kevin asked the question he was afraid to hear the answer to, "Are we in trouble?"

"Yes," was the factual response from the seemingly emotionless ship-board mind as they tore through the doorway into 'nothing' at breakneck speed.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

If the Lantians had known of such things they would have recognized that the tactics employed by the invading armada of space ships before them mimicked those of a feline toying with a mouse that it had no intention of eating. It was just play, a death game initiated in such a way as to demonstrate that the antagonist was fully aware of its position of superiority.

The enemy net was cast loosely around the besieged planet. Stray shots were exchanged on an irregular basis. Enemy ships flittered to and fro examining moons and planets in the system. But the results were nonetheless a slow tightening of the proverbial noose around the symbolic neck of the Lantian world. The aggressors were obviously satisfied with their strategy and the position they found themselves in, and were ready to deal the Lantians their final and decisive blow. All precautions had been taken and now was the time to finish this melee.

The Centrex memory core processor, or just Centrex as it was commonly referred to, was the center of all Lantian interaction. Lantian quantatronic minds interfaced with the core remotely, uploading and downloading communications, concerns, feelings, and information, really any and all mental activity that passed through their minds. This system of mutual communication and interaction is what brought Lantians together, instructed them, and made them the people they were. The Centrex was screaming with activity. Bren was experiencing the equivalent of a flash flood of sensory overload as the combination

*Kevin L. Smith*

of emotions and miscellaneous data from literally thousands of Lantian minds washed through his processor each time he accessed the Centrex. The overwhelming rush only added to the confusion he was already experiencing as he sat aboard the Star-Cruiser class ship he commanded, trying to decide the next logical move for the defense of his home world.

Insanity wasn't an ailment that Lantian biomechanical engineering permitted. However, the quantatronic processor that each Lantian possessed was capable of experiencing overloads or confusion based on conflicting or overwhelming data. Bren had decided that he was experiencing the equivalent of what he believed was a human anxiety attack. It was very disturbing. He felt sorrow and fear over his and all Lantians imminent death. He could see no alternatives; there simply was no way to rectify this situation. This was a no win scenario. Tarala touched his mind directly, bypassing the Centrex. Her thoughts infused a level of courage, but it was a small consolation and he failed to reciprocate the positive gesture.

The undeniable fact of the matter was that the Lantians were outgunned, out numbered, and backed into a corner with no way for escape.

The call from Cheri, who was commanding the Lantian fleets' best Base-Cruiser, came over the transceiver instead of through the Centrex. "Bren, I do not know what the enemy is doing to us or why they delay, but nothing is going to change between now and when they finally attack. Perhaps we should assume the offensive before they finish forming up their fleet against us."

"Whether we wait or we attack I believe the outcome will be the same. Therefore every moment of life we cling to offers opportunities, no matter how improbable that may seem. We should hold until the very last moment." was Bren's response.

Cheri's reply was delayed but a few moments: "I respect that, however it appears our wait is over. Check your displays and sensors. It indicates that the attack has begun."

Cheri switched over to fleet-wide communications and announced, "The attackers are closing, and it has begun. All ships open fire as the enemy approaches!"

Bren resigned himself to the inevitable. He decided to replace

fear with sorrow over the loss of a civilization and people that he dearly loved. He looked around the bridge at the faces all searching him for answers and courage. He had none of either.

"Anock," he asked dejectedly through the Centrex, "how did that Primarian verse go that Kentish wrote just before the Great Battle?"

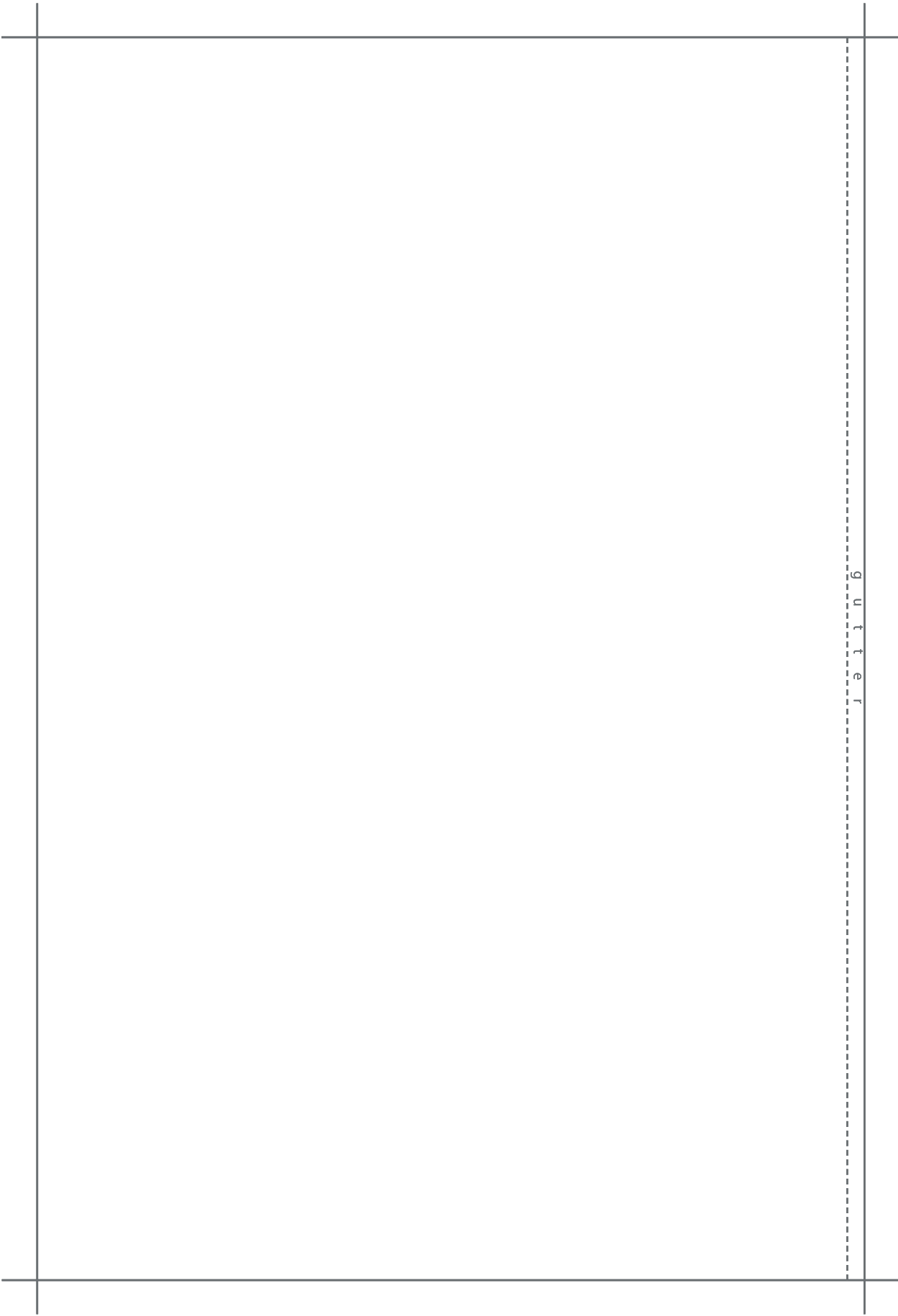
Anock allowed the inquiry to be networked publicly and then answered in kind, "It went like this Bren;

"Though your foes be strong and many,  
Though they threaten and revile,  
Fear them not my faithful brothers,  
You'll be saved throughout this trial.  
Fight with heart felt courage,  
Do not you all grow weak,  
Hope will come for Lantis,  
A strength will save the meek.""

A single tear welled in Bren's eye as he recalled the outcome of the Great Battle. There were no longer any Primarians to help fend off this new insidious attack being forced upon them, and hope seemed like such a distant star here, now.

"This is Bren," came the order to all ships via the communications channel. "I concur with Cheri. All ships maintain your positions for as long as possible and prepare to repel attackers. Fire at will."

The end had clearly begun.



quitter



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Kevin's first journey through the depths of space, though awe-inspiring, had transpired without incident. He had spent some of his waking hours lounging on the tremendous observation deck – which more resembled a combination of an amphitheater and stellar observatory – watching as the great ship entered and exited the massive dimensional portals that she created and projected forward of her position. The ship felt solid, safe, and secure. Even the longer traverses between portals, though somewhat disconcerting due to the intense blackness and apparent lack of reference points, generated little more than some slightly elevated levels of tension...until now!

For now Kevin had resigned himself to the bridge knowing split second decisions would be required from this point on.

Et'Lantis had accelerated to the point where Kevin and his crew were beginning to detect increasing abnormal vibrations in the ship.

"Structural tolerances are close to being exceeded," warned Aurora.

"I can feel it," responded Kevin, "how long until we reach the exit portal?"

Though the distant point of light that marked the deadly doorway was plainly evident against the black background, distance was almost impossible to judge. All eyes remained transfixed on the slowly growing star.

Aurora responded seconds later, "Less than one minute to the portal at our current rate of speed."

*Kevin L. Smith*

“What if we were to veer away from the portal?”

The visibly shaken crew responded almost unanimously, “We’d be lost forever!”

Each looked back at Kevin and then at each other before returning their attention to the growing bright circle of white light before them.

Aurora eliminated further discussion on the subject, “The gravitational pull is too great for us to pull away. Any deviation would only delay our eventually being pulled through the portal. I have however done a spectrum analysis of the light ahead. The source is a yellow giant sun. I believe it is Cetiri, meaning we have reached the Lantian planetary system.”

It was little consolation and Kevin was allowed no time to digest the information; the lighted circle before them had grown to the point where it now filled half the forward view screen, which had been forced to darken several times to accommodate the ever increasing brilliance.

“Fifteen seconds to portal entry,” came the unwelcome announcement.

“Alleana, quick, our angle of entry into the portal, adjust it for an elliptic orbit. Try for the greatest possible angle from the sun!”

Alleana dove for the controls between Aylueye and Chymere. Each woman worked frantically to accomplish the requested maneuver in impossible time. The ship shuttered from the demands of opposing forces put upon it as she angled for a vector that would prevent an almost instant death upon entry into the Lantian system.

The view screen before the bridge crew had reached its maximum level of obscurity before totally blacking out, yet still the light of the sun that filled it was difficult to look at directly. Et’Lantis shot through the portal and into the domain of the antagonizing sun whose relentless pull now demanded the great spaceship as additional fuel for its timeless fire. To Alleana’s credit, the great ship was cutting through space at an angle that loosely pointed toward the sun’s horizon, though the makeshift orbit was decaying rapidly.

Aurora’s analysis was instantaneous. “We are caught in Cetiri’s gravitational field without any hope of pulling free. Our dimensional jump generator will be charged and available in eight minutes, however we will fall into the sun’s corona sphere in a little over five minutes. I am sorry but our shields will prove ineffectual against the heat and

radiation.”

Kevin’s mind worked at full capacity and he could formulate only two possible alternatives; try to maintain the orbit, or try to pull away. Any attempt to avoid the gravity well they were now in not only seemed a very remote possibility, but the attempt would probably leave the ship crippled, a poor state for a vessel entering a battle against what were sure to be insurmountable odds. That only left trying to stretch out the time in orbit. They only needed a few precious minutes.

“Alleana, full thrust ahead. Try to get us into a holding orbit. Just buy us a little time.”

The helmswoman complied though the maneuver had almost no effect on the trapped ship. Aurora’s calculations indicated that only a few seconds of additional life for Et’Lantis and her crew had been purchased from destiny, and it simply wasn’t enough. Four minutes and some seconds from now they would become an irradiated fireball. It had been a good attempt. There was no use in even trying to pull away from the sun now. There was simply too much momentum and gravity against them!

Dimensions, mused Kevin. They were so complex, and yet so simple. And as quickly as he thought about that difference the answer came to him. Dimensions, and the laws of relativity were the solution, maybe!

“Alleana, I have an idea. I need you to coordinate with weapons. Program four missiles for a two second delay till detonation, then roll the ship yaw ninety degrees to starboard, apply full nose up thrusters and launch all four missiles forward simultaneously.”

The girls reacted to the commands instantly and flawlessly. Kevin couldn’t help but be impressed with the degree of precision and accuracy they displayed under such pressure.

The ship rolled easily, but the nose continued to dip to its doom. The sun now filled the lower half of the view panel; the ship continued to shiver perceptibly as thrusters strained against the relentless pull from below.

Alleana kept any doubts that she harbored to herself as she announced, “Missiles ready.”

“Fire now!”

The two-second wait seemed like an elongated moment in time

*Kevin L. Smith*

to Kevin as he waited to see if he had played his last game of chance ever or if his on the fly calculations had been correct. He was amazed at how much thought process could take place in so short a span of time.

Then he felt the concussion. The missiles had been shot forward, but without the same intense thrust that Et'Lantis was now exerting to propel her, they had been pulled down and forward below the mighty ships nose. Detonation of the powerful anti-matter weapons had generated an expanding shock wave that slammed into the under section of the ships nose pushing it up. The jarring that rocked the Citidel threw Kevin and Alleana to the floor as multiple walls of gravimetric pressure buffeted them.

The waves finally subsided, as Kevin anxiously demanded a report from Aurora.

"Ships attitude has changed to Z minus nineteen degrees, Kevin, a positive adjustment of four degrees. Additionally we have suffered no significant damage. We have sufficient orbit time now to activate a dimensional portal for a jump to Lantis. I would not have believed our survival was possible, but it appears you are fulfilling the destiny proscribed for you by the Primarians."

"That remains to be seen," exclaimed Kevin as he breathed a deep sigh of relief.

And then the sought for solution simply came to him, "Hold everything! I think we have our second ace. We just might have a fighting chance."

Kevin spent the next minute instructing Aylueye to plot a jump for Lantis that would position them approximately fifty thousand miles from the planet and then to immediately lay in a course toward the enemy flank furthest from the planet.

"Make sure I have a tactical display of all ships positions as soon as we emerge."

Aurora chimed in, "Generator ready."

"Then let's go. It's time to go hunting...besides it's getting awful hot around here."





## CHAPTER NINE

When Et'Lantis entered the theater of activity it was evident that all hell had already broken loose. Aylueye brought up a tactical layout that showed what appeared to be several hundred red triangles converging on less than one hundred blue circles, strategically spaced around a green globe that was obviously Lantis. Chymere, sitting next to her, started the recharging processes and accelerated the ship to maximum speed to avoid any unwanted altercations.

"Aim us straight for that group of red triangles there on the outer fringe, full speed. And open fire with all energy weapons as soon as we get within range. When they start to come after us hit them with the missiles too."

"Are you not holding anything in reserve, Kevin Cade?" inquired Aurora.

"Nothing. How long till we can open a portal away from here?" came Kevin's unexpected question.

The crewmembers looked at each other wordlessly as Aurora answered, "Fifteen minutes and twenty two seconds. Recharge already in progress."

"You girls are good!"

It didn't take a military strategist to understand that the Lantian fleet was being decimated. Only minutes into the conflict and thirteen Lantian cruisers had been completely destroyed, while several others were seriously incapacitated. But the bedlam of chaos had come to an abrupt halt as Et'Lantis sped into the fray. All attention was diverted

*Kevin L. Smith*

to the Citidel cruiser, which literally dwarfed even the largest of the enemy cruisers.

There was no confusion or indecision on the part of the opposing forces. As one, the multitude of invading ships began falling back into a new formation, regrouping to meet the onslaught that the Citidel Et'Lantis was threatening to unleash.

"They move as one," noted Kevin, intrigued by the pattern they were forming, "like a wolf pack. Their fleet has a central command. There simply is no way that that many ships could evolve a counter strategy that quickly if they were working independently of one another. Aurora, see if you can isolate who is giving the orders, it might come in handy later. Alleana, you need to contact the Lantian fleet and tell them to keep firing into the enemy formation, but to pull back and away from them as they do."

Alleana initiated contact as instructed. Her call had been anticipated. It took what Kevin referred to as a "New York second" for the response.

"This is Bren. I oversee the Lantian Council of Seven. To whom am I speaking?"

Kevin could sense the relief in just those few words. It pleased him to offer a modicum of hope, whether misplaced or not.

"Hello, I am Kevin Cade – from Earth. I believe you call it Terra. I'd love to explain everything to you but we have very little time, and what I am going to try is extremely dangerous, so please do exactly as I say as quickly as possible."

"We will do our very best. It appears we have nothing to lose. Besides, my friend Anock says that you are here to accomplish this very purpose. Also, please, if you fail, accept the thanks of all Lantians for the attempt; we are indebted to you whatever the outcome!"

"Let's not fail! When I say, pull away and back toward your planet as quickly as possible."

Et'Lantis was coming into range of the horde of invading ships when she opened fire. Missiles leapt away in multiple directions, beams of energy dancing from the Citidel and trying to find a home on enemy vessel's hulls. Kevin ordered the mighty ship to come to an abrupt halt. The opposing ships had tightened into a concentrated group combining the effectiveness of their shields as they waited to test

the resolve of the new interloper's weapons.

Kevin knew that time was of the essence. He had learned a powerful lesson as a child of the forest when watching a nest of hornets bring down an adult buck. Individually the *Dolichovespula maculate* were insignificant compared to the majestic deer, yet together the multitude had prevailed. So too, even if the powerful Citidel was superior to any one of the vessels it now faced, it stood little chance against the throng before it...and "they" knew it!

"Seven minutes till full charge," reported Chymere.

"Keep firing into the group," ordered Cade.

The barrage of power being thrown at the invaders was having only the slightest effect over all. From time to time a small vessel would flair up, dying in a miniscule blaze in comparison to the onslaught going on around it, only to be expunged from the group and its void filled by an outlying ship. Always the cluster was regrouping, tightening up, and protecting one another as with one mind. The weapons from the Lantian fleet continued to expend themselves upon the enemy with even less effect.

The opposing force had determined that the new wild card in this conflict was not the significant threat that she had first appeared to be. That decided, the formation began to modify itself, shifting, changing.

"Two minutes until dimension generator charge-up."

Kevin noted this as well as the fact that the enemy formation was beginning to form flanking wings. Sections were beginning to break away to the right and left of the central grouping. They would try to come around both sides not only diluting the effectiveness of his fire, but also placing him in the center of their cross fire. Until now, Et'Lantis had been able to concentrate all shield energies in one direction. However, dispersed the efficiency of those shields would be severely minimized. It wouldn't take them long to finish him off after that.

How like the wolves circling their prey in an effort to cut off escape and minimize injury to the hunting pack, mused Kevin. He had seen it many times; he had even faced it before and survived the encounter. It amazed him that such animal behavior knew no bounds. Even light-years from Earth these creatures instinctively knew the

*Kevin L. Smith*

tactic and were implementing it now. He had to stop them before they ruined his plan. He needed just a few moments longer!

“Alleana, open communications on every possible channel and demand their immediate and unconditional surrender,” ordered Cade.

“There has never been any response to any attempt to communicate with this enemy, ever,” came her reply.

“That’s okay, they may not want to talk, but I guarantee they’re listening. Aylueye, full speed ahead, aim directly for the center of the group.”

The ruse worked! Moments later the flanking ships began regrouping in anticipation of what they could only assume was some form of a suicide run, a desperate stab at the heart of an undefeatable enemy.

“Thirty seconds to charge up,” came the report Kevin was anticipating.

“Alleana, order the Lantian fleet to get as far away as possible, as fast as possible!”

Alleana obeyed the order by simply closing her eyes for a moment. Then looking back at Cade she nodded. Kevin had precious few seconds to wonder what form of communication she had used to transmit his order.

“Five thousand miles and closing.”

It was time to play his last ace. Now or never, this was the only trick up his sleeve and if it failed all was surely lost. The group before him had once again tightened up its formation and combined its shield strength. Poor fools, he almost felt sorry for them...almost.

“Chymere, open a dimension door five thousand five hundred miles directly ahead and two degrees above our current heading, and make the jump distance the absolute maximum distance the generator is capable of producing. Now! And girls...emergency full reverse engines quickly!” Kevin said much too calmly.

The last few seconds ticked away and the ship opened a dimension door just behind and above the enemy fleet. The door found its destination at a neutron star six hundred and fifty light years away. The burned-out and collapsed sun had a surface gravity of about ten to the eleventh power times standard Earth gravity. So dense was the mass of the long dead star that a spoonful of the condensed matter weighed

two hundred thousand metric tons.

No wonder chaos ensued. Enemy ships twisted and turned in an attempt to escape the incredibly intense gravity well reaching for them. Space cruisers were driven into each other, and then pulled in conflicting directions. The dimension portal sucked enemy vessels into itself like a ghostly vacuum cleaner extracting sand from a black floor.

As the effects of the gravity well expanded Et'Lantis began to feel the consequences. Her reverse thrust though constant was diminishing in effectiveness. The Citadel continued to slow its pace away from the gapping maw that had drawn all ships save her into it. Finally, though still in reverse, the great ship paused for but a moment and then slowly began to lose ground to the deadly portal.

"Maintain full reverse thrust and let me know when all enemy ships have been taken away," said Kevin in an excited tone of voice.

The trap had worked perfectly. Now all that remained was to close off the lethal entrance to oblivion before succumbing to its effects themselves. Even as Kevin barked orders the last bits of tortured and ruined metal that had once comprised an alien fleet of star ships was pulled into the death hole they have opened.

"Tactical displays indicate all enemy vessels are gone," came Alleana's report as the ship shook and rocked from being yanked by a distant black hole.

"Excellent, close the dimension door," exclaimed Kevin.

Agonizing moments later, as Et'Lantis continued its struggle with the singularity at the other end of the portal before her, Aurora reported over the ships communication system, "It will not close. For unknown reasons the intense gravity has prevented us from attaining control over the portal projector array. Our range is fifty-one hundred miles and we are accelerating in our course toward it."

"Aurora, eject the array, the generator – the whole section of the ship if you have to. But kick it out NOW," demanded Kevin, visibly alarmed and anxious.

Et'Lantis' control systems acknowledged the directions given them and began detonating explosive panel links, and disengaging magnetic joints in order to extricate herself of the malfunctioning dimension generator system. As the last beam broke away from the ships hull the freed section of ship tore out and away toward the portal. Freed

*Kevin L. Smith*

from the opposing forces produced by Et'Lantis' powerful engines, the room in its entirety shot toward its destination, the opening it had created and was maintaining. Minutes later it entered the opening and disappeared along with its dimensional vortex, which without a generation source could no longer exist.

Instantly freed from its opposing pull, the Citidel was violently thrown as artificial gravity aboard the ship fought to compensate and thereby regain control. Kevin freed himself from beneath the consol under which he had been thrown for a second time, rubbing his head gingerly.

"If we keep this up I'm going to need seat belts. Stop the ship! Is everyone okay? Are we still in one piece?"

Aurora reported dutifully, "Hull damage has been sustained in the fore and port section of engine nacelle alpha where the dimension generator used to reside. Engines are currently offline and I am attempting a cold restart now. I anticipate fifteen minutes until we can maneuver. There are additional areas of damage throughout the Citidel, however we are operational."

"Alleana, please contact Bren and the council and brief them on the situation," began Kevin.

Before he could continue giving instructions his attention was forced to the tactical display, which had continued to monitor the system throughout their ordeal.

"Wait a minute. What is that?" asked Kevin pointing directly at the largest red triangle he had seen the panel display yet.

Alleana's attention was immediately diverted, as were the other girls. She glanced from the tactical display panel down to computer enhancement and then over to sensors before responding, "I cannot be absolutely certain, however sensors indicate an energy signature identical to the enemy fleet vessels. Additionally, indications are that it is just a little larger than us. If I were to speculate I would say that we have found the enemies command and communications ship."

"How is it that we are just now seeing this monster?" asked Cade.

"It appears that it was hidden behind and in close proximity to Cariel, Lantis' moon. We never saw it, and its energy signature must have been masked by the moon."

Kevin was frustrated. It was turning out to be one thing after another. Why couldn't he catch a break? A struggle right to the end. Fate would just keep throwing fastballs until he finally lost.

"Oh great," he announce in an aggravated tone. "Even if the secondary dimension generator was charged right now, which it is not, I seriously doubt if that trick would work again."

It wouldn't have worked anyway; the enemy behemoth was too close now and closing on their position.

"Alleana, try to jamb all communications. I don't want them to contact anyone else."

So much for being the hunter. The situation was as uneven as it could get. Et'Lantis was matched in size, but obviously outgunned, not to mention the fact that her engines were down, munitions all but expended; she was damaged, and severely undermanned, in other words doomed. Kevin had been given his wish for two aces, a surprise attack with a Citadel, and a surprise attack with a black hole. The tactics must have really thrown their ranks into a frenzy. The thought brought a smile to Kevin's face as he empathized with the anger and frustration that the commander of the opposing ship must be feeling at the loss of his entire fleet and those that manned it. But the two aces hadn't been enough. Kevin Cade had been outmaneuvered by the same strategy he had employed, whether on purpose or not.

At this point he knew two key facts. First, the enemy command ship was well armed, otherwise instead of heading directly for him at full speed as she was doing, she would have remained hidden and waited for an opportunity to escape. Second, the commander of that vessel knew that he, she, or it had the advantage and was coming to make use of it, perhaps even complete the original mission of total conquest of Lantis.

Kevin thought for a moment about hurling the rest of the Lantian fleet at the monster and maybe slowing her down, but he dismissed the thought almost as fast, realizing that needless sacrifice simply wasn't his style. Besides, he knew it would have been ineffectual. No, he contemplated, there had to be a viable way to stop this beast – especially after arriving at the point of victory. What he needed was another ship that was prepped and ready to go.

Two nanoseconds later, the light snapped on in his brain marking

*Kevin L. Smith*

the formation of a revelation, an idea that, though not optimal, might at least buy a chance or some time.

Kevin scrambled to lay out his plan, "Alleana, your Star-Dancer, Safril, is in a bay and ready for flight, is it not?"

"Yes, it is on stand-by and systems are still powered up."

"Rig her for remote piloting, make sure the dimension generator and her backup is fully charged and set to open a portal big enough for Er'Lantis. Alleana I need you to keep the portal open for as long as possible. Launch her as fast as you can." Kevin then directed his attention to Aurora, "How long before we can have some engines Aurora?"

"One of our four engines is online now. You have maneuvering and minimal speed."

"Good," replied Kevin, "it's better than nothing. Helm, turn us about one hundred and eighty degrees and best speed away from that ship. Alleana, put your ship right in front of us, close, and open a portal on my mark."

"Are we going to abandon Lantis? We remain their only hope, and I feel very uncomfortable about attempting an escape at this time."

Kevin wondered if this was how parents felt when dealing with children. He hadn't had much experience around young humans but he could see how one's patience could become taxed.

Cade responded, "Don't worry Alleana. We are all that ship is interested in right now. They are going to follow us."

Alleana adopted a look of incredulity and responded, "How can you know this?"

"Instinct. Pure and simple instinct. He's coming for us fast and hard. They're mad because they lost their fleet and probably some friends and family as well. These creatures feel and react. They want revenge or my name isn't Kevin Cade! So, Aurora, let me know as soon as that ship is within three minutes of attaining a weapons lock on us. Alleana, have your Star-Dancer's backup dimension generator online and ready to open a second portal, a very big and long distance one as soon as we exit our first jump. And, Alleana, this is important. Open the second portal about fifty miles in front of Safril and send her on through."

"And what of us?"



"We hide!"

Aurora reported, "Weapons range in three minutes and counting."

"Alleana, have your ship open the portal and try to keep it open for as long as possible, then take us on in."

Kevin felt like a possum being chased by a cheetah. He could almost feel the hot breath of his pursuer on the back of his neck. What Kevin was feeling was anticipation – perhaps even a little thrill. Time had slowed to a crawl as the Star-Dancer followed by the gigantic Citidel entered the unidirectional hole in space. It wouldn't be long before the antagonists in the slightly larger enemy craft entered the same doorway with the intent of destroying Lantis' defender.

Kevin was calculating furiously as his plan came to fruition. He knew that he had only a few minutes to jockey the lumbering Citidel around and into position. He also knew that if he failed to get into place before the other ship arrived he would be spotted and destroyed. With all these facts and figures swirling through his mind, Kevin barked orders that his crew responded to without hesitation as the Citidel exited into a new section of space.

"Alleana, use the backup generator in your Star-Dancer and open up a long distance portal now, then send the ship through full speed. We want her to leave a nice hot ion trail. Helm, full maneuvering thrusters "Z" axis plus one-point-eight miles, hurry."

A few moments passed while Kevin wished the ship to move faster.

"Now full-reverse thrust three-point-six miles, then "Z" axis minus one-point-eight miles."

Aylueye's fingers danced across the panel before her. Her gaze remained intent on the status and tactical display to her side as she flawlessly input commands faster than the crippled ship was able to obey. Kevin forced his mind to be calm, there was nothing more he could do but wait. His strategy was in place. There was no time to change it, he could only hope for the best.

Et'Lantis was responding slowly but faultlessly. Kevin knew that he couldn't get out and push, so he tried counting down seconds in an attempt to anticipate the location of the enemy in "nothing" space. A glimpse at the forward screen showed that the second portal had just

*Kevin L. Smith*

opened and Alleana's ship was just entering the doorway, leaving its traceable ion trail like the good decoy Kevin hoped it was.

Et'Lantis was descending now, setting herself up just behind the first portal, which if calculations were correct, would remain open for thirty or more seconds after the enemy ship exited. There were simply too many factors to be absolutely sure how long Kevin's makeshift "blind" would last.

As the Citidel descended the last few yards, the aggressor appeared. Kevin allowed calm to wash over him as he waited patiently for what seemed like hours instead of minutes, and minutes instead of seconds. Just wait...wait.

Quietly and in a subdued voice, as though the enemy might actually hear him, Kevin asked, "Aurora, do we have any missiles left on board?"

"Thirteen remain, however our beam weapons are depleted for the time being."

"Load them all and prepare to fire on my command. Chymere, what is the status of the energy signature?"

"It remains."

Kevin rubbed the growth on his chin as he stared pensively at the view screen ahead. He felt uneasy and acutely aware that his opponent was just on the other side of this gigantic mirror ring. It was as though he could smell the invader. And he realized that his opponent may be feeling the same way at that very moment. What was to happen now? Would that unknown assailant continue thru the next portal, or did he suspect a trap?

The portal chose that fortuitous moment to vanish leaving Et'Lantis and her crew sitting in space with their proverbial pants hung down around their ankles. Before them sat the monstrous enemy vessel, shaped like some six armed claw with a center fuselage. The alien machine was poised just in front of the second, still opened portal. Her engines blazed in an attempt to pull away from the aperture she had intended to enter. At the last moment she had detected the anomalous aspect of Kevin's trap and was slowly extricating herself from it.

"They are pulling away from the portal and I sense that they are trying to send a message," informed Aurora.

"Fire all missiles now, point blank! And try to get us some

shielding”

“All missiles away,” said Alleana, “however I doubt that even that many will have much of an effect on their ship.”

“Oh I think it’ll have an effect. It won’t penetrate the shields, but I’m hoping the detonations will nudge her right into the opening.”

In the mean time the enemy had suddenly become aware of Et’Lantis. It was apparent that she was trying to come about, probably attempting to bring her best shields and weapons to bear. But her maneuver was sluggish and late. The thirteen powerful antimatter projectiles exploded against the enemy’s protective shields. The explosion was the action. Shoving the alien communications vessel into the hungry, dangerous vortex was the reaction. The ship disappeared from view along with the hell mouth that had accepted her.

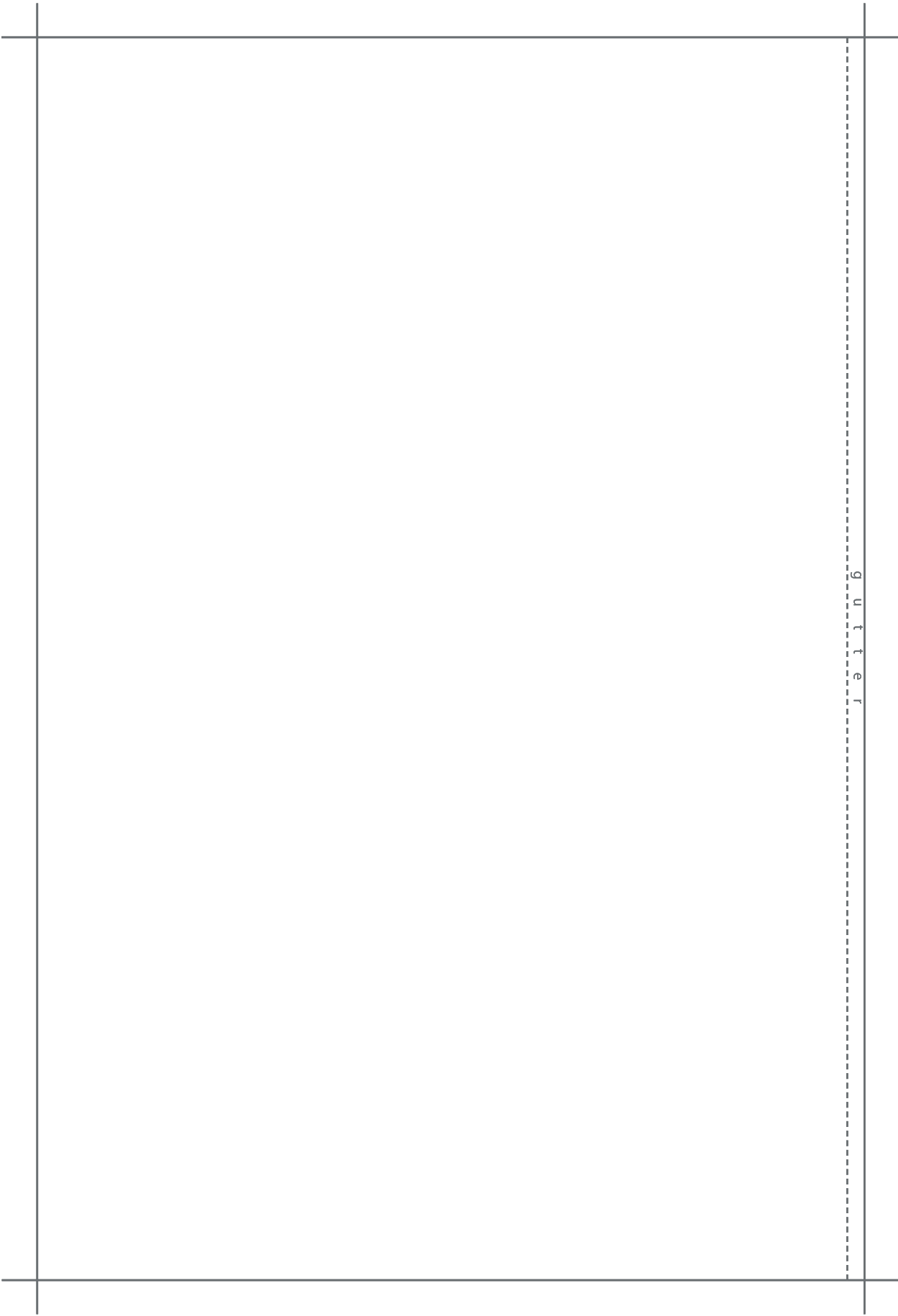
And with that came the absolute calm as all sat and silently appraised their situation, taking in the tranquil stillness of a lack of commotion. After some still moments, came the questions each of them where wondering.

“Do you think it is gone permanently? Did we destroy that ship?” asked Alleana.

“They stopped at the opening to that portal because they detected danger from the destination and not us. There’s a good chance we have been successful. However, there simply is no way to know for sure, at least for now.”

As mentally tired as Kevin Cade felt right now, he felt accomplished, he felt good, almost heroic. He wouldn’t repeat that out loud. That would be much too conceited. But he did feel just a little proud of himself. The rest, *he hoped*, would be downhill from here!

“Alleana, as soon as you can, take us back to Lantis. And by the way, I could sure use something to eat.”



quitter



## CHAPTER TEN

AS Didi drove down San Diego I-5 through the downtown “S” curve, she tried to decide whether her attempt to ease her troubled mind with a trip to the mall and a shopping spree had been successful. She decided that it hadn’t hurt, but that it had fallen grossly short of cheering her up completely.

Since their wedding day, almost two years past, Didi had spent very little time away from her spouse and lover. She liked it that way. Some women that she had talked to indicated that they needed time away from their husbands to unwind. Didi wasn’t at that point in her relationship with Kevin, and she doubted that she ever would be.

Then again Kevin had never been forced to go to work day in and day out at some building, performing some meaninglessly repetitive task, in some cluttered cubicle, surrounded by robotic drones who punched a card five times a week and eight hours a day, dreaming of the weekend and dreading retirement. He was well to do. He could afford to do what he wanted, when he wanted, and she thanked god that she was almost always included in the equation. Almost...

It had been three days since Kevin left. She still had difficulty wrapping her mind around that factoid. It was hard to believe even hearing it directly from him! She kept thinking that maybe it was a joke, or a secret phrase to identify a classified mission. But then, no, he had been very specific and factual when he had talked to her and she would have known if he had been speaking in double meanings.

But what was even harder for Didi was not knowing what had

*Kevin L. Smith*

become of him – not knowing how he was fairing, not being there to share in whatever fate he faced. She quelled the resentment that wanted to grow inside her over being left behind; after all, its basis was in love. Didi missed him and wanted him back *now!*

So the shopping hadn't freed her mind of the turmoil infecting it. Brittany sensed the negative emotions emanating from Didi as she rode along in silence. Women could do that with each other.

But then Brittany was suffering from a mental havoc of her own with the loss of a mother and the displacement of her home and friends. It was hard to believe that she would ever be happy again; however at least Kevin and Didi seemed like kind people and that relieved some of the fear she had been feeling.

Didi and Brittany had sat around the house for parts of three days waiting anxiously to hear word from Kevin. Today they had gone out and done something, and if nothing else it had given them something to focus on, a nice reprieve.

The Mercedes Benz convertible zipped over the Coronado Bridge unimpeded. The warm, clear, sunny day was certainly having a positive effect on Didi's disposition. It wasn't that her concerns had been minimized, but that her general outlook had improved to the point where she felt a renewed confidence in the fact that Kevin would either be returning or at least contacting her soon and then everything could get back to normal. Or could it? Kevin had left in a spaceship. What was normal about that? When he returned surely things would change. But what changes? Only time would tell, Didi told herself, and she knew that she wouldn't have long to wait.

As Didi rolled onto the street leading to the house she chanced to glance over at the boat dock that adjoined their home and noticed that Kevin's sport fishing boat had been returned safe and sound to its slip by the boat towing company.

"The boat's back," Didi pointed out to Brittany.

She wondered how long it would be before there were questions to answer regarding that little scenario. Then, a hint of hope gleamed through her clouded mind as she wondered if her man might be waiting for her at home even now. She quelled the excitement, telling herself that if he had indeed returned and found her away, he would have contacted her on her portable phone. Still, seeing the vessel that she

had watched him leave on days ago returned safely, tugged at her.

Her heart was beating just a little faster as the garage door opened remotely allowing the dark silver sports car to enter the pristinely organized carport. Didi and Brittany exited the car grabbing the bags of shopping plunder they had acquired and walked quickly toward the door leading from the garage to the kitchen. Didi fumbled with the door handle before dropping two of her packages, and finally negotiated the entrance to the home. She grabbed the dropped bags and deposited all the contents of her arms onto the kitchen counter top, then helped Brittany with her load.

Didi started to call out in the hope that Kevin was inside. However, something wasn't quite right. The clues had been blatantly left visible without any attempt to conceal them. A bottle of Jack Daniels was out and on the counter top, still open. The sound of the television left on in the den. And the real clincher was the smell of tobacco wafting strongly through the room. Neither she nor Kevin used tobacco, and they certainly didn't permit the use of it in their homes. Something was very wrong!

Didi turned to exit, pulling Brittany with her. No sooner had she grabbed hold of the door handle than she heard the distinct sound of spring-loaded metal clicking into place. Instinctively, she turned to identify the source of the sound and came face to face with a middle aged, well dressed man holding a gun that was aimed directly at her. Startled, Didi screamed, but cut it short as the man raised the gun higher, extending it forward closer to her, and at the same time putting his index finger from his free hand up to his lips in a shushing motion.

Didi negotiated Brittany behind herself without taking her eyes off the antagonist in front of her.

"Very nice place you have here Miss," were the first words out of the intruders mouth. "Please forgive my manners, or lack there of. My name is Mason, Michael Mason. My friend in the other room is Paul. Paul," Mason called out behind himself without taking his eyes from Didi, "come meet Ms. Didi Cade."

As frightened as Didi was, something about the man standing in front of her with a gun pointed at her waist put her a little at ease. She gathered enough courage to feign indignation.

*Kevin L. Smith*

"That's Mrs. Cade. Now how do you know me, and why are you in my home?"

Paul had just come around the corner into the far end of the kitchen. He was blonde and tall, much taller than Mason. And although he didn't look particularly bright, he more than made up for it in build. Didi knew immediately what his function was.

"Hi," was the extent of his greeting.

"Mrs. Cade," Mason emphasized the correction, "forgive the intrusion. My associate and I have been contracted to extend an invitation to you. Mr. Joseph Smith requests your presence."

"I don't know a Joseph Smith, and beside that I can't go anywhere right now, I'm expecting my husband back any time now!"

Michael's demeanor changed perceptibly, "I really must insist..."

His words trailed off as he looked directly at Brittany. Didi got the message instantly.

"You leave her out of this! She's just a friend's daughter I'm watching," Didi lied.

"My contract is quite specific. The invitation is just for you. I never deviate from my contracts parameters if I can help it. If you cooperate, no one gets hurt. The little girl stays here."

Didi resigned herself to the helplessness of the situation. There was nothing she could do but give in and hope that Brittany would be all right and Kevin would return and find her. She turned and bent down on one knee looking Brittany straight in the eye.

"I'm going to go with these men. You stay right here until Kevin comes home," Didi said out loud, but as she reached forward to kiss her goodbye she whispered, "Call uncle Will."

"All right let's get going. Joseph's jet is waiting and I've got people to see and places to go. Paul, we're leaving. Bring the car around now."

As the front door of the house closed shut behind Didi and the bad men with the guns, Brittany sat down on the living room couch and burying her face in her folded arms began to cry.





## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kevin's overwhelming sense of accomplishment and success was somewhat diluted by his concern over whether additional surprises awaited him in the Lantian system. He didn't have to wait long for an answer to that question.

The partially-crippled Citidel appeared almost forty thousand miles away from the planet of her origin. It was Kevin's plan that he would allow himself some maneuvering room just in case he had failed to completely eradicate all the opposing forces. Though prudent, his caution was unnecessary. A careful scan of the tactical display revealed a clean system – cleansed of the invaders that had so ruthlessly attempted to despoil that which was not theirs. It was hard to believe that so many had just died here only a short time ago. Everything appeared so quiet, so peaceful.

Kevin considered the deaths that had been wrought by his hands; an entire fleet of ships manned by thousands of beings, all gone. He was sure that there was no way those sucked into the vortex he had opened would, or could survive. However, he had done what had to be done. There had been no choice.

Kevin's turmoil was interrupted as the tactical display grabbed his attention. Thirty green circles were approaching them from the planet's surface.

Alleana also noted the indicators, and reported, "We are to receive an honor escort. The ships approaching will meet us and follow Et'Lantis home. Additionally, the Lantian council requests an audience

*Kevin L. Smith*

with you at your convenience.”

“How long will it take us to get there?”

“Our escort will meet us in just under one hour and we’ll be in orbit in two hours.”

“Good,” responded Kevin, “tell the council we’ll be there in just two hours and come straight away. Will you please accompany me, Alleana?”

Kevin’s “please” was not only a courteous request but also a plea for her support. His apprehension was based on the fact that to date he had only met three Lantians, his crew. The terrain, protocols, and customs were absolutely foreign to him. Having Alleana along would certainly relieve some of the pressure.

“It would be my honor to attend you,” answered Alleana.

In the meantime, Chymere had adjusted the forward view on the bridge to display the entire globe that they were approaching. The incredible beauty of the blue and green globe before him left Kevin stunned. It almost looked artificial as he tried to compare the vibrant colors of the planet before him with the more muted colors of his home world. He noted the distinct lack of polar ice and the greater ratio of water to land. Lantis was obviously an old, but well-maintained world. Mesmerized as he was Kevin was unsure exactly how much time had passed when Alleana interrupted his trance.

“I did not know if you were aware, but we are now within portal doorway range. Would you like me to open a door to the council building now, or do you prefer to wait until we reach orbit?” she asked.

Kevin pulled his thoughts together in an effort to ascertain what Alleana was referring to. He recalled the underwater cavern that had resembled his childhood home in the wilderness and the phantasmal opening that had granted him access to Et’Lantis originally. Then he contemplated the workings of the dimensional portal system used to travel through space. The sum of his mental calculation was correct.

“You generate a miniature portal that we can step through,” Kevin said it as a statement, not a question.

“We do. Are you ready to see the council at this time? I have permission to join you.”

“Are you in communication with them now?” Kevin asked.

His curiosity was understandable as he watched Alleana mediate for him.

"I am. All Lantians within a reasonable range can be in communication with the Centrex Memory Core and so can be in contact with each other. It is how we share knowledge, ideas, information, even converse over a distance," explained Alleana.

"Amazing!" replied Kevin as he contemplated the ramifications of such an incredible form of communication and of medium range transportation. "Alright let's go see how everything went."

Kevin and Alleana stepped lightly through the portal that led them from their ship to the Lantian home world. As before, the travel was less like travel and more like walking through a door. There was no disorientation or vertigo as one might expect after traversing such an extreme distance, nor was there any dissolution and reintegration of his body as some theorists had previously speculated would be necessary when utilizing a form of dimensional travel. They simply walked through to the other side and found themselves in a vast lobby that was elegantly and esthetically decorated throughout with plant life, waterfalls, fountains, artificial streams carrying water here and there at varying speeds, and well placed modern furnishings. The sound of ethereal music danced enchantingly in and out of the range of Kevin's hearing. It was more like ambience than music. The bells and exotic instruments mimicked perfectly the personality of the waters around him that seemed to have a life of their own. He closed his eyes for a moment picturing a peaceful, secluded Italian grotto he had once experienced. The great hall could have passed for a paradisiacal park save for the smooth stone floor, diffused light ceiling, and immense wall of curved transparent crystal that dominated the full length of one entire side of the great atrium.

Kevin crossed over to the transparent wall as the portal they had arrived through silently vanished. The panoramic view before him informed Kevin that he was actually standing in a building and on a floor several hundred feet above the ground. It also displayed the magnificent vista of Lantis' capital city, Teralandra. Everywhere Kevin looked was a feast to the eyes with amazing geometrically shaped constructs and edifices, each a work of art and many seemingly impossibly balanced and designed. Some of the sculptured buildings were connected and

*Kevin L. Smith*

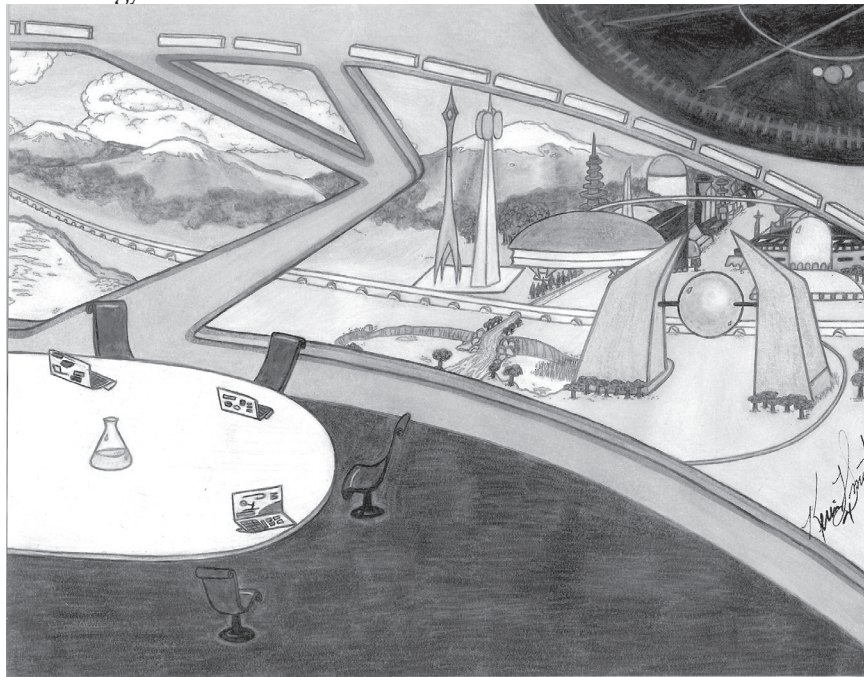
intertwined with suspended roads and walkways. Crystalline spires and metal structures appeared to be married to gardens, lush greenery, and blue waters. He couldn't have imagined a more extraordinarily beautiful city. As he peeled his attention away from the fantasy scene before him he noted that he had been holding his breath.

Alleana had stepped to his side and spoke in an undertone of near reverence for whatever reason, "Teralandra is beautiful, is it not?"

"Beyond comprehension. My mind doesn't want to believe what it's registering. You have an amazing planet and culture here, Alleana. I'm glad we were able to have a hand in preserving it."

"As am I. My whole world wants to thank you. Even now I hear them speaking. Please, follow me this way."

Together they walked down the lengthy corridor toward the council chambers of Lantis. Every step they took revealed further evidence of the wondrously beautiful merge between nature and technology that the Lantians had attained.



Kevin remained awestruck as they arrived at the massive double doors that would open unto the chamber of the council hall of Lantis. The ornately carved dark wooden doors appeared to bear images which could tell stories if they could be completely comprehended. Two

Lantian males dressed in white robes tied with black and gold sashes manned the doors. As Kevin and Alleana approached, the attendants bowed deeply and then reaching up they touched corresponding spots on the two doors causing them to slowly and silently glide open.

The sparsely albeit gracefully decorated hall before them was dominated by a large obsidian black oval table with seven black high back chairs set at seven positions around the table. Each position housed a crystal monitor and console that continued to flash data and information to whomever would accept it. As in the atrium lobby, the council hall had a transparent angled wall on one side that offered yet another amazing view of the city.

The council members, already standing as Kevin and Alleana entered the room, had obviously been informed of their arrival. As he approached, six Lantian council members a wave intense emotion washed over and through him – taking him aback for a moment. Kevin recognized deep sorrow emanating from the being in front of him, and to a lesser extent, from each person present. Kevin took immediate stock of the situation and came to the only logical conclusion.

“A council member is missing sir. I gather it was someone very dear to you,” was Kevin’s first words to the council head.

Bren bowed his head for a moment before responding, “Yes, Tarala was connected to me. Each of us considered her a close friend. She commanded one of our Star-Cruiser class ships. It was amongst the first ship targeted by the invaders. She and many others are gone from us and the pain of their loss continues.”

Anock was fascinated and found himself asking, “Pardon me for one moment. But, Daedalus, do I understand that you are sensing our emanations?”

“I guess so, though I am unsure as to how.”

Kevin paused for a brief time looking down and allowing the emotion to wash over and effect him, then permitting it to diminish ever so slightly so that he could speak without his voice showing the sensation he felt.

“I hope I’m not being presumptuous in calling you friends, but I want you to know how sorry I am for not arriving sooner.”

A tear welled up and rolled down Kevin’s cheek as he looked back up and into Bren’s eyes. He was unsure why he was being so affected

*Kevin L. Smith*

and decided to attempt to change the tenor of the situation.

"I am relieved, however, that we succeeded in driving out your enemies and preserving your world and people for now."

Bren collected himself, and remembering all that was owed to this man responded, "Please grant us forgiveness. We indeed call you friend. You have given us our lives and hope for a future. We are derelict in our duty by not properly introducing ourselves."

Alleana enthusiastically leapt at the opportunity to interact, "Kevin Cade, this is Brendellin, head of the Lantian council. Anock is the council historian..."

Anock bowed courteously.

Alleana continued, "...Cheri is responsible for technology development, Kayleigh cares for activities on our other two worlds, Daenae cares for Lantis' needs as does Sappira, and Tarala of course is no longer with us."

Bren stepped forward towards Alleana and Kevin with an outstretched hand, "Alleana, I neglected to congratulate you a splendid job. I... we didn't think success was possible. But here you are, and here is Daedalus, and we truly are appreciative of all you both have accomplished. Daedalus, please call me Bren. And as for being the leader here, that is no more. Instead, you are now leader of all you see and know of us. Today is indeed a grand day for all Lantis, and we welcome you as the one our makers long ago foresaw would be the individual that would be capable of helping us in our direst of times. You have earned the right to lead us, so we are yours to direct."

With that Bren and the rest of the council members bowed and then looked up, each smiling approvingly.

Taken aback, Kevin was still quick to respond, "Bren, council members, I'm humbled by the honor you would bestow upon me, however it's not really my style to be the big boss. You seem to have a thriving culture and a peaceful world. I doubt that you really need another bureaucrat messing with things."

It was Anock's turn to respond: "Daedalus, you don't understand! When our makers were exterminated many hundreds of years ago we were condemned to extinction as well. All that you see around us, everything we are, is as it has been from the day they died off. We are a stagnant people, as you must surely understand by now. Like humans



who die from degradation, we are deteriorating. Our makers, the Primarians, knew of our limitations as well as the threat of their demise and so made plans for your appearance with your Citidel at the proper time. You are not an accident. If you refuse to help us even though our enemies are no more, then you sentence us to an ignominious end.”

“I guess I didn’t fully comprehend the big picture...” said Kevin as he paused, thoughtfully contemplating past events in the context of what Anock had just revealed, “...and as for your enemies...I don’t know who they are, but I seriously doubt that your, or our, troubles with them are over. They seem to have developed an unrelenting interest in you that dates back a very long time. I know that there are more of them, and they don’t seem like the kind that give up.”

“What do you base your conclusions on, Daedalus?” asked Kayleigh.

“A couple of facts. First, they must have studied your Makers very carefully in order to develop such an effective bio-weapon against them. Next, I doubt that the Primarians would have gone to such great lengths to prepare against a minor threat. And finally, the message that they sent.”

Shock appeared on all the council members’ faces.

Daenae was first to explain why, “We have *never* communicated with, or heard of communication between the “Others”. What was the message?”

Kevin explained, “It was short and simple. They sent it out just before we pushed them into oblivion. They said...“We have failed, Daedalus is still alive.” They knew who we were and were worried enough to try to chase us down and finish us off. If I’m right something really big is going on and even my home planet is in the middle of it all. But I know this for sure, they’ll be back.”

“Your assessment is logical,” responded Anock as he mentally analyzed this new twist to a long unanswered puzzle, “and it further emphasizes the desperation of our situation. We need you to help us, to direct us, to lead us. You scrutinize things differently than we do. You see ways to innovate and adapt where we cannot. You can show us everything. If you do not wish rulership over us, we understand and respect that. But at least lead us that we may follow. Give us a hope for the future. We want to live!”

*Kevin L. Smith*

Kevin stared back at the six sets of eyes riveted upon him. He felt like he was wading through a chaotic mental spider web of events attempting to organize themselves and coalesce around him. It was as if his life was flashing before his eyes. But that only happened when you died, didn't it? Or had he died? He had died with respect to his old life perhaps. Certainly he had been altered starting at a very young age by a Renok-Torlan, a memory recorder and by an intelligent entity buried in Earth's oceans for millennia. More changes had been effected after only a few hours in a gene sequencer. Kevin Cade had never been a normal man and he could tell that he was changing even more now.

One moment the weight of the universe rested upon his shoulders and the next moment he felt a freedom that only genuine power afforded. Still, an elusive anxiety nagged at him, the kind of discomfort one feels when one has no idea what's wrong. Kevin tried to shelf the disconcerting sensation, chalking it up to an understandable touch of paranoia. It was to be expected after all that he had been through; a space battle light years from Earth on a ship the size of a small city that had been given to him by means of a prophetic decree outline thousands of years in the past. Still... A moment of biofeedback cleansed his mind, no longer a Torlan-enhanced mind. He was now ready to embrace his destiny. Could he do that without becoming that which he so completely despised... haughty, arrogant, power hungry? He knew well the saying, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely!" However, there were some amazing possibilities!

"Okay folks, I'll give it a try. We'll see if I can help. But If I start to get out of hand I want you to kick me to the curb," came Kevin's reply.

The council stared back at him questioningly as Bren voiced their lack of understanding, "I am sorry, but what does "kick to the curb" mean?"

"Just an Earth expression which means that if I ever start abusing the tools or authority you are granting me I want you to stop me. In fact I will give my first order here and now; I require that this council, with Brendellin as its head, remain in operation for as long as Lantis continues to exist, and may that be a very long time."

Anock allowed a grin to spread across his elegantly intellectual and handsomely chiseled face as he spoke, "It is as was foretold; that



Daedalus would come, and that he would be a man of great humility, not desiring authority, but willing to help at all costs. We now know you are the Seedling our Makers planned for. Do you plan to help your world as well?"

"I am not sure that there is anything that I can do. My world isn't exactly a people open to agreement or unity. I could do more harm than good... I don't know."

"The prophecy contains a story. It may help, or perhaps provide some answers. Would you like me to recite it?" asked Anock.

"Sure. Can we sit?" responded Kevin to his query.

Bren directed all to seat themselves at the table, offering Kevin Tarala's vacated chair, while Kayleigh slipped out to another room to procure a seat for Alleana. After all were comfortable Anock began his recitation.

"This prophetic verse has been transliterated to your language which we now speak due to the Centrex Core. The Core has rewritten the poetic verse, so I am unsure as to the exact reproduction, but this is how it is rendered now..."

"His wings fold gently at his sides, as fore the council stands he.  
Commands are given from the heads, a planet, Earth, he should see.

"Across the void there sits a world, that's on the brink of death.  
For all the creatures living there, don't know the worth of breath.

They need our help, and very soon, each world's demise can hurt.

So you must go and use you light, put life back in their dirt.

And clean the water, sea, and air. Your power, it can do this.  
Use radiant light within yourself, just get real close and don't miss."

Daedalus now speaks his mind, "I'll do just as you ask.  
But send with me a partner please, to help me do this task."

*Kevin L. Smith*

The council heads agreed to this, and picked for him a mate.  
A wondrous one with azure wings, to help him meet his fate.

They brought to him this beauty fair. Lysia was her name.  
Her radiant face showed in the sun, her hair a fiery mane.

Her slender body's curvature, showed through her clinging  
gown.  
Her shinning wings of gossamer were folded back and down.

To Daedalus she bowed herself. He bowed to her as well.  
In one fell swoop poor Daedalus; so deep in love he fell.

To fall in love with just a look to Daedalus seemed wrong.  
But here he was in love with her, a love he knew was strong.

He touched her face and took her hand. They left the council  
hall.  
The time had come to take their leave. To answer their great  
call.

She lifted up her soft star wings and let them raise her high.  
Daedalus unfolded his. Together they would fly.

Above the glorious vast expanse they rose up hand in hand.  
And wondered when again they'd see their home, this beauteous  
land.

Portals opened well for them as speed began to rise.  
Their bright star wings caught white star steams, as space shrank  
down in size.

Stars flew by and pulsars throbbed as intertwined they flew.  
Together they were stronger here as power merged from two.

But power squared was more, you see, than space could safely

share.

A star came by and solar flared and tore apart the pair.

Daedalus was thrown away. Lysia was thrown too.

Apart the two now found themselves. The pain *she* felt was new.

Her body arched through space awhile and came upon a world.

A brown and ugly, dirty place before Lysia unfurled.

The fear in her grew wild now. She knew not what to do.

Her Daedalus was gone from her. She felt her life was through!

Now Daedalus searched frantically to find his love so sweet.

He looked for her through all the stars. It was too hard a feat.

His failure weighed upon his heart, pain wracked him through and through.

But time was running out for Earth. He had a job to do.

He didn't want to stop his search, but off to Earth he went.

Alone it took more time this time to go where he'd been sent.

Lysia now was being hurt, from this, where she had come.

She just could not escape this place for what was done by some.

This world, it seemed much worse than most, all filled with hate and strife.

The fighting here, it never stopped. How could there be a life?

Lysia's wings were scorched with flame, her body wracked with war.

Her tender frame was weakened so, her mind so cold and sore.

She had to get away from here. She could not wait too long.

The savage violence of this place would soon be her "Death Song".

*Kevin L. Smith*

With gasping breath and broken heart Lysia bowed her head.  
She felt her life force leaving her upon this world's deathbed.

Suddenly a warmth she felt, a light not of this place  
All around her life had died, but glow came to her face.

Daedalus had found the Earth that he was sent to heal.  
He came too late to save the men, the rest he'd save with zeal.

His radiant light fixed waterfall, fixed river, stream, and pool.  
The land he cleaned, the air was cleared. The Earth was made a  
jewel.

As Daedalus restored the birds and creatures one and all,  
His senses touched his loving mate, his love lost in their fall.

He flew to her and picked her up, he held her oh so tight.  
He felt the spark of life in her then filled her with his light.

She looked at him and smiled anew, all pain had left her soul.  
Together they would work here now. Make Earth new pole to  
pole.

Before them was a wondrous place that wanted for mankind.  
The magic couple here would stay. A precious life they'd find.

...And that is as close a rendition as is possible after so much  
time," continued Anock after his recital. "As to what it all means and  
when it did, or does find a fulfillment I cannot say."

Kevin was moved and somewhat taken aback by what he had  
heard. The poetry's underlying hint at danger unnerved him in an  
almost inexplicable way. And then he found himself wanting to just  
tell them all that this was classic proof that prophecies that are over-  
applied tend to break down rapidly, but he held his tongue in check.  
What he needed now was time to think about all that had taken place  
to date and then to decide how he could and would fit into the grand

plan outlined by a centuries dead group of people that had attained so much only to lose it to an unrelenting enemy that was showing no signs of going away.

Kevin's thoughts now strayed to Didi. She couldn't be the Lysia of that poem could she? It just didn't fit nor did it make sense. All he knew for sure was that he wanted to see her and to talk to her about all that had taken place. He found himself wishing he hadn't left her and Brittany behind. But what was done was done. And now here he was, agreeing to a certain level of complicity with respect to these desperate people. From this point on it was just a matter of how far he would go. Didi would help him reason on the matter, he respected her intuition.

Kevin finally responded to Anock's recitation, "I don't understand what it is that convinces you all that I am this Daedalus of legend, but..."

"You are *not* the original, but his seed, Kevin," came a soft but familiar female voice from behind him.

The silent council hall doors had admitted a new individual to the chambers. As she stepped forward, all stood, obvious surprise on their faces.

"First One, welcome," called out Bren.

Kevin turned allowing his gaze to settle upon one of the most strikingly beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her blonde hair cascaded down below her waist. Amethyst eyes stared back at the council members confidently. Her high cheekbones and full ruby lips accentuated a flawlessly sculpted face. Her tall frame appeared to be clothed in an argent suit that fit her so tightly it appeared that her body had been painted with mercury. Kevin blushed, but maintained eye contact with the girl so as not to appear flustered.

"I no longer use that title. I have given myself the name Aurora."

Stunned, Kevin's eyebrows shot up his forehead, "Aurora, I didn't know that you were real...I mean that you were a person... I mean, well you know what I mean."

"I do. I am corporeal. However I generally remain physically linked to Et'Lantis. I can disengage due to our proximity to the Centrex Core. The Core allows me to maintain a complete mental link."

"I gather the name First One came from being the..."

*Kevin L. Smith*

“Yes, the first one. My purpose and design was simply to augment the Citidel, however the Primarians considered me such a success that an entire biomechanical race was embarked upon. As to your name,” Aurora approached the table beckoning all to return to their seats, as she remained standing, “You are the son of Daedalus. I can go into greater detail at another time, but for now understand that your father Bradley Cade was *very* old. He was the progeny of Primarians, meaning you are, too. As he grew older he took advantage of the Recombinant Gene Sequencers aboard Et’Lantis for some time before all the Primarians were recalled home, and I was hidden away until such time as I was needed. Your father remained behind and blended in, adapting and hiding his identity so well that I was unable to gain knowledge of his whereabouts until the middle of the twentieth century, Earth calendar. It was then that his wealth and reputation brought him to the forefront and you along with him.”

“How is that even possible?” Kevin asked, “I saw him growing older.”

“The effects of a sequencer are not permanent, Daedalus. Without continued access to the device the results are temporary, relatively speaking. Eventually, your father’s DNA began deteriorating again from replication.”

Kevin wanted to be stunned by the revelation, but the truth of the matter was that he hadn’t been blessed with much time with his father.

“So I inherit the title?”

“And the responsibility! I believe your father was killed to prevent him from interceding in any way with respect to Lantian matters. I also believe you were targeted. It was why I helped you.”

The revelations that came flooding into Kevin’s mind were almost too much to cope with. His face belied a state of mental tranquility. However, the fact that he was receiving long sought for answers to his questions left him ecstatic.

“One more thing you might wish to know.” Aurora addressed Kevin, “Your father had another son of his own, long ago while the Primarians were still on Earth. You may be familiar with his original name, Icarus. He too accessed the sequencer on many occasions. I never succeeded in finding him after I was placed in hibernation. I do

not know if he still lives, but if so he would be your brother.”

“There is so much, I scarcely know where to begin.” Kevin said.

He felt an overwhelming urge to just go back home and continue his life in the direction it was already going. He had Didi and Brittany to think about. How could he expect them to join him in this bizarre fantasy life? They deserved a level of normality, a stable milieu to function in. He had been deprived of that at childhood. There was no sense in resenting anyone for it. In fact it had been a unique experience that now he wouldn't trade for anything. But to thrust such on another purposely seemed cruel and insensitive. On the other hand it was obvious that he had been propelled into a series of events that finally were beginning to see a culmination, a light at the end of the tunnel of sorts. His family needed to be part of his decision-making process. It was only right that they have some say in matters of this consequence.

All eyes had continued upon him in respectful silence until he finally came to a resolution, “I will help you get started and we will see where this all takes us. Please be patient with me, and I'll try not to let you down. I'm not making any long-range promises, mind you. But I should be able to offer some direction.”

“It is more than we hoped for only a short time ago. Know that we will serve in any way you wish. Just give us the opportunity to...” it was Bren's turn to hesitate for a few seconds before continuing, “...live.”

The gravity of their situation was still sinking into Kevin's brain. He was beginning to fathom the dire circumstances the Lantians were in. Could they really be thousand year old children in need of guidance? Time would tell. But until he knew more about the situation he was resolved to prevent the contaminating of their culture. Additionally, to pull off all he hoped to do for them would require substantial resources.

“I think that the first order of business is to take care of your people here.” Kevin began as he outlined his wish to expand the Lantian fleet. “Aurora, share everything there is on the construction and design of Et'Lantis. Then scale down the size by about one fifth and build as many of them as you can. I still don't understand why you were built so large, Aurora.”

“I believe a planetary evacuation of Earth was anticipated at one

*Kevin L. Smith*

time.” Aurora replied.

Kevin didn’t stop to mull over this disclosure, instead he continued, “Arm the ships well and install more dimension generators in each ship, as many as can practically fit on them. This should offer some tactical advantage. Next we need outposts. Do I understand that you currently occupy two other planets?”

“Yes,” offered Kayleigh, the council member whose sphere of responsibility included oversight of these “off worlds”. “Bramidion is a world much like Lantis. We have a small city built there and several Lantians care for and watch over that world. We have little use for it as a planet. However, the second world we inhabit, Chthon, is quite different. At one time we believe it was much like your Earth, however some cataclysm altered the environment radically. Now the planet is harsh, with drastically changing and very unpredictable climatology. Surface temperatures rarely fall below one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. The few life forms that remain on Chthon seem to be mostly hostile. Some water and vegetation exist, but hardly enough to support a thriving world of people.”

“That doesn’t sound like much a spot to hang on to. Why are you keeping it?” asked Kevin.

“The world is rich in natural resources. As harsh as the environment is, the planet affords us with an almost limitless supply of raw materials. In fact we have seven different mines and three processing plants working there at all times. We have quite a stock pile of minerals and fire diamonds.” Kayleigh answered.

“Fire diamonds?” Kevin asked inquisitively.

“Yes, fire diamonds. Energy amplification crystals. They are the source of all the power we use. Here,” offered Kayleigh, “let me give you one.”

The gemstone, about the size of a large nut, was cut in the shape of a sphere, but without any curves. Each cut was flat, with many hundreds of small cuts forming a small globe. What really drew Kevin’s attention was the way the stone seemed to glow brightly from inside its core.

“The light you are seeing inside,” she explained, “is the fire diamond amplifying ambient energy around us. Is it not beautiful?”

“Very,” said Kevin as he stared, almost mesmerized, into the heart



of the crystal. "Is it safe?"

"As it is here, yes. But it can be made to be very powerful. The stone is rare on our world," said Kayleigh, "but plentiful on Chthon."

"I can understand now why invaders would want to take possession of Lantis. And if they ever find out about Chthon..." Kevin's thoughts trailed off.

"No one else knows about it," assured Anock, "Chthon was a very late discovery. The secret is safe. In fact no one that goes there leaves unless they know the secret of that world."

"Really," mused Kevin. "That gives me an idea."

He began to anticipate the possibilities of utilizing such vast resources. He wanted to explore the avenue of attracting intellectual assets in an effort to advance the technology now available to him. But he also recognized the potential dangers. First and foremost, there was the danger of powerful technology in the hands of inexperienced or evil men. Next, there was the danger of contamination of the Lantian culture by unscrupulous and selfish individuals. He needed to successfully sequester each level of people while maximizing the benefits and advancements that each could offer the other. Bramidion would be perfect for this part of his vision. But then, Chthon also offered some intriguing possibilities beyond the obvious, though Kevin doubted all would agree with him.

"I would like the opportunity to recruit some help for us. But I don't want to reveal the existence of Lantis for a while," said Kevin in response to this new data, "Would you allow me to use Bramidion as a location to bring some potential talent to help us?"

The council murmured amongst themselves for a few seconds before Bren spoke, "Daedalus, we appreciate your consideration in asking us for our permission to use resources, but please understand that our worlds, our ships, even we as people are yours to use as you see fit. We only ask that you let us know what you require of us and we will do our best to fulfill your directions."

"I don't know if I can get used to this," replied Kevin, "but okay then, let's set up the city on Bramidion to accept human occupants. Assign some Lantians to act as liaison and assist where possible. Remember, no one speaks to the humans about Lantis or Chthon. Also, I may want to use Chthon as a penal colony some time in the

*Kevin L. Smith*

future. Set up some shelter, not too comfortable. Then put up shield walls around our facilities on Chthon. I want the plants and mines to be inaccessible to inhabitants.”

“Next,” he continued, realizing that he had veered off the subject he had started on, “as I said earlier, we need to build up your fleet of ships. You have my instructions on the scaled down Citidels; we’ll call them Katana class ships. Concentrate on building these; we can use them for everything from defense to transport.”

“Another thing,” Kevin directed his comments toward Aurora, “I want to set up a base of operations on Earth and another on the moon. Maybe that little spot in the ocean where I found you will work.”

“Then would you like to take along some mermaids to assist us?” asked Aurora.

Kevin stared back at Aurora blankly. It wasn’t that he was tired of being surprised or shocked, it was that just when he thought he had seen or heard the most outlandish, extraordinary thing, then something more fantastic came along.

“Mermaids you say? Real mermaids?” asked Kevin

“Of course,” replied Daenae from across the table. “They were created at almost the same time as the Lantians. There are only a few physiological differences between them and us. And the Primarians believed that they would be a logical addition to a world of mostly water.”

“It does seem logical,” said Kevin, “I just wasn’t expecting it. I’ve always been fascinated by the myths surrounding “mer-people” back on Earth. Wait a minute. Lantian mermaids haven’t been to Earth before have they?”

“Not to the best of my knowledge,” responded Anock, as all turned to him for an answer.

“Well it doesn’t matter. If some would like to volunteer... I mean, okay,” said Kevin remembering he’s not supposed to ask, but to tell, and feeling a bit silly in the mean time, “Send fifty mermaids with us to assist in the setup and manning of our new underwater base and assign whoever we need to set up a base on the moon.”

It took just over an hour more for Kevin to complete outlining plans and to provide instructions he decided would be in the Lantians best interests while he was gone. When he had finished, Aurora took

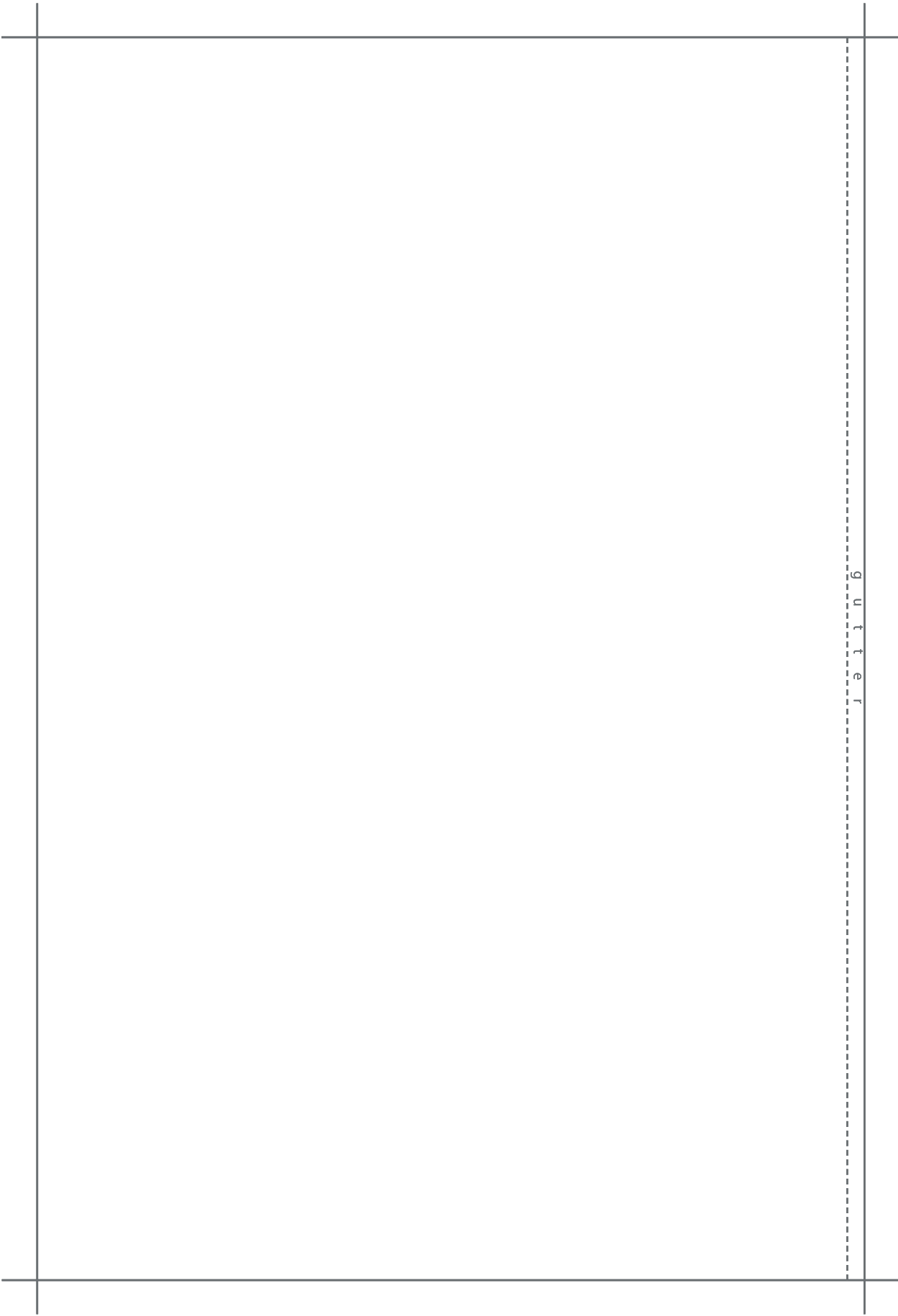
her leave, heading back to Et'Lantis to expedite repairs and the stocking of materials for purposed projects. Bren, Alleana, and Kevin enjoyed a tour of Teralandra, while the rest of the council members went about their respective assignments and newly relegated duties.

The excursion around the city was even more breathtaking than the vista that had enthralled Kevin before from his vantage point high atop the council building. Water, lush gardens, and elegant constructs blended perfectly to form more of a park than a city. And yet, it was indeed a beautiful and functional city. Everywhere they went Lantians greeted Kevin as Daedalus, thanking him for his hand in saving them. He found himself even more endeared to the people than before. But time was indeed up. Additional repairs to the ship could take place while she was under way. Kevin needed to get back to Earth and get things started. But most importantly he needed to get back to Didi. She would certainly be getting concerned about his welfare by now and he had an uneasy feeling himself. He chalked it up to the fact that he hadn't been apart from her for more than a few hours at a time since their wedding, and now he missed her deeply.

"Bren," said Kevin, "I want to thank you for the tour. We need to be going now, but I will be back shortly and we'll continue to get everything on track. Take good care while I'm away and remember that if you need me before I return, just send a ship." He turned momentarily toward his companion, "Alleana, get us a doorway to Et'Lantis and tell Aurora to prepare to leave for Earth as soon as possible."

Bren placed a hand on Kevin's shoulder as if not wanting him to leave, "We will begin implementing your directions immediately, and we look forward to your quick homecoming, for as far as we are concerned this is your home now."

"Thank you my friend. We'll be back soon," said Kevin as he took Bren's hand, shook it, and then turned to depart.



quitter



## CHAPTER TWELVE

ONCE aboard Et'Lantis, Kevin wasted no time heading for the bridge. The once isolated location was now teeming with Lantian crewmembers busy at various tasks in preparation for embarkation. Alleana, Chymere, and Aylueye were the only faces that he recognized, and they were at their stations faithfully attending to the duties at hand.

"Alleana," called out Kevin, "I'm glad to see that you and the girls are still with me."

"It seemed appropriate that I remain here for now, considering that we have developed a relationship and function well together. Beside that I have no ship of my own," she chided respectfully.

"Ouch, that hurts," came his retort. "I'll tell you what. I'll make it up to you if we can get going. Get us back to Earth as quickly as you can. And you don't have to circumnavigate any of the safety protocols this time."

"As you wish and thank you. We will leave orbit in five minutes," she replied.

Kevin turned and started to leave, but Alleana wasn't satisfied, "Daedalus, I ask your pardon but how do you plan to make it up to me?"

"Oh, simple," he responded over his shoulder, "I'm giving you this ship as second in command. And Chymere and Aylueye are my thirds right under you."

He turned to face the three girls, "Your people owe each of you a great deal of honor, and I for one plan to see that you get it. But

*Kevin L. Smith*

either way I'm keeping you three as close to me as possible because I trust you."

The bridge complement had all stopped to watch the exchange, but all of Lantis had experienced it through the Centrex Core. If Lantians could blush, the three girls Kevin had just addressed would now be the color of Alleana's hair. Instead they each proudly nodded in a gesture of appreciation and respect and then resumed their respective duties.

"Alleana, you are in charge," said Kevin as he again headed for the exit to the bridge, "Take us home. I'm going for a little tour of this monster, and I think I'll see what they put onboard in the way of food."

Kevin realized that there was no way that he could see all of Et'Lantis on a single excursion. She was simply too massive to explore completely. But a nice cross section seemed in order, and so he headed out to visit one of the principle decks in the main fuselage.

If he hadn't acquired a rudimentary knowledge of the layout of his ship from his last Torlan-infused memory download, Kevin would have been hopelessly lost almost immediately. Fortunately he had that working awareness, and then there was always Aurora.

"Aurora, where am I heading now?"

"According to my sensors you are approaching level seven, forward habitat nine A. It is currently inhabited by nine Lantians," cited Aurora factually.

No sooner had her report concluded than Kevin passed from a narrow corridor leading from a transport elevator into a large mall like causeway lined on both the right and left sides with storefront like enclosures which he suspected led to a form of housing. The well-lit, futuristically-designed walkway was the size of a standard four-lane highway and approximately twenty feet high. The end of the habitat stretched about one city block forward from Kevin's current position. The spotlessly maintained mall reminded him of the Council building hallway he had first arrived in on his arrival to Lantis. It was adorned with waterfalls and fountains, some operational and some dormant. Readily obvious was the distinct lack of vegetation and greenery so

prevalent in Lantian architecture. Kevin figured that it was due to Et'Lantis' long hibernation and that quite possibly the omission would be rectified in the near future.

As Kevin started to enter one of the habitat openings he noted three Lantians sitting at a table inside. Almost immediately upon seeing him approach they, in unison, leapt up and approached him.

"May we be of some service, Daedalus?" asked the only male present.

Each of the three bore the same youthful, attractive, and vital features that all Lantians Kevin had met thus far seemed to have. The beauty of youth forever etched into an entire race of people, and kind to a fault as well.

"Please, relax," Kevin responded apologetically, "It was not my intention to disturb you. I'm just taking a short tour of the ship to get to know her better, you know, see where everything is."

"Join us, please," said one of the girls, "I am Andrela, this is Capri, and this is Oran. We would be honored to have you visit with us."

"Thanks," said Kevin, grateful for some company for a little while. "Would you show me around your place?"

The three, obviously elated to have a visiting dignitary, wasted no time in show-casing the domicile, which turned out to be the size of a well appointed home. It included four comfortably large private bed chambers, three complete restroom facilities, a fully-equipped kitchen, two good size common rooms, and two utility laboratories that could be upgraded to support almost any field of study. All in all, Kevin decided that any but the most snobbish of human families would be most pleased with the accommodations.

After the tour of the residence the four ventured out onto the mall to inspect some other key aspects of the quadrant, including the recreational and exercise facility complete with a pool, a storage facility that looked almost exactly like a small grocery store, and additional places that seemed capable of meeting any and all of the needs of human and Lantian inhabitants alike. It appeared to Kevin that literally hundreds of individuals could live comfortably here in this section, and there were hundreds of such sections. It seemed like a tremendous waste of space, but who knew what the future might bring.

After spending some time with the engaging trio of Lantians

*Kevin L. Smith*

Kevin took his leave to again strike out on his own. He had spent several hours wandering through engineering sections, and engine nacelles when a singular question struck him.

“Aurora,” called out Kevin, knowing she would hear and respond, “Where are you?”

“I am here. I am everywhere on this vessel, it and I are one.”

“No, I mean where is your corporeal body within the ship. I wish to come see you.”

Aurora’s hesitation was just long enough to be noticeable, but she finally responded, “My exact position aboard this vessel is and has always been a closely guarded secret for obvious security reasons, Daedalus.”

Kevin took note of the more formal address and quizzed her, “I see, so you are refusing to divulge this information to me?”

“No,” she answered, “I will direct you to my location if you tell me to.”

“Direct me...”

Fifteen minutes later Kevin found himself in a central location of the main fuselage, in a dimly-lit, obviously-sequestered hallway facing a door with a plaque over it containing a symbol that looked like a single simple circle around a star. He was still trying to understand why Aurora had been evasive when the doorway opened revealing an empty semi-circular room about twenty feet in diameter. Once inside, the doorway closed and locking mechanisms could be heard falling into place.

“You are with me now,” Aurora proclaimed, “What you are about to see is the prototype of what we call the Centrex Core. I was the first core built, and subsequently installed into this ship. No other Lantian ships have such a core. The only other core in existence is on Lantis.”

With that factual proclamation the entire back section of the wall slid away to the right and left leaving Kevin with an unobstructed view of Aurora with her arms outstretched over her head, standing in, or more appropriately, absorbed into a structure of conduit, wiring, mechanics, and equipment flashing and pulsing in an electronic rhythm only she could comprehend. Cold temperatures touched him, and the smell of ozone filled the air, as electricity seemed to dance between isolated terminals. Behind her, a fire diamond almost two feet



in diameter glowed and throbbed brightly as it remained suspended by multidirectional conduits emanating from it. Aurora's long blond hair flowed forward and over her, as tiny metal robotic spiders scampered around transferring leads from one place to another around her. Behind and to both sides of her and the diamond that amplified power for her, were machines and equipment that Kevin couldn't begin to identify. Crystal consoles provided relevant data. The overwhelming complexity left Kevin speechless. He was reminded of a butterfly caught in a giant spider web, and he felt the urge to run forth and pull Aurora free from the trap she was caught in.

"This is not how I would have preferred that you see me, Kevin."

The tenor of her voice was completely different now, soft and almost apologetic. It was as though she was embarrassed.

"I didn't mean to intrude on your privacy," he replied, "I just wanted to see you, to see how you function with the ship."

"It is not my most attractive moment."

"I beg to differ," said Kevin gallantly, "I've yet to see you more beautiful."

"But this is only the second time you have ever seen me."

"That doesn't change the fact."

The flattery worked its magic as Aurora's countenance changed entirely. All trepidation gone, she invited him to step forward for a closer look at the network of processors that controlled the mighty ship. His inspection revealed nothing he could relate to; it was all beyond his understanding. But seeing Aurora encased in the labyrinth of machinery filled him with wonder. She sensed the awe.

"You are wondering what it is like to be connected like this," she stated as fact.

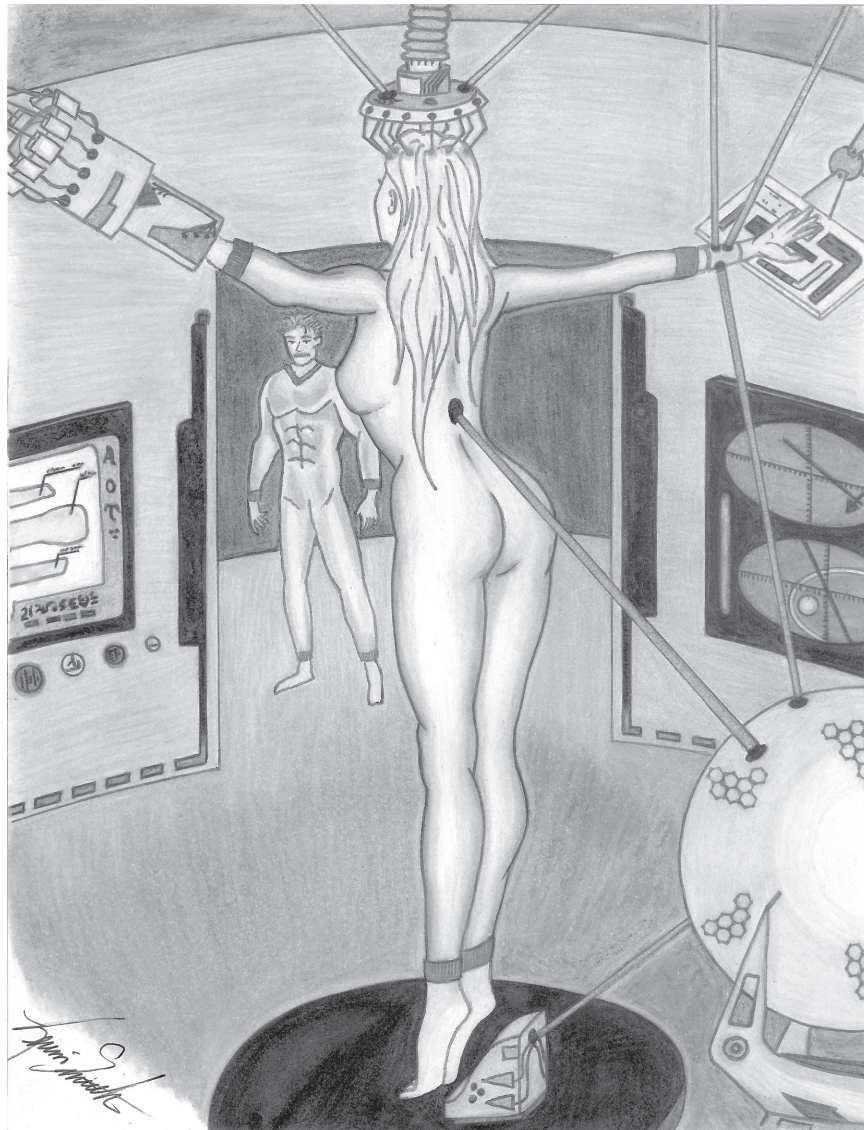
"Yes, I wonder what you feel and..." his voice trailed off as he contemplated the spectacle before him.

"Then you should know," she said plainly.

And as she spoke a panel on a sidewall slid open permitting a slightly inclined, molded couch to slide forth. On the couch lay a silver suit.

"Put on the neural net, and then lay back on the couch," Aurora instructed.

*Kevin L. Smith*



Kevin walked over and picked the suit up. Though it appeared to be fashioned from woven metal thread, it felt like a fine synthetic cloth. The elegantly-styled, futuristic suit was made of material that was elastic and seemed very strong. An emblem of what appeared to be a shark adorned the left chest.

“Why do I need to wear this suit, Aurora?” Kevin queried.

“Though your mind is sufficiently strong to link with the ship, the bio-chemical nature of your body limits access. The suit will act as

an interface for you, connecting you electronically to me. Additionally, the suit will enhance your ability to access and interact with me. It also provides protection from energy shock by absorbing raw power and allowing you to project it at will."

"I like it. It sounds like the perfect uniform."

"I agree. Its properties served to protect many Primarians on Earth when they were interacting with humans. Not all people that they met were cordial."

After disrobing Kevin succeeded in negotiating the new suit, which seemed to conform to his body shape perfectly. It felt more than just comfortable; it felt like an extension of his skin. The temperature, the weight, everything felt perfect.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Lie back in the interlock and relax," she instructed.

As Kevin lay back in the angled lounge his body began to tingle ever so slightly, like mild static electricity prickling his skin. He forced himself to relax only to find that his eyes were beginning to see sparkling lights. Aurora took note of the fact that his apprehension level was beginning to mount.

"You are completely safe, just continue to relax," came her calm, soothing voice.

Kevin acquiesced, forcing himself into a serene state of mind. Moments later his sight was gone. In fact he could feel nothing at all, not temperature, not his own body, no sounds, no smells, no nothing!

"So this is what complete sensory depravation feels like," Kevin tried to say, but ended up only thinking it.

In his studies he had read of such experiments in absolute isolation, but until now had never really experienced it. It was hinted that in that state more than just a heightened state of awareness was possible. His wait however was not to last long. Within what seemed to be only one or two minutes, feelings and sight started to return. But it was different, like an intense, realistic dream. Or maybe it was more like a perfect virtual reality simulator.

He could see stars, the blackness of the heavens in deep space, even a distant nebula blazing, with bright red and blue fiery gases streaking outward from it. But his view wasn't through glass or anything restrictive; he was simply there in the midst of the universe.

*Kevin L. Smith*

Kevin drank up the spectacular panorama like a cold glass of water on a hot summer day. The perception was that he was flying free, completely unencumbered, through the universe on wings of his own. He wondered if this was part of the Lantian prophesy being fulfilled. His senses reeling, he found himself enthralled with the experience. The sheer exhilaration of the moment made him want to speed up, to feel himself carve a hard turn.

As he imagined it, the ship accelerated and then with the port side nacelle lifting high she began a steep turn. The feeling was more exciting than anything he had ever experienced before, and Kevin hadn't been shy about thrill seeking in the past. Not that he had needlessly taken his life into his own hands for a valueless reason. There had always been good causes and proper safety considerations. But this was the epitome of elation.

"You should know that you are causing havoc on the bridge. The crew is in a state of alarm. I have let them know that you are in control," advised Aurora.

"Do you mean that what I'm thinking and feeling is actually happening to the ship?" Kevin asked.

"Yes, this form of control is called 'merging'. It will illicit the fasted response times from Et'Lantis and it is the most efficient form of maneuvering," she answered.

Kevin was startled, "I never expected to...I didn't know I could... It's just so amazing Aurora. I would never have guessed anything so wonderful was possible."

"If I may be permitted," said Aurora, "I will put us back on course. We will need to open a portal soon and we will need to be aligned correctly."

"Of course, go ahead," he responded. "It's just that I would never have believed such a thing was possible if I hadn't done it myself."

As Aurora reset the ships course to coincide with the next jump portal, Kevin began examining the ship, or himself, if he was to understand the workings of the interface correctly, from outer space looking in. He projected his view out and then back at the immense starship, perusing her from all angles. The simple, slender, elegant lines belied power and functionality. The main fuselage, the engine nacelles, and the wings all came together harmoniously to depict a wondrous

work of art. He tried to imagine the mighty vessel being constructed, all the various parts and sections being assembled. He marveled at the tremendous feat of engineering. She was altogether graceful beauty.

As he thought the words in his mind the entire vista before him began to coalesce, to shimmer and transform. Kevin wondered if he was losing his link with the ship when just as suddenly his view began to clear. Before him in all her resplendent and natural beauty was Aurora. There was no time to respond or to change his perspective. He didn't know if he would have, captivated as he was. He found himself in her arms, embracing and intertwined with the soft, silky body. Her long blond hair cascaded over her form like waterfalls spilling over rocks. She languished in fine white gauze that wrapped around, throughout, and beyond her delicate form. The gentle softness of her touch was almost euphoric.

As Kevin looked past their intimate embrace, he noticed that the gauze trailed off to become the stars around them, and that a planet was falling away behind them. A look forward revealed the sun belonging to this system. It was a sun that they would never reach before leaving through a dimension doorway.

A doorway...the portal to space closer to home...he felt the ship preparing to activate a dimension generator. Aurora drew closer to him, as if trying to make themselves smaller. He peered forward so as to see the beams of quantum energy lance forth from one of the nacelles and draw a gigantic circle in space before them. The circle intensified, becoming pronounced. Finally, a pulse of energy burst forth diffusing its power into the circle, which in turn became the dark opening through which they would travel. The starship entered the void and became instantly surrounded by "nothing". Moments later she exited into a new realm of space closer...closer to his wife!

Kevin broke the connection between himself and the ship. He allowed feelings of guilt to wash over him like splashes of unwelcome dirty water. He knew he had done nothing wrong, nor was Aurora at fault in any way. And yet a sense of shame threatened to entangle him in ignominy. No, he refused to suffer the emotion. However he did roll quickly and easily from the lounge/interface he had been laying on. He found himself standing directly before the quantatronic mind he had just been embracing. He stared into her purple eyes silently.

*Kevin L. Smith*

"I sense great conflict in you," said Aurora unabashedly. "Are you well? I am confused."

"And I am not. Confused that is." Cade responded. "You and the ship are one. So when I join with the ship, you and I are one. Is that how it works?"

"Yes. It was quite wonderful. And yet you seem to disapprove somehow."

"It's simple Aurora, when we're together like that, it's like...well... I'm a married man. I'm married to another woman," Kevin was having a difficult time explaining how he was feeling. "It's not right that I am with you that way."

"You still do not completely understand, do you?" stated Aurora as fact rather than question.

Cade stared directly into her sparkling eyes. He marveled at the creation of such a remarkable creature. She was so much more than a machine, more than a computer. He felt something for...it...her. It wasn't infatuation or lust; somehow he knew that it was more than mundane attraction.

"Tell me."

"Kevin," she called him by name instead of title. "This ship is yours, and I am yours. You and I have been united for over forty years," was Aurora's unexpected disclosure. "I have waited for you, completely alone, for more than seventeen hundred years. You could never imagine or understand the absolute isolation I have endured for so long. The loneliness was unbearable. I wasn't created to endure such. Then when the disaster with you and your father occurred I had to take action. We were joined when you found the cave and the Torlan that I left for you. It was necessary to ensure your survival, and the future of Lantis. But being with you, even like that, woke me up and brought me back to life. I had almost forgotten how wonderful it was to be with someone, to be with you. We have been linked for most of your life, I with you. And now that we have interfaced together your neural pathways are familiar with mine and the link is established both ways. I belong to you."

He was sure that her bottom lip quivered ever so slightly as a tear of happiness welled in her eye and began its trek down one cheek. Aurora's unabashed revelation had testified to her absolute innocence.



Kevin thought about lightening the mood of the situation with some infantile retort like “cradle robber”, or “guess I’m a bigamist”, but decided that, not only would it land on unappreciative ears, but also the moment called for a more serious tenor. His heart ached as he felt her emotions inundate him. So many years alone were almost inconceivable. But now, here they were, together. Kevin enjoyed a sense of satisfaction at filling the chasm that time had left in Aurora.

Beyond that, he had finally received the last part of the puzzle that was Kevin Cade, and it fit into place perfectly. The who, what, and how of himself now made sense. The presence that he had always suspected was now explained. Oh sure, there were more questions; there would always be questions. Questions were a part of everyone’s life. But now he understood his life, his direction.

“Thank you Aurora,” said Kevin, touching her face tenderly and wiping the tear that he hadn’t realized Lantians could produce from her cheek. “I’m glad that you’re with me, and I guess I’ve always kind of loved you, in a way.”

An ecstatic wave of joy from her filled his mind. He lingered for a minute in silence as he contemplated the dynamics of a man having a relationship with, or even loving more than one woman. Aurora was undeniably a woman whether she was alien to Earth or not. Or was she really alien? The fact of the matter was that she had lived on Earth longer than anyone else ever had, making her more human than most humans. He might have seen her only twice, but he had known her, or more appropriately felt her with himself for most of his life. The love he felt for her wasn’t based on a sexual attraction. Love didn’t even require sexual intimacy to exist, he decided. Yes, he loved her in a special and inimitable way, and she already knew it as the thought crossed his mind. She smiled at him, and he returned the look and then without speaking another word turned and exited the room.

Suddenly he noticed that he was feeling very tired. Had it crept up on him, or was it a side effect of using the ships interface system? No, it had been some time since he had slept, and he needed to now.

Kevin wandered the corridors for a while wrapped in conflicting thoughts. He struggled to justify the unique situation he found himself in, and then wondered if it was all that unique. His personal controversy had little to do with guilt and more to do with wondering

*Kevin L. Smith*

if his mate would understand. Did he need to justify himself? How would Didi react? There in lay the “rub”. “The rub”? Where did that phase originate? His mind was wandering! He had so much to share with her, so much to explain. She would understand. He had faith in her. He loved her.

Cade meandered, making slow but deliberate progress toward the suite that he had commandeered as his own personal cabin. Not only were the accommodations comfortably large, but the room also contained a Recombinant Gene Sequencer bed, which he planned to take full advantage of.

Upon arrival Kevin enjoyed a repast of exotic fruits and a cold cup of sweetened water. It may have been simple fair, but the distinctive flavors were new to Kevin, and the makeshift meal was a welcome treat that he had enjoyed precious few times since his arrival on Et'Lantis. Later, he told himself, he would be sure to stock the ship with some much needed staples including a well stocked wine cellar and some twelve-year-old Bowmore scotch. Just some of the bare necessities of life. The silly phrase brought back memories of bears and his old friend Fred. Even when he had been left alone by humans, he had had him as a friend. He hoped his old bear companion was doing well and living a good, happy life. His mind was wandering again. His thoughts trailed off as he realized just how exhausted he was.

Cade walked to a communication panel in his room. Activating it he hailed the bridge.

“This is Alleana,” she responded. “May I assist you in some way Daedalus?”

“How long ’till we reach Earth?” he asked.

After a moment the system responded with Alleana’s voice, “We should arrive in approximately twenty-five hours.”

“Good,” he answered. “I need to get some sleep. Call me if I’m needed, but if not, wake me at least one jump before we arrive, okay?”

“Understood, bridge out”

Kevin set aside the metallic suit he had adopted as his new uniform. The room felt just a bit chilly after wearing a suit that regulated his body temperature so precisely. He lay down on the bed, making use of the bedspread on top, and then reaching over he duplicated the steps Alleana had initiated the first time he had been introduced to an RGS.

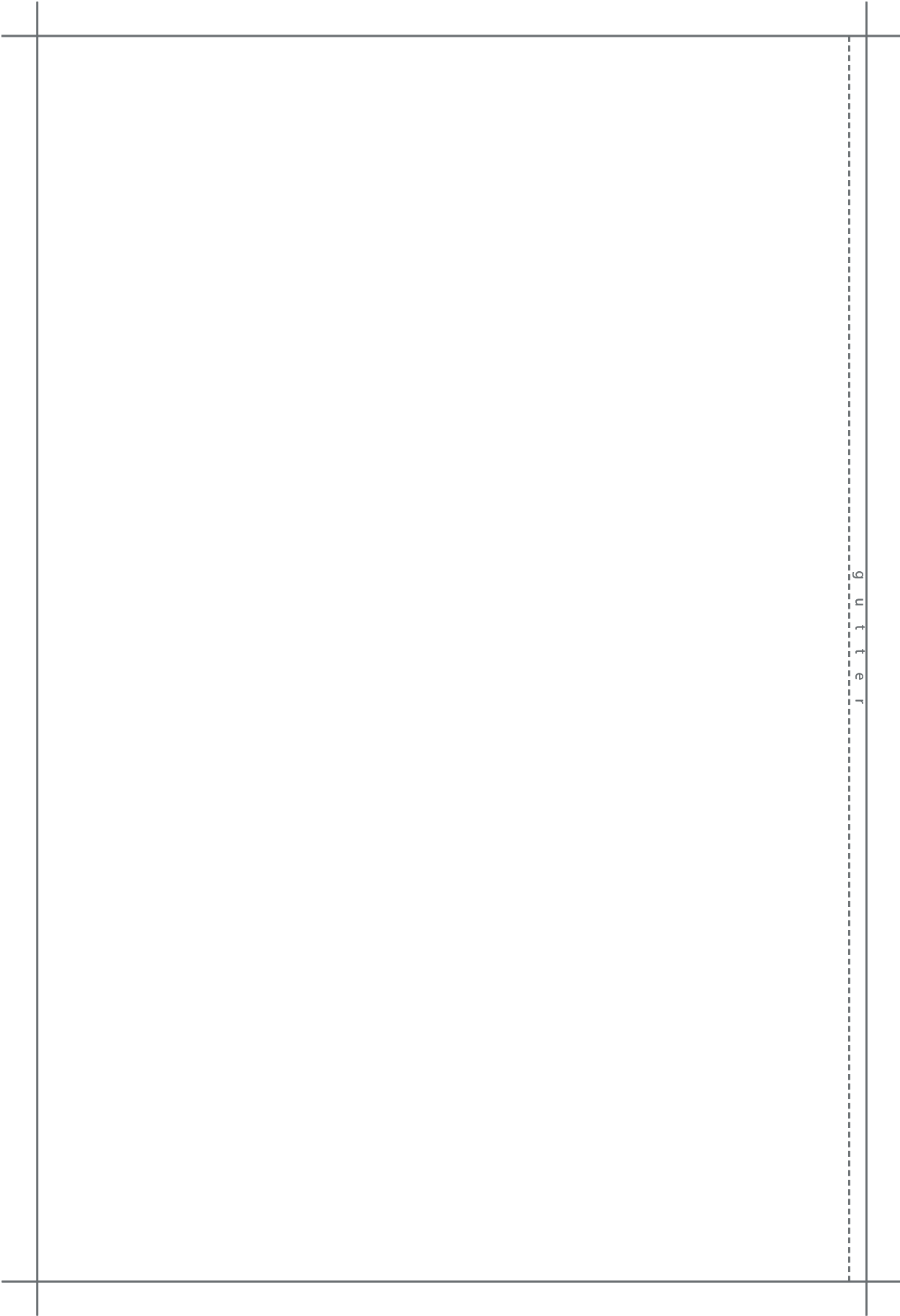


Then before activating the machine he looked around the room as if searching for someone. He caught himself visualizing Aurora in her mechanized spider web.

“Good night Aurora,” he said into the air.

“Good night, and how is it said? Sweet dreams,” he heard in his mind.

And with the push of the green button on the main panel he fell instantly asleep.





## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

g u t t e r  
Kevin Cade woke from his artificially-induced sleep. Not that he hadn't needed it, but the RGS had kept him under for almost twenty five hours, which was far longer than the usual eight hours that sufficed for him. The music that greeted his ears was pouring forth from some concealed location as always. He recognized the refrain as music performed by a seventies rock band he enjoyed called Deep Purple. He had never understood their name, nor for that matter most of their musical lyrics. However, he did know the piece playing now as one of his favorites, Perfect Strangers; and the lyrics seemed to send a message.

As the eerily haunting tune played out, he heard the words, "...I am the echo of your past..." and then moments later, "...if you hear me talking on the wind, you've got to understand we must remain perfect strangers..."

If he had just heard the music audibly the meaningfulness of the words may have gone unnoticed, but Aurora saw fit to stress the riffs mentally as well.

"Interesting metaphor you selected, Aurora," Cade said aloud, instead of with his mind.

But what he was thinking was how cunningly clever it had been for her to send a less than cryptic message to him in a song that he knew and liked. She heard his thought, and the mental image he received from her in return was a good morning kiss on the cheek.

Kevin pulled himself from bed and indulged himself in a quick

*Kevin L. Smith*

shower in the alcove at the rear of the restroom facility. The warm water pouring over and shooting at him from multiple directions was more than adequate for, not only washing away several layers of built up body grime, but also invigorating him for the day to come. He felt stronger and more agile than he could remember ever feeling before, and he doubted it was just the shower. Switching the water off he cursed himself silently for his lack of forethought in not procuring a towel prior to the bathe. A man needed his towel after all. Or maybe he didn't! No sooner had he wondered as to how he would dry himself than the nozzles that had produced water began expelling warm air, which made short work of his saturated skin.

Refreshed and clean Kevin slipped on his new uniform with its silver shark emblem. He wondered about having the emblem removed, but set the thought aside for another time and headed out the door into the main corridor.

"Aurora," Cade called out as he made his way to a transport. "How far away are we? Or should I ask, how long before we jump to Earth?"

"We will jump to Earth in just over seven minutes."

Kevin was disappointed with himself for lacking the foresight to have arranged for an earlier wake up call. He chalked it up to being so tired that he hadn't been thinking clearly. But now he was, and he wished he'd given himself some more time to prepare before their arrival. One couldn't just pull up with a two mile long space craft and park it over the planet. He required a structured, step by step plan; and to date he had given only superficial consideration as to what he would do with his life, ship, and people from this point onward.

He did however have a priority on his agenda. The first thing he needed to do was to get his loved ones together, and then he could start making some important decisions.

As Cade entered the bridge area he could tell that there was an increased level of activity. They were only three minutes from jumping into an Earth orbit.

"Alleana," Kevin called out, announcing his presence at the same time. "I would like the final jump to Earth to place us in an ecliptic orbit behind Earth's moon. Can you adjust for that?"

"Of course. It won't be difficult at all," she responded. "How far

from the moon do you want to be when we arrive?"

"Just a few hundred miles. Bring us in close. We are going to land and start setting up a base immediately. I think we should put our new base at the upper pole of the moon just behind the horizon that would be visible from the planets surface. Just find us a nice flat spot to set up shop."

Alleana poured over Chymere's console as the two made some final adjustments to the dimension generator just seconds before making the final leap to Earth. Kevin felt the excitement of coming home mount inside of him. It was reminiscent of the sailor returning from a voyage only to spot the lighthouse that marks his homeport while still some distance out to sea.

Er'Lantis traversed the void of "nothing" effortlessly and without incident as she had so many times before. Upon exiting the portal they found themselves face to face with the dark side of Luna, Earths moon.

It took less than thirty minutes to maneuver the great ship into a landing position on the surface of the cold dark satellite. No sooner had the ship touched down than a flurry of activity began throughout the vessel.

"Okay, let's start setting up our base Alleana."

"It has already begun, Daedalus."

"Very well," Cade said. "Then what I would like now is a doorway to my home in San Diego. Aurora, you would have that location. Can you open a portal for me?"

"I do have that location. The portal will open in just a moment."

"Daedalus," Alleana called. "Before you leave, may I recommend that two guards accompany you? I was made personally responsible for your safety."

"Thank you for the concern, but I don't want to startle my family too much. I'll tell you what, you can leave the portal open for me and have the guards stand by just in case they are needed."

"Very well," she said. "I'll agree to that."

The portal opened into the brightly-lit kitchen in Kevin's home. As he

*Kevin L. Smith*

stepped through, an uneasy air surrounded him. It took mere seconds to determine that something was wrong. All the tell tale signs that his wife had noticed were still there along with some extras, the liquor bottle, even a crushed cigarette butt there on the kitchen floor. Then he sensed a semi-conscious dread, a fear that was barely perceptible. Feeling emotions in that manner, especially from what must be another human, was a new experience for him.

Aurora sensed his agitation and directed the guards to join him. Before they could arrive, Kevin advanced throwing caution to the wind. He rounded the corner, heading for the living room. There huddled on the couch was Brittany, shivering, quietly sobbing, and unresponsive. After scanning the entire room he ran to her and scooped the traumatized child into his arms.

The two Lantian males that Aurora had sent to act as guards chose that moment to appear. Kevin looked into the eyes of the closest guard and knew instantly that his name was Keegan.

“Keegan,” he ordered. “You two search the entire house carefully. Call me if you find anyone or anything. I’m going back.”

Kevin rushed for the still open portal with his small charge in tow.

“Aurora,” he called out as he entered the bridge where the portal let out. “Prepare the medical facility for me quickly, and have two Lantians meet me there.”

Keegan and Ty searched the house to no avail, as Kevin feared. Whatever had transpired, had occurred long before they had arrived. Kevin was just grateful that a body hadn’t been discovered. It meant that there was still hope.

He had been in and out of the medical section of Et’Lantis for almost three hours awaiting recovery from Brittany. Her seriously dehydrated body seemed to be responding well to infusions of nutrients and saline solution. For this he was thankful. But what he couldn’t stand was having his hands tied so. No viable clues had been left behind that might point the way to what had happened, or where Didi might be. His only potential source of information lay there before him, struggling her way back to health. The two Lantian nurses Aurora sent

to help at “medical” turned out to be the same girls Kevin had met in the habitat area of the ship.

“It’s Andrela, right?” asked Kevin as the woman approached to check Brittany’s vitals. “It’s good to see you again. Thanks for your help here.”

“Your welcome, Daedalus. Capri and I were asked to come and assist. We acquired some working knowledge of human physiology out of curiosity after you left us in the habitat.”

“How do you think she’s doing?” he inquired.

“Very well. The girl is strong, and she’s making excellent progress. Some time in an RGS would accelerate her recovery I think.”

“No, not yet. Use of that device requires permission from the subject.”

“No such rule exists to the best of my knowledge,” said Andrela.

“It does now!” stated Kevin, knowing that the Lantian would pass on the new edict to all they mentally interacted with.

He knew that the RGS could heal and restore a human, but it could also take away certain abilities or adaptations that it deemed abnormal. It certainly wouldn’t be respectful of an individual’s right to govern their own bodies if “it” were used without a person’s express permission. But what of an emergency situation? What if an individual lay dying, and the RGS could save them? That was a moral dilemma that he hoped he would never need to face. It certainly wasn’t the case here. Brittany was responding fine to treatment, and it was expected that she would awake soon.

Capri entered the room holding a steaming bowl of boiled herbs that reminded Kevin of an ointment he had used on occasion. The strong aroma reminded him of menthol. She stepped to Brittany’s side gently stroking her face with a cloth soaked in the pungent aromatics. After a few minutes her eyes began to flutter open. At first they opened wide in fear and panic, but as she turned and saw Kevin approaching her with his big smile of relief, she calmed.

“Where am I?” she asked.

“You’re safe,” was his only reply to her very complicated question. “How are you feeling?”

“A little tired, I had a bad dream,” she said.

“I’m sorry sweetheart, but it wasn’t a dream. I got back as soon

*Kevin L. Smith*

as I could, but something seems to have happened to Didi. Do you remember anything?" he asked as gently as he could.

Brittany squeezed her eyes shut, whether out of fear or an attempt to recall past events, Kevin was unsure.

"Britt, it's okay. We can wait until later if it hurts to think about it."

"No, I'm alright. I just need to think... Paul, the big ugly man was named Paul. And the other one with the gun was Mark Mason, or Mick. No it was Mike, Michael Mason. All they said was that they were there to take Didi to see a man."

"Who?" Kevin was antsy. "Who wanted to see her?"

"They said his name was Joseph Smith. I think they were scared of him."

"Did they say where they were taking her? Think hard Britt!" Kevin knew he was starting to push a little too hard, but he was almost there, and time was of the essence.

"They didn't say, but the smaller man mentioned that there was a jet waiting for them."

"Was there anything else, anything at all?"

"No," she answered. "They were real fast. They were there when we got home, and then they left with Didi. The Michael man said he does only what he's told and so he left me behind."

"Okay, you get some rest. Andrela and Capri are going to take care of you while you get your strength back. If you need anything ask them, or you can call me anytime you want, the girls will show you how."

"But where are we?" Brittany persisted.

"We're a ways from home, but it's fine. Everyone here is a friend, and no bad people can get here. I know your safe here. I'll show you and tell you everything as soon as you get better. But for now you get some rest while I go see if I can find our Didi," he answered diplomatically and then he left.

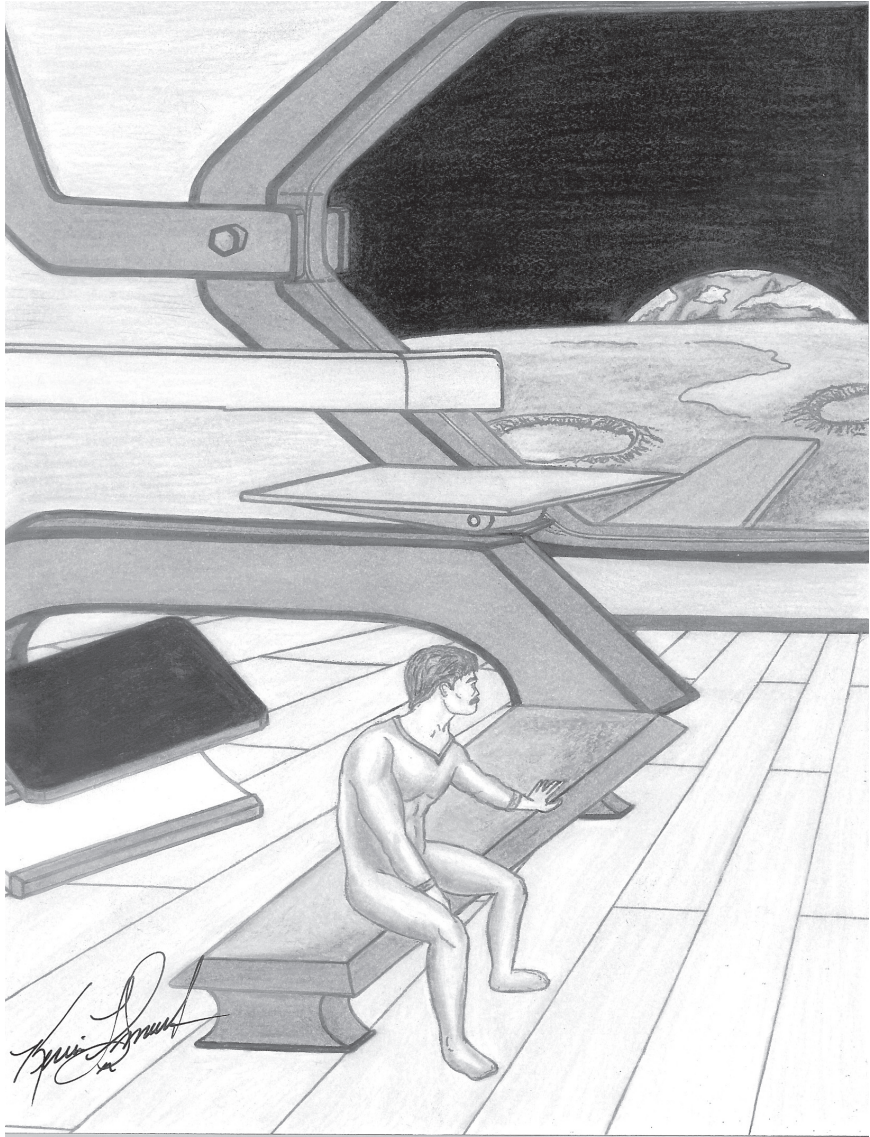
Over the course of the next sixteen months Kevin Cade exhausted every resource he could think of to help him find his wife. His base on the moon, simply named Luna, was completed as was his underwater



base on Earth. Activity between Earth, Lantis, and Chthon was never ending, as an entire complex of travel routes were established. Kevin hoped to begin recruiting scientists for research on Bramidion before long, much to the Lantian's approval. They knew of Kevin's plight with respect to the loss of his wife. Will Stockard and Andrew Blake were also well aware and both had worked tirelessly to assist in the location of Didi, but without any success.

Although they wouldn't say it, Kevin could tell that all thought her lost for good. But while everyone else may have given up the quest, writing her off for dead, he remembered a time when he had been lost. There had been no chance of survival; as far as everyone knew he had died there in the wilderness along with his father and Jake Buckley. But he hadn't died. In fact he had been reborn into a whole new life, the life of a hunter with a soul. Kevin doubted that any such adventure had befallen Didi, but he also refused to write her off as dead. No body had been recovered. No Jane Does had shown up that matched Didi's description. He wouldn't give up on her...not ever!

And heaven help Joseph, Paul, and Michael whoever they were, when he found them! And he would find them! Their suffering would be sure to last for a long, long time on Chthon.





## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

(1990)

*The* call was routed to Kevin as he sat in the room he had designated as his own office in the underwater base he affectionately referred to as Pacifica. He had wanted to call it Atlantis, but the name was too close to that of his ship and it could have caused confusion. Located almost three miles under the surface of the ocean, it was as secure as possible unless you were one of the mermaids that manned the base, or you had portal technology.

The call was from his old friend Andrew Blake, the ex-senator who was currently working for the National Security Administration as director of operations.

“Andrew, I hope you’re calling with some news about Didi,” said Kevin pointedly.

“Perhaps, I got a lead from some government documents that mentioned your Michael Mason and his associate Paul, no last name. The governor of Maryland authorized some sting operation that failed, causing the deaths of an undisclosed number of federal agents. For some reason the whole fiasco was classified,” said Blake.

“How about Joseph Smith?”

“Nothing in the report, but it does say that the whole mess took place in and around the city of Baltimore.”

*Kevin L. Smith*

"Can you get me a meeting with the governor?"

"Perhaps a conference call can be arranged. I'll try to set it up," said Blake. "But for now we have some weird situation brewing that has the big boys all nervous."

"That doesn't sound good."

"It's probably nothing. Some unusual formations on the moon or something."

Kevin bolted upright in his chair.

"Formations you say?"

"Yeah, you know that the new Hubble telescope was just launched and put into orbit. Well, let's just say it's more than just a simple telescope. Anyway, while it was being calibrated the scientists did a sweep of the moon to range the thing, and what do you know, some strange formations just off the horizon where it can't be seen from Earth. They're trying to analyze it, but so far it's no joy," reported Blake.

"My old friend, I think it's time you and I had a confidential talk. Get me that call to the governor for tomorrow at noon and I'll meet you in your office. By the way, why don't you just go ahead and clear your afternoon schedule for tomorrow now and get a head start."

Blake stared at his friend incredulously, trying to absorb all he was being told and all that he had learned from the governor. Costumed figures patrolling the streets, flying, reading minds, using "super powers"? It was all too fantastic. And then to top it all off his friend was telling him that he had established his company's newest office complex on the moon! If it hadn't been Kevin Cade telling him this, he would have called the psychiatrists in and had him hauled away.

"All this time we've been working together and no mention of something that wild? When were you going to tell me about going to the moon Kevin? How in the world did you pull that off anyway?"

"Do you have any scotch?" asked Kevin without response to the other questions.

"Sure, the cabinet over there. Help yourself," said Blake. "Listen, I've heard of some private sector research into space travel, even discussion of offering awards and cash bonuses in an effort to promote

private space travel. But there just isn't anything of this magnitude going on right now. What did you do, buy up some surplus Russian stuff? Did they get you set up, up there?" asked Blake pointing to the sky. "It's a pretty unstable place over there in Russia right now, we don't know how much longer they're going to last."

"No," answered Kevin as he sipped some of the strong liquor. "I did it all on my own."

Kevin lied, leaving out all the details regarding Et'Lantis, his underwater base, the technology and the other worlds he now controlled. He wanted to reveal everything to his friend and he planned to in good time. But it just seemed to him that too much information at this time would be extraordinarily dangerous for anyone who had it. He hated concealing truths, but he would make it up to him and his uncle in the very near future. Kevin knew they would understand in the end. Besides he knew Andrew would have done the same thing had he been in his place.

"Well somebody is going to want to talk to you about all that... that stuff you have on the moon, and it's going to be someone way over my pay grade," announced Blake apologetically. "They've seen it, so it's just a matter of time before they go poking around. What do you think?"

"No worries, we'll make it a conference call."

Kevin Cade spent the rest of the day clearing out all of his Earthly investments and holdings. It was a project that had quietly been in the works for some time. All of his real properties were reassigned to attorneys whom he could trust, not because they were trustworthy, but because they were so well paid. Everything that could be touched or seized was placed well out of the reach of... well, everyone and anyone. All dealings now took place through dummy companies and shell corporations. It would be enough to accomplish what he knew had to be done. Besides, what did Earth have that he really required and couldn't get himself... besides scotch?

"~~YOU~~ are being linked via satellite to a conference call," announced the female operator on his phone. "The next voice you hear will be that of the Vice President of the United States of America."

*Kevin L. Smith*

The pause lasted thirty seconds. Kevin used that time to be impressed by the fact that he had been deemed so worthy as to rate such a high ranking official. A voice began...

"...just make sure it's recorded and tied in with the joint chiefs..." said the Vice President over his shoulder to some assistant behind him. "Uh, yes, Mr. Cade, this is the Vice President speaking. Are you there?"

"Yes sir," answered Kevin adopting the short and to the point method of answering.

Lawyers had taught him that. Volunteer nothing! Just answer the question in as simple a way as possible.

"Sir," the diplomat continued. "It has come to our attention that you have established some form of structure on the moon's surface. Is this correct?"

"Yes sir."

"Well that's just amazing Mr. Cade. The United States government was never informed or made aware of such an endeavor. Why is that, and how did you accomplish this task?"

"Well sir, in answer to your first question, I didn't know it was required to inform you of such activity. I mean, it's not your moon. Secondly, my company's advances in astrophysics are confidential. I don't share those secrets with anyone," answered Cade coyly.

"Well I certainly appreciate that, but you must understand we're dealing with a little matter of national security. Placing any kind of potentially hostile base on the moon is a matter of grave concern to this administration."

"You have every right to be concerned Mr. Vice President, and I would probably be nervous too if I were in your situation. But I can assure you that there is no need, or cause for alarm," stated Kevin, casting his simple answer strategy out the window. "With your assistance we may be able to accomplish some truly valuable research from that location."

"Is that what you have created Mr. Cade? Is that a research station of some kind?" asked the diplomat.

"Exactly Mr. Vice President," replied Kevin. "Pure research, and perhaps we may branch out into an outer space resort in the future."

"Well then sir, I've been asked to find out why you hid the facility



behind the moon where it couldn't be seen."

"Mr. Vice President, that almost sounds like an accusation," Cade replied trying to put the dignitary on the defensive. "We established our facility out of the reach of the sun for protection from harmful radiation. The moon, as you know, has no atmosphere to act as a shield. So we used the moon itself as a protective barrier."

The fabrication seemed plausible enough to throw the interrogator off for a moment. Kevin could hear the man consulting with someone off the phone, but was unable to make out the conversation. After what seemed like a minute the statesman returned to the speaker.

"Mr. Cade, we respect your position on this matter and applaud a truly remarkable achievement. I can assure you that you and your company will enjoy the notoriety, and financial compensation that you deserve for this outstanding scientific breakthrough. However, you must understand that the security implications behind your venture are... well, frankly sir, they're staggering. If we allowed this enterprise to continue without military intervention and support we would be remiss in our obligation to protect and secure the United States of America, and the world for that matter. That said we need you to make arrangements to turn over materials and data to NASA regarding your project and then we will begin working closely with you on future applications."

"I am sorry Mr. Vice President," began Kevin, feeling the irritation in him beginning to mount. "I didn't become involved in this project just to hand it over to the military for its personal use as soon as it was done. The government has a bad habit of wedging scientists out of their work after they are done, especially if they find a particularly valuable military application for it. I want to keep this venture entirely within the private sector."

"Well Mr. Cade..." began the Vice President.

"Oh crap, will you just quit pussy-footing around with him?" bellowed a new voice over the speaker. "Cade, this is General Fisher, joint chiefs. Listen, we're not asking, we're telling you to hand over that project. We'll keep you in the loop. But we *are* assuming command for the good of this country, and there's nothing you are going to do about it. If you fight us on this, we'll take it anyway and leave you nothing, except maybe a charge of treason. Do you read me?"

Kevin L. Smith

“Loud and clear, General,” Kevin answered. “Now you hear me, all of you listening in on this little courtesy conference call. *Request denied!* Yours and every other government in existence today have just one goal in mind...control! You control the masses and some small group of powerful men control you. The morass that you have the gall to call civilization is so impregnated with greed and corruption that even when the occasional leader comes along that feels impelled to put others’ interests ahead of his own, he or she is so thoroughly diluted as to make them absolutely ineffectual. The people at the top use oil, money, energy, and anything else humans need to survive as the weapons with which to subjugate mankind. If by some chance the regime in power doesn’t control the resources, then they control the military and they brutalize the populace to maintain control until they meet their own goals. If however, one of those regimes does control an important resource, like oil for example, and they begin to abuse it, then here comes the “mighty” to subjugate them... unless they submit to you first. In fact it looks like “someone” is getting ready to do just that in the Middle East, aren’t they general? You have no one’s best interests at heart but your own. Just consider me the Nikola Tesla of our time.”

“How do you know about the Middle East situation, and just who the hell is Nick whatever Tesla? What does that have to do with anything?” shouted General Fisher obviously becoming enraged.

“Nikola Tesla, the man who invented radio, long range AC power transmission, the induction motor, and the spark plug... I could keep going. But what is important is that after all he did for mankind, after all his research and development, he died mostly unappreciated, and penniless. Good ol’ Mr. Edison saw to that, and now history paints *him* as the hero. However the government didn’t have any problems with confiscating all of Tesla’s work, notes, and diagrams and classifying them as “top secret”. Your agenda, gentleman, does not coincide with mine, and I will not participate.”

“Mr. Cade, you put us in a difficult position,” stated the general trying to regain his composure.

It was obvious that the Vice President no longer had responsibility over the matter.

“Therefore, I am ordering your arrest and the seizing of all your



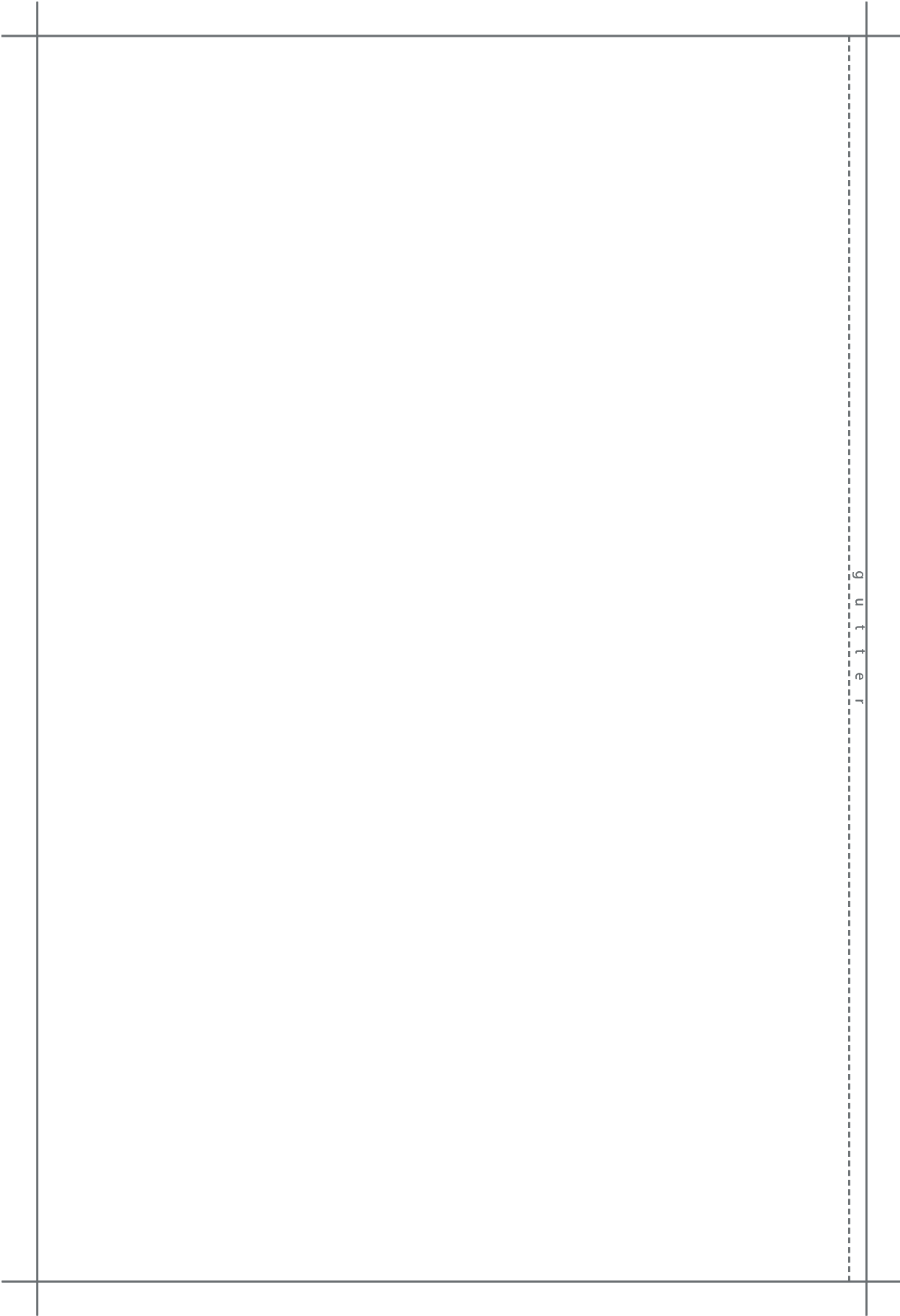
properties. If you refuse the orders of this government then we will be forced to take a stand.”

“Before you do anything foolish, General, may I suggest that you do some research on the subject of “sovereignty” and “sovereign territory,”” stated Kevin. “You’ll find its earliest reference by one Jean Bodin who is considered to be the modern initiator of the concept with his 1576 treatise *Six Books on the Republic* in which he describes the sovereign as a ruler beyond human law and subject only to divine or natural law. Since you insist on forcing my hand, general, I am here declaring the moon as my sovereign territory. And since you seem to be afraid of the threat a base on the moon can pose, I will just go ahead and assure you that the threat is as real as you can imagine. I don’t like government, and I have decided that I really don’t like you. But I may be forced to interact with you from time to time. So with that in mind, just take a word of advice and don’t push this. You back-off and we’ll keep this whole situation classified, just like Tesla’s particle beam weapon that you grabbed after his death.”

“Listen here...” began the general only to find himself talking to a dial tone.

“General Fisher, it’s the Vice President here. Are you still on?”

“Not for long son. The D.O.D. will be over shortly to collect all recordings, and I’ll see you and the President in the situation room this afternoon. Until then, not one word of this gets out! And get all that Hubble data together too. We are going to put a vacuum tight lid on this whole matter until we can figure out what to do, or we’re cooked... for good.”





## EPILOGUE

(1992)

Joel – or Grimm as he was called when in costume and fulfilling his obligations as a fighter of criminal activity – was hard at it. The *rattus norvegicus* he was watching had been scurrying around the dimly lit alleyway for over an hour. It appeared that the rat's foraging had finally paid off as it drug a discarded bone away and into a crevice behind some empty, stacked boxes. Cold water continued to drip down upon Joel from an overhang above as he stared out onto the now empty alley, devoid as it was of even a rodent.

It had been a long, cold, tedious stakeout – the kind that Joel definitely loathed. Although he knew this to be an essential part of the process of prosecuting a criminal, it was still such a gamble of his precious time. It was a gamble that he would lose tonight. But it was part of the price that had to be paid, even if on occasion you came up with snake eyes.

The filthy scum of a drug supplier hadn't even had the decency to show up for the appearance that Joel's contact had assured him was scheduled for this evening, leaving Joel to wonder if it had been worth it to suit up and even try. He could be at home right now, in bed, warm, snuggled up to...

Someone was in trouble. Little mister contact had demanded

*Kevin L. Smith*

fifty bucks for this washed out lead. First thing tomorrow he'd be getting a visit, or maybe tonight would be better seeing how he was already dressed for the occasion and all. Yeah, maybe he'd just go pay his respects to the "weasel," as he was known by Joel and others.

Joel's reverie came to an abrupt halt as light blazed out from behind, illuminating the dark passage before him.

"Not possible," Joel thought to himself. "There's a cement wall behind me."

Power began coursing to his instantly clinched fist as he prepared to engage whatever situation was arising directly behind him. In one fluid motion, the disguised vigilante leapt forward over the crates that he had been using for concealment, and then rotated himself so as to be facing his opponent. He hoped to end up in a position above the anticipated antagonist. With his fist now fully charged with power that he could direct against an opponent, he stared into what he could only describe as a brightly lit hole in the concrete wall before him.

Confusion was instantly replaced with resolve as Joel watched a figure approach the opening. The silver suited man appeared well built, with a strong chiseled face that sported a dark moustache. The man's countenance didn't appear aggressive. However, it was always better to error on the side of caution, so Joel maintained his stance. Just as Joel was growing weary of the standoff, an additional set of men appeared, one to the right, and one to the left of the uniformed stranger. It was time to act. But before he had the opportunity, the man spoke out.

"Keegan, Ty, I've got this. Please, wait back at the base. I'll call if I need you."

"Understood, Daedalus," said the men as they backed away and then disappeared as quickly as they had arrived.

"I come in peace," said Kevin Cade jokingly. "I could have said take me to your leader, but I understand that for the time being, that's you."

"Who are you, and what is this? What's going on here?" asked Joel.

"I get asked that a lot," responded Kevin scanning the area before returning his attention to Joel. "I'm just a guy like you... well maybe not exactly like you, but a guy nonetheless. It's just that in my travels I've accumulated some pretty useful technology. But all that is hardly

why I'm here. My name is Kevin Cade. My friends call me Daedalus, it's a very long story."

"Listen, I'm in an alley in the middle of the night staring into a hole of light that shouldn't exist. Can we dispense with the small talk for now and cut to the chase?"

"Just a bit grouchy, aren't we? Must have been a long night," said Kevin tongue-in-cheek. "Okay, I need your help. My wife is missing and I am going to find her. In the meantime every government agency in the world wants to get their hands on me. I need... I need..."

Joel watched as the man before him changed. Not physically, instead his whole demeanor became humble and contrite.

"I need you and your friends," he said, with obvious sorrow in the words. "If I'm ever to find my wife I am going to need the help and talents of your kind. I know you don't know me, and you have no reason to trust me. But you're my last hope. I don't expect something for nothing, though. If you will work with and assist me, I can reciprocate."

"Oh, you've got my attention, Daedalus," said Joel. "What have you got to offer us?"

As if on cue, a shot rang out of the dark, the high caliber bullet striking Kevin directly in the chest and pushing him back thru the portal to its point of origin. Instantly Keegan and Ty, who had been waiting nervously at Luna, were at his side. Kevin's suit had stopped the projectile and absorbed much of the kinetic energy delivered, but not all. He sat up, gingerly rubbing the spot where the bullet had hit him.

"That's going to make a bruise." Kevin said to no one in particular.

Joel, on the other hand, glanced back to the alley entrance long enough to see a sniper in hiding across the street. He cursed himself for missing the man and wondered how long he had been there. At that same moment the drug supplier he had been waiting for rounded the entrance to the short alleyway. Four armed henchmen awaiting his orders flanked him.

"So, it appears my source was correct," called out the antagonist. "Were you waiting for me?"

"Who are you?" replied Joel stalling for time as he tried to angle

*Kevin L. Smith*

for some cover.

"As if you don't know," the drug supplier responded. "Anwar Al-Dakara at your service. Not that the name will do you any good."

"What makes you think I have any business with you?" asked Joel.

"A mutual acquaintance," he said with a thick Middle Eastern accent.

Joel seethed with anger at the "weasel" for his duplicity. The lousy little snitch just had to try to collect his fifty dollars from both sides of the fence. Oh, was he going to pay...if!

"Listen, Anwar," said Joel. "I don't particularly care for anyone who's involved with drugs, but it's a far cry from murder. So why don't we just go our separate ways for now, and I'll deal with you some other time. But I'm warning you, if you push this any farther right now, you're going to end up having a bad day."

Anwar sneered as he spoke, "Is that what you think of me? A puny drug dealer? You stupid, filthy Americans. I sell you pigs your drugs for ridiculous amounts of money to fund a holy war. You may take me for a fool, but there is no stopping me."

"Anwar," said Joel. "Haven't you been keeping up with current events? The Gulf War is over man."

"Perhaps, but the Jihad will never be over, at least not until we have succeeded in making all who do not acknowledge Allah pay the Jizyah with willing submission. Tonight you will be paying the ultimate price for your interference."

With that Anwar waved to the sniper who had just come out of hiding. Joel stared dumbfounded as the heavily bearded man produced a shoulder mounted rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Joel poised himself to leap at the last moment, when without warning Kevin placed a hand upon his shoulder. Joel looked back at him, glad the man had survived.

"Move or we're toast..." Joel began before being cut off.

"Aurora," said Kevin as he looked directly at Joel. "Full power to the suit shield now!"

Energy coursed thru the still open portal to Kevin's suit as the RGP struck their position. Fire exploded throughout the alley lighting up the night. Concussion boomed through the neighborhood and beyond. Anwar Al-Dakara smiled evilly as the flames subsided. He

was about to order a hasty retreat when his smile was forced to vanish with the flames. Before him stood four men, Joel, the man they had shot, and two additional men pointing short staffs directly at him.

Stunned Anwar screamed, "Kill them all!"

As the gang raised Mac-10's, the infamous Military Armament Corporation model 10 assault weapons, beams and balls of energy leapt from the four heroes striking with deadly accuracy. Sprays of bullets at a rate of one thousand rounds per minute blasted forth from the machine pistols, but to no avail as Kevin's suit continued to shield the tight band of defenders. Moments later all of the interlopers at the alley entrance were silent.

Sauntering over to their position as if nothing extraordinary had taken place, Joel examined the still forms of the men.

"Two of them are still alive, including Anwar," declared Joel. "I'm sure the police will be here any minute considering how much commotion we raised. We better get out of here and let them handle the clean up."

"No," Kevin replied. "We'll bring the two with us. We need to ask some questions. Then I've got a nice little retirement spot picked out for the likes of them. They can be my first inductees."

Joel thought about it for only a moment and then responded, "Okay, we'll try it your way. But I want to leave the police a little note first."

Producing a permanent marking pen Joel wrote "terrorist" on the forehead of the man that had been the sniper.

"That ought to get some attention," he announced. "By the way, nice job. Thanks for the help."

"Any time," replied Kevin. "What about my offer?"

"I must say, I'm intrigued. You said if I help you, you could help us in return?"

"In ways you can't even begin to imagine."

"Okay then, let's try this again," said Joel looking around the alley facetiously. "What do you got to offer, besides two dudes and a great suit? Although that was a pretty good start."

Kevin extended his hand toward Joel and stepped back into the tunnel of light gesturing for him to follow.

"Come with me, if you dare. I'll show you something no one on Earth has ever seen!"

...to be continued at [www.worldofchthon.com](http://www.worldofchthon.com) and more.



## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kevin L. Smith was born in 1956 in Tucson, Arizona. After living there, then in Gallup, New Mexico, and then in Tombstone, Arizona for over twenty years he moved to Southern California where he and his family have lived ever since.

Kevin holds a Master of Science Degree in Engineering, and a Bachelor of Science in Computer Engineering. Additionally, he is a licensed United States Coast Guard ships captain and a certified Dive Master.

Throughout his entire life he has enjoyed all facets of science fiction and fantasy work, and is pleased to finally have a hand in personally contributing to the genre. In Destiny's Wildest Dream he crafts a three part story designed to set the stage for a much bigger story; The World of Chthon.

