

The book cover features a central image of a metallic, stylized face looking upwards. A bright, multi-pointed starburst emanates from the forehead. The background is a deep space scene with a blue horizon line, distant stars, and nebulae in red and purple. The author's name is at the top, and the title is at the bottom.

J. O. N. M. A. L. A. Y

SERAPHIM
SKY

SERAPHIM SKY

SERAPHIM SKY

Jon Malay

iUniverse, Inc.

New York Lincoln Shanghai

Seraphim Sky

All Rights Reserved © 2003 by Jonathan T. Malay

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher.

iUniverse, Inc.

For information address:

iUniverse, Inc.

2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100

Lincoln, NE 68512

www.iuniverse.com

This book is a work of fiction. All of the characters, incidents, and dialog, except for fictitious references to public figures, institutions, products, or services, are purely imaginary and are not intended to refer to any living persons or to disparage any company's products or services.

Cover art Copyright 2003 by Scott Kahler. Used with permission.

ISBN: 0-595-74627-6

Printed in the United States of America

For Sharon

*“When once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the Earth
with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been,
and there you will always long to return.”*

—Leonardo DaVinci

*“And you, O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to
connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere,
O my soul.”*

—Walt Whitman

*“No matter where you go...
There you are!”*

—Anonymous

C O N T E N T S

Author's Note	ix
Chapter 1.....	1
<i>Holy Spirit Benedictine Priory, Southern Vermont—Saturday, December 14, 1985</i>	
Chapter 2.....	10
<i>Montpelier, Vermont—December, 1948</i>	
Chapter 3.....	15
<i>Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas—November 13, 1985</i>	
Chapter 4.....	28
<i>The Pentagon—Sunday, December 15, 1985</i>	
Chapter 5.....	35
<i>Salem, Massachusetts—October, 1965</i>	
Chapter 6.....	41
<i>Holy Spirit Priory, Vermont—Sunday, December 15, 1985</i>	
Chapter 7.....	46
<i>Salem, Massachusetts—October 1965</i>	
Chapter 8.....	53
<i>Salem, Massachusetts—The next day</i>	
Chapter 9.....	58
<i>Journal of CDR Michael St. Pierre—Sunday, December 15, 1985</i>	

Chapter 10.....	62
<i>Sunday, December 15, 1985</i>	
Chapter 11.....	68
<i>Journal of CDR Michael St. Pierre—Sunday, December 15, 1985</i>	
Chapter 12.....	76
<i>Rosslyn—Arlington, Virginia—Monday, December 16, 1985</i>	
Chapter 13.....	84
<i>Holy Spirit Priory—Monday, December 16, 1985</i>	
Chapter 14.....	88
<i>Journal of CDR Michael St. Pierre—Monday, December 16, 1985</i>	
Chapter 15.....	98
<i>USS JOHN F. KENNEDY (CV-67)—July, 1974</i>	
Chapter 16.....	105
<i>Central North Atlantic—July, 1974</i>	
Chapter 17.....	110
<i>USS JOHN F. KENNEDY at Sea</i>	
Chapter 18.....	114
<i>USS JOHN F. KENNEDY</i>	
Chapter 19.....	120
<i>Central North Atlantic</i>	
Chapter 20.....	123
<i>Holy Spirit Priory—Monday Evening, December 16, 1985</i>	
Chapter 21.....	130
<i>USS JOHN F. KENNEDY, Commanding Officer's Memorandum</i>	
Chapter 22.....	142
<i>Holy Spirit Priory—An hour before dawn, Tuesday, December 17, 1985</i>	
Chapter 23.....	153
<i>Mike's letter</i>	

Chapter 24.....	157
<i>Space Shuttle Discovery—Wednesday, November 13, 1985</i>	
Chapter 25.....	166
<i>The Pentagon—Tuesday Afternoon, December 17, 1985</i>	
Chapter 26.....	182
<i>Crystal City Apartments, Arlington, VA—Tuesday Night</i>	
Chapter 27.....	187
<i>Journal of Commander Michael St. Pierre</i>	
Chapter 28.....	190
<i>Rosslyn, Virginia—Wednesday Morning, December 18</i>	
Chapter 29.....	193
<i>Rosslyn, Virginia—Wednesday Afternoon, December 18</i>	
Chapter 30.....	199
<i>Massachusetts Avenue, North-West—Wednesday Evening, December 18</i>	
Chapter 31.....	214
<i>Naval Observatory—Past Midnight on Thursday Morning, December 19th</i>	
Chapter 32.....	228
<i>Arlington, Virginia—Thursday Morning, December 19</i>	
Chapter 33.....	232
<i>Journal of Michael St. Pierre, Sunday, December 22, 1985</i>	
Chapter 34.....	240
<i>Holy Spirit Priory—Midnight, Christmas Eve, 1985</i>	
Chapter 35.....	242
<i>International Space Station Alpha—Present Day</i>	

Author's Note

This book is dedicated to the hero astronauts of *Challenger* (all of whom I had met in my professional life) and of *Columbia* (whom I wished I had known.) They bravely launched themselves toward the heavens to realize our common dream of taking the human race beyond the surly bonds of Earth. These very special people reached for the stars and now fly with the celestial host. May we dedicate ourselves in their memory to keep on searching for answers to the mysteries of the universe, knowing that they haven't really left us...because heaven starts *right here*.

I want to thank some special people who provided unqualified encouragement, superb insights, and lots of love. They helped me to turn my dream of this story into a flight to the far ends of the universe and into the depths of the soul.

Sharon, my incredible wife of thirty years, my soul mate, and my best friend—She shows me how to love and how to reach out in faith, prayer, and action—how to touch the face of God;

Kate, my brilliant and beautiful daughter, a talented writer whose meticulous final editing was both insightful and absolutely necessary to capture the female perspective and to make up for my right-brained inability to stay on top of details;

Liz, my beautiful and brilliant daughter and her husband, and my friend, Dave—Liz and I share our extravert marketing genes and web wizard Dave has made www.seraphimsky.com possible;

These three ladies in my life continue to help me to understand women, even though I still have a long, long way to go!

LT(jg) Ben, my Navy pilot son and Mars expert, whom I truly expect to be the first human to walk on the red planet;

Dr. Peter Bielski, a professor of great insight, and my buddy **Sue Bielski**;

CAPT Jim Etro, USN (Ret.), my fun-loving classmate and friend;

Dr. Bill Gail, my partner in turning dreams into space systems reality in the aerospace business;

Barbara Healey, a wonderful wordsmith who proves there is too such a thing as a great mother-in-law, and **Dr. Frank Healey**, the grand Papa Bear for the dynasty of my always-fascinating in-laws;

Rev. Sally Hicks, a woman of God who kept me honest;

Scott Kahler, a talented artist and friend whose painting, entitled “Visionary,” was perfect for the cover of this book;

CAPT Jim Kirkpatrick, USN (Ret.), my naval intelligence officer colleague and Executive Director of the American Astronautical Society who, like me, appreciates the parallel of the sea service and sailing the seas of space;

Dr. Yoji Kondo, of the Goddard Space Flight Center, an astronomer and fellow author whose encouragement always comes with wit and a twist of zen;

Dr. Bill Patzert of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, a fellow oceanographer who loves a good story and has many wild ones of his own to share;

Leotta Stevens, a dear friend who, like me, *really* believes in miracles; and a very special thank you to

Dr. Tomas Svitek, a space systems expert with a quick mind, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a grin that never leaves his face.

I also want to acknowledge the wisdom and inspiration of the late Robert A. Heinlein, the legendary science fiction writer and fellow Naval Academy graduate. His advice on becoming a writer, offered to the Brigade at a lecture I heard at the Academy thirty-two years ago, at long last bore fruit in at least one of those midshipman.

And finally, I have to express thanks for the life-changing writings and recorded books of Dr. Wayne Dyer. His assertion that we're not humans having spiritual experiences, but rather infinite spiritual beings having a temporary human experience actually inspired this story, and his words on manifesting one's destiny helped to get me through the discipline of actually writing it.

These gentlemen and other great explorers, thinkers, teachers, and givers of the world—Mother Theresa, Jaques Cousteau, Carl Sagan, Steven Hawking, John Glenn and Tom Hanks to name just a few—all influence what happens in the world far beyond the reach of most mere mortals. They have revealed and demonstrated the essential truth that within each mere mortal there is infinite potential.

I truly hope you'll enjoy this story and that you'll be encouraged to dream big dreams.

Fredericksburg, Virginia
July, 2003

Hierarchy of the Heavenly Host

There are:

Angels
Archangels
Principalities
Powers
Virtues
Dominions
Thrones
Cherubim

And highest of all:

Seraphim

The six-winged angels standing in the presence of God

And then...

Here on Earth, our human souls are searching for God.

**We need to understand that in searching we find,
and in finding we know, that *we* stand always
in the presence of God.**

CHAPTER 1

Holy Spirit Benedictine Priory, Southern Vermont— Saturday, December 14, 1985

“I have seen hell, senōr,” she said. “I have been there.”

He was startled by her response to his simple question as to whether she was OK. She was sitting on the steps of the altar with tears streaming from her eyes in silent anguish. The muted shadows in the dimly lit chapel accentuated her dark eyes and the lines that etched the strikingly beautiful features of her face. Only in her late twenties, she appeared older.

As he sat down near her, she continued. “Truly, hell exists.”

He didn’t know what to say. Nor did she need an additional invitation from her to go on. He listened as she spilled out her story of how she came to be here at the monastery, never taking his eyes from her. It was surreal, experiencing her hell when he had—could he admit it even to himself—an experience of heaven. He wondered why she was telling him and not one of the brothers. Maybe she could see through him to some “light” that he didn’t know about as the result of his heavenly encounter.

She told him everything. Her beloved husband, Estéban, had been taken at gunpoint from their home in the middle of the night eleven

months ago and his tortured, broken, and mutilated body had been found in a ditch outside of their Guatemalan village three days later. The police—this had been what they had called themselves—had come back for her that same day. They had found her cowering with fear and pain...and they had heaped more pain upon unbearable pain.

While her two young children, Juan and Espérance, cried and screamed in the only other room in their little house into which they had been locked, the men had beaten her savagely and then gang raped her. “Tell us about your traitorous activities, woman,” they had demanded between blows, “or we will show you the electricity that turned your man into jelly.”

Apart from her screams and prayers, she said nothing. What could she say? She had done nothing. They almost killed her anyway. In the end, when they were exhausted and finally disgusted by their own ability to create such horror, they had conferred among themselves and finally decided to leave her alive. After all, they said, it solved the problem of what to do with the children. They probably would have had to kill them too. They were patriots, they believed, not barbarians. “The bitch was a liar and a traitor against the government,” they said. They were just following orders, or so they convinced themselves. In the end, they left her bleeding, barely conscious, and almost dead.

In a daze of horrible grief and excruciating pain, she had walked, stumbled, and then run with her children through the jungle for the next ten days to the border. And somehow, through some unbelievable miracle, which included the kind but wary offerings of food and water from villages they passed through, they had found their way into the care of Christian groups operating throughout Central America. Generous and brave people, mostly from the United States, had mobilized out of sheer mercy to give refuge to innocent people fleeing the senseless slaughter of civil wars in that bleeding isthmus. She and her children had been smuggled into the States and through an underground network from home to home and church to church for nearly three months until they had reached this blessed Priory—a monastery oper-

ated by the Benedictine order—eight months ago. It was far from the southern borders of the United States and its border patrols that they had eluded. Here, the brothers had given her and her children refuge from the police in her country and from the U.S. Government, which had never granted her permission to enter.

She and her children quickly became part of the peaceful and very private family of this monastery in southern Vermont while the U.S. government, it seemed, was blind to the plight of helpless people like these in its manic policies of resisting Communist insurrections in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. This was because the unthinkable had happened in Nicaragua: the seizure of a government by the Sandanistas—*Communists*. The government was doing everything legal—even a few things very illegal—to keep this from happening in the remaining “democracies” in the region, even if it turned a blind eye to the death squads, the torture, and the horrors of the rightist governments it was supporting.

Here at the Holy Spirit Priory, there was sanctuary. Here was peace. The chapel, like all of the buildings of the Priory, was built to reflect the pureness of nature and the ruggedness of the woods surrounding it. From its high, arched ceiling hung electric chandeliers, now dimmed for the evening but not extinguished...for the chapel was always open to the brothers for meditation and prayer. The sweet smell of pine was infused with the lingering perfume of incense and decades of melted and evaporated beeswax from the dozens of candles always burning at the tabernacle and at the feet of Mary’s statue. The man and woman were alone with each other.

She studied the man in the soft glow of the sparse electric lights and the flicker of candles. He was, she thought, in his thirties or early forties, but he had a young, athletic physique. That he was in great physical condition was clear in spite of the bulk of a round neck heather sweater worn over a white button down shirt. His short but expensively cut sandy brown hair showed a few flecks of gray in his sideburns, with a wisp of hair hanging down over his forehead pointing at eyes the

color of...what? They were neither blue nor brown. The *Americanos* have a name for this color, she thought. Chestnut? Ah, hazel. These eyes, she thought to herself, have no distinct color but they are kind and gentle. She could see that even though he wore gold wire rimmed glasses, which hid nothing of the openness and caring of his eyes.

She spoke again, wanting to trust this man further. Needing to trust someone—again.

“The brothers, they are like saints, *senōr*. My government would take me back and put me on trial, or much worse. Many people disappear. I would disappear. I have done nothing. My husband did nothing. We attended the university in Guatemala City. That is where we met. I was a student of English and Estéban studied agriculture and government. And when the troubles in our country began, the people of our district came to us because we had education. They begged us to explain what was happening and why the government was making life so difficult for them. Estéban had been helping the farmers in villages for many kilometers around to help pull themselves out of the poverty, which crushes our people. He was planning to run for governor of our state and people for many kilometers around were hoping to support him. That is what got him in trouble with the government in Guatemala City. They were afraid of him, I think, because he was popular with the people. He was honest and good.

“I was teaching English to the children and their mothers. English, *senōr*, is the language of escape and hope for the poor people of the world. Our people are simple, and because we had studied in the university, we were always being asked by the people in our village to explain why it seemed like the government was at war with the poor people. We, ourselves, began to ask questions of the *policia* and soldiers who seemed to be everywhere. ‘Don’t make trouble,’ they said. ‘Don’t be troublemakers.’ All we did was try to help our people.”

She looked downward and wiped the tears from her eyes, which were like deep dark pools. As she began to speak again, she gestured

with her hands, opening her palms as if to say “I want you to understand.” She went on.

“We loved our country, but its leaders killed my husband and are killing anyone who speaks out or asks questions. They call it treason and yet it is *they* who are very evil. Your government, I think, knows we are here, but they do not come for us because of the brothers,” she said.

“It was truly hell, *senōr*,” she repeated. “But here in your country, in this place of God, I am finding there is maybe a heaven too. It is helping me to forget, but I...I cannot forget the pain of losing my husband. The peace of this place and the generosity of the brothers, this is like what heaven will be, I think.”

He paused and looked at her deeply, deciding whether to share his own reason for being here. Tonight, they had both attended the evening devotion, *Compline*, the brothers called it, and both had stayed behind in the chapel to just sit in the semi-darkness and let the flickering candlelight and peace soothe them.

They were complete strangers, here for different reasons. She had come for the spiritual presence of Jesus and to pray for understanding and healing. He had come for the music and to be around people who would accept his being there without penetrating his solitude. He had seen her and her children at Mass each morning for the past week and knew only that they had been given sanctuary by the brothers out of love and out of protest against the U.S. policy of supporting the Guatemalan government in the ongoing civil war. The brothers would not allow any photographs to be taken at the Priory for fear of having the woman and her children identified to the authorities.

He had never spoken to her other than to say a simple “good morning.” Tonight, by accident, he had found himself alone in the silent church with her and, taking the risk of breaking into her thoughts, he felt a need to speak to her—to someone—for the first time since he’d arrived. He’d been relieved when she seemed to accept him sharing the quiet chapel with her and when he had approached her. He found her

English to be excellent and her occasional smile wary, but friendly. He guessed she was probably lonely too, and she perhaps might have a need to talk. Her children had gone to bed earlier that night and were asleep in the cots set up in what had been a storage room off the main chapel, which had now become their home. The brothers knew if the police came, they would probably not come into the church. Not at first, at least.

The man had correctly surmised she had needed to tell her story. And something about this very nice man told her that maybe she could tell him anything. And so she had, here in the silent sanctuary of this chapel.

It was strange, she thought. Since the savagery of the rape and beating eleven months before, she had not been able to be near men without fear. The loving care and patience of the brothers for these past eight months here at the Priory had at least taught her that some men could be trusted. They were older, men who had given their lives to God and not to the pursuit of money, power, or women. The brothers had been easy to be near and she was so thankful for that while her body and mind had begun to heal with the passing of the months. At the same time, though, she had instinctively pulled away from any of the lay people in the area who visited the Priory, especially the men.

But this man was different! There was almost holy demeanor about him. He had approached her with genuine concern and he hadn't been repulsed by or afraid of hearing her story. He simply listened without probing, his eyes encouraging her to go on. She smiled at him, less tentatively, and he smiled in return. Tonight, in this holy place with this kind man, her fear and pain began to heal.

As he looked at her in the flickering light, he asked himself if he should tell her of *his* experience—tell her what most people, including his closest friends and colleagues, would call a ludicrous story? It would be easy to just say goodnight. And wait.

But when he had come back from the mission and was subsequently incapable of giving the National Aeronautics and Space Administra-

tion (NASA) a coherent debrief, he had bought time from their penetrating inquisition by asking to take some time off to help clear his mind. He also needed to clear his soul, and this monastery was the perfect retreat for privacy and solitude. His parents had brought him here as a child every Easter for the sunrise Mass. The music, composed and sung by the brothers, he remembered, was more beautiful than any church choir he'd ever heard. The surrounding woods were so peaceful. He knew he could come here to find his much-needed solitude while he sorted it out.

NASA had granted him time to collect his thoughts and, hopefully, come to grips with what had happened out there. So far, he'd only been able to eat, walk in the fields and woods, go to Mass, and listen to the mesmerizing singing of the brothers. And to sleep. All this was good, but he had yet to face himself—something he had to do before getting on with his life.

His superiors in Houston had reluctantly let him get away for “as long as it took,” and so far it had only been a week. Now, for the first time since he'd come back to Earth, he realized he was ready to risk revealing his heart—his soul. It surprised him that this woman from another world, whose name he didn't even know, was the one he now knew he could begin with.

Still sitting next to him, she turned to face him, inviting him with her eyes to speak. She was wearing jeans and a chambray shirt she had embroidered with the colors and flowers of the country she had left behind. She really is beautiful, he thought. Her long, perfectly black hair had been pulled into a ponytail, which hung over her shoulder. She had toyed nervously with the end the whole time she was telling her story. He drew a breath, grinned, and began.

“But there is a heaven,” he said. “You know, this place feels like heaven with all the peace and quiet.” He gestured with his hand, pointing around the chapel. She knew he was holding something back, and her eyes widened with a kind of hope she had not felt in months. He still tried to deflect it.

"It's a big universe out there and what I've seen of it has been like a vision of heaven." Nervously, he went on.

"I don't know how to begin. I don't understand what I've seen or what I know—or what I think I know. I'm babbling. Sorry."

He paused and looked away. She waited. Then he turned to face her again.

"I'm here for safety and protection, too. I'm afraid I can't explain it to you. You're here to forget a horrible experience...your hell. I can't even begin to imagine your heartache in losing your husband, leaving your home, and leaving everything behind to come here in exile with your little children."

"Please go on *senōr*," she encouraged. "You talk of heaven. I want to hear what you have seen." This time her smile lit up her eyes. He continued slowly, clearly choosing his words with care, but struggling.

"I'm here to figure out how to explain what I've experienced, and for the lack of a better word, I just called it heaven a minute ago, but that's not it. I'd like to tell you what happened. I feel like I should tell the whole world about it, but I can't. The people I work for are waiting for me to explain it, and I'm not sure I know how."

The woman looked confused, but she gently replied. "You're correct, *senōr*, I don't understand, but I can see in your eyes something...maybe it's like the look of joy I see in the eyes of the brothers here when they sing. Their joy makes me feel better. You have that same look, but you are confused too. Why don't you tell me what happened and why you are so confused, *senōr*? I would like to try to understand. We have all night."

"All right," he said.

"My name is Maria," she said. He smiled and took her hand in both of his. "My name is Michael...Mike."

"Ah, the archangel!" she said.

"Oh, not by a long shot," he said, with a short laugh.

“I think, maybe, not such a long shot, as you say, *senor Michael the Archangel*,” she said, beaming. This time, it was a far less tenuous smile.

They talked very late into the night, neither seeming to miss the solitude they sought in coming to the monastery. And Mike held nothing back while Maria listened. His heaven and her hell commingled in the course of their sharing. The candles flickered and the silence of the Vermont night outside was perfectly still as the night passed.

C H A P T E R 2

Montpelier, Vermont—December, 1948

Sunlight glints in brilliant white flashes off the silver jet fighter as it glides upward through a featureless, endless sky. It's midnight and the only source of light or sound in the little two-story house is the television set, a black and white Philco that nobody had turned off. Although the sound is tinny and the image on the screen is twitching with the juvenile technology of TV, the picture of graceful flight upward against a backdrop of gentle orchestral music is meant to move the soul. As it does every night, the station is closing its broadcast day with this visual message of inspiration and patriotism for the few viewers still awake. The aircraft's image and softened music are now a backdrop to the spoken words of John Gillespie Magee, Jr.'s "High Flight." The poem speaks of climbing into the sky and playing among the clouds and which closes by allowing its pilot-narrator to reach beyond his humanity, to speak of "slipping the surly bonds of Earth" and going where angels tread...

*And, while with silent, lifting mind, I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.*

At the poem's end, the TV screen changes to a test pattern and, a few moments later, to the hiss of static as Channel 4 in Boston shuts down. It was the only station strong enough to reach the rooftop antennas of central Vermont and to justify anyone's indulgence in the luxury of a TV set in 1948. Electromagnetic silence falls on the house, since even WSKI, the region's AM radio station, went off the air an hour earlier, at eleven.

Outside, a heavy snow is quietly falling on the sleeping town and somewhere a power line goes down under the weight of a big oak tree too late to shed all of its leaves before this early December snow. The power to the house goes out, dousing the white noise of the TV and the white light of the floor lamp next to the sleeping ex-viewer, Tom St. Pierre. Although he is still just shy of thirty years old, he looks older. Carrying about forty extra pounds and showing a few more strands of gray every day in his thinning black hair, he snores away in his easy chair, a very tired man. He's had a long day, logging a hundred miles in his station wagon in the snow and slush to make his rounds of northern New England's mom and pop drug stores and groceries as a salesman for a tobacco distributor. He's fallen asleep, as he does almost every night, in "his" chair in the living room, centered in front of the television box. The whole house is dark and quiet: no electricity in its wiring, no electromagnetic waves in its air. Except for Tom's rasping snores, which will wake himself up in a little while as his body's nightly signal to itself to go up to bed, the silence is pure.

The house is still warm because the oil burner in the basement doesn't work off of any fancy thermostat. It's on or it's off. And on this cold, cold night, it's definitely on, gently wafting warmth up through gratings in the main floor and through a pass-through register to the upstairs.

Asleep in her crib in one of the two bedrooms upstairs in the tiny house is a small girl of three, her little arms wrapped around her Raggedy Ann doll. With curls of red hair brushing across her perfectly

smooth and freckled face, Mary is as beautiful as only a sleeping child can be.

In the bigger bedroom, just big enough for a double bed and a single dresser, is the little girl's mother...soon to be a mother again. Annie Murphy had been the prettiest and smartest girl in her high school up in Burlington and had caught the eye of every young man in northern Vermont, even the smart-ass Canadian boys across the border. Tom, though, had picked her out, set his sights on her, and won her as his bride just as the war broke out. And she had waited for him to come home to her and their home after he was mustered out, just as every night these days, she would go up to bed and leave his side of the little bed open and warm for him to join her when his snores sent him upstairs.

Annie, almost thirty, is in her ninth month of pregnancy, and she has been hoping that their soon-to-be born child is a boy. She's almost certain of it, too, because he kicks and tumbles much more strenuously than their little Mary had, drawing attention to himself during the day and often into the night. But, tonight she sleeps peacefully in a dreamless slumber, and the child within her is quiet and still.

It was a miracle Tom had returned, coming back from the war with his memories and nightmares of Iwo Jima and the rest of the horror in the Pacific only those Marines really knew. Tonight, though, all is peace. Anne Murphy St. Pierre and the baby within her sleep deeply, sharing the warmth of the wool blankets and the love that permeates every nook of the house and the lives asleep within it.

The child, whose name they've already decided will be given as Michael Joseph St. Pierre if it is a boy—and it is—is sleeping as soundly as his mother, but his isn't a dreamless sleep. It's far beyond his comprehension to give shape to the images now forming in his subconscious mind, not the part of him that's all neurons and receptors and capillaries, but the mind's eye. His spirit is alive and awake. For an almost-to-be-born child, he's never seen a face—his mother's face—or his sister—or his father—or any physical thing outside of the womb.

And yet, the child tonight is beginning to experience the image of these things. His uterine world is one of vague shades of light that brighten his now fully developed eyes, sounds transmitted to his ears more effectively by the amniotic fluid than by air, and touches of fluid and tissue and feelings of incredible warmth. This warmth is both the physical transfer of heat between his tiny body and his mother's and, in the most basic and essential of human senses, the emotional warmth of love and safety. In his sleep he's already experiencing a dream, but little baby Michael is about to experience much more than a dream.

His sleeping yet wide awake awareness takes him, as always, to every cell of his mother and wraps his subconscious spirit in total love and security. Tonight is different, though. For the first time, subject to no electromagnetic fields of any kind due to the power failure, he somehow finds his awareness free to wander out of the womb. While still firmly bathed in the familiar dreamy warmth of his mother's love and protection, he becomes aware, if "aware" is the word for an unborn child's subconscious intersection with consciousness, of a powerful source of energy. Without a learned ability to perceive what a three dimensional world is, he senses a radiation from somewhere beyond himself, beyond his mother, beyond all he knows of his world. It is as if a powerful bundle of rays of energy is radiating him with warmth. It is not physical, not electrical, not anything describable. It is spiritual warmth. In this "cocoon of light," Michael's essential presence is sweeping outward from his own physical body curled in his mother's flesh. He is drawn first to the closest focal point of another "light," to his sister, the closest living spiritual essence he finds. Incapable of knowing what this experience is, or of controlling it, he sweeps though her body, occupying the same oneness of presence, and immediately he is at one with her own subconscious. She smiles in her sleep and hugs her doll tightly. In this instant, he is entwined with another spirit, with a stronger presence, which heightens his experience of warmth. His presence now leaps to merge with yet another source of energy/light, the presence of his sleeping father downstairs. This life warmth, this

new spirit, is as strong as his mother's nurturing presence still flickering within him. This experience of presence outside of himself, so far beyond his ability to sense, happens instantaneously. He has no conception of time, but then no time passes in the movement. The connection to these three spirits, his family's sleeping presence, is giving Michael what a mature, communicating human might call "well being." Even such a more developed human would not really be capable of explaining what this experience is beyond words like peace and joy...and awe.

Michael knows nothing yet about the universe outside of himself that he has begun to explore. But he sees that it's basked in a brilliant illumination from "above," outside of himself, more powerful than himself, and holds warmth and safety in the three spirits who share this home with him. His first coherent subconscious thought is that he is not alone. And it feels good. His spirit moves throughout his family and, deep within his sleeping mother, his tiny lips smile.

CHAPTER 3



*Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas—
November 13, 1985*

“Oh my God! Where the hell *are* they?” A suddenly ashen-faced Dave Jackson, Mission Flight Director, yelled the question. Every man and woman in the control center heard him both through their headset earpieces in one ear and, very clearly, through their open ear. Everyone immediately knew there was a problem, a very serious problem. Then, in a calmer voice, his normal icy professional voice returning, Jackson said into his mike, “They should have come out of blackout thirty seconds ago! Do we have radar contact?”

“Woomera has them, Flight. Just picked them up,” replied one of the twenty-two console operators in Mission Control to the Flight Director. This one monitored radar tracking from the big dish in central Australia. At least now, Mission Control knew that the space shuttle was being tracked. *It still existed!*

“TDRSS (pronounced tee-drus) Three has no signal, Flight,” said another, his face turned upward from his console toward the Flight Director. “There aren’t any telemetry transmissions at all coming from *Discovery*.”

The huge TDRSS, short for Tracking and Data Relay Satellite System, geosynchronous communications satellite sitting twenty two thousand miles above Australia and the western Pacific and high above *Discovery's* orbit, one hundred and seventy miles high, was Houston's normal mode of communicating with the shuttle. And right now, it was receiving no signals from the orbiter. None at all. *Discovery* had just flown into its receiver pattern and out of the "dead zone" over the Indian Ocean, a hole in radio coverage caused by the failure a month before of TDRSS Four, which normally would have covered this part of the flight path. *Discovery* had been in a complete communications blackout, something that manned space flight missions had dealt with ever since Project Mercury. Now, *Discovery* had flown out of the fourteen-and-a-half minute blackout...and wasn't broadcasting any signals at all. This was a very serious crisis, and everybody knew it. Nobody said it, but the fear that lurks deep in the heart of every person who works in the human space flight program, the fear of losing a crew, had just reared its ugly head.

Jackson, a true flight director in the tradition of the legendary Gene Kranz from the Apollo era, didn't have time for fear. His mind never stopped ticking off the procedures and the options. Options, if there were any—and there always seemed to be—meant that there were decisions to be made. He spoke calmly into his mike but every eye in the control center was on him. They could read his lips and they could feel the calm returning.

"OK, people, we now have a radar track but no transmissions from the orbiter. We know where they are, and it's where they're supposed to be, but we don't know why they aren't communicating. The crew is about two hours into a scheduled six-hour sleep period and we should presume they're still asleep. Execute remote activation of telemetry." And turning to the communications console operator, he directed: "Comms, let's see if we can get through. I want some answers."

From the communications console a split second later came the reply. "Telemetry commands sent. Reply system should be activated.

Wait.” Ten excruciating seconds later, “No signal coming in. Telemetry didn’t turn on as commanded, Flight.” Without telemetry, or TM, the signals from the spacecraft which provided information about the shuttle’s engineering status, the control center had no way of knowing about the crew’s health—or whether they were even still alive.

Pressing a button on his console to link his voice channel to every tense set of ears in Mission Control, the Flight Director, in a fight to keep his tone calm and business-like spelled out the situation. “All stations, this is the Flight Director. *Discovery* has come out of the Indian Ocean TDRSS blackout. We should have established two-way comms through the ground antennas in Australia thirty seconds ago and the operational TDRSS should be linking now. Since we’ve got two healthy receiving paths through ground and space antennas, let’s assume either a transmitter failure on the orbiter or, well, let’s see. Comms, I want hailing on all available uplink channels from Woomera. Light up the night over there. If Australia is still cold, go through TDRSS. CAPCOM, start the wakeup calls and keep calling until you get someone. Come on, people, let’s look sharp! This is the real deal!”

Major Sue Ellen Reed, U.S. Air Force, herself a shuttle pilot still awaiting her first flight crew assignment, was the ground support astronaut manning the Capsule Communicator (CAPCOM) station, traditionally the only console with a direct voice link to the crew. She had already grabbed the book of flip charts of emergency communications procedures. Now, she put the book down to look up at the large-screen-display that covered the entire front wall of Mission Control. It showed a map of the world with the shuttle’s position moving slowly across the southeastern Indian Ocean. She reached for the switch in the intercom unit on her belt and keyed her mike. In the calm, cool voice that astronauts didn’t practice but just sort of grew into, she started the calls:

“*Discovery*, Houston. Time to wake up, gang.”

No reply.

And again: “*Discovery*, this is Houston, do you read me? Wake up time. *Discovery*, Houston, speak to me, guys.” There was again no reply and she shot a glance at Jackson. She continued to send her voice from her mike, the thin clear tube circling her tightening jaw from the ear piece, to her console, to a transmitter and then to a fifteen foot diameter dish antenna at the Johnson Space Center. From there it went up to the TDRSS Number One in geostationary orbit over the central United States, and via a direct space-to-space link to TDRSS Two over the central Pacific, down to Guam, and up to TDRSS Three over the western Pacific, and then simultaneously through space by a direct line-of-sight path to an omni-directional Ultra-High Frequency (UHF) receive antenna on *Discovery*. It also went down to Woomera, a high tech outpost in the dustiest, most remote location in the middle of the central Australian desert, and up again through a forty foot dish pointing directly at the shuttle, to another antenna on the orbiter. It was a long way for radio waves to travel, but Sue Ellen knew that the waves were bouncing off the space shuttle at the speed of light, less than two seconds after she spoke.

“*Discovery*, this is Houston, do you copy?” Her voice was still calm, but the concern showed in her eyes.

By now every member of the mission control team in Houston and the backup center at the Cape was in full motion. Three minutes had now passed since the blackout ended...meaning that *Discovery* should be in radio contact through multiple transmission paths. And there was still an eerie silence from the orbiter, which was now being bombarded with no fewer than fifteen different transmitted signals.

“*Discovery*, do you copy?” were the only spoken words anyone in Mission Control was now really listening to. But they were really listening for the unspoken words: the reply from the shuttle. Where were they? What had happened?

One and a half more minutes, an eternity, went by before a speaker crackled: “Houston, *Discovery*, I hear you. What the hell time is it and why are all the lights out?”

The spontaneous cheers which broke out in Mission Control virtually drowned out the far away southern drawl of Marine Colonel Chuck Chandler, the Mission Commander on *Discovery*, but that voice was the sweetest sound Sue Ellen Reed or Dave Jackson had ever heard in their lives.

Chuck wasn't the only African American astronaut, but he was the first one to rise to Mission Commander status. He was a dead-on accurate engineer and pilot who was physically strong enough to kick the butt of just about anybody, but he was intelligent and respected enough to get the best reaction from anybody, anywhere. He'd been selected recently for promotion to Brigadier General and this was his last flight before returning to his beloved Marine Corps. He knew this flying machine and the people he had under his command as well as any human being could. With Chuck awake, things were going to get better, fast.

"Chuck, this is Sue Ellen. Sorry to wake you, but it's MET 147:33. Repeat, Mission Elapsed Time 147:33. It's about three in the afternoon back here in Texas. You're only one point seven five hours into your scheduled six hour sleep period. We woke you up early because you came out of the Indian Ocean comms blackout and we were receiving no signals of any kind from *Discovery*." She grinned and added, "got a little worried one of you guys kicked a switch with a toe while you were floating around asleep. So you'd better wake the crew and let's see what's up." Sue Ellen's face still showed her professional concern, but just being in communications link with Chuck and the crew meant that everybody's worst fears were, at least for now, not coming true.

"Houston, *Discovery*," in a voice turned suddenly one hundred percent awake and professional, "crew being awakened. Stand by. OK, everybody accounted for. We'd powered down most of the lights for the sleep period, but it was pitch black when I woke up...no lights at all. But before I could touch anything, all the lights came on. Temperature's pretty cold...about forty-five or fifty degrees, I'd say, but I don't

smell any noxious odors or see any sparking, that kind of thing. The lights have come on, but it looks like most subsystems are shut down—everything except emergency voice comms, the lights, and the fans, which are turning on one by one. Wait...systems are powering up. She must be responding to automatic startup or commands from you guys.”

“Sounds good, *Discovery*. The systems operators here are powering up everything that can be done from here,” said the smiling CAPCOM. “Lights are coming on in all the consoles here too. Startup sequences showing no anomalies. Looks like we’ve all got some work to do. Report crew status as soon as they’re up. By then, I’m pretty sure we’ll know which checklists you’ll need to pull out and start on.”

“Oh, they’re up, Sue Ellen! This is about the most alert I’ve seen these slackers since we lifted off.” The joke wasn’t lost on anyone; there were no slackers anywhere in the program, especially in this crew or in mission control back on the ground. Now, in spite of the flurry of activity in Mission Control, it was clear the worst of the crisis was past, even though everyone knew that something very bad had happened up there to cause the massive shutdowns of electrical systems. Had Mission Control not caught the situation when they did, the crew would have been in very serious trouble. A margin of mere seconds, or at least minutes, would have meant a cold and quiet death of the crew in their sleep.

Jackson, clearly in charge and showing the confidence and competence that earned him this job, spoke again into his mike. “All stations: I want diagnostics run on every system, starting immediately. Crank up the SMS.” Ever since the near disaster on Apollo 13, the Shuttle Mission Simulator (SMS) had been manned during missions by experienced astronauts trained in every facet of the mission right along with the flight crew. This allowed Houston to replicate on the ground any situation faced by the shuttle in space. Almost any situation, that is.

“And I want that crew status as soon as you’ve got it, CAPCOM.”

“CAPCOM aye,” replied Sue Ellen. She caught herself and began to wonder which of the Navy guys in the astronaut corps she’d picked up that “aye” crap from.

“*Discovery*, Houston. Crew status please,” she ordered through her mike.

It was Chandler who replied not just for Sue Ellen, but to his crewmates as well. “Houston, all crew members are now at emergency stations and busy as hell. Crew, this is mission commander, let’s all sing out so Sue Ellen can hear your lovely voices. Quickly report any physical or technical problems you can see from where you are. Pilot first.” He turned to the man sitting to his right in one of the two seats on the flight deck, each having all the controls for takeoff and landing. NASA had never liked to call any astronaut a “co-pilot” or “deputy commander,” so it had invented the term “pilot” to mean just those things. He, and so far all NASA Mission Commanders and Pilots had been male, had always sat to the right of the Mission Commander on the flight deck at the spacecraft’s controls. There was never any doubt on space flight missions: (a) who was in command, or (b) that the Pilot was just as capable of commanding the mission (if the need ever arose) and was always ready to do so.

“Houston, Pilot,” said Jim Peters. Jim was a civilian test pilot on his second mission, his first having been a year earlier as a mission specialist serving as flight engineer. He had a remarkable photographic ability to remember every circuit, subsystem, and switch in the orbiter and lightening-fast recall of exactly what switch to throw and when. He was along on this flight for some “stick time” and earning his next flight assignment as mission commander. With Jim aboard, there was no true flight engineer on this mission. The rest of the crew was well trained and all knew the orbiter’s systems, but there wasn’t any need for another avionics whiz. Peters’ hands were flying already, a checklist already velcro’ed to each knee.

"I'm fine," he said. "Avionics coming on line. Power cells passing seventy-five percent and coming up. Looking very good. Very busy here. Over to you, MS One."

"Houston, MS One," said Mike St. Pierre, the senior Mission Specialist and Payload Commander, "I'm fine, but let me pass for a minute...MS Two, go ahead and report, Amy."

"This is MS Two. What's going on? I'm a little groggy, but other than that, I'm just fine. The manipulator arm is in stowed position, cargo bay situation nominal. Telescope power back on and I'm starting to test its gimbals." Even though she was the youngest member of the crew and on her rookie Shuttle flight, Dr. Amy Minh was a world class astrophysicist and the hands-down heart throb of the astronaut office.

Amy had come to the United States almost eleven years before with her mother, the wife of a captain in the South Vietnamese Navy. Her father had succeeded in putting his wife and his cherished seventeen-year-old daughter onto one of the last few helicopters that were able to leave the chaos and flames of a falling Saigon. The women were dropped virtually penniless onto the tiny helicopter deck of an American destroyer, the *USS BENJAMIN STODDERT*, waiting off the coast for the final chapter of the war in Vietnam in what was called "Operation Frequent Wind" in April of 1975. In fact, *STODDERT* was the last United States warship to leave Vietnamese waters, officially marking the end of the U.S. military presence in Vietnam, as the fleet retreated to Subic Bay in the Philippines and to Guam.

Never again hearing from her father, whom they could only presume had been killed in the final and hopeless defense of what had been their country, Amy and her mother and about two hundred other refugees on board began to make their way from Subic Bay, Philippines, to Hawaii, and then on to their new lives in the United States. Settling in "Little Saigon" of Los Angeles, Amy's mother supported her with the meager salary she could earn as a clerk in a dry cleaning store. Amy had made the most of her mother's support and encouragement by quickly learning almost flawless English and then a year later by get-

ting into and winning a scholarship from Stanford. She went on to attend graduate school at the California Institute of Technology, earning a Ph.D. in a mere six years from her start at Stanford to her finish in Pasadena at Cal Tech. Now, she was still blazing new ground for the thousands of Vietnamese refugees in America by becoming a NASA astronaut Mission Specialist. Brilliant and beautiful, and now awake and in full swing, Amy Minh completed her report and went back to work.

"This is MS Three," a final voice broke in a second later. "I'm OK. The mid-deck is a mess with sleeping gear and equipment floating everywhere, but I'll have it back in order in a few minutes. Everyone else is topside and really busy right now but they look and sound fine. I'll take some vital signs when things calm down."

Sam "Felix" Utegaard, MD, was a neatness fanatic, hence his "Odd Couple" nickname, and on this, his first flight as the mission's medical specialist, he was finding out that five people living and working for a week in a space smaller than the average college dorm room meant living amid a constant mess. His official job was to keep the crew healthy and to carry out microgravity physiology experiments, but he'd realized that if *he* didn't keep things velcro'ed or stowed in their place, nobody would, and he'd go nuts.

"OK, Houston, that's everybody. Mike, you want to finish your report? You all right?" Chuck asked.

"This is MS One. Yeah, I'm fine, really. I was in a deep sleep back there. My dream was a doozy. I'll probably want to talk to somebody about this when we get down, but I had kind of a mind-blowing experience while the power was off and I'm still a little bit shaky."

There was silence for a full ten seconds until the mission director spoke. Glances were exchanged around the room among the console operators. Nobody used words like "mind-blowing" in the left brain engineer-driven world of NASA.

"CAPCOM, go secure. Now!" ordered Jackson, not through his mike. "Sue Ellen, find out what the hell he's talking about before the

rest of the world thinks we're flying a bunch of dreamers for astronauts!"

"Mike, this is Sue Ellen. I just switched to space-to-ground circuit three, offline and encrypted, at Flight's direction because we'd like you to elaborate on this dream thing without everybody listening in. It's just you crew members, Flight and me listening right now. Eyebrows went up when you said 'mind-blowing' and 'shaking,' and we want to make sure you're all right. It's OK to talk. We just think you should have a chance to explain without the world hearing it. So what's the problem, swabbie?"

"Sue Ellen, there's no problem. Really. It's just that before you folks woke me up, I was really out cold. Physically out cold. And I had an experience I can't explain right now. It's happened before, but not for a long time. I'd like some time to think about it and talk later. That OK?"

"Mike, this is Dave Jackson, I've been monitoring this. Did you have an attack or something? Can you continue your mission functions? Should Sam take a look at you?"

"Listen guys, I'm fine. Felix wouldn't find anything, but I'm sure you'll want him to go over me with his tricorder. And, shipmates, you guys up here with me, you don't need to worry. I just had a kind of dream that's a little different from most people's dreams and although I can't explain it now, I'm reasonably sure the power outage could have been a factor. It's kind of hard to explain and this isn't the time. My mind isn't blown, but I used that expression because this was really something I need some time to sort out. So can I get back to work? There are a million checklists we need to go through. I suspect that we've got a lot bigger problems trying to figure out what went wrong with *Discovery* and fix it before it happens again. It looks like we got lucky this time. A total shutdown isn't something we ever simulated. Amy and I are busy checking out the payload bay and making sure that we don't have any problems out there that might have caused the sys-

tems failure. Then I'm going to help Jim go through the avionics. OK, guys? I'm fine."

"What do you think, Dave?" asked Johnson Space Center Director Craig Hunter, who was sweating from his sprint to mission control from Building One across the center's "campus," and who had arrived a few minutes before. Hunter, a retired Air Force general who, night and day, monitored mission operations by closed circuit TV, had just bolted from his office on the tenth floor of the administration building and made it to mission control in under five minutes, which was a record, even for him. He was ready to launch into a stream of questions about the near disastrous shutdown of the orbiter, but first, he wanted to know if a crewmember was in trouble. The safety of the crew always came first at the Johnson Space Center.

Jackson, who had personal responsibility for all aspects of the mission, thought a minute and then said, "General, I think we can all agree that Commander St. Pierre is a pro. He sounds a little shaky but he also sounds like he's handling whatever this 'dream,' or whatever it was, pretty well. I like the fact that he mustered up the humor to call the doc by his nickname Felix and that he used the Star Trek reference to the tricorder. Humor can be used by people to hide a problem or to signal they're OK. I think this is the latter. Let's go back into normal comms mode before the press gets suspicious and get on with the mission. Something seriously wrong happened up there and unless we figure out what it was and how to recover completely from the anomaly, we'll have to bring them down...maybe on this orbit. Let's not worry about St. Pierre right now, OK? He's got a job to do and so do I."

"Sounds good, Dave. Let's hear what might have gone wrong with the orbiter. That's our number one issue, right?" The General's face still showed the sweat from both his sprint and from the worry that there may still be a crisis to deal with.

"Right, sir," said Jackson. "My number one issue is to get that spacecraft fully back on line and make some decisions about de-orbiting or continuing the mission. The crew could still be at risk."

“OK, Dave. Let’s get on with it. Keep me informed. I guess I’ve got to talk to the press sometime soon to head off the feeding frenzy.” And he turned to the huge plate glass window that formed the rear wall of the control center, the huge illuminated world map forming the front. He could see that the few press representatives who had drawn this quiet shift were on their feet and were staring at him expectantly. A crew sleep period was always dull enough to drive almost all the reporters off to restaurants or a quiet place to catch a nap. But “Vultures Row,” the first row of press seats in the visitors’ gallery behind the glass was never completely abandoned by the men and women from the press, so long as there was the chance of a catastrophe to be reported.

“Oh shit! Sorry...I forgot about the press,” Jackson exclaimed. “Good luck with them, General. Let me know if you need me to talk to the reporters. If I took a couple of minutes to meet with them and put on my calm face, they may not go nuts and start making up things just to get something on the wire.”

“OK, good plan. I’ll have to get together with public affairs ASAP and I agree we can probably head off the worst guesses they might be making now that the crisis is past. If we’re able to finish the mission, the crew comes down in two more days and then let’s debrief Mike about this dream thing. It’s probably nothing anyway. He’s a pretty squared away guy,” said Hunter.

“Yeah, I feel pretty sure we can wait a couple of days to talk to Mike. Right now, we need to start evaluating the orbiter’s systems to decide whether we want to terminate the mission early. Something we thought was absolutely impossible just happened to the orbiter and we’re going to run every test we can think of and then think of a million more to do. I’m not at all sure we’re out of the woods and we’ll probably bring *Discovery* down on the next pass. But if we do abort the mission, I’m confident it won’t be because of Mike. We’ll watch him carefully, but my guess is he’ll be fine. So right now, I’m a lot more worried about getting the orbiter fully back on line and figuring out exactly what happened than worried about St. Pierre. We’re going to

be real busy for a few hours, especially if we're bringing 'em down on this pass. We only have about fifteen minutes to make that call." With that, Jackson turned away from the Center Director and went back to work.

Turning to Sue Ellen, he said "CAPCOM, return to normal comms. Have the doctor check out each crewmember within the next couple of hours, as time permits, if we're not deorbiting on this revolution. Make no specific reference over open comms to Mike's report of a dream or of a 'mind blowing experience' or any such happy horseshit. We've got a mission to run."

"Yes, sir!" she grinned.

And, as thousands of circuits were checked and hundreds of checklists were meticulously reviewed and dozens of news reports were filed, the mission continued. The crew was challenged, both physically and mentally, to execute the diagnostics and inspections required to figure out why a billion dollar electric flying machine had shut itself down and nearly killed five human beings and potentially destroyed the future of the United States space program. What had happened in low Earth orbit over the Indian Ocean was nearly the end of the dream of humans living and working in space and, someday, going back to the Moon and onward to Mars, Titan, the stars.

Mike St. Pierre knew about dreams. And he knew that it had happened again.

CHAPTER 4



The Pentagon—Sunday, December 15, 1985

“How the hell could you have let him go somewhere alone? What in God’s name were you thinking, Admiral?” The challenge, more than a question, was bellowed out by Dr. Howard Willoughby, whose title was supposed to be Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Studies, but who was more correctly the Technical Director for a staff which didn’t show up in the Department of Defense phone book. In fact, there was a number on the door to the office suite of the staff, but no other indications of what organization was using those offices. This was typical of highly classified, or “black” programs in the Pentagon.

Vice Admiral James Haley, U.S. Navy was the Deputy Administrator of NASA, and he had been “invited” here to the Pentagon on a Sunday morning to discuss Commander Michael St. Pierre, their astronaut just back from a near disaster in space. Hailey wasn’t at all happy about being here. Actually, NASA Administrator Alan Powers had received a call at home on the previous day from the Secretary of Defense himself, and, since he was looking forward to a round of golf at the Army and Navy Country Club that remained open all year, he had dispatched the Admiral in his place. Powers had heard that this Willoughby had a reputation for being unpleasant. And besides, he

had told the Admiral, St. Pierre was a Navy officer, wasn't he? Haley was a tough nut, and if anybody could stand up to the Pentagon and stand up for their man, he could. So, here he was on a Sunday morning.

Haley was fifty eight years old and in better shape than most men twenty years younger, revealing his age only by the complete whitening of his hair and the deep creases at the corners of his eyes from his trademark grin and intense concentration. But he wasn't smiling now. He was a decorated fighter pilot in the Korean War, a test pilot, an Apollo program astronaut, and the only individual in the entire NASA organization briefed into every special access program which affected NASA, and many that didn't. He wouldn't take any shit off the DoD brass, but he was so smooth that they'd never know he was stonewalling them. And now the stonewalling had begun.

"Listen, Howard, I don't know what you might have heard about Commander St. Pierre's shuttle flight, but nothing out of the ordinary happened, except that the power failure created a very dangerous and stressful situation. Mike and the rest of the crew responded magnificently and got things straightened out in a matter of minutes and they went on to complete the entire mission. Hell, they even finished some of the mid-deck experiments we always put aboard when we have extra mass margin in the hopes that we can work off the backlog of projects that the scientists keep adding. They had a real crisis and came out smelling like roses. So what's the problem?"

"You know exactly what the problem is, Admiral," Willoughby said, stabbing the air with his finger. "Just a couple of weeks after the mission, you've stashed this guy away somewhere. We've heard something strange happened up there, and we've heard that St. Pierre either did something or messed up something that gave your guys in Houston a fit. So what happened and where is he? I don't need to remind you he's still on active duty, he still has a special compartmented intelligence clearance, and he's only on loan to NASA."

Haley sized up this balding, paunchy, fifty-something scientist/bureaucrat in thick glasses, which pinched the sides of a very fleshy, joweled face, which uncharacteristically sported a bushy gray mustache that nearly covered his pouting mouth. He was wearing a five hundred dollar Burberry's suit that matched his hugely inflated ego from running programs with budgets that nobody ever saw. Haley didn't like what he saw. The expensive suit and the arrogant expression couldn't disguise a guy porking himself up for the obligatory triple bypass operation which was inevitably coming up before he hit fifty-five. The Pentagon was full of these guys. They worked eight hour days (minus the two hour "working lunches" in the executive dining rooms or at their private clubs in the city), zipped around inside the Beltway in black chauffeured limos, and pulled in the big salaries up at the civil service salary cap of over a hundred thousand dollars. Meanwhile, a virtual army of active duty officers and hard working junior civil servants, earning about half as much, put in twelve hour days and many weekends jumping through hoops to answer "blue blazer" task orders from the flag and general officers, and these suits. He couldn't believe he had to sit here and try to come up with answers about something that was the last thing he wanted the Pentagon to know about. This was too important and it was too soon. He didn't like having to give St. Pierre this time to himself, but he had known him for years. He liked the guy and believed him when he said he could get his story together if he could just have some time and space.

Looking at the Technical Director, he didn't bat an eye. "So, Howard, just what is it that you've heard about the 51K mission that I haven't told you?"

"Listen, Mr. Haley. (The "Mr." was intentionally insulting to the Admiral as he sat there in civilian clothes, a Macy's \$150 suit, his new uniform since moving from the short sleeved casual of Houston to the formality of NASA Headquarters.) We know that during the power failure, St. Pierre was asleep and when he woke up, he said something we overheard on the intercom about having had a 'mind-blowing expe-

rience.’ In case you didn’t know it, we’ve been keeping track of Commander St. Pierre for years. Remember that he’s a former intelligence officer who knows just about everything about our overhead collection systems. And we’ve known about his...‘special capabilities’ and you know what I mean. If he’s had a mind-blowing experience, it’s the experience we’ve been waiting for a long time. We think he can make a contribution to intelligence, which would be the first big breakthrough we’ve had since satellites and seismic listening probes were invented.

“The Office of Special Studies,” he continued, “has been around for a long time. You engineers think every big development in national defense comes from nuts and bolts and circuit boards. Hell, in DoD, we spend a shitload of money on space systems engineering and you guys over at NASA sure know how to spend it. You’ve got an important program and you’ve got some of the best officers we have on loan to work for you, but in our alternative intelligence programs, we’ve been exploring some non-engineering ideas and we’ve had our eye on St. Pierre. So please cut the crap and tell me what happened and where the hell he is.”

Again, Admiral Haley evaluated this man. How much did he really know? It was obvious that he had tapes of the two-way conversations between Houston and *Discovery*. But any tapes he had would only contain those exchanges up until NASA’s alert CAPCOM pulled the plug and took the communications system offline, off all public access, to an encrypted channel so they could talk to St. Pierre. Or did he have all the details on what happened in the secure communications? NASA doesn’t like to share its problems with the public or with the rest of the government...only the successes. There probably wasn’t much on the tape, even if they got the whole thing. They couldn’t have managed to get much more after they landed, because St. Pierre seemed to button up, saying he needed some time to work through his thoughts. It took three weeks to debrief and replay every nuance of events connected with the power failure, and they had needed him for that. He stayed focused on the job and, otherwise, pretty much kept to himself, since

he isn't married, although he's been separated from his wife for years. That's why we finally let him get away to Vermont. Only four people knew where he was: NASA Administrator Alan Powers, JSC Center Director Craig Hunter, Chief of the Astronaut Office Captain Bob Wood, and himself. And even though he wasn't about to tell this clown Willoughby anything, his guess was that the guy had seen Mike's NASA psychological profile. Or DOD had a profile of their own on him.

Haley decided to put out a little bait and fish for answers. "OK, Howard. Maybe you know Commander St. Pierre told our flight surgeon about his 'flights of fancy' in the course of a very long and arduous physical and psychological screening process. Hell, in my own screening twenty years ago, I almost told the shrink that I walked in my sleep and wet my bed, just to get him to lighten up a little, but St. Pierre was an outstanding mission specialist candidate because of his superb academic and engineering education, his record of performance at sea as a pilot until he was disqualified because of his vision, and because of his space-related expertise as an intelligence specialist. And he's been an outstanding performer in the program. He gets the highest simulator scores of any of the non-pilots. He's flown twice before this and turned in 4.0 results on each mission. So we didn't take him into the program for any 'special' talents other than his excellence as a naval officer and we're not using him for any purpose other than to get our job done." He paused to let this sink in.

"What I can tell you is that during the flight, Commander St. Pierre was indeed asleep when the power failure occurred. In fact, the whole crew was asleep since this was a short mission without the SpaceLab module in the cargo bay, and we weren't running the crew in shifts. The shuttle's electrical systems suffered a complete and immediate shutdown due to a computer glitch, which put the fuel cells into standby mode, and then a circuit breaker tripped because of a faulty sensor and it all shut down. Everything went black. And since they were on the other side of the Earth from the sun when it happened, it

went really black and quiet up there. They were also in a comms black-out zone because we're one bird short of a full TDRSS constellation and it took almost fifteen minutes for them to come around into the next uplink connection area, which was Woomera, Australia. So for roughly fifteen minutes, these guys, well, guys and one gal, were floating along in an aluminum cocoon at twenty thousand miles an hour, out cold and kept alive by the ambient air and heat in the shuttle. The bird is an amazing electric flying machine, but without power, they couldn't stay alive for long. Lucky for us and for them, we caught the problem right away when the orbiter came into view of Australia and the WestPac TDRSS bird and wasn't transmitting a peep. In about six minutes, we'd sent commands that woke up the orbiter's systems and the crew. These guys, the astronauts, are trained pros—the best in the world—and just started grabbing checklist boards and flipping switches like crazy. And Mike St. Pierre was up there checking and flipping with the rest of them. End of story. Happy ending and all. And as for where he is, he's on a well-earned vacation. Do you have any questions?"

"So you're saying this power failure is the total extent of the 'mind-blowing' experience of the good Commander?" asked Willoughby with annoyance.

"Well it blew our minds pretty good when we realized what was happening," Haley replied. "I'd say Mike just summed it up for all of us. It was a really bad dream."

He wasn't sure he had been convincing enough. Everything he'd said was the truth, but he knew it wasn't the whole truth. And he wondered what the whole truth was. It must be time to call Saint again and ask how it's going, he thought.

Willoughby looked at the Deputy NASA Administrator and glowered. "Well, Admiral, you know what we're after and when you bring St. Pierre out from under the rock you've used to hide him, we'll want to talk to him. Are we clear?"

“Are we done?” the Admiral asked, trying to match the civilian’s annoyed look, but not pulling it off very well. And without waiting for an answer, he was out of his chair and heading for the door.

“No, we’re not done,” Willoughby said, too late.

I know we’re not, Admiral Haley thought to himself as he headed back to his office to place a call to Vermont. He hoped Mike St. Pierre had something to tell him.

CHAPTER 5



Salem, Massachusetts—October, 1965

Mike had had a very rough day. Two quizzes that he had barely remembered to study for were tougher than he expected, but he thought he'd done well. Actually, ever since first grade he had been at the top of his class and now that he was a senior, he knew he couldn't let up if he wanted to get into the Naval Academy. So, as always, he had stayed up late to study the night before.

As he came through the door, still sweating even though he had showered after football practice, he headed for the refrigerator and the milk bottle. His mother hated it when he stood at the refrigerator with the door open, downing milk right from the bottle. But she'd say, "milk builds strong bodies," and kept a standing order for eight bottles with the milkman, twice a week. After wiping his white mustache with his sleeve, he called out, "Hi Mom! I'm home."

Annie St. Pierre had been in the back yard taking down the wash from the clothesline, wanting to get it in now that it was getting dark and cool outside. When she heard the refrigerator door slam, she dropped her clothespins and burst through the back door to greet Mike. He thought he hated it when she still hugged him all the time,

but down inside, he didn't. The truth was, he loved it, even though he always said, "Aw, Mom!"

"How was practice today, Michael? Is the coach going to put you in this Sunday?" she asked.

"It was OK, and I don't know. I think I almost broke Steve Doucette's ankle today when I tackled him and I thought the coach was going to kill me, but I nailed him good. I think the coach was impressed—it was a wicked good hit—but he was really ticked off at me for almost taking out our star. So I guess I won't start and I'll wait for my chance to get sent in." Steve Doucette was the All-State and All-Catholic Conference running back as a junior last year and he was Mike's friend, but he was also the first string at everything from sports to girls, and Mike was the perennial runner up. Steve was going to end up at Harvard or some other Ivy League school because of sports, and his grades were good enough. Mike was no runner up in this category, though: he was in the top ten in the class. But in spite of his great grades, the guidance office was pushing Mike into Boston College or Holy Cross. The brothers always pushed their best students into the Catholic colleges, especially if there wasn't going to be an athletic scholarship coming along. At BC or the Cross, the products of the Xaverian Brothers' teaching and discipline at St. John's Prep would continue to put luster on the brilliant seventy-five year track record of the school. The Prep was a Danvers, Massachusetts high school whose excellent reputation throughout New England was one of the reasons, with the hundred inches of snow per winter being another, that his parents had traded the simple life in Vermont for a more complicated but rewarding and slightly warmer life on the outskirts of Boston.

While he let the Prep guidance office think he was open to thinking about attending a Catholic college in Massachusetts, Mike had other ideas. He'd watched every episode of *Men of Annapolis* on TV beginning when he was in the seventh grade and had been hooked ever since. Now, living on the North Shore, the ocean had become part of him. And when he wasn't trying to bum a ride on one of his richer

friends' sailboat, he was reading the stories of his hero, Horatio Hornblower, sitting on the beach at Salem Willows. The Prep expected the boys to know their current events and encouraged them to think about what they heard was going on in the world. The United States had injected itself into the war in Vietnam and he knew if he went into the Navy, it probably meant going in to fight. Many kids who had graduated from Salem High had disappeared into the draft. Luckily, he didn't know anybody who had been killed, but it would come sooner or later. His dad had told him a million times that if he had a choice between being a grunt in a foxhole or a sailor with three hot meals a day and a bed to climb into every night, he'd be nuts to be anything but Navy.

The Prep had a good track record of sending a couple of boys each year to one Ivy League school or another but somehow, amazingly, had rarely succeeded in getting a kid into Annapolis or West Point. Mike knew he had the grades for the Naval Academy and wanted to be the exception. He was a team player who didn't quit even though he watched most of his football games from the sidelines. He was too shy with the girls to get many dates, so he made time from studies and sports to be in every school play, even if he could only get a bit part. Mike hoped he was the kind of well-rounded, hardworking, persistent student the service academies loved to see.

So he played his heart out at football practice because he just knew he had to do it, but, oh, how Mike loved those Drama Club musicals! He didn't have time to learn the lines, or the voice to sing the lead roles, but he loved to be around the girls who came from the neighboring all-girl or co-ed Catholic schools to be in Prep productions. St. John's was an all-boy school and there were times when he wondered why he wanted to go to an all-male college. He especially wondered about this when he thought about Meghan Reilly. Meghan was a junior at St. Cretien's School in Salem and she had the voice of an angel, freckles on her nose, and the long, straight blonde hair which made her the lead star, and center of attention, in any production. Out of his

shyness, Mike had put her on the pedestal of an “untouchable.” He had convinced himself that she didn’t even know he was alive because she never started any conversations with him, and he was too shy to find out that she knew exactly who he was and that behind the angel’s voice and goddess looks, she was just as shy as he was. In fact, he didn’t know she was always hoping he would ask her out but assumed that because he was a senior, and really smart, and really good looking, *and a jock*, that he didn’t notice her. If only he knew. If only she knew.

In addition to almost breaking his teammate’s ankle, practice had ended up, as it usually did, with “hills” because the coach thought he didn’t see enough effort from his still undefeated team. Hills meant running up and down the forty-foot high hillside that surrounded the practice field until you were ready to drop. As usual, he didn’t drop, but he was glad he was a back and not one of the linemen. They were encouraged to be very big boys to plug the holes, cursed with having to haul their bulk up and down that damn hill. Nevertheless, Mike realized those linemen and backs like him were all in superb physical shape because of the brutal hill conditioning. This physical and intellectual superiority, year after year, put the Prep team head and shoulders over every other athletic team they played. But tonight, Mike was sure of only one thing...he was tired. Well...hungry and tired.

His dad arrived home at six thirty, about the time Mary came in from her job at the hospital. Mike’s sister was a nursing student at Salem State, but she had to work in the afternoons as a nurse’s aid at Salem Hospital to help the family’s finances. Tom St. Pierre had continued to work in the wholesale tobacco business and still drove hundreds of miles a day covering all the small grocery and drug stores on the North Shore as far west as Worcester. He didn’t make much money. In fact, it was very little money by North Shore standards, but it was enough to keep a roof over their heads, to send the kids to Catholic school, and to keep food on the table. And Mike made sure none of the food went to waste, except maybe the lima beans which his mother still seemed to think the family liked even though she was the

only one who ate them. Tonight, though, she had made meatloaf, mashed potatoes, canned green beans and a chocolate cake with chocolate frosting. Everybody's favorites.

Just as the family sat down to dinner, though, the power went out. This happened from time to time, but usually there was a storm outside which had brought down a power line. Tonight, it was an unseasonably warm and fragrant October night. Through the open windows came a slight breeze that carried in the musty smell of fallen leaves...and the equally familiar whiff of a smoldering fire from someone burning a pile of them earlier in the afternoon. The stars were out, but there was no moon. It was very dark.

Tom, always the resourceful and good-natured head of the household, told everybody to sit still and quickly found a flashlight. Out of habit, he checked the fuse box at the top of the cellar stairs but realized the power was out to the whole house, so it couldn't be a blown fuse. He looked out a window and saw nothing where the lights of the neighbors' houses should be and announced to the family that the power to the whole neighborhood was out. Candles were lit and their humble feast was eaten while every family member told the events of the day. This was a very close and loving family and there was no need for the electricity that had gone out. Besides, they all felt it would be just a short while before the power came back on.

In fact, however, it would not be just a short while and it was not just their neighborhood in Salem that lost power. The electric grid for the entire northeast United States and Canada from Pennsylvania to Montreal, and as far west as Chicago, had gone out in what would later be called the "Great Blackout of Sixty-five." For ten hours, across the Northeast, dinners would be eaten in quiet candlelight. Elevator riders would be annoyed, then panic, then settle down. And then, with no choice, they would become friends with their fellow captives. Across the northeast, TVs were useless and babies were conceived. *Lots* of babies. And then, a peaceful sleep would descend on America in the very deep darkness.

For Mike St. Pierre, exhausted from a long day and gorged from his mother's great cooking, it was the deepest sleep he had had for years. With no way to get any homework done, except by candlelight, and no TV to watch, he'd gone to bed early and fallen into the deep sleep his body craved. Tonight, when he fell asleep, he began the most exciting and wonderful journey of his spirit that he had ever experienced. Or, at least, that he could remember.

CHAPTER 6



*Holy Spirit Priory, Vermont—Sunday, December 15,
1985*

MEMORANDUM TO THE RECORD

From: MICHAEL J. ST. PIERRE, CDR, USN

*Subj: JOURNAL OF EVENTS ON NASA SPACE SHUTTLE MIS-
SION STS-51K*

*1. As directed by the Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space
Administration, I am preparing this report to explain the events which
transpired.....*

Bullshit! Let's start this again. I'll leave that header up there because I may go back and write this up the way the Navy ground into me since the first time I wrote an official memo. I guess generations of officers have known they could get going on writing a document if they got the From/To/Subject and "In accordance with" or "As directed by" down on paper. It's like an author with writer's block writing "Chapter One" and then waiting for the rest to come.

But this isn't supposed to be a formal report. I may end up writing one downstream, I guess, but this is more of a journal for my own use.

I asked to come here to the Priory in my home state of Vermont so I could spend some time thinking of what to say and how to say it. And now, I guess, with the help of typing that Navy BS boilerplate I began, it looks like the words are starting to come. So let's just let my stream of consciousness run and we'll see what comes out. OK? OK. I feel like talking to myself. That could be bad. I'll worry about it later.

I don't know who I'm writing this for. Mostly for me, I guess, but let's just say that what I write here won't pass for my formal report, even though I suppose I can turn it over to my Chief and get back into training for my next mission. By the way, the Chief is Captain Bob Wood, USN, Chief of the Astronaut Corps and the closest thing I have to a boss. "Pecker" (his call Navy pilot call sign and nickname) is more of a friend than a boss, though. (I should go back and delete the fact that anybody calls him Pecker! Maybe later.)

On my drive up here, before I left Boston, I rented a "Personal Computer" from a copier machine store so I could write this report. The salesman told me some day everybody will have one of these things. Bet he's right. NASA is as high tech as things come and I've had a computer on my desk at the Johnson Space Center for the past two years, and I've been spoiled. I can't even read my own handwriting any more. So here I am in the private cabin that's always available for people to use on silent retreats at the Holy Spirit Priory. I came here to take the time to think and to write. I've found it's a great place to do the thinking...and I've even started to pray again. It's been a long time since I did.

I've been here a week and this is the first time I've tried to make a start in writing anything down. Well, in this case I'm writing it onto a floppy disk. I didn't bring a printer with me so I don't even know how I'm going to turn in this report. I'll just pound away at the keyboard and see how it goes.

OK, who the hell am I? My friends at NASA call me Mike, but some of my Navy friends still call me by my call sign, "Saint." Every aviator's got one, and this one was a lot better than most. Sure better

than Pecker. The Saint goes way back to the academy. After a couple of months into plebe year, when I was being called “Dirtball” or “Stud” by the upperclassmen, everybody just started to use last names. My classmates for obvious reasons shortened mine to Saint. They also said I could put up with the crap better than most people. Saint-like? I guess it does take the patience of a saint sometimes to put up with all the happy horse shit. (Reminder to myself...go back and edit out the profanity I slip into this! I’ll probably have to rewrite the whole damned thing.) And one wise guy who said if I wanted to become a Navy pilot, I’d better pray to my patron saint, St. Michael the Archangel. Something about sprouting wings, I guess.

I was reminded about this connection to the angel again last night for the first time in a long time. Maybe I should be praying to the saints for their help. Actually, I’ve been trying. At least I’m in the right place for it.

I’m not really sure I’m going to want NASA (or God forbid the Navy) to read this, but I’ve got to use the time to try to capture what’s going on in my mind. I want to analyze what happened to me and why I’m here, and try to sort out what it all means. Actually, I’ve met an incredible woman here at the Priory. Last night I began to tell her about why I’m here. I know that in the next few days (or weeks if need be), I’ll try to tell her more. It’s obvious to me she’s been a catalyst to start this journal. Considering I’ve been here for eight days now and every other day I get a call asking me how it’s going, I’ve got to figure out how it *is* going.

But how *am* I doing? What *has* happened to me? What *will* happen to me? What do *they* want? What do *I* want? At least, now I know I’m going to tell them to stop calling so I can make progress at my own pace. I’m in no hurry. And now that I’ve met Maria, maybe it’s good to take my time to tell her at the pace she can handle. She seems to need the time to talk to me, too, because she’s been through the most horrible experience a human can endure, and now she doesn’t know

what the future will bring for herself or her kids. So, we'll see. I hope to God something good will come of this.

"Hoping to God" is a good place to start. This is about God in the final analysis, but it's more about His creation, especially how I, and the other people here on the planet, fit into the creation. This speck of dust we call a world isn't the center of the universe. How can I tell them—how can I comprehend myself—how this tiny whiff of energy wrapped in the molecules of my physical body has been "out" there with God? That's why I'm here trying to sort it all out. That's why I flash between unbearable energy to communicate and total gibberish when I try to talk about it. The brothers here have been kind. I guess that's why I came here and why I've finally sat down at this computer. This first session with the computer is the start of my attempt to tell the story.

What it all boils down to is, I've had an experience that I don't think anybody else on Earth could have in this day and age of electromagnetic bombardment. I'm a NASA astronaut Mission Specialist who was a crewmember of mission STS-51K on the shuttle *Discovery* four weeks ago. It was a very successful mission, in spite of a near tragedy, which I'll get to in telling this story. We launched two satellites, one for NASA and one for Japan, both communications satellites which are now being boosted by their own rockets to geostationary orbit. We also used a cargo bay-located telescope to test remotely-controlled, space-based observation techniques in preparation for the Space Telescope which we plan to take into space in the shuttle in a couple of years.

It was an uneventful mission before and after the lights went out. That was the near disaster. The orbiter suffered a massive power failure that shut down everything; every circuit board, every light, every motor. Everything. That's what we call an unscheduled event...an anomaly. And what I experienced during this unscheduled event is why I'm here.

I guess I know what happened because it's happened before. Why me? Why now? Why doesn't this happen to everybody? Is there a purpose for this? God knows I'm not worthy of any of this, but God also knows I'm here and I'm here for His help in order to understand this more. I wish I'd asked for that help long before! I wish I'd really thought about, no, prayed about what had happened to me when it happened before. Both times it happened.

CHAPTER 7



Salem, Massachusetts—October 1965

Mike knew he was awake, even though he could “see” his body was asleep. He wasn’t seeing with his eyes. He knew that because his eyes were part of the physical body in the bed below him, but what he was experiencing was almost like a movie. He was “seeing” an image that had many of the characteristics of a scene his eyes might have delivered to his brain, if he had been using them. He “saw” his eighteen-year-old body below him as he hovered in his bedroom. He then thought about his parents and immediately saw his mother and his father in the living room downstairs with a kerosene lantern burning on the table between his dad’s recliner and the couch (the electric lamp that normally adorned the table had been moved to the floor). His dad was trying to read the Salem Evening News and his mother was trying to sew, but they were both looking up to talk to each other. He couldn’t hear what they were saying because he was “observing” their bodies without the use of either his eyes or his ears, but he was also aware of their spiritual presence. He could sense his mother’s essence was happy because she was able to spend this time talking to Tom at a time when he would normally be shut off in a cocoon of television oblivion. And he could sense his father was answering her, but at the same time was trying to

retreat from her. Mike sensed that the newspaper his father held up to the faint light of the lantern was not so much a source of news, but a wall of hoped-for-seclusion after a long day of work.

Mike felt sad when he realized his parents did not seem to be truly happy or deeply satisfied. Still, he felt warmth because their spirits were stronger together than they were alone and because they were so close to him, closer even than a few hours ago at the kitchen table having dinner. Not bounded by his own body, he swirled around the room and then, in an instant, was at one with his mother and then with his father. Annie put down her sewing and Tom put down the newspaper. Both looked around the room as if perhaps Mike had come downstairs, and then at each other. He realized he couldn't use his ears, for they were back upstairs, asleep with the rest of his physical senses, but he somehow knew what they were saying.

"I'm looking forward to seeing Mike play on Saturday, Annie," Tom said. "I sure hope he plays—he's such a great kid," she replied. They reminisced aloud over the many joyful memories they had of him at the Prep. Mike shared the joy too.

He felt himself searching for Mary, but she wasn't there. About the time he had gone to bed, she had slipped out and driven her beat-up VW bug (flower stickers and all) to Beverly to see Bill, her boyfriend. Mike was disappointed not to find her at home because he wanted to experience this kind of bond with his big sister that he loved, but he knew where she was and that she was OK. She didn't seem to share his shyness and would probably marry Bill, or some other good-looking guy, before too long.

Without any sense of time's passage, he was above the house. Although it was dark, he could somehow see the roof and its brick chimney, which always seemed ready to tip over because of loose bricks, but his dad said it was OK. He perceived it now for the first time in years, and now he wasn't so sure his father just didn't want to go to the trouble of fixing it—and then realized they probably couldn't afford it. He turned his attention to the sky and he was aware there of a

few clouds, and beyond them he expected to see stars, but he didn't. Instead, he felt warmth that seemed to come from the sky. In fact, this energy, he could clearly sense, seemed to come from everywhere, but more strongly from the sky, and very strongly still from the essences of his mother and father below him.

As he rose higher, he could sense the entire town. He could "see" it as if from an airplane. Whatever he wanted to see, he saw immediately, faster than a blink of an eye, but he wasn't viewing with either eye, blinking or not. They were both tightly closed back at home, and just starting to twitch with the rapid eye movement of deep physical sleep.

He was in Danvers, at his locker in the main corridor of Brother Benjamin Hall at the Prep. He was circling the spire of the chapel. He was at the crest of the hill, looking down at the practice football field. He didn't want to stay here for long, and realizing he didn't have to, he allowed his mind to transport him again to the sky.

High up again, he was looking down at the crescent shore of his world from Boston to Gloucester and he noticed something. Like the sparkle of tiny stars in the sky, he now noticed that the bright specks of light that came from below him were not coming from the sea, but from the land. They weren't even in distribution, but they were everywhere. Although there were no electrical lights unless they were running from gasoline generators, Boston was a solid glow. There were patches of "light" from every neighborhood, and sweeping down he could see small clusters in every home. It was like constellations of stars but then he realized he was able to distinguish every individual, living human soul, against a low-level background that seemed to come from every living plant, animal, and bug. He flew above the sea and could sense this same low-level glow from below its surface. Why was the glow so bright from humans and so dim from other living creatures?

He was home again and experienced what seemed to be both a visual image and an eminence of each of his parents. Their radiance was extremely strong and yet as he glided upward again he wondered

why some of the “stars” were weak and others, like his parents, seemed to glow brightly?

He was out again, now saturated with an awareness of his freedom. He could be anywhere he wanted in an instant or he could reach out what seemed like his arms (for he was aware he had taken a movable model of his body with him which he could “see” if he wanted to visualize it), but he wasn’t seeing. He was visualizing—putting his awareness of the physical and spiritual entities around the place he chose to be into images which were registering in his brain, back at home in his bed.

But his spirit was out here and it “felt” like his body was flying because it “looked” so real to him.

Without realizing a conscious desire to go there, he was now outside the house where Meghan Reilly lived. He’d never been inside, but he knew where it was. He should know—he’d driven by it dozens of times wishing he had the courage to go up to her door and ask if she was home. He’d seen her there a couple of time and even waved to her once when she noticed him driving by. Her wave back had made him happy for weeks, he remembered. She had smiled at him.

Inside her house, he asked himself, should he be here? Her parents, too, were in their living room, a scene very much like his own home. Instead of a lantern, they had put several candles on their coffee table and were playing cards. He noticed how happy they seemed, and he was pleased to learn Meghan’s family seemed as close as his. Then he swooped up the stairs to find her. It was easy because her radiation was like a beacon to him. It had led him here and now it led him through her bedroom door.

Meghan’s room was the classic picture of an only child. There was a four-poster bed and bookcases full of dozens of expensive collector dolls, a dollhouse—probably hand made by her father—and her dresser was covered with an assortment of cosmetics, hairbrushes, and movie magazines. Meghan dazzled him. She was so enchanting. She had lit over a dozen candles, obviously enjoying the blackout as an

opportunity to enjoy the mood of candlelight, and the room was glowing with light. But as the light mattered nothing to Mike, he was entranced by her presence. He hovered on the ceiling, moved to each corner and then settled in the one furthest from her. She was lying on her bed with her chin propped up by her hand and she was straining to read a paperback book by the light of the nearest candle. He was even able to “read” its title—*Tom Jones*. He was able to sense the physical presence of ink on the paper and his mind transferred the essence of this reality to his brain where the metaphysical presence before him took the form of a book, of shelves of books, of candles, of an incredibly beautiful girl.

The wind up alarm clock on her bed stand showed ten o'clock and Meghan had been yawning off and on while he watched her. She put down the book and stood up. She was still wearing her school uniform skirt and white cotton blouse, but she wasn't still wearing the knee socks that were standard for Catholic schoolgirls and neither was her hair held back with the headband she always seemed to be wearing when Mike had seen her before. As she slowly undid the buttons on her blouse, Mike knew that he should definitely not be here. He knew he should leave, but he couldn't. He couldn't!

Under her blouse was a simple white cotton bra Mike had never seen anywhere but on a clothesline. He realized he had visualized it in virtually every fantasy he had experienced since meeting Meghan for the first time and seeing the ghost of its thin straps and the shape of her breasts through her blouse. He was entranced as she reached down and unzipped her skirt and then pulled it and her half-slip down to her ankles. He had enjoyed the sight of girls in bikinis at the beach every summer and although he knew this should be no different, this was clearly different. He could somehow tell that her bra and panties were pure white and he realized that they were much sexier than any bikini he'd ever seen on a beach.

Again, he felt as though he should leave, but in an instant, she had reached behind her and released her bra and in another instant, she

slipped her panties off. His heart and lungs were miles away, but even there, they seemed to stop for in this sublime instant. Meghan, completely naked, walked to her dresser and stood for several minutes in front of a mirror, brushing her long blonde hair. She was pure innocence and intense sensuality together in a perfect balance. Then, as she opened a drawer and pulled out a pair of flannel pajamas, Mike realized that she was the most beautiful image he had ever seen or imagined in his life. Time stood still while she began to dress for bed.

Ten minutes later, with Meghan now tucked under her covers, slipping into her own sleep, Mike began to recover his senses. He had never let himself out of the furthest corner of the room since she had started to undress, but he now swept his presence to within inches of her and tried to kiss her gently. There was no kiss...just an image in his consciousness of a kiss, but in this instant his consciousness met hers. In the morning, she would wake up and vaguely remember a dream in which she was with Michael St. Pierre and it would leave her with a warm and pleasant feeling. Right now, though, her sleeping lips began to smile. He knew she knew he was alive, and he knew he had been a fool for thinking she was untouchable to him.

Was this really happening to him? Was this nothing but a dream, he asked? Was her presence real? He looked at her again in her sleep. She was an angel, he thought, but then he realized it was he who was moving on and above the Earth like an angel. What was happening to him? And how was it happening?

But he knew it was real. And the next instant of retreat into his own sleeping body revealed how real it was as he woke to find it still very dark and cold in his bedroom from the lack of heat caused by the power failure. He also found himself dripping sweat and shivering hard...and fully aroused. As he lay, now wide-awake, in the utter darkness of his bedroom, Mike reflected on what had happened. Again, he asked himself if it was a dream. He'd had so many dreams in the past but rarely remembered details, or even major events in them, for more than a few moments upon waking. This was so different! How could

he have seen things he had never seen before unless he was there? Could he go back? When could he go back? Of course, it *must* have been a dream. He was still feeling the effect of having been sexually aroused as he'd never been before and he replayed his dream over and over again in his mind. Meghan Reilly, he thought, I want to know you...really know you. Thinking of the image of Meghan that he'd seen and the sense of her presence that he'd felt in his sleep, Mike eventually drifted back into sleep, his body and spirit staying together for the rest of the night.

In the morning, he found his mother up and serving him a plate of scrambled eggs and toast which had come from the re-energized electric toaster, the power having come back on at about four in the morning. With the daylight of a new day of classes and another day of football practice ahead, his world had returned to normal, but he knew his life would never be the same again.

CHAPTER 8



Salem, Massachusetts—The next day

That evening, again after an exhausting football practice and another of his mom's hearty meals, Mike had called her. He didn't have much experience at calling girls and asking for dates. In fact, even though he'd been to dances and even on sporadic dates with different girls, he'd never had a steady girlfriend. Nothing had ever clicked. Either he was too shy or they were too shallow, but mostly it was some of both. This night, though, was a serious call, much too serious to be made from the kitchen phone, the only phone in the St. Pierre household. What was discussed over that phone was for the listening pleasure of everyone in the house. So he walked the half-mile to the pay phone outside the mom & pop grocery up on Lafayette Street, his pocket full of dimes.

After standing in the phone booth for over three minutes, he took a deep breath and dropped the dime into the slot. He knew her number. A woman answered, but it wasn't Meghan's voice. He guessed it was her mother.

"Hello, Mrs. Reilly. Is Meghan home?" He'd guessed right.

"May I tell her who's calling?" her mother asked.

"This is Mike St. Pierre."

"Yes, she's home and I'll go get her for you. And Michael?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I just think it's wonderful that you've called," Mrs. Reilly burst. "Meghan came home from school today and she mentioned your name at dinnertime. And here you are calling. What a wonderful coincidence!"

"She did?"

"Yes. She said that she'd heard you were going to Annapolis. That's just fantastic! Your parents must be so proud. Congratulations. I think it's great that there are boys like you who are willing to serve our country. These are difficult times, with the war and all. It's so nice to have you call. Let me get Meghan for you. Good luck at the Naval Academy, Michael."

Mike was embarrassed. He'd never even met Meghan's parents and here he was listening to her gush about his career plans. How was it possible that today of all days, Meghan had mentioned him to her parents? He'd decided during the day of classes, daydreaming about her and his dream of her, that it was just that...a dream. He'd had a crush on Meghan for months. Of course he'd dreamed of her, even before last night's very different kind of different dream. But his thoughts as he waited for the twenty seconds it took Meghan to come on the line returned to his doubts about the true nature of this one dream. *She'd brought up his name at dinner? She'd chosen today to think of him!*

"Mike?" Her voice was music.

"Uh, hi Meghan."

"Hi Mike." And she waited for him. She wasn't going to make this easy. He had to decide quickly what to say. He wished he'd really thought about that before dialing. The time spent walking to the phone booth and standing there with a dime in his hand would have been a great time to do that, but, mostly, he was just working up his nerves. The moment passed and he jumped in.

"Hi. Hey, Meghan, I was, uh, thinking about you today and I was wondering if you'd like to maybe go to a movie or something some-

time?” He sensed an awkward pause coming. “Or not, I mean, I, uh...”

“Michael St. Pierre, I’m just so glad you called. I know we’ve barely talked to each other before, maybe at Prep drama club stuff and I guess we’ve danced a couple of times at mixers, but, for some reason I was thinking about you today. And when I asked my friends about you, they told me you were going to go to the Naval Academy at Annapolis. Are you really?”

“Well, I got an appointment from Congressman Bates and I guess I’m going. I’m not really interested in BC or U. Mass. I’d really like to go to an Ivy League school, but, well, the Navy would pay for my college if I go to the academy and that sounds like a pretty good thing.” Now it was time for Meghan to surprise him.

“Did you know that I’ve been thinking of applying for an Air Force ROTC scholarship?”

“You have? That’s fantastic, but I didn’t know girls could do that.”

“I didn’t either, Mike, except that I’m going to apply next year for early decision at Princeton and there’s only one way I can go, and that’s to get a scholarship. I found out that women can apply to ROTC. So isn’t that amazing that you’re going into the Navy and I might go into the Air Force?”

“Yeah. It is. Wow!”

“And yes, Mike, I’d love to go out with you. What are you doing this weekend? Other than your football game, of course. Do you want to go down to Rockport on Sunday and browse through the art galleries and have some ice cream? That’s always one of my favorite things. How does that sound to you?”

Mike was stunned. Meghan had been thinking about him. She’d talked about him with her friends. She was thinking of going into the military, just as he was. She *does* want to go out with him. And she practically asked him out on a date.

“Uh, sure, that sounds great. What time should I pick you up?”

"We go to the nine o'clock Mass and then our family is going out to brunch. So how about one or so?"

"OK, I'll borrow my dad's car."

"You know where I live, don't you Mike?"

"I do. I'll see you at one. And Meghan?"

"Yes, Mike?"

"I'm really glad I called you."

She giggled. "I am too, Mike. Thanks. Hey, look for me in the stands on Saturday. My friends and I are going to your game against Peabody. Give 'em hell, Mike! *Nobody* likes Peabody!"

"Yeah, it's just about our biggest game of the year. I hope I get in."

"Mike St. Pierre...I think you're a great player. You'll get in. Good luck. I'll be cheering for you."

Mike imagined looking out into the stands, where the St. Cretien girls always sat together, and seeing him, beaming.

"Mike? Hello?"

Mike quickly recovered. "Yeah, it's really great that you'll be coming and cheering for the Prep."

"No, I'll be cheering for you, silly! And I'll see you on Sunday. I really was thinking about you today. It was very sweet of you to call, Mike."

"Uh, OK. Me too. See you Sunday."

And that was the beginning of the rest of their lives.

Mike neither cared about, nor thought much of, his dream again because from that day on Meghan was real to him. She was a living, breathing, thinking, and loving companion. She was there in the stands that Saturday, waving at him as he trotted onto the field to replace Steve Doucette early in the second quarter when Steve had to leave the game with a suspected concussion. He had looked back to the stands from the huddle on that first play. His parents were cheering from under their shared plaid wool lap blanket. And Meghan was beaming a brilliant smile from her knot of girlfriends from her school. She was there in his car the next day, sitting in the middle of the front

seat next to him as they drove up the coast on Route 127 through Beverly Farms, Manchester, Magnolia and Gloucester and into Rockport. It had been a perfect October day. They talked about their lives, their hopes, and their dreams about life. And it was no dream this time.

CHAPTER 9



Journal of CDR Michael St. Pierre—Sunday, December 15, 1985

...And what I experienced during that unscheduled event in the flight is why I'm here.

While I was asleep aboard the orbiter *Discovery*, the spacecraft experienced a total power failure. Every single electrical system shut down. The engineers in the debriefing after we landed said that what happened was technically impossible, but the reason we train so hard for these missions is that we have to be ready for anything, including the "impossible." Someone said, "nothing is foolproof, because fools are so ingenious." Well, no fools designed the space shuttle...it's the single most complicated machine that humans have ever made. But like any mechanical system, things break, and through a series of cascading system failures that were not caught by the backup safety systems, the orbiter shut itself down. We crewmembers were about an hour and a half into our sleep period—everyone was out cold. We're only scheduled for six hours of sleep in every twenty-four hours of the mission and, although it's sometimes difficult to fall asleep in zero G with the whirring of motors and the hum of pumps, when you go out you go all

the way out. It had been a long day—our fourth since launch—and we were all tired. I was really, *really* tired.

And so while we slept, the orbiter shut down. Amazingly (impossibly?) no audible alarms let us know things were going down. It's possible we slept through one or more alarms, but I doubt it. The engineers who went over the failure analysis are still trying to prove we missed something, but I'm pretty sure we didn't. The power must have gone off suddenly because not one of us woke. That's truly amazing. At sea, onboard ship, in spite of all the ambient noise, I always seem to remember waking up when the noises changed indicating some pump somewhere had shut down, but, like I said, it was several days into the mission and we were dead tired. And, man, did we come close to being dead!

Anyway, there we were flying along in an aluminum cocoon, our lives sustained by the ambient air and heat in the orbiter's crew space. We were on the dark side of the Earth for the entire time the power was off and this was lucky because the orbiter is much better at holding in latent heat in the crew space than it is in insulating us from the sun. If the power had gone out with the topside of the shuttle pointing at the sun, it would have become very warm very quickly. As it was, the temperature had fallen about twenty degrees Fahrenheit in the ten minutes the power was out, but this might actually have made our sleep even deeper. Had the temperature continued to drop without our waking up, we might never have awakened.

While I was in this deep sleep, I had, for the lack of a better expression, an out-of-body experience. This one was, again, for lack of a better expression, "out of this world." I still have trouble finding the words to describe what happened.

I'm going to go back a little to put this experience into context, at least for myself, since I said that's who I'm writing this for. I had similar experiences twice before and both of these experiences are as real to me today as they were then. Each changed my life. And the circumstances of what happened then have more than just a little similarity to

what happened “up there” in *Discovery*. I’ve never shared the first experience very deeply with anyone, except with a priest. He probably didn’t believe me, and he certainly didn’t seem to (or want to) understand, but I needed his absolution, at least back then I felt I needed it...well, let’s just say I did something in my first “trip” that I wasn’t very proud of.

The second experience happened aboard ship. Although I’ve kept this stuff very private, I did mention these experiences, in a very guarded and oblique way, twice before. Once, I submitted a written report to my Commanding Officer at sea when I was Assistant Intelligence Officer on the USS JOHN F. KENNEDY (CVN-67). He took my report and ordered me, for the good of my career, not ever to mention it again. And finally, in my astronaut screening interviews, I had a two-hour session with the psychologist who NASA uses to screen out the wackos...or to find the “normal” people who might just go nuts about ten days into a mission with five other people in the confines of the space shuttle. Anyway, the doctor and I had an excellent interview...I was my normal charming self and he had clearly dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s of his nut-screening process. But as I was about to get up to go and he was shuffling his papers (my “profile”) into a neat pile, he asked one last question: “Anything we haven’t talked about that we should know about?” I should have smiled, said “nope” and bolted.

To this day, I don’t know why I told him this. I think I got suckered into the “well, we’re done and my report will be just pro-forma but now that we’re buddies, tell me something about yourself” way of talking. It’s a pretty good “shrink trick,” actually. So anyway, I told the psychologist what I’ll repeat here as background to what happened in space. I told him that once in high school, I’d had a dream that stuck out in my memory as more than a normal dream. I said I’d had the illusion in which I was able to fly and move my attention, my ability to observe things, beyond my sleeping body. I then said I’d had one other instance many years later that was more or less the same experience.

The psychologist, I can't even remember his name because I haven't seen him since, looked at me a little strangely, wrote something down on his notebook, and then recommended a couple of books on dream interpretation. Turns out the doctor was also a devout Christian who believed dreams are a window to the unconscious and are perfectly normal. So, I've assumed he officially proclaimed me normal and sent me on my merry way to passing the astronaut screening process. And here I am...an astronaut.

But these flights of my spirit were not the normal "windows to my unconscious." Looking back with my new experience fresh in my mind, I can see that my ability to remember in detail what happened while I was asleep, and the fact that what I saw was "real" and my observations were being made in real time, means these were observations—flights—of my conscious mind. Some essence of me was able to be somewhere else and observe things, which really happened, which I couldn't possibly have known unless I was there.

I've just been given a note by Brother Maurice telling me Admiral Haley is on the phone. I'll resume this shortly. I feel like I'm on a roll.

C H A P T E R 10



Sunday, December 15, 1985

“Hello Admiral. This is Mike.”

“Well, how’s it going, Saint? You must be working on earning that nickname up there with the monks. But, no shit Mike, what can you tell me?” asked Jim Haley.

“Admiral, I can’t thank you and the Chief enough for letting me get away from the debriefings and the normal post-flight PR crap. And with the orbiter’s electrical shutdown to analyze and explain, I’m sure it’s a zoo. This is the perfect place for me sort out what happened. I’m making progress. That’s about all I can say. Have they nailed down what caused the system shutdown?”

“Yeah, we’ve traced the problem to a cascading series of system failures which found the one-in-a-million chance of happening in a specific sequence that nobody ever dreamed of. Murphy’s Law at its finest, and almost deadliest, but speaking of dreaming, what happened up there? Are you ready to tell us something?”

“As I said, sir, I’m making progress.”

“Not good enough! Dammit, Mike, you’ve been there for a week now. What happened? You asked for time and we’ve given you time to write up your report or to prepare for a debrief. Or to agree to see the

shrink! Listen, son, you need to know some folks are getting a little pushy to know why you've disappeared. And I have some bad news for you."

"What bad news? Is somebody hurt?"

"No, Mike, not that kind of bad news. This could be just as bad! Do you know who Dr. Howard Willoughby is?"

"No, sir. Should I?"

"No, I guess you wouldn't know who he is, Mike, and I wish I didn't, but I've just come from his office in the Pentagon. The Secretary of Defense called the NASA Administrator and I got detailed to go see this guy. Willoughby is a real piece of work...a horse's ass and he heads up a group buried in the SECDEF staff called 'Office of Special Studies.' Actually, he's the chief scientist and an Assistant Secretary of mumbo jumbo. I suppose Willoughby has good scientific credentials, but he's really arrogant and he wants your ass."

"Excuse me, sir, but he wants what? And why?"

"I won't sugar coat this. He hasn't spelled out the details, but it sounds like he wants you back in the military to participate in intelligence programs that use para-psychological phenomena rather than overhead collection satellites. He implies they have a dossier on you that says you have a documented ability to make remote observations of events while you're asleep and remember them afterwards."

"That's BS," Mike interjected. But then, as he wondered if he should have said this, the admiral continued.

"Mike, it turns out the Pentagon has spent who knows how much money over the years on studies of using psychics for intelligence, sort of like how the FBI and police will listen to psychics and profilers to get every possible advantage in finding kidnap victims or bodies and catching the bad guys. But these programs, what little I know of 'em, have been really silly. Total crap. While we space guys have been out there flying hardware which sees and listens to the bad guys, they've been paying nutcases who say they can do the same thing by 'feeling' the bad guys' vibes.

"Mike, I think—no, I know—that Willoughby has picked up on some things you've said, including what you apparently said to our own NASA flight psychologist. I can't imagine what the hell that was. But they've been wanting to interview you ever since you were overheard saying you've had a 'mind-blowing experience' while you were asleep up there."

"Damn. That *is* bad, isn't it?"

"No shit!" Mike could sense the admiral's anger rising. He was getting angry too, but now he was worried.

"And you think this guy is serious?"

"Look, I need to have a little understanding of what's going on here. What I gather is, you had some kind of a vision and I'm guessing it's some kind of a religious thing, which would explain why you're holed up in a monastery. Mike, I'm a religious man myself. I go to church on Sunday and read the 'good book' every chance I see it on the shelf and don't have a good excuse not to, but I don't put much stock in modern day miracles or visions. I'm not a Catholic and I just don't understand how intelligent people can buy into these visions of Mary in grottos or crying statues or bleeding hand and foot wounds, but I don't judge them either. So if you're having some kind of religious experience, Mike, that's one thing but, quite frankly I wouldn't peg you for that kind of guy. I've gone steaming with you through the bars of Houston and the Cape a few times, so I know you're pretty down to Earth. Just what the hell are you doing and how bad is your head messed up?"

Almost a minute of silence went by, neither man speaking until Mike finally made a decision and began to talk again.

"Admiral, you've got one thing right. I'm not a religious nut and I didn't have a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I'm a man of faith, yes. I was brought up in your standard traditional Catholic family and I'm the product of eight years of grammar school nuns and four years of high school with the brothers. I have every right to be one, but you're right, I'm *not* a zealot. I've always been able to reconcile faith and science. In fact, I find them perfectly compatible. You can't believe how

compatible they are. But what I've been working on here is how to tell you this totally human, an "earthly" human, as you put it, has had a vision in my sleep which wasn't a dream. And it wasn't the first time it's happened, but this time, I was flying in a space shuttle in which all electrical systems were shut down. What I'm trying to come to grips with is that I've had a vision...not of Mary, not of Jesus, but of the whole shooting match. Sir, I had a vision of the expanse of the universe. It's like I was able to see the physical universe, not as telescopes see it—as it was millions or billions of years ago when the light left the stars we look at—but as it is right now," Mike stammered. He knew this wasn't the answer Haley wanted, but he had to continue.

"And Admiral, I experienced—I felt—I can't describe it—spirit. You, me, my grandparents, Jesus, Mary, not individual spirits, but one connected—one body with gazillion cells—one whole spirit of the universe along with all the planets, stars, galaxies and stuff it's made of. And sir, we're not alone. I'm sure of it. Oh Jesus, I'm sorry, but I don't even know what the hell I'm talking about, and saying it over the phone just doesn't work."

"Holy shit!" was the best Haley could come up with, uttered under his breath.

"I need more time, sir. Can I please have more time?"

Long pause.

"Admiral?"

Haley finally responded. "Mike, I don't know how to respond to what you just said. I suspect you've got a real serious problem going on in your mind. I can't wait to get you here and start pulling it apart."

"Yes, sir," was all Mike could manage, and it came out sounding like an apology.

"But right now my concern is that Willoughby thinks he has a chance to tap into this vision thing of yours to supplant overhead collection systems. Hell, he may want to make you, or people you train, actually become the overhead system itself...put you up in a shuttle to dream your way into the enemy's camp. I think he's certifiable. And if

I didn't know you better, I'd write you off as a wack job too for what you just said." He paused for a few seconds and then continued.

"But then I think about who you are. You're the most down to earth and squared away guy in the most talented group of people on the planet, the astronaut corps. I want you to come back and sit down with me and the right people here at NASA to talk this through. I don't have a clue what you mean, but I don't want this dickhead Willoughby to get a hold of you yet. How much time do you need, son?"

"Look, Admiral, I couldn't have been able to get out what I just said to you a couple of days ago. I know it doesn't make any sense, but the peace and quiet here has helped me a lot. Because it's a retreat house and I'm in my own cottage. I'm able to be by myself just to think. And pray. But I go on walks in the fields and woods here and I go to Mass every day. And I met a woman here last night and somehow she helped me to talk...although she probably thinks I'm crazy...and I've started to journal my thoughts now. In fact, when you called, I had just started to write. Can you give me a week? Really sir, this isn't easy."

"You can have three days, Mike. I'll try to keep the dogs from picking up your scent, but you flew up there to Boston on a commercial plane ticket. And I can assume you've got a rental car outside in the parking lot there. It won't take them long to find you if they really try."

"Thank you Admiral. I guess I stopped being a spook a long time ago and didn't cover my tracks too well. If someone really wants to find me, they will. This isn't a secure phone either, but you can't believe how important this is to me, sir. And maybe this could be *really* important to a lot of people. Like to the planet! Oh Lord, listen to me. I've got to get this in perspective."

"Listen, Saint, you keep working on it and I'll see you here in Washington at NASA Headquarters in a couple of days. In fact, I'll expect you on Thursday morning in my office at zero eight hundred. Don't talk to anyone about this stuff, especially about this 'we're not alone' stuff. I don't need to tell you how scary that sounds. I don't want Administrator Powers, General Hunter, or Bob Wood to know about

this conversation or you may never fly again. And I don't even want to know about this woman, do I?"

"No sir, you don't, but it's not what you think...why you don't want to know about her."

"Spare me the bullshit excuses, sailor."

It was Mike's turn to flush with anger.

"Then tell your boss to spare me the BS, then. I'll get my story together. I know the bureaucracy and what's at stake for you, me, and NASA."

He didn't have to say it, nor did he want to. There was too much on the line—his credibility, his career, the fragile support for the space program in the Congress, the usually good cooperation between NASA and the Defense Department, and on a much deeper level, his own soul.

"Mike," Haley broke into his thoughts.

"Sir?"

"You're some kind of a saint alright."

"That's not funny, sir."

"Not meant to be. Get your act together, son. See you in a few days." And he hung up.

CHAPTER 11



Journal of CDR Michael St. Pierre—Sunday, December 15, 1985

Picking up from where I left off to take the phone call from Admiral Haley. Now, not only have I been able to start opening up because of Maria, I've just given the essence of what happened to the second highest official in NASA. I can imagine what he's probably thinking right now! But he's a good man and I trust him. I'd trust him with my life, just like his Apollo astronaut crewmates did, but what have I really told him? I said I've had three experiences, the most recent a month ago in space. I have three days now to connect the dots between these three times in which I was somewhere while my body was asleep somewhere else. So let's go back and start with the three "events" in my life that have led to my being here trying not to go out of my mind.

It was 1965 and I was a senior in high school. I haven't forgotten the slightest bit of what happened. I don't want to. It seems like yesterday, and looking back, it seems more and more like what happened on the shuttle in another power failure and another deep sleep, but different in a fundamental way. I'll get to that. 1965: I'd come home from football practice really tired—exhausted. My mom's meatloaf—I can even remember what I had for dinner, that's how memorable that

night was—was the perfect slug of protein and fat to put my tired body into a very deep sleep, but it was also a REALLY quiet night in October. It was the night of “the blackout.” The power had gone out for the entire northeastern U.S. and, even though power failures were pretty common back then, this was a really big one—and a long one. People all over, including my folks, were breaking out the oil lamps and candles that everybody kept in their basement fallout shelters. But I was really tired and didn’t feel like doing homework by candlelight, so I went to bed.

In my sleep, I had a dream that I remembered the next day, and still remember today. It wasn’t an ordinary dream. I’ve read stories about people having surgery or people in car accidents who, just before they were declared dead—and in some cases after they had been declared dead but were later revived—had “out-of-body experiences.” I’ve always been intrigued by these stories because of the similarity to the dream I had that night in 1965. These people say that while they were close to death, they “hovered” over their own bodies looking down on themselves and then they say they have visions of walking in fields, or flying, or seeing dead relatives, that sort of thing. Plus, almost all of these stories include their seeing some kind of brilliant light which draws them to it, but, without exception, they say they are brought back from the light, sometimes again hovering over their bodies and sometimes just instantly having the vision end when their physical body wakes up.

Are these stories true? These people have no real reason to lie about them and I don’t have any reason not to believe them.

Was what happened to me in high school the same kind of out-of-body experience? I don’t know. I don’t know if the “visions” which those people near death have are real or illusionary. I haven’t ever spoken to any of them and I haven’t read any scientific papers on them, just as I haven’t ever really read about dream interpretation. My gut tells me dreams and most of the near death experiences are subconscious suggestions of the mind or of the soul, mere illusions. These

dreams may be...probably are...important messages for the people who have them.

But what happened to me during the blackout wasn't an illusion. I'm convinced it wasn't. When I have normal dreams, I usually forget what they were about either before or immediately after I wake up. I suspect that most people do too. And yet I can remember everything about what happened up there in the shuttle. I should be writing about that right now, but first, I want to go back to that night in 1965 and understand how connected it is to last month's experience.

Probably the reason I can't forget that night is because of Meghan. In my...I need a word to use to describe what it was, so I'll use "flight" for lack of a better one...in my flight, I saw her. I was in her bedroom. I "saw" her. My eyes were about two miles away inside my sleeping skull and yet I saw her. I flew to her house, through her front door, past her parents, up the stairs and into her bedroom. It was like I was able to see with my eyes and it was like I was able to fly. In fact, I could sense I had my eyes, ears, arms and legs with me as I flew, but I know they were back in my bed. I think what was moving was my spirit, no—my "observational ability" was moving. And it was moving at any speed I chose. I could instantly be somewhere else and "seeing" things in that somewhere or I could move to that somewhere at any pace I wanted to move, observing along the way. I think I remember what I saw because I was able to perceive and register the observation in a reference frame that would fit my human ability to experience and remember it. But now, I'm getting beyond the description of where I went and what I saw and into *how* it was happening. And then, there's the WHY which I'll have to come to sooner or later.

So let me get back to the easy part: describing that night in 1965 when the power was off and I was in Meghan's bedroom. Looking back, I realize what I saw in her room was something that changed my life, but only in a physical way. Look, I was eighteen years old and I really had only one thing on my mind and it wasn't spirituality...or football. It was a hormone-driven passion to get close to a girl. And

here I was flying around in dreamland, able to go anywhere I wanted to go. It's no big surprise that I went to the bedroom of the girl whom I had a huge crush on. She was gorgeous, talented, smart, and (I thought) untouchable! And I was able to fly into her bedroom and "be" with her.

She was amazing. Years ago, I actually tried to confess to a priest that I was the ultimate peeping tom. I was really there, because I'd never been in her room before and when I saw it some time later with my real eyes, it was exactly as I'd seen it that night. I watched Meghan for what seemed like hours, but I saw her undress and stand in front of a mirror—in front of me—completely naked. The priest said he thought I'd watched some kind of skin flick from the way I described it, and I could tell he blew it off like the parade of things he heard every day in "the box."

It was like watching with my eyes, but after she put on her pajamas and fell asleep, I let my "observation" go right up to her...and then through her. I felt a union with her, some kind of spiritual union. I somehow knew she had been aware of me before then, and suddenly she wasn't so untouchable after all. The next day, I actually asked her out on a date and she accepted. She told me she'd dreamt about me the night before, and that she'd hoped I would call her. I never told her what had happened in my sleep and in her sleep, probably because I *myself* doubted it was real. But I saw that bedroom again six months later when her parents were out for the night and we kissed and held each other on top of that very same bed. In 1971, I married her to seal the deal.

So on that dark, blacked-out night, my sleeping body somehow let my consciousness, with its ability to observe with all my senses, roam where I wanted to roam. I roamed to Meghan and fell in love, but I also flew through the sky over the North Shore of Massachusetts, to my football practice field, and as I flew I could see the whole beautiful crescent from Gloucester to Boston. I "saw" Meghan, my parents and hers, buildings, fields, and woods below and clouds, the moon, and

stars above me. But I also sensed something I couldn't "see," but surely felt. There were no electric lights, but when I directed my attention downward, it was as though there were lights, scattered in the sparsely populated towns and countryside and densely packed in the cities I saw below me. Lights? Couldn't be, there weren't any. It was a blackout.

Above me were the moon and stars, but they were like the points of light we see every night. That night, against the background of those lights, I sensed, not saw, a glow. It was as uniform as the brightness of a daytime sky or as the darkness of night. And I knew this glow was somehow the same kind of energy as the glow from the points below me; the same as the energy I felt as I flew out of my sleeping body and through my parents, through Meghan's parents, through Meghan. It was as though the one-ness of spirit surrounding the Earth was the same as the individual spirits of the living souls still bound to Earth...bound to their living flesh.

Did the seventeen-year old me comprehend what I was "seeing" as my spirit flew through the darkness of electromagnetic silence? Of course not. My body was aroused by the vision of a beautiful sixteen-year-old girl in her complete innocence and nakedness, but the seventeen-year boy old risked finding love that night. It seemed so simple then, to call Meghan and ask her for a date, get to know her and fall in love with her, wait for the right time to see her naked again, and give myself to her.

I didn't understand that experience and I waited a long time to have another one like it, but I did it again. Twice more. I never saw the connection to electricity. I still don't understand it really, but after three times I know it's there. I now believe electricity, or the presence of electromagnetic energy that is its companion, is the key to all three of my flight experiences. As much as I'm struggling to understand the spiritual dimension of these experiences, the engineer in me is trying to understand the connection between my experiences and electromagnetic energy. Actually, the experiences are correlated with electromagnetic silence. And this, I think, is the key. The spirit is...spirit, but the

body, like the space shuttle and anything else in this world and the world itself, is molecules. My body is a living thing which can only be in one place at a time, while my spirit can be, or is, everywhere. So as I live, my spirit's vantage point of observation is here with me, but, like the space shuttle, my body is a machine, one both inanimate and alive. Both are affected by electromagnetic energy. The shuttle, or a TV set, or a toaster, is a machine that runs on electricity. My body is subject to the electromagnetic fields around me. I've read that the body actually generates an electromagnetic field, a more subtle manifestation of energy than the electric eel jolting its prey or than the plankton lighting up in the ship's wake. So when the electromagnetic fields the body is used to are taken away, it seems to me like the body lets the spirit ease up on its co-existence with it. My spirit, in the power failure, had permission to let my attention wander elsewhere. I imagine that when we die, the body lets go altogether. The spirit, then, is totally free to go, to be, anywhere...everywhere.

Let's try to simplify this. Or at least here's how my simple mind has sorted this out so far. First, my spirit is now, and always has been since my conception, everywhere. Just like Christians believe God's spirit is everywhere. My "ability to observe my universe," however, is limited to what I can see, hear, smell, or touch with the senses of my body. The body seems to hold the "frame of reference" of my universe here, but if my body lets go of my ability to observe, or my frame of reference, I can "be" wherever my spirit is. I can "be" anywhere. And I can get anywhere instantaneously because *I'm already there*. Is this what happened to Jesus after his resurrection? But He had His body with Him...

So maybe it's my spirit that's in the "image and likeness of God," not my fingers and toes and hair and nose. (I've never believed God is an old man who is older and wears a toga.) So while I'm alive, this flesh and blood seems to need to hold onto my spirit's attention here, which is what gives me life. But, what if the body lets the spirit's center of attention wander away under special circumstances, circumstances which don't happen to people often enough to be reported, like almost

dying, or like being in a deep sleep in a power failure which puts me into electromagnetic silence? What if what happened to me is just like those near death experiences? What if those people's human bodies are so close to death, so weakened, or so *accepting*, that their own electromagnetic "field" is weak enough for their spirits to soar out of their body, then hover over them, romp in fields, or whatever? This doesn't happen to everybody who's near death and brought back to life, so why isn't the experience of out-of-body experiences universally reported? And why didn't lots of people asleep during the Blackout of '65 have this kind of experience? Or, for that matter, why didn't it happen to everybody sleeping on this planet before we invented electric stuff and created the unnatural electromagnetic fields we live in today?

I don't know.

All I know is it's happened to me three times that I can remember, and I can remember them all clearly. I'm struggling with this because if this line of reasoning stands up, I'm describing a fundamental understanding of the human spirit and its relationship to the human body. It also means I'm not only describing what happens when we're near death, but hinting at what happens when we die. The bond between our body and our spirit is obviously incredibly strong, but the connection, the limitation on the freedom of our spirit, is important to the body. Maybe it's what sustains our life—our physical life—but as the physical life fades, or for some unique reason in me as the body's electromagnetic surroundings go silent, the spirit is free to fly. And the sky's not the limit...or is it?

When I "flew" over Massachusetts in 1965 and on another time I've not yet described, I stayed on Earth. I could "see" the sky and I could fly above the Earth, no further than a bird or an airplane might. But last month in *Discovery*, I was already in space. And, oh my God, I was out there. Why? How? I don't know. What did I "see" out there? Everything and everyone. God? I've had a look at what people see after they die. They see it all. No, it's not that they see it. They know it. They know God. Is that heaven? I'm guessing that it must be heaven.

(I'm taking a break)

How's that for a stream of consciousness? I've been trying to describe what happened to me when I was seventeen years old and I break out trying to explain mysticism. I'm out of my league. WAY out of my league. That's why they call it "mystical," right?

On the other hand, that experience in the power blackout of 1965 *was* real. I "saw" Meghan. She, body and soul captivated me. I truly saw things in my dream, real things and real people and real visions of the energy of spirits on Earth and above. I could never have seen these things with my eyes and my observations were able to move instantaneously. And, my God, it was a short experience, too short. It lasted only a few hours and most of them were spent in Meghan's bedroom. I didn't want to do anything else! Back then it was the experience of a lifetime. Except now there have been two more of these experiences. The first lasted hours, the third lasted only fifteen minutes or so, but what about the second time? I want to reflect a little while before I continue this, because that second time was different. Meghan was there again, but there was no joy this time. Remembering it still hurts.

C H A P T E R 12

Rosslyn—Arlington, Virginia—Monday, December 16, 1985

Howard Willoughby had assembled an interesting assortment of people in an office in downtown Arlington, the collage of high rise office buildings across the Potomac from the Kennedy Center called Rosslyn. He had an office in the Pentagon he used for official meetings with “outsiders” like Vice Admiral Haley, but here in the tower of glass and steel, he had another office and here he kept his staff of head shrinks, psychics, physicists, and ass-kissers. He used this office to think and to formulate plans. Today, he’d decided to implement a plan and he had called the people to his conference room to kick it off. Present were: Colonel David Hansen, USAF, the distinguished looking Chief of Staff for Willoughby’s Office of Special Studies at the Office of the Secretary of Defense; Winston Blackstone and Melvyn Gibson, one a Ph.D. in psychology and the other an M.D. in psychiatry, both of whom had served for years as staff members studying paranormal human behavior for Willoughby; and Major John Watson, USA, a barrel-chested crewcut detailee Willoughby had culled from the Chief of Military Police. The only person in the room who didn’t know any of the others was someone Willoughby had invited for special reasons

only he knew: Lieutenant Colonel Meghan Reilly-St. Pierre, USAF (Reserve). But her business card and her Air Force ID card had long since left her married name behind.

Meghan Reilly wore civilian clothes, a perfectly tailored and very expensive dark blue twill suit with a pure silk white blouse—an elegant strand of pearls at her throat. She was, at thirty-five, extremely attractive, quietly successful, and very curious about why she had been invited to this obscure office this afternoon when she had a pile of work waiting for her at her desk at Analytical Technologies Associates, Inc., known (like most defense contractors) by its acronym ATA. Her hair color, still a shimmering blonde, now came from a bottle and the best efforts of very expensive hairdressers, but she turned heads everywhere she went. Five six, with a petite, athletic figure and a delicate silhouette untouched by years of military training, she had the physical appearance to match her brilliant mind. Some of her colleagues disapproved of her insistence on keeping her hair highlighted, but she knew that being a blonde meant having power. Plus, she wasn't about to change for others. Though she loved the attention she received, any guy who didn't respect her opinions or threatened her like an inferior was shot down fast. Men from Princeton to the Pentagon had crashed and burned.

Willoughby could see from the curious expressions on their faces and, in some cases, stares in Meghan's direction that he had better begin. Everyone in this room was a government employee and he could command their attention and their actions for as long as he wanted—except for Ms. Reilly. And she was the key to his plans.

"OK everyone, you all know who I am, or I presume you do because you came to this meeting," he said. "Colonel Reilly, I recognize you may be the only person here I haven't met at one time or another before, so let me give you some background."

"Before you go any further, Dr. Willoughby, let me assure you that nobody calls me Colonel unless I'm doing my weekend warrior stuff for the Air Force. Please call me Meghan. And, yes, I do know who you

are. When I got the invitation to come to this meeting, I did some digging and, even though I don't have all the tickets to know everything your office does, I do know enough to be confused as to why OSD Special Projects would want my services. I'm an ex-Air Force logistics officer with an MBA and I analyze acquisition plans for DoD. I don't know anything about 'special' programs and I don't know why I'm here." And Meghan looked at Willoughby with a look that said, "start talking or I'm outa here!"

"Thank you, Ms. Reilly...Meghan. I confess I'm not comfortable with jumping to first name familiarity when we initiate programs of the highest national priority, but thank you for your candor, and thank you for being here.

"OK, let me go around the room and do the introductions, shall I? First, let me introduce my Chief of Staff, Colonel Dave Hansen. The Colonel has been working what we call 'extra special' programs for the past three years." David Hansen briefly and self-consciously raised his hand and nodded. A distinguished, silver-haired, trim looking Air Force officer, he looked far too much the dapper gentleman to match the five rows of combat and personal performance decorations on his chest above silver jump wings.

"Next," continued Willoughby, "Doctors Blackstone and Gibson, also from our staff." The two very intellectual looking gentlemen, in what almost seemed to be identically thick horn rimmed glasses and matching tweed sport coats over obviously machine washed white shirts and nondescript polyester ties, nodded in unison. "Winston and Melvyn are the DoD's foremost experts in para-psychological behavior. I've asked them to sit in on this because I think the opportunity we're going to discuss today could be a major breakthrough." Willoughby almost beamed while his eggheads continued to nod their heads in unison. Meghan began to wonder what the hell she'd mixed herself up in.

"And this is Major John Watson," Willoughby continued. "The Major is here because I suspect we will need the service of the long, and sometime strong, arm of the Department. He will implement the first

phase of our operation. And this is to bring Commander St. Pierre to his senses, I mean, to bring him into our program.”

Meghan was on her feet in an instant, “Are you talking about Commander Michael St. Pierre?” she asked in total surprise.

“Why yes, Colonel...excuse me...Ms. Reilly...excuse me again...Meghan,” answered Willoughby, with an unctuous smile. “I’m about to discuss our famous astronaut, your former husband.” Meghan continued standing with her mouth open, waiting for an explanation. “Please sit down,” Willoughby said, with a very serious look on his jowly face. But Meghan continued to stand and glared at Willoughby in anger and confusion. He ignored her and continued.

“All right, it’s clear that some of you know why we’re here and it’s quite unfair for Meghan to be kept in the dark. So let me summarize for you. Please sit down, Meghan, but before I start, I need to inform you that what I am about to say is a trigraph special access subject. Before I say another word, I must request your signatures on a nondisclosure statement. If any of you choose not to sign this sheet, I will dismiss you from this meeting and you will never speak of this matter again. Are there any questions I can answer?”

Willoughby waited for someone to speak. He’d been through this procedure dozens of times. *Everybody* signs. They always do. Everybody wants to know what’s next and is willing to sign a legally binding promise NEVER to disclose the subject of the program they are signing on to. He looked around the room, waiting. He looked at Meghan, who had regained her composure and had seated herself uneasily.

“Meghan, I know you wonder what we’re going to discuss, but I know from a review of your security clearances that you’ve been read into several compartmented programs, including the overhead intelligence programs. I regret I can’t divulge more about why we’re going to discuss your husband unless you sign this form.” He held up a sheaf of papers. “You can leave now or you can sign and hear what this is about. Trust me, I think you’ll want to.”

“Well, you have my attention,” Meghan said with a perplexed look that was half a smile and half a frown. “If I leave now, I may never know, right?” she asked.

“Right,” Willoughby said. He handed her one of the sheets of paper.

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE NONDISCLOSURE FORM
TOP SECRET PIANO (Handle via PIA Channels Only)**

Subject: Nondisclosure of Special Compartmented Information (U)

1. **Signature of individuals below shall constitute agreement by such individuals to never disclose the subject of the briefing on which they will be provided as of this date by the staff of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Projects.**
2. **Individuals who consent to receive this briefing acknowledge that they are being granted access to information of the highest national priority. Disclosure of this information to persons not specifically authorized to have knowledge of this subject has been determined to be highly likely to cause extremely serious damage to the United States of America. Accordingly, unauthorized disclosure of this information by any individual executing this agreement shall be punishable, in accordance with United States Code, by imprisonment for not greater than life and a fine not to exceed one million dollars.**
3. **Upon execution of this certification, the signer will immediately receive detailed briefing of PROJECT PIANO, which shall be classified TOP SECRET PIA. The Term PIANO shall be TOP SECRET Compartmented information, protected to the same degree as the information it refers to. The Trigraph PIA shall be classified Secret (NOFORN). Any association between the Trigraph PIA and its program name PIANO, or the subject matter associated with it shall be TOP SECRET Compartmented Information.**

Full Signature

Printed Name

Date

Meghan took the form, as did every person in the room. She looked at Willoughby. "If I don't sign this, I won't ever find out why I'm here or why you're about to talk about Mike?" she said.

"Yes," he said, "that about sums it up, but Meghan, please know this is a very serious issue. Remember these are dangerous times. The Soviet empire is armed to the teeth and is in the hands of a government rife with esoteric and very dangerous politics. We have many extremely important programs underway to defend our country. When you wear your Air Force uniform on reserve duty, you acknowledge your willingness to go into harms way to defend your country. Your civilian defense contractor employer receives taxpayer dollars to support our warfighting capacity. Commander St. Pierre continues to serve on active duty and even though NASA has him in a pinstriped suit or light blue flight suits, he's serving his country. What the PIANO program is about is nothing less than you, me, these very talented and dedicated government people here today, *and* your former husband, putting our best effort together to defend our country. Are you with us or are you not?"

Meghan looked at Willoughby. His expression was a complex web of seriousness, anger, and, thought Meghan, a touch of evil. He was showing tiny beads of perspiration on his baldpate, but behind his very thick glasses, Meghan could see a man with a mission and a man who meant every word he said.

"OK, Dr. Willoughby," she said, "let's have that form. I haven't a clue what you're talking about, but I love my job, but somehow I have the feeling that my job security may have something to do with you right now. And in spite of anything you've heard, I still care deeply for the Commander. I guess I could walk out that door, but I believe I need to hear this!"

"Very well," he said. "Let's get started." Everyone signed the nondisclosure forms without any further discussion.

When Willoughby collected the forms, he said he would like to defer further discussion on the specifics of the PIANO project until the

next day. He told Meghan he expected Commander St. Pierre to be there for the meeting and that she should be prepared to hear some truly unbelievable things.

“So you’re not going to tell me what this is all about today?” she asked, her anger returning, but now fully under control.

“I’m afraid not, Meghan, but please trust me. This program will be of extraordinary value to the security of our country. I can only tell you that the program involves overhead surveillance and Commander St. Pierre’s experience in both space flight and intelligence, and your ex has an extraordinary and unique opportunity,” he said, smiling slightly with a hint of a smirk. “Your participation, both professionally and personally, may play a key role in making the most of this outstanding opportunity. Now, I’m afraid I have to defer the rest of this discussion until tomorrow. Thank you for coming.”

As Meghan shook hands and left the conference room, only Willoughby and Major Watson remained. Watson held a manila folder under his arm and wore an impassive, but somewhat smug expression on his ruddy face as he waited for a follow-up conversation with Dr. Willoughby.

C H A P T E R 13



Holy Spirit Priory—Monday, December 16, 1985

It was late afternoon and the Vermont sun was very low above the tree line. There was a light dusting of overnight snow and the air was dry, crisp, and sweet. Mike and Maria were about a mile from the Priory, crossing a field of perfectly still waist high straw grass. Mike reached down and grabbed a stalk, broke it about eight inches from its seed pod, and put it in his mouth. He always had loved to suck on grass stalks. It was the purest taste in the universe, he thought.

Maria walked beside him. Brother Maurice, a sweet man in his early 70's, was watching the children, sending her off for a walk with "Brother Michael." For the first time since she had arrived, Brother Maurice had noticed Maria without the familiar look of fear on her face. She took a deep breath of the cold clear air and looked at him.

"Michael?" she said. "You've not said a word since we left the church. You were able to talk to me last night. Would you like to talk some more?"

"Maria...I don't quite know what to say. It feels so good to be out here in the fresh air. And it must be wonderful for you to be out here, too, after having been cooped up in hiding for so long. I was awake almost all night and up again early this morning, writing. When we

talked last night in the chapel, your story of the hell you've been through was so painful that I didn't know what to say or do. You've suffered more than any human being I've ever known. I've flown Navy jets and landed them on aircraft carriers in terrible weather in the middle of the night and I've let myself be launched by the world's biggest non-nuclear bomb into space. But in spite of having done these dangerous things, I've lived a life of such protection and freedom. You...you've lost a husband, you've lost your home, you've lost your country, and what those bastards did to you...I just don't know what to say."

"You don't need to say anything, Senōr Michael. I needed to tell someone my story. That I could tell you when I have not even been able to give the brothers anything more than a few sparse words, it is truly a miracle. I love the brothers because they do not ask. You do not ask either, but last night, your eyes—so full of your own pain and questions—spoke to me. They said to trust this man. Michael, I feel I can trust you. After we spoke last night, it was the first time in many months...the first time since...then...that I have slept without a nightmare. Thank you Senōr. Thank you."

"Maria, I needed to talk too. I came here to the monastery with a troubled heart and I thought what I came here to sort out was so incredibly important that I needed to get away from people to think and pray about, but, Maria, I am nothing. My problems are nothing. I don't even really know if what I came here for is a real problem or if I'm just scared. Last night, I found that when I thought I could take this time away from my life and say something really important about it, I began to put my life and why I came here into perspective. I found a woman who has lost everything and who has suffered the most terrible things still lives and still believes in God. I'm quiet this afternoon because I don't know what to say. While I was in my cabin last night writing a journal about why I'm here, my mind kept drifting away to you and your kids. I asked myself why God could let something like that happen to you. I asked myself why, when I was out there on Navy

ships trying to defend the world from the Communists, why could any human being do such horrible things to another. I wrote about myself in my journal, but I was thinking about you. When I finally lay down to sleep, I asked God how he could let it happen. I didn't get an answer. I'm glad that sleep came to you, but I didn't get much sleep."

"So, Michael, I was sleeping while you were awake wondering about me?"

"That's about it."

"You should look more tired than you do, Michael."

He laughed. "Well, it's been a pretty interesting day, so far. I started to write my report on what happened to me and why I'm here. I got a phone call from my boss—one of my bosses—and he gave me a deadline to come back. I hate deadlines, especially this one, but I feel like I'm starting to believe I can make some sense of it."

"Of what, Michael?"

"Maria, I started to tell you last night in the chapel. I've experienced this vision of the universe so wonderful I can't begin to express it. What are the chances that you and I would meet each other here, and together begin to share of our deepest selves?"

"Michael, chance has nothing to do with it; God has everything to do with it. Look at me. I am a simple woman who is in a strange country because the Lord has a plan for me, a future for me and my children. For whatever reasons, God has chosen you to have this experience because it's His will for you. Why He has brought us together, I don't know. But talking with you about God, life, death, and heaven is helping me to heal. Michael?"

"Yes."

"I'm cold."

Clouds had silently gathered in the sky. There was no breeze to rustle the leaves of the few trees holding onto them, yet it was not the cold air that brought the tears in their eyes as they hugged. Their fears gave way to the sweet and powerful joy of holding each other, vulnerable, but safe. Snowflakes began to dot their hair and to melt on contact on

the faces. And the melted snow mingled with the tears in their eyes as they drew back slightly to gaze into one another's face. Their kiss made the whole world of pain and bewilderment fall away.

It was truly a miracle that Maria could, for this moment, allow a man to hold her after the brutality of what she had endured and lived with for over a year. For this moment, there was only perfection and peace.

CHAPTER 14



Journal of CDR Michael St. Pierre—Monday, December 16, 1985

I've just come back from a walk in the fields near the Priory with Maria. I started writing this as a report for NASA, then started to let my train of consciousness flow into words. Now I realize that I'm writing this journal for my own eyes only because I want to talk about her. Here's a woman who has gone through hell on Earth. She's lost her husband and she's been gang raped and brutally beaten. She and her two little kids are here in the U.S. hiding from her government and from ours. They have absolutely nothing except the clothes they left wearing and what the brothers have been able to collect for them. And now she's told her story to me, a strange man who, in a way, works for the same government she's being hidden from. I'm here working out my thoughts on what seems to be some kind of spiritual awareness in spite of the fact that I'm a beer-drinking and sometimes foul-mouthed Navy guy, a science and engineering oriented professional, and a very mere mortal. To relate to what Maria has gone through in any kind of common frame of reference is impossible, but looking into her eyes...holding her...kissing her...there's been a connection I can't express.

I don't know if our mutual vulnerability and the strange, but different circumstances that brought us here, can explain why we've been able to talk to each other and to connect at a deeper level. But I have a sense that the connection is doing us both a world of good. When the Admiral gave me until Thursday to get back to Washington, I just tucked the deadline away like I've always received any deadline. I figured I'd just do what needs to be done and meet it, like I've met every deadline in my life. It's what I do.

But now, I've kissed this woman. We've connected, have accepted one another—no questions asked, but answers have been given. Are we not having a conscious experience of being united in our spirit? Now, with less than three days left, I've got to finish the description of what I "saw" and felt and *know* about the universe and about my place in it...and about God. And now, I can't just walk away from here and from Maria without coming to grips with what happened in 1965 in Meghan's bedroom and how it connects with *Discovery*, and with the whole issue of my past with Meghan and my pain in that. And now Maria. We've kissed and we've cried together. I've always been able to deal with deadlines. The military mind and discipline, but it's Monday night and Thursday morning is coming. What will I say to the Admiral? What about this Doctor Willoughby? What about Maria? What about Meghan? Yes, what about Meghan? What went wrong? Why? When?

1974. That's when. I said I'd come back to what happened then. I can't figure out the Maria thing even though I know why I kissed her. But I have to set that aside for now and get back into focus. I have to put what happened in '74 and JFK into perspective.

The reflection on my *Discovery* experience and the first time I saw Meghan in a spiritual event are for me to try to sort out. So I'm going to just type away because telling my life story is part of the process I think I need to go through. I'm just going to go back and describe how I got here and what happened along the way.

OK, I graduated from USNA in June of seventy-one. I was incredibly proud of myself for making it. The academy wasn't all that tough except that first summer and Plebe Year, which really sucked, but I made it. I graduated in the top twenty of the class (OK, I was number twenty.) But I'd had a lot of fun. I sailed on the ocean racing team, and although I never got to skipper a boat, I enjoyed being the navigator for our yawl for my second and first class years. I majored in political science, but at the academy having a major meant you got to take a few courses in an area you liked while you and every other mid were being force-fed a very heavy dose of engineering and science. So it wasn't the science in poly-sci that was the reason for the "Science" on my BS degree. I got that two hundred thousand-dollar education crammed up my ass a nickel at a time like everybody else, and I have to admit I enjoyed it. "Mother Bancroft" (that's what we call Bancroft Hall, the eight wing monster of a dormitory building with miles of corridors) sent this son off with a degree, a commission, and a better life ahead.

I loved the bay, which was the closest thing I had at Annapolis to an ocean, but it couldn't come close to the clear cold green water of the North Shore when I was a kid in Salem. Sailing let me touch it and smell it, but over the four years at Canoe U, I decided what I wanted to do was fly. I guess I just fell into a belief that the naval aviators teaching or serving as company officers at the academy were the good guys while the submariners and ship drivers were kind of dull and the Marines were total dickheads. (Note: delete that if I ever have to show this to Chuck Chandler!) I had my summer cruises at sea. After plebe year I made a trip on a destroyer to Portsmouth, England and Copenhagen, Denmark and before my first class (senior) year, I spent a month in a submarine doing torpedo tests in the Bahamas—both lots of fun. But during the in-between summer before my second class (junior) year, I had the chance to spend a week at Pensacola and had two flights in a T34 prop trainer and one unforgettable experience on a two-hour flight in a T2 Buckeye jet. I was sold.

But en route to flight school, and because of my class rank, I was lucky enough to get a one-year graduate school Master's program in government and luckier still to get to spend that year at Princeton. I applied there to be near Meghan. I was extremely fortunate to get a graduate degree early in my career while most Navy guys have to wait to get into the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California when they're Lieutenants. Since I got to spend my first year as an Ensign in civilian clothes, I was able to learn firsthand how the country *really* felt about the Vietnam War. I tried to keep a low profile on campus as a shorthaired naval officer while the protests were swirling around the University and around the country. Of course, I couldn't—and wouldn't want to—have anything to do with the protests, but I watched them with a detached fascination. Although I'd been trained to be ready to fight, and I would have gone if I'd been sent to 'Nam, I wasn't getting shot at like so many fellow USNA grads were on the ground, up the rivers, and in the skies over there. I felt a little guilty having that Princeton experience. But having a chance to be with Meghan made it easy to set the guilt aside and just enjoy that year.

I guess I was smart enough to make it through the academy and barely smart enough to finish the really intense year of Princeton graduate school, but Meghan made both seem like a walk in the park. I was so ridiculously in love. From that first date back in October, 1965, I never had eyes for anybody else. When I fell for her, I fell hard.

We dated for the rest of my senior year at St. John's Prep and when I headed off to Annapolis, we continued to date through my four long years at the academy. It was toughest during my Plebe Year because here I was, with a shaved head (not a very popular hair style in the late 60's) and no chance to see her except for parents' weekend, Christmas leave, and spring break. And there she was, the prettiest girl on the North Shore and a senior at St. C's and the star of all the Prep drama club musicals. We agreed it made no sense for her not to date other guys, and she did. But somehow we survived that year and she went to Princeton on an Air Force ROTC scholarship (one of the first women

to do so, and doing it because it was the only way a poor Catholic kid from the North Shore could afford the Ivy League.) After that first year, I started to have my life issued back to me by Mother B. We saw each other as often as we could for the next three years. For me, there was never anybody else.

And so, for the year I was in graduate school and Meghan was a senior at Princeton, we lived together off campus. She seemed to enjoy the Air Force ROTC stuff so she didn't have any problem with the fact we were both headed into the military and maybe into the jaws of the war. By this time, Dr. Kissenger had told us, "peace is at hand," and with the war being "Vietnamized" we probably wouldn't have to go. We were happy with our lot in life. We made love all the time. We laughed and we dreamed together. In the fall, on a crisp, clear day watching our proud Tigers maul Dartmouth, I asked her to marry me. We got married that spring and we graduated. Right away, we headed off to Pensacola for my delayed start of flight school and her orders to the Air Force liaison office on the same base. And that's when things, along with the two of us, started to go south.

Here Meghan was with a degree in Business Administration from Princeton, riding a desk in a cinderblock building and setting up our first home in another cinderblock Navy Family Quarters ghetto on the base. I was flying and loving it. I was stopping at the O' Club for beers with the guys after classes and even though Meghan would often meet us there, we were in the wild blue while she was just plain blue, wearing Air Force light blue and working. Almost all the other Navy wives were getting pregnant and caught up in the fun of being married to naval aviators. Meghan was on the first step of her own career and wanted more. Much more.

We were still in love. We still had a lot of fun. But when I got my wings and transitioned to jet training, and then to a Replenishment Air Group for A-7 Corsair bombers at Cecil Field near Jacksonville, Meghan asked for and got orders to Homestead AFB further south in Florida, near Miami. We had a commuter marriage but with her now

serving in a really good assignment in base logistics, she seemed much happier. In fact, we were both happy. That's when I got my first bitter dose of reality.

I was getting into the pure joy and professional challenge of flying the A-7, a single seat bomber that handled like a sports car and required the pilot to do everything himself, and manually—stick and rudder, navigate, find the target, and then put the ordnance onto it by sharply climbing, pickling off the bomb at the exact second while pulling three G's, and then rolling over and beating feet back to the boat. Carrier landings are the most heart-pounding excitement this world has to offer and only naval aviators get in on this little secret. At night, or in bad weather, this excitement goes up about twenty orders of magnitude. You can't call nighttime and dogshit weather landings "fun," but you can't call it a boring job either. I loved it!

But the only problem was that I was flying a bomber and I was having more and more trouble seeing the target! I knew every time I had my flight physical that I was straining my eyes to read the charts and guessing at a letter every now and then. It was a pretty good performance but one day the curtain fell. A sharper-than-average Navy flight surgeon caught my bluff and flunked me on the vision test. On the eve of my assignment to an operational squadron with the highest flight school grades of my class, and with the best bombing scores of my training wing, the lights of my flying career went out. Or so I thought at the time. It just took a while to get back to it.

They offered, no, they really pushed me to switch from pilot to Naval Flight Officer (NFO). With my bombing skills and flight training, I'd make a natural Bombardier/Navigator (BN) for the A-6 Intruder community. My training pipeline, they told me, would be extremely short, but I knew it meant another year, minimum, before I'd be back to an operational squadron and the real world. And to trade my gold pilot wings with its straight up-and-down anchor for the crossed anchors of NFO wings was something I couldn't bring myself to do. I loved to fly, but I loved the control of the aircraft—the stick

and rudder—more than anything else. To be a carrier-qualified pilot and not have my hands on the stick and throttle, just sitting there while some other pilot takes us in for a nighttime carrier landing would be impossible for me. It'd drive me nuts and I'd be trying to reach over and grab the stick from my pilot's hands. No way.

I said earlier that I loved the sea. So if I couldn't fly, I wanted the salt smell and the wind in my hair. Meghan and I sat down and went through the options. What we decided together was that I'd request a transfer to a new career path that would put me at sea and this would have the best possible career opportunities for her. She was a rising star at Homestead AFB, and she was being encouraged to transfer into the logistics programs being managed from the Pentagon. And she was also given hints that she should be getting her MBA, but this would mean two years of graduate school and a lengthy commitment of obligated service with less say over where she was assigned.

So the plan we came up with was that I would request transfer to Intelligence Special Duty—referred to as “Restricted Line,” meaning that as a full time specialist in a field like intelligence or meteorology, I would be “restricted” from having command at sea. I would go to the four-month training program for new intel officers in Colorado, and then seek orders as an Air Intelligence Officer in an attack squadron. I'd then go to sea with the air wing on a carrier in about a year. Meanwhile, Meghan would resign from active duty and go to Georgetown Business School on our own nickel, stay in the Air Force Reserve and continue her military career while starting a well paying civilian career at the same time. Great plan. It worked out almost exactly that way, but with a detour.

I did get accepted into the Intelligence community and Meghan got accepted into Georgetown. We both did extremely well in our programs, but after my school ended and with Meghan having another year and a half to go, I started looking for a way for me to get back to Washington (and her), and for us to stay together. I flew back to DC and went over to the Navy Annex and met with the Commander who

was my new “detailer,” the guy who writes orders for intelligence officers. Turns out he was an ex-aviator and a USNA alumnus too, and we hit it off really well. He was inclined to send me to sea right away. I said I was willing and able to go, but I got him to look at my grades at the academy, my master’s degree from Princeton, and my aviation experience. And then I showed him Meghan’s picture and said I’d really like to stick around with her in Washington until she finished grad school. I laid it on pretty thick, and in the end, he found me a special assignment on detail to the CIA. To be more precise, I was assigned to the Naval Intelligence Command, but was then detailed to “The Agency.” Turned out they wanted somebody with military experience to take a close look at the Soviet space program, particularly the manned program. They wanted to figure out why there seemed to be a correlation between their research ships positions, “events” aboard their Soyuz manned missions, and their launches of various photographic intelligence satellites. Three events at the same time are never a coincidence: it’s a planned program of some kind. The Navy’s concern had to do with the security of our ballistic missile submarines. We more or less knew there was absolutely no space-based threat to our “boomers” (strategic missile submarines) but there were too many spurious rumors of their vulnerability to ignore. It was a stretch to send me to this assignment because I really had no fleet operational experience, but I guess they just wanted a smart guy who could think through the intelligence data with their analysts and do liaison with the military intelligence community.

So off I went for an incredible year, 1972, in which I was read into the overhead surveillance programs, which I still can’t talk about. I got to travel to Houston to talk to the astronauts who were training to man the *Skylab* space station and fly the *Apollo-soyuz* mission. I spent a lot of time across the Anacostia River at the Defense Intelligence Agency talking with Air Force intelligence and at Suitland, Maryland, home of the Office of Naval Intelligence. And for a rookie intelligence guy who had never served one day as a commissioned officer in an operational

fleet assignment, I was exposed to enough cool information about the Russian and American space programs to infect me for the rest of my life with the space bug. When that bug bites, it bites deeply. I was a totally hooked space weenie...

Meghan graduated and took a job with a "beltway bandit" and continued to advance as a reservist. Her careers, both civilian and military, were now really underway. My naval career, after this surrealistic year on special assignment, got underway too. Literally.

I received orders to the USS JOHN F. KENNEDY (CV-67), home ported in Norfolk, Virginia. Instead of being sent to an aviation wing as an Air Intelligence Officer as I thought, I was assigned as Assistant Intelligence Officer to the ship's force. After all, I was now a full Lieutenant and all the junior air intel officers would be Ensigns or Lieutenants Junior Grade. The assignment was a choice one and I went back to see my detailer to thank him with a bottle of scotch. Like the Firsties used to say when I was a plebe at the academy, but in a much nicer way, he just said, "don't thank me, it's my job." But he put the bottle in his desk drawer anyway. Well, he put it into the drawer after we had a belt together. We were still aviators, after all.

Norfolk is about four hours at the speed limit, and three hours for a former pilot in a Mustang, from Washington. Meghan and I set again into our commuter marriage. It was a strain, but she seemed happy and it made no sense for her to move to Norfolk when I'd be at sea so often. So we had two households...her apartment in the Crystal City complex of high rises and government offices of Arlington and my stateroom on the JFK, shared with another guy who snored louder than I did. His name was Tom O'Malley, the Meteorological Officer, or "Black Cloud" as we called him. The weekends Meghan and I spent together were fantastic. Nothing had changed, but everything had.

And so it was about a year later, with lots of sea time, and not enough of those weekends, that I found myself in the middle of the North Atlantic in transit to a NATO exercise to take place off of Norway and a six-month deployment to the Mediterranean. It was July,

1974. We'd been to sea for about three weeks, having spent time off the Virginia Capes and northern Florida "carrier qualifying" the air wing and bringing the aircraft aboard for the deployment. It was a down night, meaning there were no aircraft aloft, not even an E-2C Hawkeye early-warning plane. The ship was doing a covert transit; meaning strict electromagnetic silence was being maintained. No radars, no radios, and no sonar. Two Phantoms Combat Air Patrol (CAP) planes were on the bow cats on Alert Five, meaning they were ready to launch at any time with only five minutes notice. It's not as good as having planes in the air out patrolling in the direction of the greatest threat, but if any threat signal were picked up by our electronic warfare sensors, we'd launch the CAP and the ship's sensors would light up to meet the threat. But it was very, very quiet out there. And I was very, very lonely.

CHAPTER 15



USS JOHN F. KENNEDY (CV-67)—July, 1974

Under a moonless, overcast sky in total darkness in the middle of a coal-dark sea, the floating city pushed into the night. If a fishing boat or a merchant ship were to appear before her without the lookouts sighting her in time, it would be lost forever to the formidable darkness below. The floating city couldn't turn very quickly. She knew only to press into the darkness at 25 knots, her escorts strung around her in a loose formation, with their own lookouts and Officers of the Deck desperately watching for the carrier's running lights to make sure they were on their assigned stations. The only problem was that while every ship larger than a fishing boat on the planet showed the same basic configuration of running lights, a United States attack aircraft carrier like the JOHN F. KENNEDY often lit up the night around it. The many lights on the flight deck shone like footlights on the dancers in the ballet of danger going on across the flight deck. The escorting ships did their best to figure out which of the lights JFK was showing were her true running lights, but in the end, it didn't much matter. The carrier was out there in the center of the formation and any motion relative to their own courses and speeds was tracked by visual bearing. Normally, they'd be watching her huge radar echo on their surface sur-

veillance systems, but their screens were dark. Their mast-mounted antennas still rotated but emitted not the slightest signal. Their radios, too, were silent, leaving the periodic flashing lights as the only communications between JFK and her escorts. Electromagnetic silence had been ordered—"zip lip." The battle group was in emission control, called EMCON. JFK didn't want to be found. Other than their running lights, still on for safety, the ships were slipping swiftly and secretly through the night.

Here in the middle of the north Atlantic, the carrier task force was in covert transit. The ships had made a staggered set of departures from the east coast ports of Norfolk, Newport, and Jacksonville/Mayport over a period of a week. They had collected at the rendezvous point three hundred miles northeast of Cape Hatteras and then set off for a six-month deployment which would take them first to the coast of Norway and then southward into the Mediterranean. It was to be a peacetime cruise, but with the Cold War raging and the hot war in Vietnam winding down, the group's departure and transit were on a virtual wartime footing. Aircraft on JFK's deck and the missile launching rails of her escorts were armed. The Soviet bastards were out there and that they were also armed to the teeth was a sure bet.

Beneath JFK's keel was the enormous mountain chain called the Mid Atlantic Ridge. Her steel hull vibrated with the pulsation of a million horsepower generated by eight boilers churning out superheated steam at a pressure of twelve hundred pounds per square inch to four building-sized turbine engines driving four propellers. Above the peaks pushing themselves upward from the slow crashing of two tectonic plates and hiding in the acoustic noise of the carrier's underwater vibrations, two American fast attack submarines, PARGO and NAR-WHAL were gliding silently through the black sea. On the surface of the moonless sea, the choreography of the carrier's aircraft launch and landing operations and the constant and frenetic repositioning of her air defense and antisubmarine surface ship escorts was carried out with all radios, radars, and active sonars powered down to avoid detection.

Below, the submarines danced their own silent dance, listening for Ivan, the nearly omniscient villain. Every sailor in every ship and submarine knew the drill: don't get found.

The object of the first major exercise of the deployment was take millions of tons of steel, almost a hundred aircraft, thousands of bombs and missiles, and tens of thousands of U.S. fighting men from their ports, and arrive undetected off Vestfjord on the coast of Norway. It would take skill and cunning. And a little luck.

Almost midnight, the last aircraft recovery of the night was just beginning. It would be a quick job, because the only aircraft aloft had been an E-2C Hawkeye early warning plane. The ship turned from its northeasterly course back to the west to allow the Officer of the Deck to set a course and speed which would yield exactly twenty-five knots of relative wind straight down the angle deck. Pilots coming aboard Captain Steve Krupski's ship could bank on that perfect set of conditions. Bringing the huge and slow moving Hawkeye down on a postage stamp deck, pitching slightly in a fifteen-foot swell, on a clear but moonless sky in total electromagnetic silence would be tough for pilot Tom Nelson. He had his eye on the "meatball" light in the dead center of the Fresnel lens of the landing system and rode the flight path smoothly down to catch the number two wire, while immediately pushing the throttle to max power to provide his insurance of getting airborne again had he missed the arresting gear wires. He received a signal from a yellow-shirted flight director with lighted wands that his tail hook had caught, and he was safe to taxi. Tom mentally thanked God for being alive, as many naval aviators did after every recovery, and followed the directions to his parking spot for the night.

From a platform just below the after end of the flight deck, enlisted Aerographer's Mate Third Class Dave Arbogast emerged from a huge open hatch onto a spacious railed-in deck. He held a gossamer thin latex balloon six feet in diameter, covered by a nylon tarp, which he held by its corners in one hand. In his other hand was a small white cardboard box which housed delicate temperature, humidity, and pres-

sure sensors, a small battery, and a tiny radio transmitter, all attached to the bottom of the helium-filled sounding balloon by a twenty foot long string. Standing just outside the door to the compartment, Arbogast pushed a switch on the box, turning on power to the radio which would transmit readings of temperature and moisture vs. altitude from the radiosonde back to a three foot long antenna mounted on the railing and connected to an AN/SMQ-1 receiver/recorder inside the shack. Seeing a light on the receiver, assuring him that the signal from the probe was being received, he quickly stepped to the railing, leaned out and let go of two of the corners of the nylon shroud, launching the balloon. As it began to quickly rise, Arbogast saw the balloon was being pulled by air currents toward the port side, and it just barely cleared the lip of the flight deck overhead. Strange, he thought, that the balloon hadn't simply flown directly astern as the ship was always sailing into the wind for launching and recovering aircraft. And the bridge would always wait for the radiosonde balloon launch after the last airplane recovery before turning. The balloon was now above the flight deck and clear and, after paying out the string, he gently let go of the sensor box and saw it glide silently through the pale light of the stern running light that had been dimmed for covert night transit, and then it disappeared into the jet black sky. He still wondered why the ship had begun its turn downwind immediately after the E-2C had come aboard. It was standard procedure for the OOD to wait for the weather team to launch the midnight radiosonde, which required the relative wind to be from fore to aft. Normally, they would wait for the aerographer's mate to call and report the balloon safely away before starting their turn. As he went inside to monitor the progress of the atmospheric sounding on the recorder and to call the bridge, he remembered.

"Oh shit!" he said. And then he said it several more times as he ran for the phone to tell the bridge that he'd screwed up royally. He'd forgotten EMCON. *There wasn't supposed to have been a balloon launch tonight!*

In a darkened compartment, painted from deck to overhead with flat black paint and located just below the flight deck level near the bottom of the ladder coming down from the island on the starboard side, Communications Technician First Class Steve Jackson saw it immediately. The ship's Electronic Signals Monitoring (ESM) equipment was capable of detecting radio signals from the faintest of sources. Tonight, just as they had for several days on this covert transit across the Atlantic, the ESM receivers were tweaked to pick up signals from any Soviet or third party ships, submarines, or aircraft which might detect their transit, but they were also tuned to listen electronically for inadvertent signals from the KENNEDY and other ships of their own battle group, which would be an indication of a violation of EMCON.

Jackson swiveled in his padded armchair and spoke to the Electronics Warfare Officer, Lieutenant Commander Dale White. White was not on watch, but he often liked to "hang out" with his troops in the EW center, not just because he liked them and enjoyed their company, but also because he was also a specialist in cryptology and intelligence and he knew his ESM equipment was vital to the success of their stealthy transit.

"Look at this, sir. I've got a weak AM signal that I picked up broad on the port quarter, but as we've steadied our course on 035, it's now off our starboard bow and growing steadily weaker. Looks like a radiosonde. Actually, I'd definitely classify it as a radiosonde. I bet the weather weenies screwed up and broke EMCON."

White let out a low whistle and nodded agreement, adding, "Concur. We see those things every day and it can't be anything else. It's heading off to the northeast on the wind. It should die in a few minutes when the balloon gets up to its burst altitude and the box falls into the ocean, but that thing pretty much classifies us as a bird farm if anybody is out there with our kind of electronic gear. Black Cloud is going to take it in the shorts because his guys screwed up."

Feeling badly for his friend and fellow "restricted line" officer Tom O'Malley, the Meteorological Officer, White pushed the button of a

gray communications box, connecting him to the Tactical Action Officer (TAO) in the ship's Combat Information Center (CIC). He then pushed down on a lever to the "talk" position and spoke in a measured, professional tone, identifying the party called and then his own Electronic Warfare station.

"Combat, EW."

"Combat aye," came the instant reply from the officer in CIC.

"Combat, we have an ESM signal bearing 050 true. Classified as a radiosonde...ours. Signal is very weak, and I'd estimate it's probably 2000 yards away by now and opening. Based on our observations of these things every day, we think it should be shut down in about ten minutes and about ten to twenty nautical miles downwind, depending on the wind. We'll write up an EMCON violation report."

"Roger, EW, copy. We found out about the radiosonde just before you called. Bridge alerted us after the aerographer's mate called them to report his screw up. So what's your assessment? How serious is this, in terms of danger of getting us detected?" asked LT Pete Rau, the TAO.

"Well, the only way a radiosonde could get out here in the middle of the ocean is if an aircraft carrier launched it. So I'd say if there were to be a Soviet submarine with an ESM mast or a electronic collection trawler out here, I think they'd have us. The power of these radiosonde transmitters is really weak, designed to just send a low data rate signal back to a SMQ-1 receiver, like we have back on the fantail. It's a unique signal and it goes up pretty high, to about 40 for 50 thousand feet, I think. So, it's got a really long direct path range, so long as the receiver is as sensitive as our ESM gear or tuned to exactly that freq like the 'Smuck One' is. So I'd classify the EMCON violation as moderate to high risk of counter detection."

"Thanks. I'll call the OOD back and he'll call the CO. Poor weather guys. They catch shit even when there isn't a cloud in the sky! Appreciate your report. Keep your ears tuned for bad guys. Combat out."

White clicked the transmit switch twice...the universal Navy wordless reply signal for "roger, out." He and Petty Officer Jackson contin-

ued to stare at their electronic equipment, showing the tiny spike of the radiosonde transmitter's signal, somewhere out in the black and otherwise electromagnetically silent sky. But their eyes were not the only sets of eyes watching that signal.

C H A P T E R 16



Central North Atlantic—July, 1974

It was two in the morning that same night. Lieutenant Mike St. Pierre lay awake in the top bunk of his stateroom. Above him less than three feet away was the four inch-thick steel flight deck, which was covered with a thick black coating laced with grit called non-skid. Almost exactly above that was the forward-most arresting gear wire. This was “the four wire,” as it was known to the pilots. They always winced when their tail hook caught it because it meant they were inches away from missing altogether and having to “bolter” back into the sky shooting sparks from the dragging of their hooks across the non-skid deep into the steel beneath. Obviously, it was hard to sleep in Mike’s rack when flight ops were going on because the sound of the planes landing overhead made everything in the stateroom jump an inch into the air and caused a deafening crash.

But Mike’s roommate could sleep through that. Tom O’Malley could sleep through anything, and tonight, even though no flight operations were being conducted, Mike was enduring a different kind of ear shattering noise...the loud snores of the sleeping weather officer.

Black Cloud had received a royal ass chewing from the Captain for the very serious mistake made by the radiosonde technician who hadn’t

remembered to check the EMCON condition before launching the balloon. But he'd taken it in stride and was now sawing logs. Meteorologists really do have to have thick skin, thought Mike. He and his intelligence officer colleagues were rarely held accountable for getting an assessment of opposing forces wrong. They could fall back on the defense that they truly don't know what they don't know. Meteorological officers, on the other hand, were supposed to guess—and to guess correctly every single day. In fact, they too were in the intelligence business and their guesses were only as good as the information they were able to collect about the weather patterns around them. And when you're in the middle of the ocean, it was usually precious-little information. The better the education, the better the educated guess. Mike's buddy, and aircraft carrier weather officers for generations had gotten their nickname "Black Cloud" by always giving the most pessimistic forecast he could justify because that got him the least amount of grief when the weather was lousy. And he even got dumped on when the weather was good, because he so seldom predicted good weather. But Tom was a master of taking it all in good humor because, after all, what could he do about the weather anyway?

But tonight, the Captain, who wasn't a very nice guy when he was deprived of his precious little sleep, had really beaten him up. O'Malley had then dutifully, and professionally, chewed on Chief Aerographer's Mate Jones, who had chewed on Petty Officer First Class Butler, the heavily tattooed duty forecaster in charge of the watch section. Butler had, in turn, and with an escalating degree of profanity, chewed on the hapless Petty Officer Arbogast. The young man had been threatened with loss of his third class rank, his "crow," the eagle in a petty officer's sleeve insignia. But because the aerographer's mates were like the intelligence specialists who worked for Mike St. Pierre, they were among the best behaved and most intelligent of all the ship's enlisted men. Arbogast was reprimanded and banished to his rack to rest up for a day with informally assigned "extra duty" of head cleaning. With the weather overhead clear and the squall of the screw up fading, all was at

peace again on the JFK as the ship glided through the darkness and two thirds of the crew slept.

But there was precious little peace in Mike's stateroom or in his mind. As Mike listened to the buzz saw of the sleeping meteorologist, he had trouble falling asleep. Clearly the snoring was a problem, but there was a lot on his mind tonight. Professionally, there were always the nagging thoughts of work. He'd been playing a central role in laying out the plans for the simulated amphibious assault and coordinated air strikes for the exercise coming up off of Norway. Much still needed to be done to assess the expected Soviet reaction to the exercise, and there was still the looming threat of detection presented by the huge force of submarines and intelligence trawlers which the Soviets operated in the North Atlantic.

JFK's task force was a huge target that the Russians would love to detect and intercept. It would take them days to vector a surface combatant to reach the task force, but if they could overfly the Kennedy with a long range bomber or patrol aircraft, they could send the message "We know you American dogs are out there and Soviet power will protect Mother Russia and its allies from your imperialist threat." It happened all the time. The most likely scenario would be to have a Bear-Delta, a huge multi-engine bomber sortie from Murmansk, fly over the northern flank of Scandinavia, make several low level passes over the task force, and then continue southward to their base in Lourdes, Cuba. Soviet aircrews loved it because they knew it would make the Americans' flesh crawl to see the projected power of the Kremlin fly bombing patterns over their heads. But mostly because they would have several days of relaxing in the blessed warmth of Cuban beaches in the company of exotic and eager Cuban women, and warmed with the effect of a rum-induced drunkenness. Little did they care that in virtually all of these overflight events, they would have the company of an American F-4 Phantom fighter on each wing tip for a hundred miles on either side of their overflight of the carrier. And little did they care that they would actually have been dead long before they reached the

U.S. forces if this were really wartime. Girls and booze made their missions very enjoyable.

As these thoughts rattled around inside the sleepless officer, there was a new and familiar set of concerns and worries that were now creeping in. Mike had been gone from his homeport of Norfolk for only a matter of days, but he had not seen Meghan in several weeks. In the buildup to the deployment, there were a million things to be done in preparing the ship. Because his wife was two hundred miles away in Washington, Mike had been standing duty on board almost every night for those last few weeks before they left. All of Mike's fellow intelligence officers were married and living either on base or nearby in Norfolk or Virginia Beach. As the weeks and then days to the deployment date approached, Mike found himself offering to stand duty for them, allowing them to spend the time with their families. He and Meghan had no kids, and yet he knew the prospect of six months or more away from home was particularly hard for the guys who did. Navy wives got a lot of advance warning about separations, which came with the Navy life. They had made conscious decisions to accept them as a fact of life when they'd agreed to marry a sailor. But sailors' kids didn't get to make that decision and Mike could see the pain and confusion in their eyes as they waved goodbye from their mothers' arms on the pier as the ship slipped its berth. Mike loved being able to help their dads spend as much time with them as possible.

Tonight, he realized he hadn't tried nearly hard enough to break away and drive up to see her so they could go through their own preparations for the upcoming deployment. Meghan was clearly enjoying her job and was spending one weekend out of four drilling in her Air Force Reserve job. That meant only six days out of each month were free for her to spend time with Mike, either in Washington or with him in Norfolk. Mike's home at the naval base was basically his tiny, gray stateroom on the ship and a sterile little room he kept in the Bachelor Officer's Quarters (BOQ) on base. Overnight stays on the ship were forbidden for a woman, even for an Air Force officer married to

one of the most popular junior officers in the ship's wardroom. And "shacking up in the BOQ," as she called spending time with Mike there, was something she found egregiously unpleasant.

Meghan had finally come down the day before JFK left port. They spent the night in the most expensive hotel on the beach in Virginia Beach, dining on lobster and ice cold champagne. During a late night walk on the beach, Mike had told her what he could, within security guidelines, about the deployment: the exercises, the expected at sea challenges by the Soviets, and the planned liberty port visits. She had said she would be too busy to get away from work for a trip to meet the ship somewhere like Naples or Athens, but she said she would miss him. Then they made love and slept in each other's arms before driving to the base, separating on the pier with a last kiss amid the hundreds of crying wives and children and their husbands and fathers in uniform, who were holding back their own tears.

"Take care, sailor. I love you," she said as Mike pulled away and headed for the gangway to climb from the pier up to the quarterdeck. He waved to her as he reached the top of the ramp, then turned and ritualistically saluted the national ensign and requested permission from the OOD to come aboard. Mike then turned and looked at the pier again. He could see Meghan threading her way through the crowd toward the parking lot. She wasn't going to wait for the ship to pull away in fifteen more minutes and she wasn't looking back. He climbed to the flight deck and joined the white uniformed ring of officers and seamen lining the edge of the flight deck and stayed there until the ship had separated from the pier and the tearful families left there. He never saw Meghan on the pier, which didn't surprise him, but it had given him a sick feeling in his gut that he wouldn't see her again for at least six months. Everybody in the Navy knows this comes with the job, but that doesn't make saying goodbye any easier. And Mike remembered Meghan hadn't cried, and neither had he. And everybody cries, either on the outside or on the inside.

CHAPTER 17



USS JOHN F. KENNEDY at Sea

Mike was becoming very, very tired, but he couldn't sleep. And it wasn't just Black Cloud's snoring. He reflected he had let the past few weeks slide by without seeing Meghan except for that last night together. They'd spoken on the phone almost every day...well at least once a week, but he knew they had drifted apart and he wondered if she shared the dull pain he was feeling tonight. When they had spent time together, off and on, since his reporting aboard JFK, it was almost always at her/their apartment in Crystal City and it was generally a whirlwind of dinners out, movies, and cocktail parties with her friends from work or apartment neighbors. They had made love often, and truly enjoyed it. It wasn't what one might call a normal married relationship because it seemed like a string of dates, but it lacked something, Mike reflected. It lacked the quiet time together, just talking and laughing, and hugging like they had had at Princeton, or even in the rough years in Florida. They didn't have the bond of children. They didn't go to church together, because Meghan had more or less fallen away from the faith.

Mike still went to Mass on the ship every day because it was peaceful amid the constant demands and stress of a ship's day. He also went

because Father Dave Williamson was one of his best friends on the ship. Father Dave had even begun to call Mike his “drinking buddy” because of Mike’s daily regimen and because, with a wink, Dave had always filled the chalice nearly to the brim with the sacramental wine and then shared the cup of consecrated wine with Mike. Often, he was the only other person in the little chapel which, ironically, was directly beneath the weather office in the island structure.

Mike continued to dwell on their childless marriage. Without children and a bond of faith, what did he and Meghan share? That he loved her never came up as a doubt in his mind. The mere memory of how she crinkled her nose when she giggled was enough to make him break into a grin, and her selfless ambition made him as envious of her as he was proud. He could tell her anything, and he felt like he knew everything about her. But was she his soul mate? Was she his best friend? Was she happy? About him? About her marriage to him? Did she miss him tonight? How much did he miss her? A lot, he decided.

Realizing he wasn’t likely to fall asleep here in his stateroom, something that happened all too often with his loudly snoring roommate, he got up and dressed in his khakis, and pulled on a Marine Corps dark green “wooly-pully” sweater. This sweater wasn’t standard uniform issue for Navy officers, but they were allowed on JFK because the Captain liked the way they looked. He grabbed his pillow and a blanket off his bed, and headed out the door. He walked forward down the main port side passageway on the 03 level, and then directly across the ship to the starboard side. When he passed the electronic warfare spaces, he undogged the watertight door and stuck his head in, asking whether LCDR White was there.

“No, sir,” the bleary-eyed technician at a console said. “The boss turned in—but could I maybe help, LT St. Pierre?”

“No,” said Mike, “I just wanted to congratulate you guys on picking up that radiosonde earlier. Those things are pretty small, I understand. Good job.”

"Thanks," said the young enlisted man, "I'll pass that on to the guy who caught it, Jackson. Good night, sir."

"Good night," said Mike, and he continued up the passageway toward the ladder to the superstructure.

Climbing ten decks, past the chapel, the weather office, the Admiral's "flag bridge," the actual bridge, and the flight deck operations "tower" all the way to the signal bridge, the uppermost manned deck on the ship, Mike emerged out into the cool, sweet night air. Because, as always at night, the passageways and inside the stairwell had been lit by dim red lights, he almost immediately had his "night eyes" and began to look around in the blackness, but it wasn't completely dark. Overhead, Mike saw his favorite sight in the universe—a brilliantly starlit and moonless sky. As he always did out of habit on nights like this when he came up to the signal bridge, Mike said a barely audible, "Thank you, God!" as he gazed upward to the billions of visible stars overhead.

"You're welcome, Lieutenant!" said Signalman Second Class Dave Rigowski, as he stepped up to Mike and touched him on the arm to let him know where he was.

"Hey, good to sorta see you, Petty Officer Rigowski. Mind if I spend a little time up here in the dark with you guys?" Mike could barely make out the signalman's ball cap above a big smile. Mike came here often enough at night that he now knew the names and more or less the life stories of all the enlisted men who virtually lived up here to communicate with flashing light by night and hoisted signal flags by day with other ships of the fleet and with other ships met in passing. Theirs was an age-old profession that had become even more critical in this electronic age. It was ironic that the skills of flashing Morse code, waving and reading semaphore flags, and interpreting hoists of colored signal flags were not replaced by radio communications but rather were made more critical because they could be done in complete radio silence, such as on this evening.

“Sure, Mr. Saint,” said the petty officer. You make yourself comfortable. Hey, I see in the starlight that you’ve brought your pillow. You gonna rack out under the stars again tonight? It’s a good one for it.”

“Yeah, my roomo is running the chain saw again. Got his butt chewed about midnight, but he’s not having any trouble sleeping. Just point me to where I won’t be in the way and I’ll try to get a couple of hours sleep. Seems like a nice night for it.”

“OK, Lieutenant. We got a mattress on that rack we have in the signal shack. Let me pull it out for you and you just pick a spot. Ain’t nobody doing much tonight. I’m just watching for flashing lights, but there’s not much chatter.”

Twenty minutes later, Michael St. Pierre, his mind at much greater peace and his ears being treated to only the sounds of the wind through the empty signal halyards and the occasional snap of the American flag from the masthead, fell soundly asleep in the peace, and complete electromagnetic silence, of this night.

C H A P T E R 18



USS JOHN F. KENNEDY

He knew instantly he was in flight. He had come up to the signal bridge and fallen asleep like this as many as a dozen times before. But he realized tonight the ship had no radars or radios of any kind transmitting and somehow he knew this had to be the reason that for the first time since he was in high school, and for only the second time in his life, he was having an experience of being outside his body. He was aware of his body asleep on a bare striped cotton-covered mattress below him on the signal bridge, and he took his observation down to “look” at himself at close range.

How is it that I can see myself? Over there, I can see Petty Office Rigowski through the open door of the signal shack. He was then *there* looking into Rigowski’s face as he looked down at a book, reading from the pale red glow of a desk lamp with a colored plastic filter over the glowing fluorescent bulb. Strange, he thought, that he could be inside the aluminum shell of the room that had lots of wires carrying electricity to the light...to the “squawk box” speaker...to the dial-up telephone. His mind raced to understand why this was possible, when for years he had more or less believed the only reason he’d been able to “fly” to Meghan’s room during the blackout was because of the total

lack of electricity. Then he realized he had “come in” through an open metal door and that there was a straight line between his current point of observation and his body, unbroken by any metal or wiring. The trained engineer in him thought about this and he still didn’t completely understand. He tried to move this point of reference a bit, so that the direct path to his body would be blocked by the bulkhead—the metal wall of the compartment—but he found the metal acted like a barrier to his observations. He could move anywhere and he could make this movement instantaneously or at any rate of motion he wanted just so long as the path to his body was not blocked by anything metal or, presumably, by anything with electricity-carrying wires. Interesting.

He was having an experience of thinking and “seeing” consciousness outside his physical body. He wasn’t able to get close to Rigowski, the only signalman on watch in the shack, because of the blocking effect, but he could “see” everything in the room so long as his point of observation was an unblocked location. If he wasn’t seeing things with his eyes, he was somehow “looking” in only one direction at a time, just as he would do with his eyes, rather than having his senses somehow in contact with each object and having those senses collect at one point, which was his “location.” How could this be? He hadn’t a clue. The phenomenon was just like being in a place physically and then visually observing things from that point. It was like standing there looking at Rigowski, but he knew he wasn’t standing there. And he knew he couldn’t walk or jump fast enough to be able to match the ability he now had to move his observation point from place to place. He could read the cover of the signalman’s book and saw that it was a novel that he’d never heard of by an author he’d never heard of. The ship’s library had hundreds of them and there was never an excuse for a sailor not to have a good book to read. The wonder, Mike thought, is that any sailors read any of them and then he realized that Rigowski was a pretty smart kid who had to spend virtually all of his awake hours up here on the signal bridge. Good for him for not just sitting around complain-

ing about the Navy and talking about the next time he was going to get drunk or laid or both, like it seemed so many sailors did. Nice kid. Time to move on, though.

Hovering over his body for just another moment, he decided to try something out. In an instant, he was on the very peak of the mast, looking down. He could see the tiny figures of men on the flight deck below, moving among the parked, or spotted, aircraft. Some were doing maintenance in the open cockpits or moving fuel lines, or just walking about in pairs talking with each other. Against what he perceived to be the dark, cold steel of the deck, each human seemed to glow, as if he were observing them with an infrared sensor used by soldiers in Vietnam to detect the Viet Cong coming through the jungle at them. He tried to go down onto the flight deck and, with a little mental effort he was among the folded winged aircraft, then he was outside the bridge window, hovering there looking through the glass at the officers and enlisted men standing watch...binoculars around the necks of the officers, their glances flitting everywhere constantly, checking the course, the wind, the actions of the watchstanders, the picture of vigilance; the helmsman standing alertly with his eyes locked on the ship's course, almost never looking up, almost never even blinking; the quartermaster hunched over the chart table on the starboard side; the chairs of the navigator on the starboard limit of the bridge and of the captain to the port side now empty as those officers were blessedly asleep in their sea cabins. He reasoned that there was no clear path between him and his body now because of the metal deck of the signal bridge on which he slept. Pondering this, he flew several laps around the ship, looking at her. KENNEDY was a thing of unbelievable strength and powerful beauty, plowing at twenty-five knots through the darkness.

Reasoning that if he couldn't move through or around metal walls, and yet he could be here below the plane of the signal bridge deck, his observation-point motion must be made possible (could it really be possible?) by some kind of bounce off of the invisible ionosphere miles

above him. If his spiritual presence here was somehow affected by electromagnetic phenomena or blocked by metal walls, then could it be possible that the layer of ionized gas, charged by the solar wind from the sun, was somehow affecting his ability to move? Radio waves bounced off the ionosphere, allowing a Los Angeles AM radio station to be picked up by a transistor radio in New York. Or was it the Van Allen Belts, far out in space, those strange force fields of the Earth's magnetic fields that shielded the Earth from the killing effect of cosmic rays and bent the sun's solar wind downward around the poles in the Aurora Borealis? He realized that unlike his snoring roommate, he knew precious little about these things, remembering only what he had learned from his required basic science courses at the academy. Meghan would know, too, and tease him playfully that he wouldn't know the Pleiades from the dipper, in spite of having studied celestial navigation and having been on the ocean racing team.

Knowing he could control his consciousness and its movements, what was he going to do with it? *Meghan*. And in an instant, he looked down at the ship, computing its course and its relative position to the North American continent astern. He mentally calculated the relative bearing from the ship to Washington, DC and used all of his concentration to "move" in that direction, using the ship's fore-aft line as a reference. His presence actually came ashore closer to Cape Hatteras than Washington. But when he placed himself high above the Chesapeake Bay, he was able to locate Washington, not from the glow of its lights, but from the presence of its half million mostly sleeping people that were there as if to light up the landscape with the light of their glow.

He circled Meghan's high-rise apartment building several times, counting the floors and choosing the window carefully. There was only one human being on the planet that he wanted to visit tonight, and he wanted to see her and be with her very, very badly. Passing through her window and the concrete walls of the building were just as easy to him

as it had been to fly up the stairs of her house in Salem so many years before

The room he found himself in was her living room. On the sill of the passthrough to the kitchenette were an empty champagne bottle and two glasses. One had lipstick on it, one didn't. On the floor were clothes: her shoes, skirt and blouse, pantyhose, and her underwear. On the coffee table was her jewelry: earrings, jade bracelet, and her wedding and engagement rings. She had gone into the bedroom completely and utterly naked. And not alone.

On the floor along with Meghan's clothes were a man's. Mike wondered if they had undressed each other. He wondered if she'd been drunk. He wondered who the son of a bitch was. The only thing he knew he didn't have to wonder was why.

Behind a half-closed bedroom door that he could have been through in an instant lay his wife and a man he probably didn't even know. Behind him in his life lay the one human relationship that mattered to him. And, even though his body slept on, the tears he had held back as the ship moved away from the pier finally crept from his eyes.

Mike asked himself if he was surprised. No, he should have seen this coming, he realized. Meghan had been alone in this apartment living a single lifestyle for so long. She had both a career and a cadre of close friends who, like her, were young, ambitious, talented, and good-looking. Meghan had a normal sexual appetite and Mike had been too long away from her. Slowly, over the past few years, Mike and Meghan knew they were drifting away from each other and neither of them had done anything about it. Could he blame her? He wanted to. He spent what little cash he had on port calls on her, and calls to her, while the other sailors found native women and got themselves drunk on liberty. It had taken resolve, but for Mike it wasn't hard. His sleeping body's heart raced on the ship as he, outside of himself, decided whether or not to enter the bedroom. He had to know.

He knew he shouldn't be here, but he finally was inside Meghan's bedroom during a spiritual flight for the second time. The seven-

teen-year-old Meghan had been spending her blackout night on her bed with *Tom Jones*—a fantasy lover. And now here she was again with Mike's presence in the room, but this was no fantasy lover. No, this guy was flesh and blood while Mike's presence tonight, just like that time years ago, was anything *but* flesh and blood. He wished he could feel his own flesh against her skin, and suddenly he realized he might never have that pleasure again.

Mike swept in loops around the bed—something he knew he wouldn't be doing if Meghan and this man were not asleep—and under the covers. And he was thankful that they were not entwined. In fact, Meghan was sleeping turned away from her lover. Mike stopped to look directly into her face—still flawless, and so peaceful. Meghan had always driven Mike wild when she was like this...her long blonde hair all tussled and flowing across her eyes and over her perfect shoulders.

He still loved her. How could he not love her? And that made the pain of her betrayal so much worse. In that night ten years before, Mike had been in Meghan's bedroom both embarrassed and yet completely captivated by the intimacy of being in her presence, worshiping her youthful beauty and innocence. He wanted to be close to her and that night had begun the start of the courtship and the winning of her hand and her heart. Tonight, Mike realized it was all inside out. He had come from the ship through the night to be with her and to unite again with her spirit while the Navy and her job kept them thousands of miles apart. But tonight, instead of a new beginning, Mike saw the beginning of the end. He was deeply hurt that his wife whom he loved so much could have ended up with another man in her bed. He knew she had gone willingly. It was over, and still, his sleeping body's eyes shed tears while his soul slipped silently and instantly out of Meghan's bedroom and out of her life. The night was very, very black.

CHAPTER 19



Central North Atlantic

Mike was back above the KENNEDY, again circling, again looking down at the city at sea which was now his only real home. Inside its steel skin were almost six thousand souls that he could not perceive through the shielding of the decks and labarynth of electrical cables, but he knew they were there, emanating life and light. O'Malley emanated yet more, his cacophonous snoring so constant a life force Mike momentarily listened for it. He smiled within, in the security of knowing that someone cared about him. Tom had already become one of Mike's best friends, but Mike still made a mental note to get to know him better the next day. He would also write to Meghan. Hovering above, Mike felt terribly alone.

He was content to float numbly through the night, watching the ship move perfectly silently when something caught his attention. Far ahead and just to the left of the ship's bow, he sensed a presence. He flew up higher, to a point where JFK was but a speck on a vast empty sea. Higher, higher, he took himself, until he saw it. In an instant he was there. From what would have been about two hundred feet above the sea, he looked down, as if from a hovering helicopter, on what looked like a fishing trawler. He moved closer. He could see that

instead of rigs for fishing net, however, this little ship literally bristled with antennas: dish antennas in fiberglass domes, whip antennas pointing skyward from almost every part of the ship, and wire antennas slung between masts fore and aft, and slung between the aftermost mast and its flagstaff on the stern, from which fluttered the red flag with its golden hammer and sickle. Ivan was there.

He immediately realized the Soviet intelligence collection trawler was heading directly toward JFK and its battle group, and it was probably about two hundred miles away. He realized also that his Navy battle group had indeed been discovered, probably by detecting the wayward radiosonde. It wouldn't have been hard for a clever Soviet analyst to track a weather balloon's path backward along the wind patterns to its source. And it wouldn't have taken more than a short burst radio transmission to Moscow through a satellite, a transmission undetected by JFK's ESM gear at their range from the ship, to order the sortie of a Bear bomber out of Murmansk.

Mike again went high into the night sky and searched in what he estimated would be the bearing from JFK to the northern tip of Norway. And yes it was there, an ocean surveillance aircraft, right where it should be if all these pieces had fallen into place—and they had.

He put himself on the nose of the airplane and flew along with it: a huge airplane as big as a U.S. B-52 bomber with four pulsating turbo-prop engines on each wing. He looked through the cockpit window to see three ruddy faces looking down at their instruments and periodically out at the blackness of the night, through and beyond their invisible watcher. Knowing what he would find there, he moved along the left side of the Bear-D airplane, past the bubbles of the gun and observation ports that were empty and to the very rear, and much larger, Plexiglas bubble. There, he could see a young airman with close-cropped hair smoking a cigarette and thumbing the pages of a very worn and tattered magazine. He read the name on the cover, surprisingly in English: *Playboy*. Its pictures, he guessed, were the universal language for bored and sex-starved soldiers, sailors, airmen away

from home who all too often, it seemed, have only two things on their mind—when they were going to be able to get drunk and when they were going to be able to see a woman again. It didn't matter whether they were Russian or American. Did anyone, he wondered, ever read this magazine for the articles? Dumb question. Men will be boys.

Suddenly, he knew what he had to do. Mike's flight was over and it was time to get to work. What he didn't know was how he would wake up his body, which was operating on his subconscious mind while his consciousness had been all the way from Washington to the gap between Iceland and Norway where he'd seen the incoming Soviet plane. But waking up was easier than he thought it would be. It happened the instant he decided it was necessary. Mike woke feeling panicked and suffocated, his body wet from sweat and heart pounding as his memory of Meghan and of the intelligence trawler trapped him in his mind. He would have to resolve both. And he had very little time. The hard part, he found, lay ahead: to either save or end his marriage. For the moment, Meghan, who should have been foremost on his mind, was not.

C H A P T E R 20

Holy Spirit Priory—Monday Evening, December 16, 1985

It was an hour past sunset and Mike had decided not to attend the evening service in the chapel. Part of him regretted missing the beautiful singing that the brothers had a special gift for, and for which they earned a healthy income from the sale of records, tapes and sheet music. Another part of him regretted not seeing Maria. The thought of their afternoon walk and solitary kiss and tears of joy on a crisp winter day lingered in Mike's mind. He had felt renewed by it—and inspired. From about three o'clock when he'd returned to his cabin until now, he had been pouring the words into the computer in his journal. Though he hadn't been writing about Maria and the kiss, he had drawn strength from them to press on in writing about his mystical experiences. He had finally described in detail, with some historical perspective, his first experience in the blackout during his high school years and moved through describing the event aboard the aircraft carrier years later. He continued to literally pound on the keys while sipping from a glass of red wine, poured from the half-empty bottle on the desk. The brothers had said he could help himself to a bottle whenever he wanted one from their storeroom in the kitchen/dining room

building. It was, he realized after a day or two, the same wine consecrated by the monks in their Masses and shared among all present. It's no wonder, he thought, that the brothers have plenty of the stuff around and why it was so easy for him to get a bottle each evening. Though he wasn't drunk, he was bound by the ancient truth *ex vino veritas*.

There was a knock on the door, and as he rose from the computer to answer it, he wondered...hoped...it would be Maria. He would welcome her, and he would kiss her again, he thought. If it was Brother Maurice, he would of course be glad to see this new friend and gentle soul, but he would also be just a little bit annoyed because, much as he had come to love his talks with Maurice, he needed the time alone tonight to think and write. Unless it was Maria, he again thought.

He was smiling with this thought when he opened the door, but instead of a smiling gray-haired man of God or a beautiful and sad-happy woman, he found himself staring into the unsmiling face of a muscular, red-cheeked, perfectly uniformed Army Major.

"Good evening, Commander Saint Pierre. My name is John Watson. I'm very sorry to disturb you. May I come in?"

Mike looked at this very large and imposing figure and the bewildered look on his face brought a touch of amusement to Watson's initially glowering features. Mike recovered quickly, though, and said, "Sure. Come on in."

Watson stepped inside the little cabin, quickly took in the entire picture and then sat, uninvited, on the couch looking up at Mike, a very famous astronaut he'd known only from TV and from the service record Dr. Willoughby gave him to study. As Mike stood by the door, clearly waiting for an explanation for this surprising intrusion on his presumed privacy, the Major put his cap on the coffee table and spoke first.

"Look, Commander, it's obvious I've surprised you and I apologize. You seem to have come up here to Vermont for some privacy after

your recent shuttle mission and here I've barged in on you." His apologetic manner met Mike's cold glare.

"It's nice to meet you, Major. I don't want to be rude, but you must understand you're catching me off guard. I was told I would not be interrogated during my stay here, when I was granted leave specifically by my chain of command in NASA. I have nothing against the Army—except your football team, Mike managed to grin, "but your showing up in uniform in the middle of the night is a little confusing. What's up?"

"Commander St. Pierre, I'm here as your escort back to Washington. I know you're on semi-permanent assignment to NASA, but I'm carrying orders for you from the Secretary of Defense." As he reached into his inside coat pocket for a folded piece of paper that he tossed casually on the coffee table next to his cap, Watson continued. "You're to come with me, well, actually with me and the two military police soldiers waiting in the car for us. We're going back to Washington, and we have a meeting in the Pentagon tomorrow morning at 0900 hours. You'd better pack."

His annoyance turned to shock and then into anger as Mike picked up the sheet of paper and read it. He put it back on the table.

"First of all, Major, those orders are signed by a deputy undersecretary. I don't know you and you've not shown me your credentials. Second, it's late in the evening, it's at least a twelve-hour drive back to Washington, and if we left this instant, we'd walk half asleep in crumpled uniforms into the Pentagon for that meeting. Come to think of it, I don't even have a uniform here, or a suit for that matter. I left all that back in Houston and only brought casual stuff. And finally, what's the deal with you arriving at a monastery with military police? Am I under arrest or something?"

"Sorry. Here's my Army ID card, Commander, and here's my badge identifying me as an officer of the Department of Defense Military Police. And no, sir, you're certainly not under arrest. Howsoever, as you're an officer on active duty in the armed forces of the United

States, you're obligated to follow the legal orders you are given. This piece of paper, delivered by myself as an official representative of the DoD, constitutes specific legal orders and you, sir, will please follow them. How quickly can you leave?"

Mike was bewildered, but not without his wits. He decided to take the high road.

"OK, Major, I understand what you're saying, but can you tell me what this is all about?"

"No, sir, I'm afraid I can't due to security restrictions, but this is for real. These orders are for real. Again, sir, please get ready to go."

"Major Watson, that's your name, right? Major Watson, your credentials appear valid and these orders, although very confusing, appear to be authentic. You'll understand, though, if I wish to make some phone calls to my next senior in command, namely Captain Bob Wood, U.S. Navy, chief of the astronaut corps of NASA at the Johnson Space Center. If I can't reach him, I intend to next call the director of the Center, Brigadier General Craig Hunter, and then I'll call the next most senior officer in my military chain of command, namely Vice Admiral Haley, Deputy NASA Administrator. This is going to take some time. We're certainly not leaving here tonight because I'm not calling them until tomorrow morning. Remember it's the middle of the night for these gentlemen and I only have their office phone numbers. I promise you I'll call them first thing in the morning. If they concur with the orders, then I'll most certainly accompany you, but we won't drive to Washington. We'll drive to Boston and take the Eastern Shuttle that leaves every hour on the half-hour. We can be at the Pentagon by 1300 tomorrow and I'll meet with anyone you want. How does this sound, Major?"

Watson's face remained passionless. Then, suddenly, he smiled, stood up, and said, "Commander, you impress the shit outa me, but I should've expected that from someone who flies the space shuttle, even a Navy guy. I'll tell you what. We can leave in the morning. How does nine sound? You can have breakfast. Say your prayers. Whatever. Just

be ready to roll. We can stop somewhere in Boston to get you a suit and tie. Hell, I'll even buy you lunch at Durgin Park before we go to the airport for an afternoon shuttle flight to National. But here's the deal: you won't make any phone calls tonight or tomorrow morning. My guys have already cut your phone line anyway. How's that sound?"

Mike was livid and, uncharacteristically, lost his cool for the first time in a long time. "What the hell do you mean I can't make any phone calls? Who the hell do you think you are that you can dictate orders to me? I know I'm just a piss-ant mid-grade Navy commander and that doesn't count for much down in the five sided puzzle palace, but for the love of God, I'm a NASA astronaut just back from a near disaster mission and I'm pretty well known by a lot of DoD brass and people at the top. Who the fuck do you think you are that you can come in here and give me orders? For Christ's sake, I'm even senior to you Major!" Mike realized he was so mad he was shaking and using profanity which was out of character, something he only did when he was very, very upset.

Watson said nothing immediately. He reached down, pulling up the pant leg of his right ankle and in his sock, he had a pack of cigarettes. Marlboro in the box. He shook out a cigarette, put it in the smirking end of his lips, and lit it. Blowing the smoke directly at Mike, he said, "mind if I smoke?" Mike glared back, waiting for an answer to his question, and thinking this Army guy was a leaping, screaming asshole. They stared at each other into discomfort, then intimidation, and finally into fury.

Poking a finger at Mike, Watson finally said, "Commander, I resent your use of profanity. I thought this was a holy place. But rather than telling you again who the fuck I am, let me tell you why I'm going to make the rules here. I'm bending over backward not to pack you off tonight as I came here to do. Let's get something straight—I think you're a real dick, but you have a reputation for being a good guy, especially with these monks. I had a little talk with the head guy, the abbott, Brother Boniface, before coming over to your cabin. He really

likes you. Calls you 'Brother Michael.' How 'bout that shit? We didn't hit if off real well, the head monk and me, but we definitely reached an understanding. He doesn't like it, but he's smart enough to understand that because you're a military officer, you'll have to do what you're ordered to do. He also now understands that if you don't do what you're told to do my buddies in the FBI and the INS will descend on this little piece of heaven like flies on a shit. And they will take into custody a young woman and her children who are in this country illegally and receiving unlawful refuge from these monks. They're breaking the law, so in addition to taking the wetbacks away, I'm sure the Feds will want to take a really close look at this little commune. It won't be pretty. Are you getting my drift, Commander St. Pierre?"

Mike's face burned. He couldn't speak. He just glared at Watson, who calmly took a long pull at his cigarette, enjoying his newfound leverage. Mike's mind spun, and, as it did so many times in his professional career, he saw the picture clearly and realized what had to be done. When he could speak, he did so slowly and as politely as he could muster.

"Major, you've made yourself perfectly clear. On the one hand, I believe the government would, under normal circumstances, have no interest in invading the sanctity of a church to arrest and deport a harmless woman and her children. On the other hand, it's clear you and the DoD must have one very compelling reason for 'requesting' my presence back in Washington. Frankly, I have no clue what that reason might be, but I'm naturally curious. And unless you throw me into the brig for something, I know I can raise hell once I'm back in Washington. As you've somehow figured out, I have indeed come to care for this young family and the holy men who live here and I wouldn't want to see harm come to any of them. Also, as you probably know, deporting them would be the same as like a death sentence for the mother and a future of orphanages for the children. No matter how much of a thug you are, you can't possibly want that to happen."

Mike, forcing himself under control, walked across to the table and picked up his wine glass and took a long drink. He didn't offer the Major a glass, but he continued.

"So, I'm going to go with you in the morning. The plan to stop to buy clothes is fine. You can forget that nice little lunch together. So how about you getting the hell out of here and taking your goons down the road to a motel or find a rock to climb back under. I promise I won't make any phone calls until I'm back in Washington. And, oh yeah, I do honestly apologize for the profanity. I only use it when I'm *really* pissed off. Now please shove off."

"Good night, Commander. See you here at zero nine hundred. Have a nice night's sleep." And at the instant he said the word sleep, he winked and gave Mike a malevolent grin. "Sleep tight and pleasant dreams," he said as he walked out the door stamping out the cigarette on the threshold.

Mike picked up the phone just to see if it was really dead. It was. Mike drained the rest of his glass of wine in one big gulp. His blood had drained from his face, and his heart pounded, and the wine helped. "Sweet Jesus Christ, they know," he said quietly to himself, much more of a prayer than a curse. "They know."

C H A P T E R 21

USS JOHN F. KENNEDY, Commanding Officer's Memorandum

S E C R E T/NO FOREIGN DISSEMINATION (S/NF)

18 July 1974

From: Commanding Officer, USS JOHN F. KENNEDY (CV-64)

To: Commander, Carrier Group SIX

Subj: SOVIET BEAR-D OVERFLIGHT DURING TRANSIT
(UNCLAS)

1. (S-NF) At approximately 0600Z this morning, this ship as an element of TF 3.2.0 was at position 55 deg N, 62.5 deg W conducting a covert transit exercise originating at the Virginia Capes and destined for Vestfjord, Norway where simulated strikes and amphibious operations were to be conducted. At the cited time, the task force was overflown by a single Soviet Bear-D, which was intercepted by two F-4B Combat Air Patrol (CAP) fighter aircraft at a range from the ship of approximately one hundred nautical miles. Although the intercept of the Soviet aircraft was made well outside the range of its airborne air-to-surface missiles, hence no actual threat would have been presented by the Bear to ships of the

task force, the detection of our location and the subsequent sortie of this aircraft to our exact location is an indication of the failure of our attempt to remain covert for the rest of this transit. Accordingly, the task force would not have achieved tactical surprise, had this been an actual combat operation.

2. (S-NF) This report is being submitted at the direction of COMCARGRU SIX because of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the detection of the incoming aircraft and the Soviet intelligence collection trawler which is assessed to have made the initial detection of the task force and reported our location, resulting in the Bear's sortie to our location. Specifically, the Soviets nearly achieved total surprise and overflew the task force unescorted by CAP, thereby constituting an extremely serious and dangerous precedent which would undermine U.S. strike potential in the North Atlantic theater of operations. That this did not happen is the result of the quick thinking and dynamic initiative of one of my ship's officers. What makes this event extraordinary is that this officer's actions have not been explained sufficiently to constitute what would be "normal" counterdetection of an incoming threat. Accordingly, the following narrative of events is provided for further analysis, as appropriate, by higher authority.
3. (S-NF) At approximately 0220 local time, the ship was transiting on a course of 050 true at EMCON ALPHA. No aircraft from the task force were aloft from the time the E-2C was recovered at local Midnight. No air, surface or subsurface contacts were being tracked within two hundred nautical miles, verified by the E-2C from an airborne position fifty miles to the north of our track one half hour prior to its recovery. Our track had been specifically selected to remain well clear of commercial surface shipping and airline routes. EMCON ALPHA was being rigidly enforced and monitored by own ship ESM sensors. A violation of this condition occurred at midnight, immediately after the final aircraft recovery

when a meteorological radiosonde probe was inadvertently launched from JFK. The EMCON violation was reported to COMCARGRU SIX and a report was filed, as required. Disciplinary action for the infraction is pending. This actively-transmitting balloon-borne probe is assessed to have been the cause for the task force's detection by the Soviet trawler, which was later verified to be operating, also in radio silence, approximately three hundred nautical miles, bearing 050 true from our position.

4. (S-NF) It is clear, and understandable, that the Soviet trawler had remained undetected and due to its detection and classification of this carrier battle group, it is equally clear how the Bear-D was vectored to our position. What is less than clear, and the rationale for this special report, is how the Bear and the trawler were detected by our own force with enough advance notice to launch the CAP, intercept, and prevent the enemy from achieving surprise. Those detections were the result of the actions of the Assistant Intelligence Officer, LT Michael J. St. Pierre.
5. (S-NF) LT St. Pierre, who was not on watch in any capacity at the time, reports he had been topside on the signal bridge when it occurred to him that the ESM data tapes being recorded in the Electronic Warfare Center should be rewound and carefully analyzed for any signal, however slight, which would indicate that the task group had been located and its position reported by any Soviet unit undetected in the area. The reasoning he cited was that he had been "concerned" about the radiosonde EMCON violation and then concluded that if it had been detected, the detecting unit would report the detection to Moscow and a patrol aircraft would be sent to investigate. The EW personnel on watch were reluctant at first to conduct such a difficult analysis of the data tapes on a hunch, but LT St. Pierre became insistent. He also contacted the CIC Watch Officer and the Officer of the Deck personally, prior to the completion of the analysis, and adamantly recommended

launch of the Alert 5 Combat Air Patrol which were, as per standard operating procedure, manned and fueled and positioned on the bow catapults. I was not initially awakened by the OOD or CICWO, as they were skeptical of the Lieutenant's recommendations and, to be frank, concerned with the vehemence of his arguments that there could be an inbound Soviet aircraft. LT St. Pierre succeeded in waking the Electronic Warfare Officer, LCDR White, who directed the communications technicians to conduct a review of the tapes because LT St. Pierre is his personal friend and because the "hunch" sounded plausible. He also felt it would be good training for his men.

6. (S-NF) Fifteen minutes into a review of the ESM tapes, the on-watch Communications Technician, CT1 Jackson, did actually find a virtually undetectable trace of what has subsequently been analyzed to be the burst transmission of a known Soviet ship-to-satellite communications system. The transmission had been made from a location due east of the task group, at an unknown range. I was awakened by the OOD and consulted with the Electronics Warfare Officer, the CIC Watch Officer. Concurring with their recommendations, I directed the notification of the embarked flag's watch officer and the Admiral and immediately ordered the launch of the Alert 5 fighters. This launch was followed in fifteen minutes by the launch of the alert E-2C Early Warning Aircraft. The two Phantoms were vectored to the most probable threat bearing to the northeast and they and the E-2C were authorized to use active radar search. An inbound Bear-D aircraft was detected by all airborne aircraft at a range of two hundred nautical miles and intercepted at over one hundred miles. The E-2C also detected a small surface ship, later classified visually as a Soviet *Raduva*-class intelligence trawler. When it was clear the Bear was inbound to our exact position, the Task Group Commander ordered securing EMCON and all active search systems were immediately activated. Location of the Bear and the trawler were

immediately verified and tracked. No other contacts within four hundred nautical miles were detected. The overflight by the Bear, accompanied on each wing tip by JFK's F-4's, was otherwise uneventful. After three passes overhead, the Bear departed to the southwest, presumably bound for Lourdes, Cuba, as is their practice.

7. (S-NF) In a subsequent interview with LT St. Pierre, LCDR White, and CDR Ford, my Operations Officer, LT St. Pierre continued to insist that his instinct to push EW for an analysis of their data tapes and to strongly recommend launching the alert fighters was simply his analytical solution to a "what if" scenario based on a Soviet detection of the radiosonde. Although I am concerned that his correct analysis and actions are somewhat implausible, I have no choice other than to conclude that this was the act of personal initiative and extraordinary courage by this young officer. His actions, which prevented an extremely dangerous undetected overflight of this task group, are highly commendable. It is my intention to recommend, by separate correspondence, that LT St. Pierre be decorated for his actions.

Very respectfully,
 Stevenson E. Krupski, CAPT, USN
 Commanding Officer

"Well, Lieutenant, what do you think of this?" asked Captain Krupski of the white-faced Mike St. Pierre, who decided his CO hadn't actually asked a question, so said nothing. He had been inside the CO's tiny at-sea cabin, high in the superstructure, just aft of the bridge, only once before to obtain a release signature on an intelligence assessment report he'd written for the Intelligence Officer. Tonight, far less relaxed than that first time when he's actually had a chance to exchange pleasantries with the "old man," he stood before the Captain's desk, ramrod straight at attention.

The senior officer went on; “You drafted the entire thing, except the last paragraph. You can thank CDR Ford for that, but I think it’ll do the job. I’m going to hand it to the Admiral myself this morning. It’ll probably never make it all the way to AIRLANT. If I were Admiral Bowen, I’d deep six this baby into a safe or a shred bag. He’s got a successful interception of the Bear to report and I don’t think he wants to see any discussion of that radiosonde in writing. The covert transit is blown, but that happens all the time. Nope, I think this report is never gonna see the light of day, but it’s a good report and I really do mean to put you up for a Navy Achievement Medal.”

“Yes, sir,” said Mike, haltingly. “Thank you, sir, but I don’t think an award is warranted. If I’d been wrong, I’d be in major trouble right now, wouldn’t I?”

“Well, yes you would, in fact. That is, if the OOD or the CIC Watch Officer or LCDR White hadn’t just kept it to themselves that some yahoo Lieutenant had conjured up a vision of that trawler and the Bear in a dream. You’ve got a solid reputation in the Ops Department, or so the OPSO tells me, but even that reputation wasn’t enough to have the watch officers wake me up and go to General Quarters based on your say so. The EW detection of the trawler’s signal that you astutely recommended was the key to the whole thing. I’m really impressed you thought it out and acted on it, but, Saint, I’m still not too clear on what *really* happened.”

Mike just realized he’d been called by his almost forgotten aviator call sign. He stood there, not sure if he’d been asked a question or not. So the Captain continued.

“I’m sitting here looking at a bright young intelligence officer with gold pilot’s wings on his uniform. I did some checking and found out you were a real up and comer in Corsairs, and your call sign was Saint. Good name for somebody who flies. You probably know I flew Corsairs, myself. Loved ’em. Still do. Wish I was still flying ’em. I wish I was flying *anything*! So I know you had a vision problem and had to bail out of flying and get into the intel business. Fucked over and

kicked out of flying by a flight surgeon. Shit, I hate flight surgeons! Show me an airdale who doesn't hate flight surgeons and I'll show you a goddamn NFO. I'll bet they offered to let you transition to NFO, to be a BN in A-6's. Am I right? Thought so," he said as Mike continued to stand there wondering where this was going, but nodding his head at the Captain's question.

"So...Saint..." he said looking at Mike with a new, quizzical expression, "you're not really sure that this sudden intuitive notion to run into EW and Combat and start yelling to 'launch the alert five, launch the alert five' was just a lucky hunch? You told Commander White, and later you told the OPS O you'd been up on the signal bridge zonked out under the stars. You said your roommate, Black Cloud, was snoring and you were sacked out on a spare mattress up there to bag some Z's. So what the hell really happened? You just dream this up?" This last question came out in almost a yell as he's been working himself up just thinking about this whole crazy scenario and wondering how he was going to explain it to the admiral. While Mike stood there still at attention, the Captain continued, now in a bit calmer voice.

"I want a straight answer, mister. You'd better tell me this was just an extremely intuitive hunch based on your assessing the EMCON screw up of the radiosonde and not some kind of vision thing. I sure hope it's the first one because if you tell me you really saw the Russkies out there in a dream, I'm not sure what I'm going to do. This piece of paper here aside, I'd really like to know."

"Sir, I think I'd like to stick with what's in this report I drafted. But, Captain..."

Mike stopped to carefully choose his next few words. He knew he should shut up and stick with his story that he had made a lucky guess tonight, but he also knew what he'd told Dale and his department head about his very real observation of the Russians in his dream-flight. He guessed he could deny he'd said it, but academy grads don't lie. He could pass it off as his having been half-asleep, but again, that would be

misleading and not very credible. So he took a deep breath and continued.

“Captain,” he said again, “twice in my life, the second time being tonight, I had the experience of being totally conscious and aware of my surroundings while I was asleep. The first time was when I was in high school and we had a total power blackout in New England, where I was living. Tonight, the second time, we were here transiting in total EMCON. I may very well have been hallucinating—and I’ve *never* taken LSD or any other drugs other than good old Navy-sanctioned booze. On both these occasions, that time and tonight, I woke up with a clear memory of what I’d seen during my sleep and on both occasions, what I’d seen was something I couldn’t have known if I hadn’t been there...been somewhere other than where my sleeping body was...at the time. I wouldn’t be surprised if you sent me to the ship’s doc to get a psych analysis of my head, and I know I’m risking a lot in sharing this with you, but if you put together what you know about what happened, plus what I said earlier tonight to Dale White and CDR Ford, you’d know I couldn’t sell you on the story that it was just a lucky hunch. Look, Captain, I lost the chance to fly because of my eyes. You can take away my chance to finish this tour and finish my career in the Navy by writing me up as somebody who went nuts on you and started talking about dream walking. I’m afraid that’s what you’re going to do...and I wouldn’t blame you, but, that’s my story, sir. I’m glad it worked out OK and we picked up the fuckers, excuse me, sir, the Russians, before they could overfly us. It’s your call, sir.

Mike again straightened himself to his best Naval Academy attention. “Request permission to hit the rack, sir? I’m really tired.”

Captain Krupski didn’t know what to say at first. In fact, he didn’t know what to say or do at all. He knew this young Lieutenant had just done an amazing thing in preventing an embarrassment that would have hurt U.S. defense posture and would have hurt his reputation, even the remote possibility of getting him relieved for cause by the Admiral because of the radiosonde EMCON violation and it’s result-

ant overflight by the Soviets. Lieutenant St. Pierre, an officer with a 4.0 plus record, an officer with what was routinely written into officer fitness reports as “unlimited potential,” and but for his eyesight would have been one of the Navy’s best bomber pilots, was standing here telling him to his face that he had had a vision in his dream which had proven one hundred percent correct. The Lieutenant had made an assessment, a scientifically intriguing assessment, that this phenomenon may have been caused...twice in his life...by some kind of effect tied to electromagnetic blackout conditions, but for his eyesight, this officer was a highly skilled bomber pilot. According to St. Pierre’s personnel record, which he had scanned just before this meeting, he could see this young man held the highest possible security clearances from the Navy and he’d served on special assignment to the CIA. Hell, he, himself, had never even been close to the CIA. So, for a moment, he didn’t know what to say to LT Michael J. St. Pierre. And then he did.

“Lieutenant, I have absolutely no clue how to respond to what you’ve just said. I’m exhausted. You’re exhausted. This was a pretty good night, even though our covert transit got busted. We had our Phantoms all over that bastard way, *way* over the horizon and we reported a previously unknown intelligence trawler’s location back to CINCLANTFLT. The Admiral’s sound asleep down in his cabin, probably relieved that we can relax our EMCON for the rest of the transit and so won’t run over any civilian fishing boats in the dark because our radar will be up, and he’s happy with the way things worked out. All he’s going to know about what happened tonight is what’s on this piece of paper. You’re going to get a medal out of it. I’m not going to get fired for that Bear arriving unannounced because of that god damned radiosonde. So it’s been a good night.

“I’m going to assume what you told me about ‘dream walking’ or ‘flying’ is just coming from you being as tired as I am. I’m going to give you the good old Navy congratulations on a job well done and say ‘Bravo Zulu,’ Mr. St. Pierre, Assistant Intelligence Officer. If Dale White or Jack Ford asks you any questions about your ‘hallucinations,’

I want you to say something like ‘I guess it was just a lucky hunch,’ or something like that. If that bothers you because you think it isn’t true, just shrug and say nothing at all. I don’t want you talking about dreams. Not to your boss, not to that slacker weather guesser whose guy started all this tonight, not to your buddy Father Willie, and most especially not to *any* of the ship’s doctors. Do I make myself clear, Lieutenant?”

“Perfectly, Captain.”

“Good. You can go. And...hold on just a minute.” He got up from behind his desk and extended his hand. “Good job, Saint. I really do think you’re OK and I know I would have enjoyed flying with you. In Corsairs, that is. You go get some sleep. In your bunk this time. And unauthorized mental liberty off the ship is strictly off limits.” He said this with a wry grin and shook the hand of a very shaky, and very tired, Mike St. Pierre.

It was now zero five hundred in the morning. The Captain rubbed his exhausted eyes and looked longingly at the rustled sheets and pillow on the bed behind him that in very short order would be made up and folded back into the couch which was the only other piece of furniture besides the small desk where he now at in this tiny sea cabin behind the bridge high in the JFK’s superstructure. He knew he wouldn’t be able to climb back into the comfort of those sheets until the end of another long day as mayor and CEO of the floating city and multi-hundred million dollar operation. He took the short report he had just discussed with his Assistant Intelligence Officer and signed it, placing it in his a gray metal tray which was marked with a green plastic label gun label as “exhaust,” and lay next to another similar tray, piled high with folders and papers, labeled “intake.” For a moment, he contemplated two courses of action: (1) calling his steward to bring a pot of coffee, the staple of chronically tired naval officers, or (2) taking the first folder from his “intake” box to start his normal work day, but he stopped.

He looked again at the mostly accurate memo he’d just signed. In his gut, he knew he should let the matter drop with its dispatch to his

next senior in command, the Carrier Group Commander, whose cabin lay six decks below him just under the flight deck and just forward of the island. But Krupski was absolutely fastidious about one thing: documentation of all noteworthy events in his professional life. He maintained a private file containing “memoranda for the record” which he considered to be semi-private, but part of his official recording of the execution of his duties as steward of so many lives and such an awesome arsenal of weaponry. So he picked up a blank piece of paper and inserted it into the manual typewriter he kept on the edge of his desk, and began typing:

18 August 1974

From: CAPT S. E. Krupski, USN

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Tonight, an unusual event occurred that I truly cannot explain. One of my ship's officers, LT Michael J. St. Pierre, Asst. Intel. Officer, has just stood before me telling me that....

And Captain Krupski began a detailed and completely accurate description of the events of the night, leaving nothing out. He took great care to describe and then speculate upon the possibility, described by Mike, of a real out-of-body experience of the young officer. As a man who had been trained by the Navy to deal strictly with facts, he felt certain one of the following were true: (a) the Lieutenant had made a truly startling and amazingly accurate intuitive assessment of the radiosonde's threat to their covert transit and then covered it out of some strange logic by a fabricated story of the dream experience; (b) the Lieutenant was suffering from real hallucinations and, purely coincidentally, had made a lucky or very skillful guess about the chance that Soviet units would pick up the weather sounder's radio transmission; (c) the Lieutenant could not possibly have known exactly where the trawler and airplane were unless he was really privy to highly classi-

fied material which nobody else on the ship was privy to; (d) the Lieutenant is a Soviet spy covering for himself to ingratiate himself to his superiors; or (e) what the Lieutenant had told him about an electromagnetic silence-generated blackout had enabled him to experience conscious over-the-horizon observations while his body, including his brain, were physically asleep.

The Captain turned over all of these possibilities he had typed onto the sheet, and a few more he hadn't, in his mind for a few minutes while he called for his coffee. Then he completed his memorandum to himself by reluctantly concluding that although option (e) was neither logical nor believable, yet he intuitively felt it was the truth. And he said so in writing. Although he made a mental note to keep an eye on Mike St. Pierre, he suspected he would henceforth observe the continued excellent performance of an outstanding young officer with no further unexplained behavior. He also assumed his memorandum to his own personal records would remain private, for his own eyes-only.

Only one of these assumptions turned out to be correct.

CHAPTER 22



*Holy Spirit Priory—An hour before dawn, Tuesday,
December 17, 1985*

“Brother Maurice, are you up?”

“Who’s that? Oh, Brother Michael, it’s you!” said the soft-spoken septuagenarian who had befriended Mike from his very first day at the monastery. “Good morning, son! You’re up early. Come on in.”

“Today, Brother Maurice, I guess you should just call me Mike. And I’m not up early...I haven’t been to bed. I’m leaving in about three hours and I’d like to talk with you. Did I wake you up?”

“No, Mike, you seem to be a night owl and we’ve noticed you like to sleep in, which is normal for our guests. Please sit down. In case you didn’t know, we folks who do this prayer stuff for a living turn in early, right after *Compline*, our evening prayers, and we get up at three for morning prayers and the start of our work day.”

Mike did know. He’d observed the brothers’ lifestyle of gardening and bread-making to pay the bills, and the hours spent in prayer for their real sustenance.

“Except for your afternoon naps,” Mike joked.

“Don’t tell Brother Abbott!” the monk said with a laugh, continuing, “so no, you didn’t wake me up. But let me ask again, Michael,

how may I help you? And you can call me Moe. That's what my fellow brothers call me."

Mike was physically exhausted, but emotionally he was on fire. He had, after the tense visit by the Army officer, taken an hour-long walk in the freezing darkness of the compound, and then spent a half hour in the chapel, lit only by the flicker of candles. He then, in a sense of calm, returned to his computer and wrote all night. He had poured out his mind and soul into the journal in which he was able to finally describe what had happened to him in, deep in sleep and on the very edge of outer space on the shuttle flight. In the chapel, he had just sat in peace, not in prayer, but drinking deeply of the peace the place and the night gave him. He knew Maria and her children were close by, asleep in the small room off the chapel. He thought about her and he shuddered at the thought of the INS invading this sacred place to take her into custody for deportation. And then he had returned to his reflection on why he was here in the first place, and peace truly came to him in the night.

He had seen in his mind while sitting in the chapel, and he had written about it in his electronic journal, as clearly as he could, what had happened on *Discovery*, though he still couldn't explain why. When he was finished, he saved his text file onto a five and a quarter-inch floppy disk and went out into the pre-dawn darkness to find a person he could truly trust. That had brought him to Brother Maurice.

"Brother Maurice...Moe...I need a favor, a very big and important favor.

"Of course, Mike, just ask."

"At nine this morning, I'm being picked up by the Army officer who was here with two military police guys last night. I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to say why. In fact, I'm not at all sure I know why myself, but I do know I have to leave."

"Mike, the Abbott held a meeting with all of us just this morning before prayers a couple of hours ago. We know about the threat the officer made to arrest and deport Maria and her kids. The Abbott said

he had invoked hell fire and brimstone in warning Major Watson, I think that was his name, not to think about doing such a hateful thing, but Brother Abbott said the officer just listened passively and then said that if our famous astronaut visitor failed to leave with him, he wouldn't think twice about violating the sanctity of her refuge. So I see it's your own refuge, which has been violated instead, Mike. Why?

"Moe, the answer to that question is on this computer disk. It's a journal I've been writing on a computer in my cabin. I've been trying to come to grips with some things that have happened to me on a few occasions in my life, the most recent being on my space shuttle flight. I can't really describe them to you right now—it's taken me two days to type it all onto this disk—but I really do need a favor, and because I've got a little time before I go, I'd also like to ask you a few questions."

"The favor I've already agreed to, Mike. And I'll do my best on your questions. Shoot."

"OK, here goes. Look, I've been a Catholic all my life. I was lucky enough to have gone to Catholic schools: eight years of the Sisters of Notre Dame and four years of Xaverian Brothers. Sorry, I didn't mean to make that sound like prison sentences. I'm pretty regular about going to Mass—at least on Sundays anyway, but, Moe, I'm not what you'd call a student of religion or theology. I've never taken a philosophy course in my life, except 'The Philosophy of War' at the Naval Academy—and that sure doesn't count. So I'm completely ignorant of the main philosophical and theological questions that you and the brothers have studied in the seminary and read about. So my questions are going to sound a little crazy, but here goes."

"Mike, nothing you're going to say will be crazy. In theological matters, it's a matter of faith, not proven truth. And philosophy is really just the posing of questions. Any answers the great thinkers down through history have put down are just their beliefs, and then the arguments in favor of those beliefs. So I doubt you'll sound crazy to me. After all, look at me, I'm seventy-three years old. I've never been married. I wear sandals in the middle of winter and, like I said, I get up at

three in the morning. My parents and my two older sisters, God rest all their souls, wrote me off as a nut case a long time ago when I chose the monastic life instead of becoming a parish priest. Anyway, I'm off the subject. Go ahead. I guarantee I won't think you're nuts, Mike."

"Well, like I said, Moe, I can't, or really don't think I can, go into the details of why I came up here after coming back from my mission. I told your Abbott, Brother Boniface, that I had had an emotional experience and needed time and reflection away from the rest of the world. I said I'd come here with my parents for Mass from time to time when I was a little kid and I remembered this as a beautiful and peaceful place. He didn't ask any questions, just took me in. So I haven't told anybody here what happened—well, except Maria."

"Ah, Maria," Brother Maurice broke in. "You've 'just met a girl named Maria!' Isn't that how the song goes? Don't think we monks, sort of deprived as we seem to have made ourselves, haven't noticed both you and she have seemed to brighten up by several shades of gloom since you've been spending time together. If you want to talk about her, go ahead. We all think the world of her and her children...just as we all think the world of you, Michael."

"No, Brother Moe...well, yes...I would like to talk about Maria, but let's leave that for a minute. As I was starting to say, I did have an 'emotional experience.' But I think it goes much deeper than emotional. Mike fumbled through a description of his three out-of-body experiences, attempting to negotiate the simultaneously impossible and miraculous aspects of his flights.

"I know," he continued, "I need to understand a few things about myself, about myself as a human being, and I need to understand a few things about God. Now, I guess I'm ready to ask the questions."

If Maurice was startled, he didn't show it. He simply smiled and waited. Mike went on.

"If I'm made up of a body and a soul, is it possible the soul can experience or witness an event that's happening somewhere else? How is this possible, if it's my brain that remembers the event afterwards

and can describe what happened...somewhere else...in great detail? When my eyes see something or my ears hear something, or when I taste or touch or smell something, I know the neurons in my body transmit the information to my brain and I can recall it, talk about it, draw pictures of it. You know what I mean? But if my eyes aren't there and neither are my ears, my nose, my tongue, or my fingers, how can I 'see' something and describe it just as though I'd sensed it with my body's senses? And how is it that God communicates to me, since He's not doing it through my body's senses either? Is it possible, Moe, that we have some *other* kind of sense, call it a soul, call it a spirit. Call it whatever you want—a sense that gives us the ability to transcend our flesh and bones and brain and neurons and take us somewhere else, or *be* somewhere else at the same time our body is back here on Earth? And, Moe, here's the big one...is it possible God *is* this same kind of soul—spirit—being...who can do all this stuff and just not have a physical body? Or is the individuality of our existence an illusion that's just caused by our having a physical body? Is our soul actually *part* of God's spirit and we have the perception of being an individual only because we were born into a human existence? Are all the spirits who have ever lived in bodies walking this planet just one big force, like Obiwan Kanobi told Luke about in *Star Wars*? Brother Maurice...I know *what* happened to me up in the space shuttle. I just don't know *why*!"

"Mike, let me get you a cup of coffee. How much time did you say you have?"

"A couple of hours."

"OK," Brother Maurice said with a gentle smile as he got up to heat up the water for coffee. "There's not a chance I can answer all that for you. First of all, this is something we monks are up here in the woods praying about for year after year after year, so that we might understand and grow in and become part of the nature of God. You might not believe this, but in addition to my own questions like these, a lot, and I mean *a lot* of folks who come here for retreat ask me questions

like this. Now, I don't know what's on this, what did you call it, a 'disk?' I don't know what's in your journal or what happened to you up there in space, but you've asked some of the most fundamental questions of ancient...and modern...philosophy and theology. So, while I get the coffee going, do you want the long answer or the short answer?"

"I guess the short answer, Moe. I'm sort of running out of time."

"Well, the good news, Mike, is that both the long answer and the short answer are more or less the same. I don't really know."

"Thanks...I guess."

"I apologize for being flip with you, but let me give you a little bit to think about. And to pray about."

"If you had some time and a lot of patience, I'd have you go back and start with Plato and Aristotle and then move on to Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila. These great and holy people spent a lot of time contemplating the nature of the soul and we're so much richer for their work."

Brother Maurice got up and spooned two teaspoons of instant coffee into two mugs and then poured in the now steaming water from his electric hot pot. He handed one to Mike, asking if he wanted sugar or creamer, which Mike declined. "Good thing," he said. "I don't have 'em anyway...and I'm not supposed to have the coffee pot in my cabin either," he said with a wink.

Mike shook his head, saying "Navy guys like it black." The monk settled back into his chair and went on.

"Plato, who lived about four hundred years before Jesus came, was the first of the philosophers to lay down a foundation of thought which later had a tremendous impact on Christian theology. He described a person as having an immortal soul imprisoned in a physical, mortal body. He said the soul itself has three natures, the lowest being the shared 'consuming' part of our nature, all living things having such a nature, analogous to the lowest class in society. The highest nature of the spirit, 'reason,' was, he said, a characteristic of the soul correspond-

ing to the ruling class in society. In between is the ‘spirit,’ spirit described in the sense a horse has a spirit and a rock doesn’t. Plato then said concepts, unlike things, are eternal. And so, because humans can have knowledge of these concepts without being taught them, they must have come to this knowledge before birth. In this way, he reasoned the rational part of the soul exists before the birth of the mortal body, dwells with the body through life, and then returns to its preexistent state when we die. So there’s a dualism to human nature; body and soul, co-existing. Much of what we believe about the human soul comes from this foundation of philosophical argument from Plato. Are you with me, Mike?”

“Sort of, but they never taught me about Plato at the Naval Academy. The last time I think I heard about him or about philosophy was from the brothers back in high school.” And both he and Brother Maurice smiled. The monk continued.

“And then Aristotle, who was younger and a student of Plato, took this thought further and in a little different direction. He said the soul wasn’t a separate entity but more of an aspect of the person, which gives us powers unique to humans. Other living things have souls, providing nutrition and sensing powers which allow them to grow, move, perceive in a very primitive way, and reproduce, but human souls have all these basic powers and also the unique power of reason which transcends bodily functions. Another key difference in approach between Plato and his student is that Aristotle said the soul’s a fundamental function of the human body, and then it follows that the soul would die with the death of the body. He did speculate, though, that one aspect of a person’s rationality would survive death, but even were that to be the case, this wouldn’t amount to personal immortality as an individual because this aspect is a shared characteristic of the soul among all humans.”

Mike was fascinated, and Brother Maurice could see the wheels turning in the young man’s mind. He got up and poured another cup of coffee for him.

“But I’m not up here living the monastic life because of the ancient Greeks. There’s a body of teachings in the Christian era which mean so much more to me and which might help you to understand too.”

“Good, because you lost me on Aristotle,” Mike said. The old man continued.

“OK, here comes the good stuff. In early Christianity, there were philosophers like Tertullian who built their thinking on Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. The Stoics more or less followed Aristotle in believing that the soul is corporeal and generated with the human body. Origin, a Stoic who lived about in about 200 AD, followed Plato in teaching the immortality, pre-existence and post-mortem of the soul, but it was Saint Augustine who has had the greatest impact on our modern Christian theology. He’s sort of my personal hero, Mike. He wrote that each human is essentially an immortal, but not eternal soul living in, but not imprisoned in, the physical body, and the soul comes into existence with the birth of the person. This sounds like what you were taught in parochial school, right? OK. And then he said, like Plato had thought, that the soul lives on after death. Also, like Plato, Augustine wrote of the three levels of a soul’s nature, but in his concept the highest attribute of the soul is the will and the will is superior to the intellect. And, Mike, here’s the key. Augustine taught that by cultivating this highest faculty of the soul, most often by overcoming the unhealthy urges of the body—lust, gluttony, that kind of thing—one develops and grows from within his capacity to know and to relate to God.

“And then almost a thousand years later, St. Thomas Aquinas took the teachings of Augustine and the foundation of the Greek philosophers and created an even more clear and convincing description of the nature of the human soul. He said the will is the highest faculty of the soul and the primary objective of our will is to find good. And since God is the perfectly highest form of goodness, our soul longs for God. The question is...do we exercise our will to move in that direction? Or do we, in our human weakness, let the base urges of our bodies divert

our will to those urges...sin...and draw us away from God? And, so you see, Mike, the basis for much of what the Church teaches today, don't you? Thomas was a giant!"

"I wish I had time to read the philosophers, Moe, but somehow I suspect I could wade through their writings or textbooks trying to explain them and I wouldn't get the kind of stuff you've just explained to me. I still wish I had the time, though. What I've experienced should be bounced against these minds and maybe it would make more sense to me, but by talking about this with you and the other night talking to Maria about it, I've come a long way." Mike noticed his coffee had become only luke-warm, but he drank it anyway. It's bitter taste, and especially the caffeine were just what he needed for the day ahead after a sleepless night, and he was grateful for it...and grateful for the wisdom of this wonderful old man.

"You don't have time, Mike. I do, but you don't. You'd read a lot about the nature of the spirit. You'd read about the duality of the human existence...body and soul. You'd learn you have to quiet your human mind through meditation and prayer to allow the soul to experience the existence...the presence of God. You'd hear theories about what happens when we're born and when we die. You'd hear how the belief in God allows you to transcend your human frailties and live a life of miracles. And I believe this with all of my heart so I've never much worried about what my parents, or my sisters, or the world thinks about my being a monk up here in the back woods of Vermont. I could be anywhere, just so long as I could find the peace to quiet the demands of the world and the demands of my frail human body on my existence, which exists purely to share in the presence of God here on Earth...and afterwards.

"You don't have time for the *really* long answer, Mike, but does this help? I do think I understand your questions because I've asked them of myself a million times, but do you see how it's only by quieting the screaming distractions of the world and the clutter of the mind's calls for your attention to mundane and useless things that will allow you to

hear God? Mediation and contemplative prayer are the only things that work. It's good to study the teachings of the philosophers, but it's better to listen to your own soul and God's very real presence in it."

"Moe, when I get the chance, I'd like to get a reading list from you. I have a sense that these people you've read have really had experiences of the presence of God in their lives, but none of them have had the experience I've had. For about fifteen minutes of time up there in the space shuttle, I knew I was in the presence of something so beautiful and powerful that I felt totally insignificant. And at the same time, I felt as though I was witness to a universe of matter and energy and power that made me feel that, just because I was able to sense its immensity and its energy, that I was uniquely...the only word I can come up with is...blessed...*blessed* to be able to be aware of it."

Maurice could see that Mike had tears coming down his cheeks, and he was shaking. "Mike, it's OK," he said, "I'm overcome all the time by the presence of God. I understand."

"But you can't, and I wish it was you and not me," Mike said as he looked with tear-laden but light-filled eyes. "I'm too weak, too selfish. I'm only human."

"But you weren't alone then, and you are never alone, and you never will be. Now what's your favor?"

"Thanks for listening, Moe. I'll keep working on it, I guess. OK, here's the problem: I'm leaving this morning and I'm worried about Maria. I'm also worried about the journal I've been writing falling into the wrong hands. So I've actually got a couple of favors to ask. First of all, we've got to figure out how to protect her and her kids should the government send in the goon squad to arrest her. On this, I have to ask the help of you and the brothers. I don't want to get anybody into trouble, but we've got to do something fast."

"We'll go see Brother Boniface, Mike. I'm sure we can work something out. Maria will be safe. We've actually given her protection a lot of thought ever since she and the kids came here, but from what I've

heard about this Major Watson, I think we need some kind of a plan. We'll think of something. Don't worry."

"Then there's the other thing. Can you please hold this computer disk for me? I'm leaving the computer that I brought with me in my cabin. I'll have to figure out how I can get it back to the rental company in Boston, but I don't want to leave this disk with just anybody. Will you protect it for me?

"Michael, God protects you, Maria, her kids, and all of us in this monastery. We'll trust this disk to His keeping—and put it with my socks. Trust in God, but remember that nobody wants to rummage through an old monk's socks. Let's go see the Abbott."

And so Mike and Brother Maurice went out into the light of dawn. Mike knew he was on the right track of understanding. He also knew he could leave Maria in the keeping of these wonderful men. And, he realized, when you truly come to know God, you can finally begin to trust God.

CHAPTER 23



Mike's letter

Dear Maria,

I'm really sorry to be saying this in a letter rather than in person. I've left this morning to return to Washington because my government has required this of me. I don't know what this is all about. I'm not in trouble or anything like that, but I'm worried about what might happen—and about what might happen to you.

Brother Maurice will explain why I'm worried about you, Maria. Before I left, we met with the abbot and we've made plans for your security. I'm confident that we've planned for what to do if the police come for you. The brothers will protect you and your children. You'll be safe. Moe will explain.

I know that God has a plan for you, and for us. I'll think of you when I look up to the stars in the sky. None of them are as brilliant as your eyes when you smile. When I look at the ocean, I'll realize that it can't match your strength or tranquility. And when I look down at the Earth, I'll think that in all of its greatness there's only one person who might understand me.

I have to come back to you and your children, Maria.

Please pray for me.

Mike

(Michael the Archangel...remember?)

P.S. I love you.

Maria was both smiling and crying as she read Mike's letter. Brother Maurice had delivered it to her after the nine o'clock daily Mass ended. He said he didn't know what was in it, but that he had a good idea, and he'd be available to talk to her at any time after she'd read it. While Juan and Espérance were drawing with crayons in their little bedroom, she had read it in the closest pew to her door in the chapel. She looked up at the crucifix above the altar and prayed, "Oh, dear Jesus, thank you for Michael and please send your Holy Mother to protect him." Then she put down the letter and cried quietly in the peace of the chapel.

She thought about Michael. His kiss was still fresh enough in her memory that just the thought of it stirred feelings, both emotional and physical, that she thought would never, ever, come again to her. She had loved her husband, Estéban. They had been best friends and lovers in the university and they had been full of hope and joy as they made their new home in the countryside and filled the home with these two precious children. He was gone, and even though she often felt his spirit with her, especially in her times of terror and suffering, she couldn't help but thinking of his brutal torture and death. Oh, Estéban, she said to herself, how much I miss you.

And now Michael. He left her too, but she re-read his words about his feelings toward her. She knew she would surely see him again. Oh, Michael. "Jesus, please bring him back to me," she said aloud, lowering her head.

She looked again at Jesus on the cross and thought about what Michael had said about him. She noticed Brother Maurice had slid

onto the bench next to her. With tears in her eyes, she reached out and hugged him. He smiled and asked her if she wanted to talk about it. She knew she had to.

“Brother Maurice,” she said, “Michael is gone, but you know that already.”

“Yes, Maria, I do. He spoke to me before he left and I watched him write that note to you. I helped to make arrangements to protect you, but I don’t think they’ll be necessary. Our brother Michael also spoke to me with quite a lot of passion about two things. First, he cares deeply for you and your children, but he cares for you in a special way, Maria. And he also talked to me about his faith. I felt humbled by his questions, and they moved me. I came back into church this morning to pray for him.”

“Michael talked to me late into the night two days ago, Brother. He told me about his faith and his dream, but it wasn’t a dream, was it, Brother?”

“No, Maria, I don’t think it was a dream. I think it was a vision and Michael is a very special person for receiving it. He is still working on his own understanding of what he’s experienced. He asked me some very deep philosophical questions this morning and it was like his eyes were on fire. I had no idea where his questions were coming from and I gave him a summary of what some of the early philosophers had written. He just sat there nodding his head and listening. I guess he’s shared some of these things with you, but he’s still trying to figure them out. That’s why he came to me. Maria, I think you gave him so much more than I ever could have. He’s had some kind of wonderful experience, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, I think so, Brother Maurice.”

“Well, he’s on his way to a less than wonderful experience right now back in Washington, but somehow I guess he’s not going to be too worried by it. He goes with God.”

“Yes, he does,” she sighed.

“And, Maria, he’s going with you beside him, in spirit.”

“Yes, and he’s here with me in spirit too.”

“Praise God,” Brother Maurice said, as he rose to leave.

“Amen,” she replied.

After he had gone, she knelt down and prayed, her face lit in the brilliant kaleidoscope hues of the December morning light shining through the stained glass window above the altar.

C H A P T E R 24

Space Shuttle Discovery—Wednesday, November 13, 1985

Mike looked back at his sleeping body and then around the mid-deck of the orbiter. He could see all the electrical systems of *Discovery* were shut down and he realized that not only he, but also each of his ship-mates were asleep and safe as the ship sailed silently through the darkness. What happened, he wondered? Never, in any simulator runs back in Houston and never in any of the dozens of previous flights of the space shuttle had there been a complete power failure with all systems shut down. He was a professional astronaut and he'd been trained never to panic. In fact, he thought about the situation and asked himself if he shouldn't wake up his unconscious body and reunite his conscious presence with it so he could alert the crew and start to deal with the situation. He didn't.

He could sense there was no immediate danger. And, in a brief instant, he realized he was out again. Like the power blackout, like the night in the middle of the Atlantic on the JFK, he was out. What is it, he asked himself, about electricity and its absence that seemed to have an effect on his out-of-body experiences? Does the physical body, known to have a faint but measurable electromagnetic field surround-

ing it, interact with the surrounding fields generated by electrical currents or by radio waves which are everywhere on Earth due to TV and radio stations? Do these electromagnetic fields hold him back when they are present? Does the death of the body, and the end of a lifelong personal bond on the spirit, loosen its grasp on the spirit so that it can be free to go “out” to heaven?

This line of analytical thoughts flashed through Mike in an instant as he continued to look at himself and the crew. He had just about decided to wake up his body and rouse everyone to deal with the power failure—the decision his astronaut training and his common sense told him to make—but he hesitated. He realized there was no imminent danger. He just somehow knew it. And he didn’t feel alone.

Mike’s conscious awareness was not the same as it had been on his previous flights. Then he had felt an aura with a familiar sensation of force, light, or warmth. But in the absence of electricity, and of physical sensation, the aura must have been a life force felt by his spiritual awareness. It had been all around him, but he couldn’t perceive that it was generated by other people until he moved his perceptive presence near to them, or through them, as he had that first night with Meghan. Now, though, he had knowledge of the presence of others who, again, he couldn’t parse into individual entities, but it was much stronger than he had experienced before. Much stronger. He felt he was among an infinity of...others...all at the same time.

Like his experience on the JFK, he realized his ability to move his perceptive presence was limited by metal barriers. Now, he was surrounded by the aluminum and steel cocoon of the space shuttle, but not completely surrounded because there was a five-inch diameter optical quality quartz window on the mid-deck main access hatch. Had it not been for this tiny window, his ability to “leave” the orbiter might have been cut off. Through that “window to the universe,” he was out in an instant. And this time, it seemed to be different. Once his perception’s “center” was outside of the space shuttle, he wondered if he

should go down onto the planet below him, but to do what? Go to Meghan in yet another dream flight? No, he felt no urge to go down.

Mike watched *Discovery* against the Earth below. He realized the Earth had that same glow of the countless billions of life sources below him, which he had seen when he'd been above the North Shore in 1965 and, again, it was possible to discern where the strongest sources were: where the dense populations of people were. Although it was the night side of the planet, his spiritual "eyes" needed no light to see the difference between land and sea. Below him, ahead, he could see the northwest coast of Australia and behind; he could see the "glow" of the vibrant life force that was India. He had, on two other occasions suited up for space walks in the Shuttle cargo bay and he'd been able to look down through his space suit's visor at the world beneath him and had marveled at the beauty of Earth, the blue planet. Now, he marveled at the beauty of his home planet in a new light, the light of souls.

He realized, as he had the night he had flown above the JFK, that time moved on while he moved and observed, but his perception's movement took no time at all to get from one place to another. It merely took his decision where to go—and he was there. He was back now, inside the orbiter, sensing the peaceful and healthy sleep of his body and that of his crewmates, and decided once not to wake up to deal with the power failure. He was torn, though, because he was trained to deal immediately with technical problems. But somehow, he still had the feeling, as if being told by a voice of someone else that all was at peace here, and safe.

Mike was outside again, now looking at the *Discovery* against the darkness of space, but, his mind told him his eyes would be seeing the light from stars and the sun's light reflected from the planets and the moon in this solar system. He knew his eyes would see this light as it arrived after traveling at 186 thousand miles per second for several seconds (from the moon), for minutes (from the inner planets and Mars), for hours (the outer planets), and for years to billions of years (the Milky Way and the universe beyond). Now he could see that same

glow of the presence of other spiritual forces than his own. And he could see bright sources out there in the faintly glowing sky. He wanted to know if they were stars, because they “looked” like stars to his mind’s eye. His practical curiosity took over and, in an instant, he was “standing” on the moon. Not knowing exactly where to look, but simply by thinking about it, he found himself on the Sea of Tranquility floating and standing next to the descent vehicle’s base of the *Eagle*. “Houston, Tranquility Base...the *Eagle* has landed.” The words of Neil Armstrong ran through his mind as he viewed the American Flag painted on the base of the vehicle.

He was disappointed, though, not to find the flag planted by the Apollo 11 crew. Its pole wasn’t standing up, but was laying on the moon’s surface, having been blown over by the *Eagle*’s ascent rocket as Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin returned to rendezvous with Mike Collins and the Command Module. The flag itself was nowhere to be seen, except for the traces of discoloration in the Moon’s dust where it had landed and then disintegrated. Mike realized what had happened: the nylon flag had been bombarded by ultraviolet radiation from the sun for the past sixteen years and had simply turned to dust. Instinctively, he remembered the instruction he’d received as a Boy Scout never to let the American Flag touch the ground. A good rule, he thought, although it wouldn’t have saved this flag, purchased at a Houston hardware store, from having its fabric broken down to mere molecules and scattered among the dust. He wondered how many people back on Earth still thought the flag the astronauts had planted back in July, 1969 was still there “waving” in the vacuum of the Moon’s surface, ready to be saluted by the next returning astronaut...presuming he or she was American. Now Mike, an American astronaut, had finally come back and he realized he had no hand to salute with anyway.

Moved by being here among the artifacts left from the historic landing in the summer of 1969, that he lingered there for several minutes.

Time, he knew, was passing and he returned instantly to the *Discovery*. Nothing had changed and he sensed it was still OK to be “out and

about.” Again, in an instant, he was back on the Moon at the Eagle’s landing site. He now “looked” outward.

He then made visits to each of the planets in the solar system too, disciplining himself to spend no more than a minute at each. He went to each instantly and allowed himself the luxury of sensing the feel of being in orbit around each, much as a spaceship would have to be in order to view them. Then he put himself on each body’s surface. Jupiter and Saturn were the exceptions because he sensed radiation fields which he thought might limit his ability to approach them—due perhaps to the same limiting electromagnetic factor which connected his soul to his human body, still asleep inside *Discovery*, orbiting Earth. Then he realized that the electromagnetic energy, which limited his spiritual movement, only mattered where his body was...not where his presence was. So, he “flew” down into the clouds of Saturn weaving through its rings as he approached and then to the surface. He was mesmerized by the sheer size and beauty of this gas giant. Then, before moving on, he made a low pass over the surface of Titan, knowing that scientists had said it was likely to be one of the best worlds in the Solar System for Earth to colonize because of the abundance of hydrogen gas which could be mined and shipped back to Earth, or to fuel rocket ships to the outer planets beyond. And so he, himself moved onward. An instant later, he was looking at the great red spot on Jupiter. The giant gas planet was physically closer to the Sun than Saturn, but at this moment it was on almost exactly the opposite side of the side of the solar system. How had he been able to “find” Jupiter so quickly and be here, he wondered? But here he was. Mike then took a few extra seconds to place himself on Jupiter’s tiny moon Io, and marveled at the explosions of geysers of molten rock and gas spewing from its countless volcanoes. Then he stood on the frozen surface of Europa. Could he dive beneath the surface? Yes...he could...and he realized the planetary scientists were right...there *is* water here. And life. LIFE! He could sense that aural presence of spirit, but not from distinguishable individual sources. Microscopic life forms? Probably, he thought. And his

lips, on his sleeping body back in the orbiter, smiled. Life in our solar system. He was stunned, but he wanted to see more; to know more. He made another instantaneous return to check the safety of the shuttle and his friends, and then he moved on—far onward and outward.

Out beyond, though, were still the sources of “light” that intrigued him. Again, he knew instinctively it wasn’t the radiation of light, or X-rays, or any other cosmic rays, which he now sensed. He picked one and he was there. And then another, and another, and another.

Life, he now knew, was everywhere in the universe; on planets around distant suns he couldn’t name, he found life and their spirits. The lives he found took shapes, none like his own. They communicated their presence to him in ways he could not begin to understand, other than to know they were intelligent and sharing in his spirit. Was he communicating with them? He hadn’t been able to communicate with the people he saw in his earthly spiritual flights because there had been no sense of sound or language. But yes, he felt, he was communicating with these universal life forms, but he understood nothing, and yet everything. There was no common reference or language (as if that mattered in this spiritual journey). And yet it was the “oneness” with the life forms he sensed in aural “light” from what he perceived to be microscopic life forms and in “visualization” of the physical structure of creatures, some similar in physical size to himself and some he guessed were so large as to make Earth’s elephants and blue whales look like ants look to humans. He decided that he had no way to know how large or small any creature he “saw” was because his own body and things of our planet we use for size comparison were not here with him. His spirit was there with them, able to sense the physical presence of them just as he had been able to sense, rather than see, the physical presence of the lunar lander, the moon, the planets and the stars. Life, he realized was sized to the worlds it lived on, and our own physical dimensions and mass had no relevance to life’s physical dimensions and mass anywhere else in the universe. It made sense, he realized, but did it make sense that he was even there among these distant worlds, so

many of which were alive at that instant because he knew he was visiting them right at that instant and not at the end of years or millennia of light speed travel from Earth? He went from one source of this living energy to another outward further and further, with each jump taking no time, but allowing himself to spend brief precious seconds of time at each. Only his will to “see more” and his self-discipline kept him moving outward, although he wished he could stay at each glorious and miraculous place where he found life.

He soon realized, even in the voids between these distant entities the energy of spirit was present. Everywhere, he found spirit. And, knowing his time was limited—doing checks on *Discovery* about every three minutes on his crew’s health—his perception moved further outward. He moved through a vast sea of galaxies, stars, clouds of dust, planets, comets, and dust. If he tried hard enough to perceive them, he knew the sea he traveled was far from empty. It was a continuum of clusters of stars, most with planetary systems around them and in between it was a sea of smaller bodies: rocks and comets, dust, gaseous molecules, light particles, cosmic rays (also particles) and other waves of electromagnetic energy. As he sensed these forms of energy, fundamentally different from the life forms of spiritual energy, he could only barely perceive the differences along the continuum of what he realized must be wavelengths and directions of travel. Radiation at infrared, optical, ultraviolet, gamma, and x-ray wavelengths were virtually omnidirectional but inhomogeneous, meaning he found the universe full of energy of all sorts, all traveling at light speed, crisscrossing through the “stuff” of solid mass, and gasses that were also fellow travelers through the cosmic expanses of space.

He peeked inside the core of a galaxy and was able to examine its very centers where he found what he sensed was a black hole. He flew into the very center and could sense absolutely nothing coming out. Not even photons of light could not escape the powerful grip of its immense gravity which was, he saw, pulling stars and every other form of matter or energy in its vicinity into its blackness. And yet here too,

in the heart of one of the most dense and powerful places in the universe, he still felt the warming glow of a spiritual presence. He was able to leave the black hole at will.

He reached his perception out further to the most distant physical piece of matter he could find—dust and molecules beyond which there were absolutely no more dust or molecules, and then, on the highest vantagepoint possible above his home planet, he “looked” out. Beyond, he knew there was still energy—light at varying wavelengths and cosmic rays—radiating outward beyond the farthest reaches of physical matter. This was energy radiated by the galaxies of the physical universe over the billions of years of their existence. These beams were traveling outward into the void beyond the furthest reaches of physical matter, obviously moving away at a higher velocity than the expansion of matter. Mike sensed the universe beyond was indeed a void because he took his presence out, and out, and out. He took his presence beyond the reach of every shred of radiated energy: visible light, x-rays, *anything*. He “looked back” from the place where he first sensed the complete lack of any physical matter or any electromagnetic energy of any kind. Here, he realized, he was truly “outside” of the physical universe we call home. He moved from one side of it, instantly, to its other side. He went far, far beyond this boundary and looked back again. The universe was, he saw without it being a surprise, a perfect sphere, and the sphere, he realized, was the perfect shape. It was the shape God had designed for the perfect arrangement of everything. And out there, far outside of the physical universe, Mike knew he wasn’t alone. This was, he realized, as close as he had ever come to a true realization of the presence of God.

His center of perception remained momentarily suspended in empty space, an infinite immensity completely devoid of physical matter or energy. But he had found new life, and in doing so he had found life on Earth wasn’t unique. He was overwhelmed, totally immersed in spiritual awareness and awe. Having now forgotten who he was or where he came from, he could have stayed forever.

And then it was over.

“Houston, *Discovery*, I hear you. What the hell time is it and why are all the lights out?” It was the voice of Chuck Chandler, the mission commander.

“All hands, all hands, wake up! Wake up! Power’s out. Let’s get hot. Crew status? Sing out everybody by the numbers...Pilot, you first.”

The flight of Mike’s body inside the awakening *Discovery* went on into the night. Wide-awake now, physically awake, the flight of his spirit had been pulled back into his body’s needs. He had work to do. He wondered again if he should have awakened the crew fifteen minutes ago when he realized he was “out.” He instinctively knew that they’d been safe, but he began to wonder if he’d put their lives at risk. The time to think about that and about what happened would have to wait. He answered the call to report his status to Sue Ellen in Mission Control and, as he made his report that he was OK, blurted out something about “a mind-blowing experience.” Where had that come from? he wondered. Mike’s life would never be the same again. He knew that whatever awaited him during the rest of this space shuttle mission and then down on Earth when they landed would be something he could deal with. He grabbed the correct checklist for emergency actions for Mission Specialist One and started down it, but he was smiling. He wasn’t alone any more. He was a member of a crew, all his close friends, and he was a part of something else. This was something that he wondered if he could ever describe to anyone.

C H A P T E R 25



The Pentagon—Tuesday Afternoon, December 17, 1985

“Good afternoon, Commander St. Pierre,” said Howard Willoughby from behind his huge mahogany desk, getting up and reaching out to shake hands as Major Watson escorted Mike into the room.

“Good afternoon, sir,” Mike replied, trying to take stock of this man who had dispatched Watson to bring him back to Washington. He’d learned that sometimes the best defense is an offense. It wasn’t really his nature to be rude, but he decided to use the moral high ground of having been brought here against his will, and then see how this Willoughby would react.

“But before we start, I’ve got to tell you that I’m not real happy about having this officer here come and more or less arrest me and threaten my friends up in Vermont. Last night, I was enjoying the peace and quiet of my vacation on leave from NASA and now I’m standing here in the Pentagon. I’m sure it’s important, but I don’t understand.”

“Commander, I do appreciate your coming. I know you have every reason to be a little angry at this intrusion into your...vacation.”

“That’s true. I am angry,” Mike said, with far less control than he wanted to convey. He’d gone without sleep the night before, except for

the fitful nap he'd had in Watson's car on the way back to Boston and another on the very short flight from Logan Airport to Washington National. He felt physically lousy. He knew he should shut up and just listen, but he took one more shot.

"Dr. Willoughby, I know you're a senior civilian official on the staff of the Secretary of Defense, and, by definition, I respect your office and your authority. But I don't respect the way Major Watson here came up to strong arm me into coming and prevented me from contacting my chain of command first." He glared at Watson, who had taken up a "parade rest" position next to the door, an impassive look on his face.

"But, Commander, I did consult with your chain of command. In fact, on Sunday morning, I had Vice Admiral Haley standing—well he was sitting as I invite you to do, where are my manners? He was right here in this office. We were discussing you and our requirement for your services back here in the Department of Defense. In fact, I made it clear that I would require your presence. I just presumed he had informed you of that fact."

"So why didn't you just ask the Admiral to have me come back to see you?"

"To be honest, Commander...may I call you Mike? To be honest, Mike, I did just that. I said that your presence was required for an important program."

"And what did he tell you?" Mike was beginning to calm down a little.

"Well, unfortunately, he more or less told me to go to hell. It was clear he was unwilling to cooperate. Admiral Haley is still on active duty, but it's a special category of active duty service for flag and general officers retained beyond their normal retirement date for special duty, like ex-astronauts in executive NASA jobs. So we couldn't very well give him an order, you know, as the Department could to an officer on true active duty and bound to obey—like you are," he said, pointing at Mike.

Mike realized this civilian had no idea about the sanctity of the military's chain of command concept and the legality of orders given and received. Willoughby, like so many senior executives in the Pentagon, probably felt as though he had some aura of authority that came from his title and his reserved parking space right outside of the main entrance to the five-sided building. He decided he should help Willoughby get to the point. Then he could get to *his* point, which was how he came to be here.

"Dr. Willoughby, let's cut the bullshit. I suspect when you didn't get what you wanted from the Admiral, you sent this M.P. officer here up to Vermont using the assets of the defense intelligence community to track me down and using the threat of the FBI against defenseless refugees to get me here without truly arresting me and bringing me back in chains. What you did was illegal and immoral and I resent it. NASA will resent it when they find out. And, I hope the White House will resent it and take the appropriate actions against you when my boss takes this upstairs. But now that I'm here, why don't you tell me what the hell you want?" Mike took a seat so he could prevent himself from shaking in his growing anger.

Willoughby also sat down and dismissed Major Watson, who snapped to attention, saluted, and left the room, closing the door on the way out.

"Mike, we're clearly not off to a good beginning. Let me try to start putting things right by telling you why you're here." And he reached into his desk drawer, pulling out a single sheet of paper.

"But before we begin, I have to ask you to sign this nondisclosure form," he said as he passed the top secret, compartmented PIANO form across his desk to Mike, offering the pen from his Cross desk set for his use.

Mike had, of course, seen, and signed, many such forms during his brief tour of duty with the CIA many years earlier and later as an intelligence officer. They were the standard precursors to being told very, very secret, and usually important, things about an enemy or about the

United States' technical ability to monitor an enemy, but he'd never heard about Project PIANO nor had he seen the trigraph acronym PIA before. This made sense, of course, because it was obviously—a secret.

"Before I sign this nondisclosure sheet, may I ask what this has to do with me?"

"It has everything to do with you, Mike. Everything." And Willoughby smiled what Mike evaluated as a very smug and self-satisfied smile.

"And, of course, if I don't sign, you can't tell me what this is about, right? And I get to walk out that door and go back to Vermont, or back to Houston, or over to NASA Headquarters and raise holy hell about what you did to me."

"If you don't sign, my friend, I'm not really sure what will happen, to be honest. Could be some very bad things for your friends. Could be some very big problems for you right here in this building, but one thing is for sure—you'll sign and you'll listen. And that's because I know—no, we know—what happened up there in the space shuttle and out there on the JFK. And what happened is extremely important to your country and to your future in the Navy. And when you sign this form, I'll tell you why. You *will* sign, won't you?"

Mike took the form, read it carefully as he had trained himself to actually read all such forms which end with words about the penalties for non-compliance, signed it, pushed the paper back to the civilian, and sat back to listen.

Willoughby smiled broadly. "Thank you, Commander. Thank you. I'm very excited for you and for the program. Would you please follow me?" He took the form, folded it twice and placed it into his suit coat pocket, got up and walked to the door. "This way please."

Willoughby led Mike through the outer office where his secretary looked up from her typing and smiled at him with an admiring look. Mike smiled back, realizing she must have known he was an astronaut because he knew the look—all astronauts did. They left the suite on the second floor of the E ring, or outermost ring of the Pentagon and,

taking the stairs to the fourth floor and then walking inward to the central or A ring hub, they walked almost a half circumference from the eighth corridor, or spoke, around clockwise to the third corridor. As they walked without speaking, Mike reminisced about his previous times in the Pentagon, the “five sided puzzle palace,” as it was known. He looked out the windows facing the center courtyard and down on the roofed gazebo snack bar in the middle of the lawn, now brown in the cold December air. In the summertime, military personnel, but for some reason rarely the civilians, would come out to the courtyard to have a hot dog, or a smoke, or just to sit in the sun for a break from fluorescent sterility of the offices they inhabited.

Walking outward along the third corridor, and then to the right onto the C ring, Mike and Willoughby reached a door marked 4C341. It had no other markings of any kind other than the four rocker-switch buttoned “cipher lock” device, which Willoughby manipulated with practiced speed. At the loud click, Willoughby pushed the door open and Mike followed him into the Special Compartment Intelligence Facility, or SCIF. Mike had been in many a SCIF, but he knew he had never been in this one.

Most SCIFs were just as plain and lifeless as the other bleak office cubicles in the Pentagon. They were a little better over at the CIA headquarters in Langley and at the brand new Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Headquarters at Bolling Air Force Base off to the East across the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. But this facility, he saw instantly, was tastefully paneled with a light wood, decorated with green shrubs (fake, he presumed, in this room without windows), and furnished with a magnificent mahogany conference table. In leather-upholstered chairs around the table were sitting: Major Watson, who had obviously come here ahead of Mike and Willoughby and was nearest the door, a distinguished looking Air Force Colonel in uniform, two professorial civilians could have passed for twins in their tweed sport coats and horn-rimmed glasses, and—it took his breath away—Meghan Reilly-St. Pierre. Mike was stunned.

“Well, Commander St. Pierre, you already know Lieutenant Colonel Reilly. Let me introduce my staff to you,” Willoughby said cheerfully.

“Hold on a second,” Mike said as he walked over to Meghan, reached out for her as she stood up, and hugged her long and hard. “How are you, Meghan?” he asked simply.

“Fine, Mike. Great. Bet you didn’t expect to find *me* here, did you, sailor?” And she kissed him on the lips, a kiss appropriately brief for this audience and this situation. “It’s really good to see you, Mike. I’ve missed you.”

“What the hell *are* you doing here, Meghan?” And turning to Willoughby, Mike added, “And now I guess I find out what I doing here?”

“In a moment, Mike. In a moment...Everyone, this is Commander Michael St. Pierre, our famous astronaut just back from space. I’ve invited Mike here to join our team. Let me introduce each of you to him.” But before he could continue, Mike spoke out clearly and more loudly than he wished he had.

“Hold on a minute, sir. Meghan, gentlemen, I’m very intrigued to find out what this is all about, but let me make one thing clear. I wasn’t invited here, I was brought here by the Major here almost like I was being arrested and I’m not yet a member of your team, whatever that team might be. But I guess it must be pretty important. I’m sorry I’m being rude.” And he was sorry, but Willoughby’s overly friendly tone and the assumption that he was going to work with the team before he even knew what it was all about—and his lack of sleep—was catching up with him.

The Air Force Colonel broke the tension by coming over and shaking Mike’s hand.

“Look, Commander, let me apologize for the team for the way you’ve been treated. I wasn’t terribly comfortable with any of it, but here you are now and let’s get on with this. I’m Dave Hansen, Chief of Staff for Dr. Willoughby here and this is Doctor Winston Blackstone and Doctor Melvyn Gibson. They’re our co-chief scientists for the

Special Projects group here in OSD. We honestly welcome you here today and ask that you reserve further judgement until you've heard us out." He smiled a disarming smile and Mike shook his hand, and those of the scientists.

"OK," he said. "Thank you Colonel. I'm all ears." And as they all sat down, he exchanged glances with Meghan, who gave him the little grin that he knew meant she was glad to see him. He gave her a smile and a shrug gesture that conveyed the message he was in dark about what was going on. She nodded. He was glad to see Meghan too. It had been about a year, since last Christmas in Washington, since he'd seen her.

It was Meghan who spoke first, surprising Mike who expected Willoughby or Hansen to begin the briefing on why he was here and what this was all about.

"Mike, it was only yesterday I met these gentlemen or had any idea what this was all about. I presume they've asked you to sign the PIANO nondisclosure form (Willoughby nodded and patted his breast pocket). OK, I've signed the form too and I've been briefed on the PIANO program. The name, as you know, means nothing, just a code word a computer spit out at random. PIANO is going to be part of the DoD's ongoing reconnaissance and surveillance programs, but a very different kind of program. You're familiar with the overhead imagery and signals intelligence collection systems and with the Agency's human intelligence efforts. I've only been on the periphery of these programs through my Air Force Reserve duty and my job at ATA, but I know you've worked the NRO programs, at least from an intelligence user context out on the aircraft carrier, etc.

"But PIANO, I've been told, is a new way of looking at intelligence. Dr. Willoughby here has been funding programs in paranormal, or para-psychological studies in the hope of being able to probe an enemy's psyche, so to speak, to try to figure out actions and intentions. I haven't been given much of a briefing on this stuff because it's in other trigraph compartments. I don't understand exactly where you come in except you're an astronaut and have been trained not just as an

intelligence officer, but also as a space-based observer of Earth. I've seen the pictures you guys bring down of cloud patterns, geology, and oceanographic phenomena and I know you guys get training in observing and taking the best possible pictures of what you observe. So I'm guessing PIANO is going to be a Military Man-in-Space, or MMIS project, which is what they call that sort of thing. I'm guessing they want you to be a central figure in this new program and I was told I was needed to help convince you to play ball. How'm I doing, Dr. Willoughby?"

"You're doing great, Meghan. But let me take a moment here to fill in some of your 'guesses' and get to the point of why your husband is critical to the PIANO program. Again, Commander, let me apologize for our strong-arm tactics in getting you here. Based on Admiral Haley's reaction, I guessed NASA wouldn't agree on short notice to this, and I confess I authorized the Major here to use a little heavy-handed leverage to get you to come. Are we OK in that area now?"

"No, sir, we're not. This sounds like something pretty important. I bet if you'd just asked me nicely I'd have come. But let's move on, OK?" Mike said in a very serious tone.

"I certainly hope we can indeed move on, Mike. Let's just say that we wouldn't want to raise the profile of your Central American friend up there in Vermont. You have to trust me that what we've invited—excuse me, brought—you here for is extremely exciting and important to your country. The NRO crowd likes to use the phrase 'of the highest national priority' to describe programs they're running. PIANO, I believe, will be as important, or more important, than anything they've ever done. I'm staking my career—and possibly yours—maybe all of our careers on this belief.

"But before we continue, (gesturing to one of the three uniformed Air Force enlisted persons that had not been introduced but were seated in chairs along the walls of the conference room) can we have some coffee here, please? (An enlisted man jumped to his feet and went

to fetch a pot of coffee.) Anyway, let me continue.” Willoughby stood and began pacing laps around the conference table as he spoke.

“Meghan is correct. I asked her to be here and to join this team for just exactly the reason she has outlined for you, but I’m also very aware of the excellent analytical work she and her company have done, and I’m willing to establish a contract with ATA to have her continue to serve on the team and to bring in some other of ATA’s analysts. The NRO has their own cadre of contractor support and they’re all fine companies, but they’re hardware and data analysis companies and I want something different for this program. Ultimately, hardware will have to be built, as you’ll soon see, space hardware, but let’s put that aside for the moment.

“You, our astronaut intelligence specialist, have some very useful training and a depth of experience in both of your career’s disciplines, namely space systems and operational intelligence, but I believe we have learned, and we will have to confirm, that you have other experiences that make PIANO even more exciting than the space shuttle or overhead collection systems.” He was looking directly at Mike, and then shifted his gaze at Meghan as he now addressed her.

“Mike seems to have had what has come to be known as ‘near death experiences.’ This is extremely significant, but what’s even more important is that he’s had these experiences without the unfortunate, and usually prerequisite, condition of actually being near death.” He emphasized these words while looking at Mike.

“I’ll cut to the chase. We have come to learn through a review of some deeply buried personnel reports on the Commander, that while serving on the aircraft carrier JOHN F. KENNEDY, he had such an experience while physically asleep, but very much mentally awake and aware of what was going on around him. In fact, I’ve read a private report written by his CO, a certain Captain Krupski, in which he details this experience, as reported to him by then Lieutenant St. Pierre. But the Captain suppressed this extraordinary information in all official correspondence surrounding the coincidental warning provided

to the ship about an incoming Soviet bomber overflight and the presence of a Soviet intelligence trawler. KENNEDY had been operating in complete electromagnetic silence. In short, Captain Krupski reports, and then speculates upon, the *possibility* of Lieutenant St. Pierre's having had, and then acted upon, a paranormal dream-like, but very real vision of actual events that he could not have known otherwise. If he were wearing his uniform, you would see a Navy Achievement Medal ribbon on his breast which was awarded, with somewhat murky wording in the citation, for having provided very professional and critical service to his ship, preventing his task force from having an un-alerted Soviet overflight—something which could have ended the career of the good Captain Krupski.”

Mike felt the first big drop of sweat go down the small of his back, but he kept his face impassive and continued to watch Willoughby with utter amazement. How could he possibly know about what happened on KENNEDY? Had the Captain told somebody about it? He must have.

“Furthermore, Commander St. Pierre revealed a hint of this clairvoyant ability in his interview with the NASA psychologist as part of his very successful pre-selection physical just three years ago. The reporting doctor made light of this admission as normal human intuitive ability. But because of our special research in this field, our office has access to an amazing array of documents, which we find by scanning for key words. We found Captain Krupski's memorandum for the record and the NASA psychologist's assessment of Mike. Doctors Blackstone and Gibson and I have read them—both of these gentlemen are clinical psychologists—excuse me Dr. Gibson, I should be more precise and point out you are a medical psychiatrist. You, Commander St. Pierre, seem to have the only known and documented ability that we are aware of to have out-of-body observational experiences that are neither hallucinogenic nor imaginary, outside of, as I've said, actual near death experiences. And we find this capability is in the hands of a commissioned naval officer and intelligence specialist who is

trained for, and experienced in, space flight. This is a priceless opportunity. You, Mike are the treasure we've been looking for. We can change the face of intelligence collection. Do you now see why it was so important to bring you here?"

Mike was speechless. Every word Willoughby had said was essentially true. He couldn't believe Captain Krupski had actually written another report, other than the official version that he'd drafted for the Captain and which the Captain had signed and sent on to the Admiral. And after his interview with Dr. Fowler at the Johnson Space Center, and his thumbs up on his physical and psychological screening for astronaut duty, he felt his passing remarks had been buried or forgotten. It was all true and he was hearing about it in the Pentagon, and in front of Meghan, who was now looking at him with her mouth open. It was the first time in his life he'd ever seen her totally nonplussed and unsure of what to say or do. Unable to say anything, he waited for Willoughby to continue.

"And so, we find our astronaut taking a week of reflection up in the woods of Vermont just three weeks after coming down from a space shuttle flight in which he was heard to say 'I've had a mind-blowing experience' during a sleep period in which all electrical power is shut down on the orbiter. Might he have had another such experience? I...we...suspect that he has. And this brings us to Project PIANO. Here's what we have in mind."

"Wait, Dr. Willoughby," Mike finally said. "I'm not going to confirm or deny anything you've said. You seem to know a lot about me, but how did you—?"

"We've spent years combing books, magazines, scientific journals, official government reports, personnel files, virtually everything that we can get our hands on, looking for evidence of what we call 'remote viewing,' the seeing of things without being there."

"So you use computer searches looking for key words, or phrases, right?" asked Meghan, now recovered slightly from her shock and intellectually engaged again.

“Right. We check out everything. There are literally thousands of reports of clairvoyance; virtually all of them total crap. The Army has had a program on remote viewing for over twenty years and hasn’t yet documented a verifiable paranormal achievement, but the program here and the staff that supports us is continuing the work begun by the Army. The odds of success are admittedly low, but the opportunities are enormous. There are so many anecdotal accounts of out-of-body experiences that this is where our research is focused. We’ve thrown out the thesis of psychics, or anyone who claims to be able to conjure up a vision. The FBI and some police departments are always willing to try using psychics, because they don’t have anything to lose and sometimes they really don’t have anything other than hope going for them when they’re looking for a kidnap victim or a corpse. We’ve got more at stake. We’re trying to protect our country.”

Colonel Hansen broke in. “We really do think this is important and you, Mike, may be the first ray of hope we’ve had in years.” Willoughby picked up where he left off and continued.

“So we’ve narrowed down our search for the key to remote viewing to near death experiences, often called out-of-body experiences. Doctors Winston and Blackstone and I have interviewed dozens of people who have claimed to experience such an event. We’re convinced beyond a reasonable scientific doubt that these experiences are *real*. But here’s our problem: the only truly credible stories we’ve believed, because to one degree or another they’ve been actually verified, are the ones which occur in near death experiences. Oh, we think that deep meditation has also shown some promise, but people who succeed in out-of-body experiences in meditation while awake seem to have metaphysical experiences that are almost exclusively described as their belief that they were in the presence of God.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Mike said, regretting it immediately as he hadn’t yet decided how much, if anything, he wanted to reveal to this group of people. Willoughby raised his eyebrows, as if making a mental note, then continued.

“So the problem is that we want to be in the presence of the military and political planners in Moscow or Beijing or Benghazi. We need the kind of experience that happens in the near death state. And we’re not getting volunteers from people skilled in contemplative meditation to try that kind of thing.”

“So, what’s the point?” asked Mike, now listening very intently.

“The point is, I’d like to tell you why it was so important to bring you here, and your ex-wife as well. By the way, my dossier on you, Mike, doesn’t say anything about being divorced. Are you perhaps just separated?”

“I’m afraid that’s none of your business,” said a now recovered but shakily voiced Meghan. And then, turning to Mike, she asked, “But, is this stuff true?”

“Like I said, Meghan, we need to talk. Assuming I’m not really under arrest, let’s talk after we get out of here.” Now, turning and speaking to Willoughby, he said, “I need to know exactly why I’m here and what you want me to do. I need to hear the whole story.”

“I was just about to get to that, Commander. Mike. Sorry, I really do want to keep this friendly. My advisors and I believe that if what we assess is true, and if we can create the right circumstances, we hope to use your sleep-induced observational ability for intelligence purposes. As I said, we go through thousands of documents looking for references to the kind of thing we’re interested in. And a couple of pieces of paper we’d come across had your name on them. You are here as an amazing result of our search.

“Project PIANO is—or will be with your participation—a program in which you will participate in a classified, a *highly* classified space shuttle mission in a specially designed cargo bay facility. We want you to try to test your ability to observe things on Earth from space—intelligence things—and determine if we might have just discovered the most effective national technical means for surveillance that has ever existed. Admiral Haley will ultimately agree to this, I’m fairly certain, but his agreement has to begin with your acceptance of this challenge.

Are you with us?" And, his face aglow with anticipation, he watched and waited for Mike to react.

"Wow," was all Mike could manage.

"Wow," Meghan echoed.

"Yes, indeed, wow, Commander."

"Holy shit." Mike shook his head, still unable to fathom the impact this would have on to his now very complicated life. The room was silent for a full thirty seconds.

"But why the space shuttle?" Mike asked, uncertainly. "Let's say there is someone, someone like me, who believes that under certain circumstances, circumstances which don't include being dead or almost dead, but just asleep, has the ability to see things and talk about it later." And, as he said this, he thought about Salem Massachusetts in 1965 and about the middle of the Atlantic in 1984. "What if that person had this kind of experience *without* being in space? You wouldn't need to put that person up in the Shuttle, would you?"

"No, Mike, I suppose you wouldn't." The answer had come from one of the two, until now, silent experts, Dr. Blackstone. "But in the few short weeks since you've come back from your space flight and your experience up there came to our attention, we've discussed this among our experts and we think your special capability, combined with the unique environment of the space shuttle, give us an exciting opportunity to test a hypothesis we'd often spoken of only in theoretical speculation. You and what we think you can do for us is an incredible breakthrough! Please work with us, Commander."

Dr. Winston also spoke up with the same passion and the reasoned logic of his colleague. "Yes, indeed, Mike. We think this is a spectacular opportunity. We don't really know what happened to you up there," as he pointed to the ceiling, "but the sooner we can begin to debrief you, the sooner we can validate our theory that flight in space is an unique aspect to tapping your ability."

"Mike," said Willoughby, "do you see why it was absolutely essential to bring you here? Our country is facing enemies who can wreak

havoc on the world. We spend billions upon billions of dollars to pay for satellites, listening posts, submarines and human agents, all to prevent bad people from doing bad things. If we can find out what makes you unique, what gives you the capability to see things just like people near death see things, we may be able to train others to do the same thing. We may have in you the perfect prototypical surveillance system; the perfect spy.”

Mike didn’t know what to say. How could these people have guessed that his experiences out-of-body had something to do with electricity and electromagnetic fields surrounding body—or the lack of them—but they knew the power was out on the shuttle when something happened. They had to be guessing, and they were guessing pretty well, from what he was hearing. He wondered if maybe they were right. He’d only begun to think about the myriad of consequences, which would follow a mere nod of his head right now. The patriot in him wanted to give this a try. The cautious professional in him wanted to think through those consequences, to follow each down the path to what it could mean to his career, to his *life*. On the other hand, Willoughby had threatened to deport a woman and her children who had sought refuge. And he’d done so without apology. These thoughts began to swim in his brain and he felt he needed to be careful—to buy some time.

“Can I think about this? I need to discuss this with...Meghan...and Admiral Haley.”

“Of course you can think about it. Meghan is cleared and in the program now. And you can discuss it with the Admiral if you must, but only if he’s willing to sign the disclosure form you’ve just signed.”

“Oh, he’ll sign,” Mike said. “I’ll go see him tomorrow.”

“And, of course,” Willoughby said looking at both Mike and Meghan, “let me remind you this is now a trigraph compartmented program. You cannot discuss this anywhere but in a SCIF. And this SCIF is the only authorized site in the Pentagon for this program at the present time, although we’re clearing a room over at our project’s office

in Rosslyn as a planning center. That should be up and ready by tomorrow. Why don't you bring the Admiral there so that he can be briefed? Meghan knows where it is because that's where we first met her and convinced her to be here today. How about ten tomorrow?" Hearing no objection, he said, "Good, it's settled. As you say in the Navy, 'Welcome aboard' Commander!" And he offered his hand. Mike reached out his own slightly sweaty hand and they shook.

"Meghan, let's get out of here. I need a drink," Mike said to her quietly. He started to feel a little relieved, knowing that he had evaded making an immediate decision, but he was also apprehensive about catching up with Meghan.

"I do too, Mike." And she smiled at him affectionately, but her look also showed that she was troubled.

Turning again to Willoughby and glancing at the silent, smug looking Major Watson, Mike asked "And the family we discussed up in Vermont? They're safe, right?"

"They're safe. Now that you're on board."

"Great, but let's talk tomorrow about whether I'm on board or not. I told you I needed to think about it. OK?"

"Fine, Mike, fine. I know you'll do the right thing. We'll see you two tomorrow morning with the Admiral."

"OK, ten, unless you hear from us that that doesn't work on his schedule."

"Pleasant dreams," Willoughby said with a chuckle, but nobody else laughed.

C H A P T E R 26



Crystal City Apartments, Arlington, VA—Tuesday Night

They had gone back to Meghan's apartment, their apartment in happier days, almost without a spoken word, except for Mike's heartfelt admission that he was glad to see her and he was sorry it had been so long since he'd called. Like married couples everywhere, they didn't always have to speak to know what was going on between them. As they drove the mile in Meghan's car from the Pentagon's sprawling North Parking Lot to the high rise complex adjacent to National Airport, Mike looked out at the Christmas decorations which were everywhere and thought back to last Christmas, the last time he'd seen Meghan. He'd flown up that morning in a T-38 training jet to Andrews Air Force base. They had Christmas dinner at the Willard Hotel across the street from the White House and gone back to the apartment in Crystal City for a nightcap. He'd even kissed her and she'd returned the kiss, neither without passion, but he'd not stayed the night.

For reasons he still couldn't figure out, he refused and returned to the Willard. He remembered how he had looked out on Freedom Plaza in front of the hotel, and had reflected on what he and Meghan had

lost. It was painful. The hurt now returned from its hiding place deep inside as they headed for the apartment.

Perhaps now he and Meghan could begin on a new footing. While he fished in her collection of cassette tapes for Christmas music, Meghan began to boil water for pasta and opened a chilled bottle of Chablis she had in the refrigerator. She and Mike listened to Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" while she broke up lettuce and he sipped the wine. They'd barely spoken since leaving the Pentagon.

"I'm still glad we never got the divorce," Mike said, strangely out of the blue. "At times like this, it's still nice to be able to call you my wife. You look fantastic. You always do. I'm glad I've been your husband."

"Where did that come from, Mike?" she said as she looked at him with an appraising expression on her face. "I thought you'd want to talk about what happened this afternoon. And, if you can, I thought you'd want to talk about whether any of this strange stuff Dr. Willoughby said was true or not. Is it true?"

"Well, more or less," was all Mike could muster.

"You have these...out-of-body experiences? Really?"

"Just a couple of times."

"Like on the shuttle? Like on the JFK? Any other times?"

"Yup. They happened. Weird, huh?"

"Any other times?" she asked again.

"Yeah, one other time, but I was really young, and it was inconsequential—to national security and the space program, I mean." He hoped he'd satisfied her curiosity.

"Huh," she commented, looking down at the carrot she was peeling. It wasn't going to be the end of it.

"Can we talk bout us?"

Meghan suddenly became defensive.

"You and I had our chance, Mike. I blew it. You blew it. When you came back from your deployment on the KENNEDY, you told me you somehow figured I'd been unfaithful and I admitted it. I'm still not sure how you knew or why I admitted it. I was, and I still am, in

love with you, Mike. But I blew it because you were gone so much and I was lonely and I was selfish. I blew it and I lost you. *You* blew it because you let me go. But I'm still glad we never got the divorce and that we were OK to just live apart and move on with our lives. I'm satisfied with my life, Mike, but I was happier when I was with you."

Meghan was standing now in front of him, looking him in the eyes, searching for a response. Mike put down his wineglass and slid off the barstool to face her. They hugged each other and kissed, with real affection, like they hadn't kissed each other for years, but they let the moment pass, and neither one tried to regain the momentum.

Avoiding their past, they enjoyed the simple dinner Meghan cooked, talking about mutual friends and life in Washington for her and life in Houston for him. He joked about the funny characters among the astronauts and she joked about the anal-retentive over-achievers in her office. She admitted she was afraid she was becoming one of them. He laughed and said she was, and would always be, an overachiever. He was too, she said. After all, both competed in their jobs with the just about the most highly qualified and over-achieving people on the planet. Why couldn't their lives be simpler, they asked each other. Life was complicated, they told each other.

And then they got to it.

"OK, Mike, you've talked about everything else you could think of," she said as they sat on the couch with dishes of ice cream and coffee. She gently brushed his hair from his forehead as she had done so many times before. "Let's talk about what happened up there."

He told her, but kept only to the mechanics of what happened. He talked about his speculation about electricity and the human body's interaction with electromagnetic fields and how this somehow affects the conscious ability to get "out" into the out-of-body experience. He speculated that when somebody is near death, the body's own electromagnetic field grows weaker until the "spirit" (a word which, for some reason, he used cautiously with Meghan) is more free to roam and observe. Maybe when you die, he said, this bond might be broken

completely and your consciousness, your spirit, is now free to go anywhere—to heaven or to hell.

She asked him a lot of questions, mostly technical and analytical, but she never touched on spiritual issues and he knew he had no desire to tell her his deeper thoughts on them. They talked around, but never specifically on the subject of Willoughby's project, remembering the penalties for breaking protocol on protecting special compartmented intelligence information. She seemed not very interested in talking about the JOHN F. KENNEDY experience, as though the space shuttle experience, his recent experience, was all that mattered to her. So, she never asked him again about that or about any other of his experiences. He was glad not to talk about them because if he did, he'd end up talking about how he'd gone to her on both of those "flights." And he'd have to tell her...or lie about...what he'd seen her doing. He was still embarrassed that he'd violated her privacy in her own bedroom as a teenager and he was just as embarrassed that he'd "flown" in to find her with another man.

Mike realized he and Meghan were on different wavelengths. She was all intellect, as she'd always been. He'd thought through the intellectual elements of his flights and looked deeper and found the spiritual significance of them, but he knew she couldn't meet him on that level—and he suddenly realized he was OK with this. He took a deep breath and shuddered, as if to unburden himself of his buried expectations and regrets. He was free—and in his heart he freed her as well.

The evening had been truly enjoyable. Physically, Meghan had an allure that could melt any man, and it still melted him. With the warming effects of the two bottles of wine they'd killed—and with her smile and her voice and her perfume—he stopped talking about paranormal experiences, space flight, the Pentagon, NASA, and became lost in the consciousness of being together for the first time in so long.

When they made love that night, it was with a passion and a tenderness Mike hadn't experienced since he had separated from Meghan eleven years ago. As he lay awake with her sleeping quietly in his arms,

he was lost in thought. It seemed they both had “let go” tonight. In giving of themselves, they both retrieved a part of themselves that the other had held. There was a life that still lay ahead of him and he would be whole again. Tomorrow he would face choices. And he knew that in making those choices, Meghan wouldn’t be a factor. He kissed her gently, rolled over, and went to sleep.

CHAPTER 27



Journal of Commander Michael St. Pierre

It's four o'clock in the morning. Meghan is asleep in the bedroom and I'm again trying to journal my feelings, but with a pen and paper this time. By the way, I'm realizing this journal I started on the computer is now just for me. I read somewhere that journaling feelings are one of the best ways to come to grips with them. It seemed to work up at the Priory or I never would have been able to open up to Maria the way I did. Or was it Maria who opened me up to writing my thoughts and feelings? I guess it was that way, wasn't it?

I woke up in the middle of a dream about Maria. In the dream, we were falling from the sky together, holding hands and praying aloud that we might never the ground. That Maria was in the dream doesn't surprise me. She was all I could think about when I was making love to Meghan. I hope I don't wake her up right now, because I really don't want to talk to her. And deal with us.

What am I feeling? Is it that I love Maria? I realize I barely know this woman, but I'm powerfully drawn to her. Is this because she needs me? Do I need her? Do I want her? Would she even think about loving again? Is it fair to her?

Willoughby, I guess, means well. He's getting paid to figure out how to get intelligence on our country's enemies and he's come up with an amazing idea. He may not even be aware that if we do this project, he's going to get laughed at by just about everybody except his staff shrinks, his Air Force lackey, and by me. Meghan is smart enough to have laughed at it too, but he was clever to wait to confront me with what is essentially the truth in front of her, instead of telling her ahead of time.

How do I really feel about taking part in this experiment? Would it even work? I doubt it and I'll say so when I get my chance. Those three experiences outside of my body all happened in pretty unique circumstances, which would be difficult to duplicate on demand. When I was up in the shuttle, I remember I was able to go outward away from the Earth. Why didn't I try to go down? Was I unable to come back down to Earth? No, I went outward in the universe because I had to know what's out there, that's why. Now I know. If I was up there again, I wouldn't want to go down, would I? There's so much more out there I'd want to experience. I want to be utterly free in the presence of God and the infinity of spirits out there. And I want to know more about the universe. Was I really out there beyond the leading edge of the big bang? Where is, or where was the center where all this started? Why aren't there moving signposts on Earth pointing to the "center" of where it all began? For that matter, why doesn't anybody on Earth care enough when they look up at the sky to wonder which direction the center of our own galaxy is?

The dawn is coming. I'm not going to wake Meghan yet. It's been a good night. But I keep thinking of Maria. I'm furious she's in the limbo of Vermont with the brothers, in very real danger now of being deported.

I'm going to go see the Admiral in a couple of hours. He'll certainly be surprised since I wasn't supposed to show up for two more days. I want Meghan there too. Let's think about what's going to happen. I have a choice...or do I? Do I play ball and guarantee Maria's safety?

Do I become Willoughby's "humanoid?" Do I use this wonderful gift God has given me to inspire my fellow man? Scientists are going to keep probing the sky with bigger and better optical telescopes and radio telescopes and people are going to be listening for signals coming in from some extraterrestrial television station. We NASA guys are soon going to lift that huge space telescope I saw over at the Goddard Space Flight Center up into orbit and it's going to look deep into the universe. My crewmate, Amy has been telling me this space telescope will see stars and galaxies BILLIONS of light years away. To think I've been out there! What role can I play in figuring out where to look? How can I play this role without revealing that I've seen galaxies and other worlds—and LIVING, THINKING BEINGS out there in the dark? If I tell people what I've seen, they'll call me a nut cake and my voice will definitely not be heard. If I don't—if I go to work on this secret project in the DoD, will I be wasting my gift? Or will I be truly helping my country stay safe?

I wish I still had the peace of Vermont. I want to see Maria. I don't know what'll happen today, but I do know there's one thing I can do about it. Pray. And listen.

C H A P T E R 28



Rosslyn, Virginia—Wednesday Morning, December 18

Mike had asked that only he, Willoughby, Admiral Haley, and Meghan be in the room. He wanted Meghan there as a referee, thinking they might just need one and he trusted her intelligence to say the right thing to keep things from getting out of control. He and Meghan had eaten a breakfast of pancakes he'd prepared before she got up. A perfect December breakfast, he'd said. They had kissed tenderly when she joined him in the kitchen. He loved her in a way that would never change, in spite of it all, but she wasn't his soul mate.

Mike had gone by himself at eight to NASA Headquarters, a brand new building on C Street Southwest, which stretched all the way between Third and Fourth Streets. Breezing through the security checkpoint with a flash of his NASA ID badge, he took the gleaming stainless steel elevator up to the ninth (top) floor. The décor in the hallways was very modern—all white with pastels and brushed steel. Arriving without an appointment, he was still shown immediately into Admiral Haley's office, such was the treatment afforded to astronauts here at Headquarters. The modern look hadn't penetrated the "front office." Here, it was all dark paneling, leather chairs, and highly polished wood.

The Admiral looked up and said "Well I'll be, look what the cat dragged in! Mike, good to see you, but weren't you supposed to be here tomorrow and not today?"

"Good morning, sir," said Mike. "We need to talk."

"Well, let's get you cup of coffee, by God," and shouting through the door, "Susan, two cups of Navy mud. Sit down, Mike, sit down."

"Sorry to just walk in on you like this, Admiral. On the phone, you told me to be here tomorrow and I only half believed that I'd actually come, given my state of mind when you called."

"Here you go, sir," the Admiral's executive secretary interrupted as she brought in the coffee in fine china cups on saucers. She winked at Mike. Just-flown astronauts were always welcome in her lair.

"Thanks, Sue," the Admiral said. "Better close the door."

"So now you're here early," he continued, taking a sip of coffee. "Good! You ready to tell me what's going on in your life? What happened up there? You've got people worried about you. And you've got that guy over in the Pentagon worried about you, and you've got me worried about *him*."

"Admiral, I'm sorry I haven't called you before now, but the past forty-eight hours since I talked to you on the phone have been—a little weird. And that guy at the Pentagon is bizarre."

"You've spoken with Willoughby?" the Admiral asked with surprise.

"Without going into too many details, sir, yes, I've spoken with him. He arranged to have me come here to Washington on short notice. He sent an Army officer up to get me. And at some point, I'll have to explain how they got me to come. It's not a pretty story. But I was at the Pentagon yesterday and I met him and his staff. And, this is a little embarrassing, he somehow managed to involve Meghan. She was there too."

"What?" Haley exclaimed. "Meghan is your *ex*-wife, isn't she?"

"We're separated, sir."

"Yes, but you've been single for years, I thought. What's the connection to her?"

“Dr. Willoughby is using her to get to me, I think.”

“To get to you? To do what? I knew he wanted to contact you. He told me that much. So what does he want from you and why would he dredge up your ex-wife?” His exasperation and confusion were getting the best of him. “I’m wondering if I should get the Administrator in here, or move this discussion to his office,” the Admiral said.

“Sir, I’d prefer that we don’t do that. You already know Dr. Willoughby. Mr. Powers will know about all this before too long, I suspect, but I need your help to keep this thing under control?”

“What thing, Mike?”

And Mike replayed his meeting with the Willoughby group, and Meghan, as far as he could go without crossing the line into exactly what Willoughby really wanted—and what lay behind the veil of the PIANO secrecy agreement he had signed.

They talked for two hours about Maria’s situation, Major Watson, Meghan, and the essential elements of what happened up on *Discovery*. The Admiral couldn’t wait to sign the PIANO nondisclosure agreement and get his chops into Willoughby. What was Mike not telling him, he wondered?

CHAPTER 29



Rossllyn, Virginia—Wednesday Afternoon, December 18

Mike, unlike the passive listener the day before in the Pentagon, took charge of the meeting immediately. After the Admiral had signed the nondisclosure form, Mike had taken the initiative away from Willoughby from the very start, summarizing the essential facts of what had happened on the KENNEDY eleven years before and what had happened aboard *Discovery* in space. He made no apologies and made no analytical statements about what any of it might mean. He simply and clearly confirmed what Willoughby had learned in his research. He didn't talk about God, extraterrestrial intelligent life or about how, spiritually, his life had been changed forever. Just the facts, coming from a professional naval officer and astronaut.

"Admiral, Dr. Willoughby wants me to come back to the DoD and he wants to put my special abilities to work in the field of intelligence. He wants to specially equip a space shuttle with, I presume, some kind of fiberglass or other non-metallic structure in the cargo bay. There, I'm presuming, he wants me to go to sleep, or possibly be put to sleep. I'm guessing some kind of drug is what he's being advised by...what was the name of the team psychiatrist? Dr. Gibson was it?

“Anyway, Project PIANO is, I believe, the compartmented program to see if I can come down from my sleeping body in orbit and collect the ultimate combination of human and technical intelligence which would put us one more step ahead of the Soviets in the Cold War. At face value, assuming you all believe I have this ability, it sounds like a feasible and potentially valuable plan. I assume Dr. Willoughby has begun trying to figure out how he can get this project past the giggle factor inside this building when somebody has to step up to the big bucks it would take to do this. And I assume he doesn’t care much what will happen to my professional reputation if this gets out and if the *Washington Post* were to get hold of it. Jack Anderson would just love it!

“Let me make it clear that I have strong personal reasons to want to see this squashed. And I have technical reasons, which I hope I don’t have to sit down and discuss with you, why I don’t really think it would work anyway. To name just a few, my guess is that it’d only work on the dark side of Earth. This may not be a big problem, but we’ve got to wonder why it’s even a factor. Second, I’ve only been able to do my perceptive movement in the absence of electromagnetic interference. Maybe that’s why I didn’t, or couldn’t, come down onto the Earth from the shuttle. Maybe I went out into space because that’s where it was peaceful. Maybe I went out there because that’s where I was drawn. I decided to go there, but maybe I had some suggestions being whispered in my spiritual ear.

“So, what I’d rather do, is keep doing my job at NASA. I’m good at being an astronaut. I’m proud to be wearing my uniform when I still get to put it on, but maybe I’ll hang it up and become a civilian so you’re not tempted to find a way to order me to do it.

“And then there’s the issue of the coercion which you used (pointing his finger at Willoughby) to get me here. You sent your Major Watson up to Vermont and he threatened what amounts to bodily harm, probably a sentence of death, on an innocent woman and her children.” Meghan looked at Mike curiously now, while she had been

entranced by the strength of his conviction and the clarity of his monologue.

"I want this threat removed for good, whether I do this thing or not. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a silence for a brief moment, but it was a profound silence. All eyes were on Mike. The Admiral was grinning. Meghan was still puzzled. Willoughby was fuming.

"Now, you look here Commander St. Pierre," Willoughby spoke first, coming out of his chair. "You have absolutely no right to come in here and tell me what will work and what won't work. We have a solid body of research in this area—"

"Horse shit," said Admiral Haley. "You don't have any 'body of research' which involves an individual like Mike or an experience like his in space. You don't know anything about this man or what you're dealing with. I agree with every word he's said. If he thinks it won't work, it most likely won't, and your spending what would be hundreds of millions of taxpayers' dollars on the chance it will, would be a terrible waste of those funds and a terrible waste of the reputation of this great officer. Kill this thing now. And as for the woman in Vermont, I don't know too much about what Mike is talking about, but I do know you'd better respond to his demand for her safety."

"Don't you 'horse shit' me, Admiral. I say we press on. I've started the wheels in motion to get a go-ahead on the project. I have a briefing to the Secretary of Defense next Monday and we have precious little time to prepare for it. I demand the participation of this naval officer and I demand that NASA release him to duty here on my staff. I can make these demands stick."

"By threatening to deport a harmless refugee family?" Mike asked.

"By enforcing the immigration laws of this nation, Commander, but I truly find this distasteful because I'm not the ogre you might think I am. I'm just a dedicated civil servant trying to do my job. I have the ability to use the full force of the regulations of the Department of

Defense to compel your participation, Commander. I won't have to threaten this woman. She's of no concern to me."

"Well, she is of concern to me," said Mike with more emotion than he had wanted to show in this meeting. "Do I have your word she's safe?" He virtually shouted the question.

"As I said, she's of no concern to me. If her presence there were to become known to the FBI, this too is of no concern. I make no promises, but I can promise you, sir, that come next Monday, I expect you to be at my side defending this program with the conviction you've shown here today...which by the way I *do* respect. If you can speak with this much authority for what might be done with your help, I can promise you your professional reputation and your career will not only be secure, but will be advanced considerably. Please, let's not be confrontational, Mike."

"Can Mike have a couple of days to consider this?" asked Haley with a gleam in his eye which was caught only by Mike, who knew him well enough to see a plan developing. The sudden change in the Admiral's demeanor caught Mike off guard, but he instinctively knew he should yield to the NASA official.

"Twenty-four hours. No more," said Willoughby.

"I expect to see the Commander back here tomorrow. That will give us tomorrow and the weekend to prepare for the Secretary's briefing."

"That's enough," said the Admiral, preempting the absolute and immediate "NO!" which was about to come out of Mike.

The Admiral turned to Mike and Meghan and nodded toward the door, signaling his intent to leave with them. As the three rose, Willoughby blurted, "no discussing classified information, Admiral. Do you understand me?"

"Certainly, sir," said a surprisingly upbeat Admiral Haley. Mike saw the look, heard the tone, and decided to hold his tongue. He'd done enough talking for one day anyway.

Meghan looked shell-shocked as she left the building with Mike and Haley.

“What the hell happened in there?” she asked, grabbing Mike’s arm and swinging him to face her. There was fire in her eyes. It was a mix of bewilderment and rage—and fear.

“I’m not exactly sure what just happened either,” said Mike, not looking at Meghan but over her shoulder at the Admiral to see him surprisingly calm and under control. Amazing, considering the circumstances, Mike thought. “What happened in there, Admiral? I was ready to go for his throat and all of sudden you break into this ‘what, me worry?’ grin and drag us out of there. Did I miss something?”

“Look, Mike, things were heading south in there pretty fast. I don’t know what to make of all this stuff about dreams and out-of-body experiences and all, but I saw a bad situation getting worse and I came up with a plan.”

“A plan? What kind of a plan?” Mike asked, bewildered.

“And will somebody *please* tell me what’s going on here?” Meghan almost shouted.

“Look you two, let me buy you lunch. It’s almost two and I haven’t had anything to eat since the coffee I had with you, Mike, in my office this morning. There’s a great Northern Italian restaurant up Wilson Boulevard a couple of blocks, just above the Metro stop. It’s called Tivoli. You tell Ricardo the matre’d that you’re with me, and you’ll get a great table. I’ll meet you there in about fifteen minutes after I make a couple of phone calls. Trust me, I think this is going to work out.” And he was gone.

Mike and Meghan looked at each other. And the momentary silence spoke volumes.

“What are you going to do?” she finally asked.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Do you love her?” she asked.

“Meghan...Her name is Maria Gonzales and she’s an illegal immigrant from Guatemala. The brothers up in Vermont are giving her sanctuary from deportation. If she was arrested and sent back, she’d

probably be dead in a week, or worse than dead. Don't make me explain."

"Do you love me?" she blurted out, and the question surprised him.

"You know I do, Meghan. But I realize now I'm not in love with you."

"Whatever brought us together—it wasn't us. If it was meant to be we'd still be," Meghan said to dismiss the topic, embarrassed.

"I'm not sorry about last night," Mike said, sensing her insecurity.

"It just wasn't the same as before." Meghan said it as if she was talking about the Red Sox record. She was holding back. Relieved, Mike played along.

"I dunno, you threw a curveball in the last inning..."

Meghan cracked up, then held onto a smug grin. "So you're gonna do the project, right?"

"I'm still exploring my options."

"Fat chance!" Meghan retorted. "Look, you're a military professional. How are you *not* going to do what this guy wants you to do? He can get the Navy to pull you from the astronaut program and send you to Diego Garcia, can't he? NASA and the Admiral can't stop them if the Pentagon really wants you to do this, right?"

"I don't honestly know, Meghan. NASA pulls some weight in the Administration, but I'm pretty small potatoes. If DoD plays hard ball I'm going to get screwed."

"I guess we should head up to the restaurant." Meghan said, letting go of his arm and turning to walk. Then she turned back to face him.

"Last night was special, Mike. If you do this project, I'm going to enjoy having you around—even if you're not in love with me."

Mike said nothing as he hugged her and kissed her forehead. Then, he put his arm around her and they turned and walked up Wilson Boulevard together.

C H A P T E R 30



Massachusetts Avenue, North-West—Wednesday Evening, December 18

Mike drove up Massachusetts Avenue through a gray mist. It was all gray—the sky, the embassy facades, the melting snow, the mist in the air, and his mood. Gray. Cold and gray. And then came the apprehension. He had actually met the Vice President once before, the same day he had met the President. He would never forget the reception for his astronaut class at the White House three years ago. President Reagan had been a lot of fun—all jokes and smiles meant to put his guests at ease as only he could, but, knowing what everybody in NASA knew by now, Mike had felt the President's heart wasn't really in the space program. The reception, he felt, had been a check mark in the box of the White House schedule. Nine AM, boy scouts from Podunk; nine-thirty, phone call with SECDEF; ten, shake hands with the astronauts; ten-thirty, Baptist ministers from Georgia; etc. etc. etc. Then he smiled at his own thought. Hell, everybody knew Reagan never began work at nine in the morning.

But then, as he continued his drive up Mass. Ave., he reflected on Ronald Reagan's presence in the White House. Mike realized that Reagan's strength was his leadership. Mike had been honored to shake

a real leader's hand. But Mike had also met Vice President George Bush midway through the reception. It was as if the VP had just been passing through the building and had decided to stop in and meet the new crop of NASA astronauts himself. He came and mingled with the group while the President was having his picture taken with the astronauts one at a time. He was very low key and the chance meeting with Mike just sort of happened. Upon introducing himself, Bush gripped Mike's hand in a vice-tight handshake. "Commander St. Pierre, the pleasure is all mine," the VP had said.

"Mr. Vice President, we haven't met before and I haven't even flown yet. Believe me, sir, the honor is all mine."

"Well now, Commander," said Mr. Bush, "I do indeed know who you are. When my aide showed me a profile of this outstanding class of astronaut candidates, you kind of stuck out. I told Barb I was going to watch out for you. You see, we have a lot in common, Commander."

Mike was blown away. It was one thing to shake the hand of a sitting President of the United States, but another to meet the Vice President and find he knew about you. This really took him by surprise and his face had turned red.

"Mike, they call you Mike?" Bush had continued.

"Uh, yes sir, it is. They do, I mean," Mike barely managed to get out.

"Mike, if you stopped to think about it for a minute, you'd remember the two big things you and I have in common: tail hooks and spooks. You and I, Mike, we might be the only two guys in this city with the same combination of naval aviation and intelligence experience. See what I mean?"

Mike recovered his wits quickly and realized, of course, the Vice President had been a Navy pilot in World War II. He remembered a young Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Bush had not only flown combat missions with distinction, but had also been shot down and survived bailing out over the ocean. And, of course, George Bush had served as Director of Central Intelligence during the Ford Administration. Now

he, the non-combat veteran pilot—make that *ex*-pilot—who had only been a junior intelligence officer in the fleet, was finding his career compared to that of a true hero and master of intelligence by the hero/master himself. It took his breath away.

That conversation had taken place almost three years ago. Now, it was a gray December evening and Mike was driving not to the White House but to the “House on Observatory Hill,” the Vice President’s official residence on the grounds of the historic Naval Observatory on Massachusetts Avenue, just past the British Embassy. He was about to meet George Bush again.

Catching sight of the classic red London phone booth outside an impressive building on the left side of the street, he knew he was approaching the entrance to the Observatory. He saw a huge white-painted anchor, the unmistakable and universal marker of a naval installation and pulled up to the gate where he waited for a guard to come out to check his credentials. He wondered if it would be a secret service policeman, a Navy rent-a-cop, or a Marine. He got two out of three and was happy to learn the Marines had kept their warriors away from at least one guard post in the world on a wet winter night. He returned the “good evening” greeting to both the DoD policeman and the uniformed Secret Service officer.

Having presented his Navy ID card and told them of his appointment to visit the Vice President at precisely 1830 hours, he settled into his seat while the two guards retreated to the shack to check him out and prepare his vehicle pass. He noticed in his rear view mirror the sign, brightly lit with a spotlight, at the entrance to the VP’s closest neighbor across Massachusetts Avenue. All sailors are taught early on to read and write backwards so they can write down ship or aircraft contact data on the rear of illuminated plexiglas “tote boards” aboard ship for decision makers on the other side to track them. So it was easy for the sailor in Mike to read—in reverse lettering visible from his mirror—“Papal Nuncio.” The VP’s neighbor was the Pope’s official representative to the United States. Mike grinned as he realized how the

Church was here, too, but it was not the Vatican's help he needed in this situation. The Nuncio was probably some very old Cardinal with an Italian accent who wouldn't have a clue what he was talking about, but would probably figure Mike was crazy or should be excommunicated. Or both. They used to torture and kill the heretics, right?

While he reflected on the Church's trial of Galileo, he was startled by the return of the DoD policeman. "Yes, sir, you're expected. Please proceed up the curved drive to your left, and oh, Commander—Admiral Haley and Doctor Minh have already arrived and have gone up to the house."

Mike, of course, had expected to meet the Admiral here, since he had hastily arranged the meeting in the first place. But Mike hadn't seen his crewmate, Amy, since the day after they'd landed. She was an astrophysicist and a good friend, so she would have been the most logical person for him to talk to about his "celestial observations." But when they landed, he wasn't ready to talk to anyone. Now that had to decide what to do next, the Admiral had figured on Amy as being somebody who could maybe relate to Mike on multiple levels: friend, crewmate, and astronomer. Mike wondered how in hell the Admiral had arranged so quickly to get her here from where? Houston? Was she taking her Christmas vacation nearby? He smiled as he mused at the Admiral's connections through which he could get an appointment with the Vice President of the United States on no advanced notice—and at the VP's own home. He parked the car at the front door of the Vice President's elegant, but simple, three story Victorian house. Not even the evergreen hedge shaped and trimmed into an elephant, which greeted him in the front yard, could penetrate the apprehension that once again descended upon Mike as he strode up to the front door.

There was no doorbell. Well, it's an old house, Mike thought as he sharply rapped the freshly shined brass knocker and then waited, expecting...what? Secret Service? Butler?

"Well, hello, Commander St. Pierre. Won't you please come on in?"

Mike could only croak out a simple “Thank you, Mrs. Bush” to the most familiar white-haired lady in America. Her warm expression and firm grasp immediately captivated Mike as she ushered him in to the others. Mike found himself in a brightly lit book-lined study where he was greeted by a wryly grinning (with that familiar slanted smile) George Bush. A chuckling Vice Admiral Haley and a beaming Amy Minh were standing by the blazing fireplace. “Howdy partner,” Amy said with the wink.

“Welcome aboard Commander,” said George H.W. Bush.

“Thank you, sir,” Mike said while shaking hands with the Vice President, who had an iron grip. He then shook hands with the Admiral and Amy. “Admiral...Amy, this is a total surprise. How did you—?”

“Admiral Haley called me this afternoon, Mike,” she said. “I was in town for a meeting at the Office of Space Science at headquarters. Mr. and Mrs. Bush were very kind to invite me to dinner with the Admiral. You look tired.”

“Thanks for noticing,” Mike bantered and then turned his attention back to his hosts and the Admiral. He was very pleased to have a friend here for moral support.

He still had no clue what the Admiral was up to, but he decided to relax and enjoy the serendipity of the invitation and let things evolve. It was a cheerful little group, Mike thought, as they exchanged pleasantries about the weather, the house, and the last time Mike had met the Vice President. Surprisingly, the Admiral remembered it too.

“Jim, Mike and I had a really great talk over there at the Boss’ place a while back. Turns out we’re both ex bomber jocks and ex spooks. Had a great time telling sea stories. Couldn’t tell those spy stories, though, right Mike?”

“Ah, yes sir, but, Mr. Vice President, I still think my stories come out a little lame compared to yours.”

“Well, Mike, perhaps. But now you’ve got some new stories of your own, I understand. Barbara, could you give us a couple of minutes? Just Mike, the Admiral and me. Maybe Dr. Minh...sorry...

Amy...would like to have a look see around this old firetrap. Lot of history here. Actually, I bet Amy would rather have a tour of the telescopes over at the Observatory, but maybe that could come later. If you'd excuse us, I'd just like to kick this off with Mike and the Admiral."

"Of course, dear." And, as if on cue, Mrs. Bush and Amy disappeared out the door.

"I hope Dr. Minh doesn't feel excluded," the Vice President said. "I understand that she's an amazing lady, arriving as a kid from Vietnam with nothing but brains and now she's a Ph.D. and an astronaut. What a great story! But, Jim, you said you wanted a private meeting, so here we are. Your nickel."

"Mr. Vice President," began the Admiral. "I invited Amy because there may be things she can help clarify as we get into this. I...we...appreciate your agreeing to see us on such short notice. And thank you for your hospitality...to invite us into your own home is very kind," he said.

"Mi Casa es su casa, Jim. Mike, did you know your boss here used to take me up in those T-38s of yours when he was a young capsule jock down at Houston and I was in the Senate. I kept telling him I'd still like to be flying Navy combat aircraft and he said he would too, but those NASA training jets—they were great airplanes."

"Still are, Mr. Vice President. We still fly all over the place in them," offered Mike.

"Well, you're flying in the space shuttle these days, too, Mike. I knew you were going to do well when I met you over at the White House. Yes, I do remember our conversation pretty well. And I remember well the first time I met this here Admiral of yours a long time ago. We've built the friendship through the years, haven't we, Jim? Hell, we even exchange Christmas cards. There's probably one from you and Beverly out there in our basket full of cards in the living room right now. And it's for damned sure not machine signed like all mine are these days. So when Jim Haley calls my office and says he has

something important to discuss with me, and tells my secretary it's of the greatest urgency, then I make the time to meet with him. I'm delighted to do it. Delighted to see you again, Commander, and delighted to meet that charming young, and obviously brilliant, astronaut/astronomer/astro-everything who's probably having a glass of wine and sharing a story with Barbara instead of touring this old house. So I'm more than happy to welcome you both here." And, turning to his friend, he said "So what's up, Jim?"

"Is this room secure, Mr. Vice President?" the Admiral asked.

"Well, there's a Secret Service guard at the door who's heard me say and do enough dumb things to keep me out of the White House in a couple of years," he said with a wink. "But let's just not go where we shouldn't go outside of a SCIF, if that's what you mean."

"OK, sir, let me get right to the point. Mike here is doing a great job for us at NASA. He and his crew just came though what might have been a very serious casualty on the shuttle. As you no doubt have been told—hell, it's been all over the news—the power went out up there and then we got everything back on line. Now, here's where I'm going to ask you to keep an open mind, sir."

"Go ahead, Jim. Yes, I've heard all about the excitement on the shuttle mission, and we're all glad it turned out all right. And I've always made it a point to keep an open mind. So go on."

"Mr. Vice President, here goes. During the time up there when the power was out and the whole crew was asleep, Mike had what we'd call, for lack of a better phrase, an out-of-body experience in his sleep. He and I have discussed this at length this afternoon. What he went through might not have been very remarkable if he'd been, well, *near death*. Most folks, me among them, are pretty sure near death experiences are real—and after all, they've been documented well, also. But Mike here was flying in space and having this experience, and it was apparently more revealing to him than any of us might imagine. How'm I doing, Mike?"

"Just fine, sir," said a suddenly very shaky Mike.

“Gentlemen,” said Mr. Bush. “Let’s sit down. It sounds like this is going to get interesting!” He moved to an easy chair, Mike and the Admiral taking opposite ends of a couch. Mike found himself slipping deeper and deeper into the folds of the soft leather and he realized, psychologically and physically, he was far from comfortable. So he moved to perch his butt on the front edge of the seat. This was a trick they’d taught him and required of him from day one at the Naval Academy to stay and look alert.

“As I was saying, Mike has had this experience. If I were a preacher, I’d say it was some kind of vision. If I were a pessimist, I’d say it was a hallucination. If I was a psychologist, I’d say he was nuts...in a nice, professional way, of course. And then I’d either get him committed or put him on a year of therapy at fifty bucks an hour, but as a guy who knows Mike as well as I do, I’d say it was something pretty special.”

“So would I, I guess,” said George Bush. “Go on, Jim.”

“Why we’re here, sir, is that this morning we had a meeting over in Rosslyn with a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense named Howard Willoughby. He and his office do some pretty esoteric things, but we’re not coming here to malign him or his staff. Without judging them, I’d say they could be doing some very important things for the Department. I’d never jump several steps in the chain of command to run down somebody who’s just trying to do their job, but, Mr. Vice President, I come to you as a friend because Mike is about to be placed in a situation that I don’t want him to be in. Dr. Willoughby has somehow figured out something special is going on with Mike and wants to use it in a kind of paranormal experiment which I think is expensive, reckless, and possibly dangerous to Mike, both physically and professionally. Willoughby is high enough up the ladder in the Pentagon to get a hearing for his idea before the Secretary of Defense. It’s scheduled for next Monday.”

“What kind of experiment?”

“Without getting into a compartment we can’t talk about in this room, I can only tell you it’s a classified military space shuttle mission.

NASA has very little to say about how the shuttle is used on this kind of mission, except to ensure the crew's safety. And since the mission profile and the orbiter modifications haven't been designed yet for this—can't be designed without Mike's help—the Administrator and I don't yet have the ability to stop this thing yet."

"And you *do* want to stop it, right, Jim?"

"Big time, sir, big time. I want to stop it immediately. But there's something else. We could probably get this project canceled eventually over in NASA on the grounds of crew safety, but if the Secretary of Defense takes this to the President, it may take on a life of its own and it'll be years before it gets killed. Meanwhile, I'll have lost one of the best astronauts we have. And please believe me, sir, we'll lose him."

"So, I take it you don't want to do this...this mission, right Commander?" Mr. Bush turned to Mike who looked like he was going to jump off the couch at any minute.

"No, sir, I don't. This is the wrong way to use this gift I've been given," he replied.

The Vice President studied Mike and then the Admiral for a moment. They could see the wheels turning in his mind. Had he taken what Jim Haley had said at face value or was he about to say it sounds like a crock and his time was being wasted? The wheels stopped and the sideways smile came back.

"Just say you won't do it, Mike! You're a pretty famous fella, you know. Just back from a successful, if pretty scary, shuttle flight. You're not some desk jockey over in the Pentagon. Just say no. Hey, Nancy Reagan is saying that all the time on TV to get kids off of drugs. 'Just say no.'"

"Uh, it's more complicated than that, sir," said Haley. "It turns out Mike has become friends with a Central American woman who has sought refuge in the United States—let's not get into where or how. The why is very real and serious, believe me. She was the wife of a regional politician who was murdered, probably by the government's secret police. What I'm afraid of is that her situation could be a politi-

cal mess. This Willoughby guy has threatened to have her and her two little children taken into custody by the INS or the FBI and deported. If that were to happen, she would be in immediate danger, probably life-threatening danger, if she were returned to her country. But, given the whole political situation down there vis a vis our government—and the fact that if the press were to get hold of this story, we could have an embarrassing situation. In the worse case, of course, she could be killed. But it's also possible that any attempt to arrest her would become an international incident and an embarrassment to the President.”

“I don't like the sound of either of those scenarios, Jim,” Bush said.

“I didn't think you would, Mr. Vice President,” replied Haley. “Willoughby doesn't seem to care about the consequences. But he's figured out Mike would care, really care, if this were to happen. It's the carrot—no—it's the stick Willoughby's using on Mike. We're afraid the Secretary will get sold on this idea while Mike's being coerced into going along to protect her. Seems like our guy here is willing to risk the brig to disobey a direct order from the DoD to comply, but he's not willing to risk this woman's life. Did I get all that right, Mike?” Mike was nodding almost nonstop at this point.

“Son of a bitch!” the Vice President said as he looked at Mike. “That rotten son of a bitch! I'm sorry for the language gentlemen, but this is unsatisfactory. Barb hates it when I get this mad and start cussing, but, dang it, when I hear about somebody on our payroll in a position of authority in any part of the government acting this way, it down right upsets me!”

“Uh, yes sir. I kind of thought you'd feel that way,” Haley said.

“Mr. Vice President.” It was Mike talking now. “I think Dr. Willoughby has good intentions at the core of his plans for this mission. He's been chasing after a silver bullet to solve the ultimate intelligence problem, to get into the mind of the enemy anywhere on Earth. He thinks he's found the solution and he's being ruthless in trying to execute it. I suppose if I was in his position, knowing what he knows

about me—which is only the tip of the iceberg, I assure you, I’d probably be doing the same thing.”

“Except you wouldn’t be acting like an asshole! Excuse me, sir, I apologize for the profanity,” said Haley.

“We Texans call ’em as we see ’em, Jim. I have a daughter-in-law who’s an immigrant to this great and generous country of ours. My own grandchildren speak their mother’s native Spanish and our good old American English. I’m very proud to have them in the family and I love them dearly. And, as you both know, Dr. Minh, out there with Barb, has set the world on fire ever since she set foot on these shores. If I remember correctly, she was one of those thousands of South Vietnamese who were evacuated from Saigon in the final days of the war. Just look at what she’s accomplished for her new country: Ph.D., NASA astronaut. Can you imagine if we’d booted her back to the Communists?

“As I listened to you talk, Jim, I thought briefly about the importance of our immigration laws and, for an instant, I thought about some of our political goals down there in Central America that don’t always make things look right, but then I thought about my own family and, well, I got the picture you were painting for me. I know there are Hondurans and Guatemalans being sheltered by religious groups and in the underground all over this country. You can imagine how little we want to round these folks up and send them home, knowing what would be waiting for them. I don’t want that to happen to this family the Commander knows, but I can well imagine the unstoppable events once an official of importance in the government puts the INS on the track of someone like that.

“I don’t know very much, because you haven’t told me very much, about this ‘experiment’ this Dr. Willoughby wants to do, but I do know you, Jim, enough to trust you with the stick and rudder up there doing barrel rolls and stall spins. You and Beverly are like family. And you, Mike, I don’t know you very well, but I know there’s truth in those eyes of yours. And I can see the concern. I don’t know whether

this Willoughby is a professional Senior Executive Service guy or a political appointee. I'm afraid it's probably the latter and I hate to think he got there through some connection with the boss, or God forbid, with my staff. What this would mean is that I'd probably have to check with the boss to make sure he isn't a close personal friend before we fire his ass."

"We didn't come to get him fired, sir. We just figured that at some point, the SecDef and my boss, the NASA Administrator, would be duking it out over this, probably in front of the President. I don't know the President well enough to get invited to his home this close to Christmas, but I sure do thank you for letting us spell out this situation to *you* tonight, sir. And that's what we came to say. If there's any way we can head this thing off before it gets to the President, or if we can stop this thing gracefully when it does get there, I believed I had to get your support. It's presumptive as hell, but this can't be stopped without your help, and I apologize for this intrusion."

"Jim, you don't need to apologize and you have my support. I don't think we broke any security rules here tonight and we only bent the chain of command a little bit. Mike, please write down on that pad there the exact details of your Central American family's situation. I can guarantee their safety. You have my word on it."

"Thank you, sir," said Mike. "You can't imagine how relieved I am. And, sir, I do intend to say no to Dr. Willoughby tomorrow. I'll then take the consequences of disobeying what could be a direct order from Dr. Willoughby."

"There won't be any consequences, Commander. Hell, by tomorrow, there might not even be a Dr. Willoughby to worry about." And the Vice President smiled his warm, sideways smile, and shook hands with both Mike and Admiral Haley, now, as friends all around.

"Jim, is there any need to bring in Dr. Minh?" Bush asked.

"At this point, I don't think so, Mr. Vice President," Haley replied. "But at dinner, I think she and Mike can tell us about that hairy shuttle flight. Scary as hell, what happened up there. But Amy and the whole

crew did a fantastic job in recovering from the power shut-down. And in spite of it all, she managed to complete all the test objectives of the cargo bay astronomical telescope. She and Mike are both experts on the free-flying space telescope that's being built out in Sunnysvale to go up on the shuttle in a couple of years. Amy can describe the significance of that program to astronomy. We're going to be re-writing the textbooks every year once that observatory gets up there."

"It's costing a lot of money, if I remember correctly, Jim," the Vice President said, with a hint of skepticism.

"By the time Amy gets done with you tonight, Mr. Vice President, you'll be going to Capitol Hill yourself to shake the money out of Congress," Haley said.

Aha, Mike thought to himself—Admiral Haley's amazing. He's working on killing two birds at the same time tonight; kicking his dilemma and Maria's situation upstairs to NASA's next senior in command, and cementing the White House's support for the Space Telescope program, a program that was growing in cost and yet had unbelievable potential to change the face of space science. Knowing that Haley had hatched this whole plan on the spot in Willoughby's meeting, he gave the Admiral a knowing look and got a half smile in return.

"But, Jim. Did we really do the right thing to keep Dr. Minh out of this conversation?"

"Mr. Vice President, Amy Minh brightens any room she's in and I wasn't exactly sure how this little talk was going to go. So I brought her here as one of Mike's friends to elaborate on a few points about space if we had needed to. And I figured she and Mike might have a few things to talk about later. If Mike isn't going to go snooping around down on Earth to read the minds of the bad guys, I thought we might just figure a way to get him to poke around in the stars. That's something Amy knows a whole lot about. And that's what NASA is supposed to be doing in the first place."

“Good plan. I just figured for a minute there that maybe she and our good Commander here are, well, an item.” He said this with a wink.

“Oh, they’re a good team, sir, but they’re crewmates and I presume good friends, and they’ve got a lot in common. Do I presume right, Mike?”

“She’s a great crewmate and a good friend, sir. And, yes, I’ve got a lot to talk about with her. And it won’t be classified!”

“Mike,” said the Vice President, “I don’t know what to make of what I’ve heard here tonight about this out-of-body experience stuff. In any other circumstance than the one we’re in here, with any other people talking about it, I’d pretty much scoff at the idea. I’ve read about this stuff and I don’t understand it. Sounds like hooey. Part of me wants to just forget about this conversation, other than the practical issues about this guy in the Pentagon and this Guatemalan politician’s wife, of course. Another part of me is curious, intellectually curious, I guess. I think there are things in this world—hell, things in this universe—that we just don’t understand. Mike, I hope you figure out what really happened to you. Some day, I’d like to hear more about it and just maybe I’d learn something, but, gentlemen, I think we’re done here. So you do what you need to do over there with this Dr. Willoughby, and I’ll make sure that nobody bothers this woman. Thanks for coming to see me on this and, Jim, thanks for trusting me with this off the wall stuff.” They all stood up and hands were shaken all around.

“Let’s say,” said Mr. Bush, “we rejoin the ladies. Anybody hungry? We’ve got a Navy cook here who does everything good right down to the Navy bean soup, but he doesn’t do broccoli. Nope, we’ll never know whether he knows how to cook that vile stuff,” he said with a laugh at an inside joke which neither Mike or the Admiral got, but both figured it was a joke which was between the Vice President and himself.

And, as if without any kind of signal, the door opened and there were Barbara Bush and Amy Minh, wine glasses in hand, deep in discussion on the living room couch. Like old friends—like new friends.

Dinner in the brilliantly lit dining room was the best tasting Navy chow Mike had ever had. And, to no great surprise, no broccoli was served.

CHAPTER 31



Naval Observatory—Past Midnight on Thursday Morning, December 19th

Amy and Mike were shivering in the barely heated enclosure for the Naval Observatory's twenty-six inch refracting telescope. Through the open slit in the domed roof through which the telescope was pointing toward the sky, Mike could see the clouds had cleared and the sky twinkled with stars.

"So, Amy, why don't you show me the Christmas Star? You figured out how to use this thing and you've got your doctorate in astronomy. Which one of those twinkling stars up there is going to lead the Magi to Bethlehem tonight?"

"Well, Mike," said Amy, examining the telescope's controls. "I guess they're all Christmas stars tonight. You pick some and we'll look at them."

After dinner, Barbara Bush had called Captain Steve Mautner, the observatory's Superintendent, and as he lived right there in Navy quarters on the grounds, he was more than happy to come over to his seldom-seen neighbor's house and meet two astronauts wanting to take a peek through the telescope. Although it was almost eleven, the Captain looked fresh and enthusiastic in his long blue uniform overcoat and

white hat with scrambled eggs on the visor when he knocked on the Vice President's door. He brought Amy and Mike in tow for a tour of the observatory. He took them right to the telescope's building, but before bringing them inside the domed structure, he went in briefly and turned on the heat. Just a little bit of heat, he explained, so there wouldn't be any thermal distortion of the mirrors or of the air in the body of the telescope when they came back. Then he said he had a treat for them.

They went gone up the front steps into the huge white marble structure of the main building, which, Steve said, was built just before the civil war to house the Bureau of Instruments and Navigation founded there by Lieutenant Matthew Fontaine Maury. Maury, he went on to explain, was the most famous son of Spotsylvania, Virginia and was called the "Father of Modern Oceanography." Maury had gone on to serve in the Confederate Navy, but his reputation and honor were alive and well today, even in the dead of night. Steve proudly showed Mike and Amy several of Maury's original notebooks, used to chart the world currents and establish oceanographic, meteorological and hydrographic observation standards that are largely still used today. The observatory, though, had moved on with the development of celestial navigation to house the most precise hydrogen maser clocks, the most complete and accurate maps of the stars, and the most elaborate mathematical models of the Earth's movement among the stars that existed anywhere on the planet. The telescopes at the observatory, he told them, weren't used any more for discovery. The light pollution of Washington, their low altitude above sea level and the soupy, humid air of the city and the relatively small size of the instruments had rendered even the twenty-four inch telescope almost useless for astronomy. It was *astrometry*, however, the precise mapping of the stars for celestial navigation, which was the order of the day...and the ongoing work of the Naval Observatory.

As Mike was walking through the corridors on their way back out through the building, he happened to notice a sign on an office door.

“CDR O’Malley,” it said. “Steve, hold it a minute. Is that Tom O’Malley?” he asked.

“It sure is. Do you know him? He’s my Deputy Superintendent. I’m a submariner, finishing my career here in this great shore duty job. But Tom, he’s an oceanographer and a meteorologist. In fact, I share this building with the Oceanographer of the Navy, Rear Admiral McGann, and his staff. Those guys are all oceanographic restricted line officers and Tom is on detail to me from the admiral’s staff.

“And Tom’s still a commander? I knew him when he was our ‘Black Cloud,’ our weather guesser, on KENNEDY a few years back. He was a Lieutenant Commander and I was just a Lieutenant then. Kind of figured he’s be a Captain, or a TV weather guy, by now.”

“Tom’s a great guy and a terrific officer. In terms of years of service, he’s right up there with my own year group, but something happened back there somewhere. Maybe a bad fitness report or something. Great guy though. Pretty cool you know him.”

“Yeah, he *is* a great guy,” Mike said with a smile. Secretly, he realized he knew what had happened to Tom to screw up his career—that damned radiosonde. What a small world, he thought! “Tom and I sure had some great times together—except for the fact that he snores something terrible,” Mike added.

“And *you* snore too, swabbie!” chirped Amy with her most dazzling smile, remembering her trying to sleep three feet away from him floating in the shuttle’s mid-deck.

With her snoring comment in mind but not knowing the context, Captain Mautner put the two and two of Amy and Mike together and got the wrong answer. So he dropped the subject and took them out to the telescope facility.

And here they were. Steve had turned them loose to use the powered-up telescope as long as they liked, trusting Amy, who quickly showed that she was familiar with it’s controls, even though the instrument was very old. It was, the superintendent had said, the telescope which had been used by Asaph Hall to discover Deimos and Phobos,

the moons of Mars in 1877. Amy the astronomer hadn't known this piece of trivia, but it was clear she'd spent plenty of time shivering and peering up into countless dark skies with, and without, a telescope. They were now alone.

"Amy, Admiral Haley obviously brought you here for a reason. Did he tell you why?" Mike asked.

"He said you had some questions about astronomy, but to be more precise he meant cosmology from how he described the questions you might have. He figured I might be able to help. I'm going to be honest—I was flabbergasted to be invited on a few hours notice to show up at the home of the Vice President of the United States. Hey, just like you, I've shaken the President's hand and the Vice President's too. Everybody likes to be seen with an astronaut, huh? Big whoop! But it *was* a big whoop to be here tonight and to see you and the Admiral lock yourself in a room for some kind of powwow, and a serious one too from the look on your face when you arrived. And then for me to have a one-on-one with Mrs. Bush! She's an incredible woman, Mike! It's a thrill I'll never forget. And you and me, buddy, we've had some big thrills lately, haven't we?"

"Yeah, I guess we have."

"Big time! So here I am flying in from LA, where I was getting ready to kick back with my mother and other family members during the Christmas down time from the NASA PR tours, and next thing I know, I'm getting met at the airport by the Deputy NASA Administrator and driven directly, do not pass go, to the home of the Vice President. Well, if I came here to answer your questions about the universe, right here and right now is as good a place as any. Or how about looking at some stars—or how about a planet or two? I can probably find you the Orion Nebula in about five minutes. Or how about the Andromeda Galaxy? You want to look, or you want to talk? Or, heck, maybe I'll get lucky. Want to make out?" And they both laughed.

"Amy, when I want to get lucky, you'll be the first one to know, OK?" And then Mike turned serious. His expression brought Amy

back down too. She sat down on the observer's seat on the rotating telescope assembly and said, "What's really on your mind, Mike?"

Mike and Amy did actually look at some stars. They were brilliant specks of light. She found Andromeda and there it was, a beautiful spiral of stars and worlds. He'd already been there, though, and yet it looked a little different tonight. He'd been there as it actually was a month ago and here he was tonight, but seeing it as it *had been* millions of years ago when it beamed its photons out in all directions across the light years of space until that light made it down through the soup of Earth's atmosphere and through the tiny thirty inch wide tube of this telescope and off mirrors and through lenses until it hit his mortal eyes.

And while they searched the sky for one beautiful thing to see after another with Amy's expertise in knowing just where to look, Mike began to tell her about his own recently experienced understanding of what is out there. He didn't hold anything back. At one point, she tried interrupting to establish that she, like so many space scientists, didn't believe in the traditional notion of God that Mike used as a kind of frame of reference to his narration, but then she realized neither did he. Not anymore.

When he paused, she actually was able to help clarify things for him. She told him that an observer looking only at the clues the universe sends out—as cosmic rays, or gamma rays, or X-rays, or as ultraviolet, visible, or infrared light—can only see things that happened a very, very long time ago. She said that the very beginning of *Star Wars* “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far way,” was a really good explanation of the limitations of observing the universe. A space traveler could never really take his or her body out there among the stars faster than the speed of light, *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* warp speed being no more than science fantasy and not true science fiction, she explained.

But was what Mike was telling her science fiction or fantasy, she asked herself? Was this man truly dreaming of finding the edge of the universe, the place beyond which the matter flung by the Big Bang had not yet reached? She told him her training would lead her to say it was

impossible; that there was no leading edge of space. She described the expanding universe as a balloon, on the surface of which all the stars and galaxies and stuff of the universe was dotted, and how as the balloon is inflated, every single dot on the balloon's surface moved further and further away from every other single dot. She could tell he was unsatisfied with that analogy. He asked how the three dimensional space our solar system sits in among the stars of the Milky Way with stars in every direction and other galaxies beyond and more galaxies beyond them could bear the slightest resemblance to a balloon's surface. She admitted it was just a model, an example used to teach a concept. He said concepts were concepts, but *being* out there was another.

He told her many things about what he had seen in his spirit's perception during that fifteen minutes out in the universe. He told her about his sense of the seemingly limitless and yet randomly scattered abundance of life/spirit forms out there and the unifying presence of spirits who may either have been living people at one time or may have been from some other source, and how those spirits came to him—or more like he came to them.

He told her how his human mind was incapable of understanding the perfect knowledge and universal awareness he knew he'd been a part of. He said he prayed that when he died and his spirit was no longer held back by the cerebral tissue of his body, he would be able to completely understand this universal intelligence and the collective personality of beings not just from Earth, but from the most distant reaches of space. And he said he would be part of it for the infinity of time that lies ahead. That, he concluded, was probably what heaven was. Not a where, but a what. Forever.

When he finished, it was past two in the morning and they were both very, very cold. Amy and Mike hugged and she kissed him on the cheek. He had shared things from the depth of his heart without fear of being judged by his close friend and trusted crewmate. And he had shared things about the universe that, while she had trouble believing them herself, she knew Mike believed. *Truly* believed.

“And when we get back to Houston, Mike, can we keep talking about this stuff? I need to talk with you about some little details like the theory of general relativity and quantum theory...just minor details. You know, down here with our telescopes and our computers and our theories, it looks to us like the universe is expanding at almost the exact rate which can either keep expanding forever or which can succumb to the pulls of gravity and collapse the whole thing back to a singularity. That’s pretty miraculous, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, but miraculous is a word I won’t make fun of ever again, Amy.”

“Did you know we can only find enough matter to make up about twenty percent of the stuff it would take to explain how the universe works according to the generally accepted theories?”

“So there’s some other stuff out there, huh?”

“Mike, there’s a lot of stuff out there which we don’t know anything about. In fact, there are brilliant men like Stephen Hawking and Roger Penrose, brilliant theoretical astrophysicists, who can’t agree on how the big bang happened or what happens next. They can’t even agree that time only runs in one direction, or at least will keep running forward forever.”

“Seems to me, Amy, like time only moves forward, with us in it—except what I’ve been telling you is that it’s like I was moving around out there without it taking any time at all.”

“I’m trying to understand this, Mike and I’m going to have to use some technical language. While we humans with our human senses and telescopes and the like can only observe on this side of what we call the event horizon because of the spacetime contortions of the universe, you could go out there into the universe as if it was *frozen still* and you could see anything as it is right now?”

“I guess that’s what I’m saying, sort of. I know I wasn’t seeing because that would mean my eyes would be catching light and sending imagery signals to my brain. What I think is that somehow my brain was able to put together a picture-like mind’s eye view of things, not

from light, but by awareness of things in their spatial relationship with my point of view and each other. I know that you can't see anything in any wavelength of the electromagnetic spectrum until the signal that's being carried by that light beam or radio wave or X-Ray gets to us. That's what you mean by event horizon, right?"

"Right. You can't see anything until the horizon of the event's happening reaches us at light speed, and the light is being bent by gravity by all sorts of things out there, this is what we call spacetime. In a black hole, the event horizon is a more meaningful term, and more correctly used. Because light and other electromagnetic energy can't escape the tremendous gravitational pull, you can never observe over that event horizon because the observability of the event never reaches you. All visibility of what's happening in the black hole stays there. And, if you believe Einstein—and everybody pretty much does because none of the pieces of this relativity theory have ever been disproved by observations—you can't get into a spaceship and launch yourself out there at or beyond the speed of light, because you can't poke through the event horizon without distorting time itself...and that's not physically possible. Or so the theory goes. I've probably explained it poorly, Mike. I'm sorry."

Amy could see that Mike was struggling too.

"Amy, you're losing me. I'm just glad I could share with you something I don't think I can ever share with anybody I don't completely trust. What I'm telling you, according to the science world, *can't* have happened to me. I'm sorry I'm not the kind of guy who's going to try to explain it to the world because I'd sound silly and I'd be classified as a nut."

"You're right about that, Mike, and you're also right about sharing it with me. You can trust me. Although I have lots of questions about what you think you've seen, I'm not at all sure if I do or if I don't believe you. People having dreams and then believing that what they remember happened in them aren't all that uncommon. I don't know a lot about dreams. I almost never remember what I dreamed for more

than a few minutes after I wake up, if at all. So I guess I want to spend time with you talking more about it. I've spent years and years studying about the universe and trying to understand people like Hawking. As brilliant as they are, I know there are a lot of things that they don't know...and that maybe you might know now. We need to talk about it, Mike. And besides, you're my friend. A really close friend. Thanks for trusting me, really. I won't let you down by spilling the beans to anybody. You decide who you want to tell this stuff to, but please don't stop sharing. I suspect that tonight, we've just hit the tip of the iceberg. I think just maybe you and I could put my astronomy and your observations together and maybe, just maybe, we can point the Hawkings of the world in the right direction. Or we'll figure out that you've just been having normal dreams that seem real. You owe it to yourself to try to figure out which. You willing to try, Mike?"

"Count on it. I've got a lot to learn. I'm dying to start reading books on astronomy and cosmology and you can help me to digest 'em."

"And let me add a few titles to your reading list, Mike. I think you need to spend some time with people like Hawking and Richard Feynman and the distinguished Dr. Einstein, but, it sounds like I should introduce you to some of my other friends...Kant and Neitche." And now it was Mike's turn to be surprised since these were the same kind of mystical writers that Brother Maurice had recommended, and he had never figured Amy for a philosopher, or even a religious person.

"I've been trying to keep this to the scientific side tonight, Amy," Mike said. "But you can tell this has been more of a spiritual experience, for me. I hope this aspect doesn't make me sound crazy. God, I'm tired of saying that to people."

"Not at all. I'm Buddhist, but I was sent to a Christian school in Vietnam, so I had to study the bible when I was little. As Vietnamese, though, I come from an ancient and wonderful society of very spiritual people. Asian religious culture and my Buddhist beliefs have their roots in the Hindu worship. Over two thousand years ago, the Vedas and then the Upanishads were the first real written scripture. Then, in

China, came the study of Tao, Confucianism, Buddhism, and later came Japanese Shinto. In Asia, we have a very rich culture of mythology, philosophy and cosmology. The journey of the soul is very much part of my life, as it is yours, Mike. We have a lot to talk about.”

“We sure do,” Mike replied.

“By the way, how’s Meghan? You haven’t mentioned her all night, but I know you saw her here yesterday. The Admiral told me he’s worried about you and her. I don’t know how he knows her, but I don’t think he approves of you two getting back together.”

“We’re not,” Mike said, surprised at this turn of conversation. And now Mike’s look said this was a subject which he didn’t want to go into. The brief shadow that fell over his face told her he missed being with a woman.

“So I’ve still got a shot at you after all, sailor boy?” she playfully said as she hugged him and then turned her face to his, closed her eyes, and reached to kiss him again. This time, he could clearly tell, it wasn’t going to be the kiss of “just friends.”

“Amy, I can’t,” he said. “This is going to sound awful, but...you mean too much to me as my friend to turn this into something else.”

Amy opened her eyes and an instant, the faintest instant, of disappointment slid off her beautiful face. She smiled and then began to laugh gently. “Just checking, Mike. Thanks for being honest with me. And you’re right. This is going to be the start of a whole new kind of friendship for us. Thanks for not letting us blow it.” And she hugged him again. “Now, let’s get out of here. I’m freezing and you know I need my beauty sleep.”

“That’s one thing you don’t need, but let’s find someplace to crash. Ooh, that’s a lousy expression for us space people, isn’t it?” She nodded her agreement as she took his hand and they headed back to his rental car, she having arrived earlier that night with the Admiral who had long since headed home to bed.

They were both quite as he drove to the Willard, still his favorite hotel.

“Rooms at this time of night? It’s Christmas time,” the midnight shift desk clerk had said, but in the end, he admitted that they did have two very small rooms available, even though they were officially fully booked. “But,” he said with a big grin, “there’s also one large suite available, the presidential suite, that could be offered.” The clerk had recognized them as astronauts from all the recent TV coverage of the near disaster in space, and they certainly qualified for the very best suite, and maybe they only needed one room the way they came in together in the middle of the night. Mike and Amy looked at each other for about five seconds while they thought about sleeping in a *presidential* bed. Then they smiled, laughed, and took the separate rooms.

They both slept past Willoughby’s deadline that came and went at ten. Mike was well aware that he’d miss it as he finally went to sleep in the pre-dawn morning, but he knew what he would do and he somehow knew it would turn out just fine.

Before a late lunch with Amy, Mike called Meghan at work and she was frantic. Did he know they were expected in Willoughby’s office over two hours ago? Where had he been last night? When would he be coming back to her apartment? What was going to happen? What the hell was he going to do?

He asked her to go see Willoughby for him this afternoon, and to just say one word. “What word, Mike?” she asked, afraid she knew the answer.

“No.”

Before she could recover from her confusion, he wished Meghan a very merry Christmas. He said he was sorry, but he couldn’t explain right now.

“Will I see you tonight, Mike?” she asked, recovering somewhat.

“I’m sorry, Meghan, but I can’t. It was fantastic to see you again.” And Mike searched to find the words. Finally, he said, “I still love you, Meghan. The way you are. And the way we are.”

“That doesn’t sound good, Mike.”

"Meghan, we've had something special and I'm grateful to God for it, but we're not going to end up together again. We both know it, don't we? It's time to move on. I'm saying no to Willoughby and you'll have to trust me it's going to turn out all right. I love you, Meghan." He hesitated for a moment, but he knew he had to say it: "It's time we start talking about a divorce and an annulment."

"Oh, Mike, I'm so sorry," she said. And she was, but she knew.

"I am too. Thanks for taking the message to Willoughby for me. I promise we'll stay in touch, and not just about the divorce. God, I hate that word! But, Meghan, Merry Christmas again. I won't be able to come back tonight. I'm heading out of town. Take care."

"Goodbye, Mike. I love you."

But Mike had one more question for her. "Meghan?"

"Yes, Mike." Was there hope, she asked?

"Meghan," and he hesitated. "This is going to sound like a silly question right now."

"What is it?"

"What did you think of the book *Tom Jones*?"

"That's a crazy question. I don't know...I guess I liked it. Why?"

"When did you read it? I'm sorry, Meghan, but this is a pretty important question and I can't explain why."

"I think I read it back in high school. I remember because I wasn't supposed to be reading stuff like that, but a copy was being passed around. Yeah, I'm pretty sure I read it when I was a junior. Mike, this is a crazy thing to be talking about. You're leaving me again and asking for a divorce and I don't know what's going on with you."

But Mike was smiling from ear to ear. It was all true. He'd seen Meghan reading that book on that dark night so many years ago. This was the first time he really knew and really believed it with his whole heart!

"Thanks, Meghan. Sorry, I can't explain. I'm sorry for everything."

"Don't be sorry, Mike, but—but nothing. 'Bye."

"Goodbye Meghan. Take care of yourself. I'll call."

And as he hung up, he wiped a tear from each of his eyes. A part of his life was over, but then again, so much was just beginning. He knew it was real—all of it.

Before returning to the table and his lunch with Amy, he called the Admiral's office. When his secretary put Vice Admiral Haley on the line, Mike told the Admiral of his having sent word through Meghan to Willoughby that he wouldn't participate in the project.

"Good for you, Mike. I'm glad you're taking the good advice you got last night. What about that son of a bitch, Willoughby? What do you think he's going to do?"

"I'm saying no and I don't really care, Admiral. You're right. I got some great advice from a great man last night. And that's all thanks to another great man. Thank *you*, Admiral!"

"You're welcome, son. What're you planning on doing now? Are you heading back to Houston to finish the debriefing of the Shuttle flight?"

Mike said he planned to go back to the Johnson Space Center right after New Year's Day. Haley didn't ask for any more details. He knew Mike knew what he was doing and where he was going and that he'd be just fine.

"OK, Mike, I'll call the JSC Center Director. He'll pass it on to the troops to expect you back in a couple of weeks or so. You thinking about anything special you might want to do in NASA now? Between flights, that is? Amy have any ideas?"

"We're going to work something out. I'll keep you posted and let you know if I need any more help. Thanks again, Admiral."

"You guys have a good Christmas."

"You talking about me and Amy, sir, or about me and Meghan?"

"You figure it out, Mike. You figure it out. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you and Mrs. Haley too, sir."

Mike and Amy dined in the Willard Room and then he took her up on her invitation to go to LA with her for the holidays. He was a happy man as he flew out of Dulles that night with her on a commercial

flight. Not as much fun as the T-38 rides, but the relaxing flight was time to mull over the one thing left on his mind. One very important thing.

CHAPTER 32



Arlington, Virginia—Thursday Morning, December 19

“HE SAID WHAT?”

“He just said to tell you ‘no,’ Sir.” Meghan braced herself for another shouted outburst from the beet-red Howard Willoughby.

“I told the son of a bitch right here on Wednesday that he was to be here this morning, ready to go to work on PIANO and, by God, he’s going to do it. Where is he?”

“I don’t know, sir. He called me and yesterday afternoon and asked me to come and see you and deliver this message.”

“Why the hell didn’t you call me yesterday, then?”

“I’m not sure. After he phoned me and hung up, I was a little shell-shocked and then I decided I needed to try to talk some sense into him. I think this is a unique opportunity and I know it’s important to the intelligence program. So I called everywhere I thought he might be. I found out he’d stayed at the Willard last night, but he’d already checked out. He did say he was leaving town and so I called the Astronaut Office in Houston and some of our mutual friends. Nobody knows where he is.”

“Did you call that son of a bitch, Haley?”

"Yes, sir, I did. The Admiral just told me to deliver Mike's message to you, whatever it was." (She felt that the man deserved a better title than Willoughby had used, so she emphasized the word Admiral.)

"Did that...that idiot say anything else?"

"Yes, sir. The Admiral (again, with emphasis) said to just pass on whatever message Mike gave me for you."

"Damn it, damn it, damn it! That son of a bitch! (turning to his deputy) Colonel Hansen, how do I order him to do this? Get Watson back in here. I want to get the wheels turning to arrest that woman hiding up in Vermont. I want her in custody so I can tell that son of a bitch who's in charge here. I want action, goddammit!"

Meghan was stunned. What ran through her mind wasn't what might happen to Mike or to the woman in Vermont. She wondered what this might mean to her job, to her security clearance, and to her future. She knew she'd really lost Mike again and this time for good. She stood there now, expecting to see the full weight of the Office of the Secretary of Defense come down on her and on him. And she braced herself.

But the explosion never happened.

"Uh, Dr. Willoughby?" It was Colonel Hansen speaking.

"What is it?" Willoughby spat.

"It's over, sir."

"What's over, goddamnit? Where's Watson? Why aren't you as goddamn mad as I am? Let's get going Colonel!" He was positively seething now.

"Howard, I'm not getting Watson and I'm not going to get this woman deported. And neither are you. Although I personally think it's unfortunate, there's not going to be a Project PIANO using Commander St. Pierre or anybody else. It's not going to happen. It's just not going to happen."

"What the hell are you talking about Dave?" Willoughby seemed to be regaining control and his voice was returning to a lower tone. "We can make this son of a bitch play ball. Let's get going on doing it!" He

looked at the Colonel intently, as if willing him into action, but still surprised to have been contradicted by his mild-mannered and always cooperative deputy."

"No, sir, we're not," Hansen said.

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I got a call from the White House this morning. The call was from a friend; a National Security Council staffer. The woman is an Air Force Brigadier General I've known for years. She told me that somehow, either the President or the Vice President—she wasn't really sure which—found out what's going on. The bottom line is that I was told to tell you that if Commander St. Pierre rejected your offer of a role in some 'special program,' that's all they said, some special program, then the program was not going to happen."

"Yeah, but they don't know we have the hammer of the Gonzales woman, do they?" Willoughby said with his malevolent sneer returning.

"Well, sir, apparently they do. I was told to tell you her situation was known to both the White House and to the INS and steps were already being taken to grant her political asylum and permanent resident alien status. She's getting a green card. Somebody high up is taking care of this lady."

"How the hell did that happen?" he fumed. "Is that all, Dave?"

"No sir. I was told I should be prepared, should you try to take any action, action of any kind, against Commander St. Pierre or this woman, then I should be ready to accept your resignation on behalf of the Secretary of Defense."

"Bull shit! Absolutely not! They can't do that. I'll take this to the Secretary. I'll take this...I'll take this to the *press*, goddamnit!" And Willoughby literally looked like he was ready to explode. His red face was beginning to turn a shade of purple.

"No, sir, you won't. In fact, if you mention this subject outside of this room, you'll be violating the nondisclosure form for PIANO that you signed and I signed, and Vice Admiral Haley signed. I also talked

to Admiral Haley this morning. He somehow thought you'd be leaving. He, and I will be watching you and if you so much as breath the words 'PIANO' or 'out-of-body experience' or the name Michael St. Pierre ever again, you'll be making little ones out of big ones at Fort Leavenworth. I never liked this assignment as your executive assistant, Howard. I finally get it that you are one nasty son of a bitch and I'm too proud of this uniform to work for you one day more."

"You can't be serious?"

"I am, sir. I am. I expect you'll be leaving the building immediately. We'll send your personal effects to your home. Your friend Major Watson is standing by outside the door to assist you to your car. He doesn't know it yet, but he's not coming back either. Goodbye, Dr. Willoughby."

"Is that all you can say to me, Colonel?" Willoughby was too confused and deflated, and afraid, to muster any more bravado in his tone or facial demeanor. He just stood there, numb and sweating.

"That's all, sir. Good day."

Meghan was still standing there, stunned, through this amazing exchange and turn of events. She realized she had absolutely no idea what to say or do.

"Thank you for your assistance, Meghan," said the Colonel. You have a merry Christmas. But she realized it wasn't going to be a very merry one at all.

C H A P T E R 33



*Journal of Michael St. Pierre, Sunday, December 22,
1985*

It's almost Christmas. I've flown to Los Angeles with Amy. She's amazing! She knows so much about the universe and now she knows more about me than just about anybody on the planet. I've never had much of a chance to get to know her before. And her mother is fantastic! She raised a daughter who's turning the world on end. I've been eating nonstop since we got here and I've probably gained five pounds. They say Italian mothers stuff their families like manicotti, but they've got nothing on Mrs. Minh!

Amy came into the astronaut corps two years after I did and, even though I've been impressed since the day she arrived by her intelligence, I've also had kind of a crush on her. With that long, straight, jet black hair and the million dollar smile, I can easily see why so many Americans fell in love with Vietnamese women during the war.

Amy is as smart as she is beautiful. I opened up to her, not just on the technical and scientific side of my observations out there in the universe, but also on a spiritual level. We shared some very intimate talk the other night back in Washington. It's amazing how Jim Haley had the insight to ask her to come to the Vice President's house. I

know now he must have had some kind of sixth sense (interesting metaphor, given the stuff I'm putting into this personal journal). Anyway, he must have had some kind of insight into how this woman who risked her life with me in space and who understands so many of the wonders of the universe could help me to put my experience into perspective. I also shared the spiritual aspects of all this with Maria and it means a lot to me that she was able to receive it. She also listened and didn't judge me. And I could tell it wasn't going over her head. She's obviously a woman with great faith. How else could she have survived her personal hell? Thank God for her.

Amy let me talk about both the cosmological and the mystical aspects of my out-of-body experiences. Maybe it was because she was there in the shuttle, sleeping right next to me at the time, but I've discovered that Amy, like Maria, is a very spiritual person. She's a scientist, of course, and a great one. Maybe, it's because—and the element of Eastern religion is part of it—she was able to help me to put things into place.

So there it is: Amy and Maria, two very special women from a Christian and non-Christian perspective have helped me to put thing in place and see more clearly who I am. But there's more to sort through.

Maria shows up in my life (and I show up in hers, for that matter) at a time when I'm vulnerable and need someone with whom to unburden my soul. I end up falling for her, but is this really love or is this an emotional rebound from Meghan. Is my attraction toward her spirituality mislabeled as love? I find her to be someone I can talk to and share deeply with. Is it possible, given how little time I've known her that I do love her? I don't know.

And there's Meghan. It wouldn't be honest not to admit I still love her and I guess I always will, but where Maria looks with me, at me, and around me with eyes open to possibilities, Meghan is...what? She's intelligent, capable, practical, and ambitious. She's perfect, but not perfect for *me*, in spite of all we've shared. We weren't emotionally

intimate. Maybe that's why we grew apart. Her infidelity has been difficult for me to recover from and I realize now we have little to build our relationship on if we try again? Shared past experiences, physical passion—sex—but what else? There aren't any hopes and dreams for the future. It's time to really let go.

And Amy. Let's just say we're the best of friends. If there was anybody who should have laughed at me and told me I was on drugs, Amy should have been that person. My visions of the universe don't make complete sense to her because it flies in the face of so many of the astronomical theories she's studied. I've seen what I can call a three-dimensional, Cartesian coordinate universe, which is infinite, but not infinitely filled with *stuff*. She sees the complex universe of curved space and wormholes and spacetime event horizons, but she didn't blow me off when I was describing what I saw. At the observatory, we looked out there at the stars and we talked about a universe that doesn't have any boundaries. We talked about a universe where, floating in the infinite expanse of emptiness, there's this ball of matter...stuff...that's been flung out there.

She listened. I appreciate her continuing to draw me out. And it's not to prove me wrong and to tell me I must have just had some kind of hallucination. She wants to understand. And we're both understanding the universe better and better with every conversation. I thank God for her.

What about the Admiral? He's got the responsibility for answering to the NASA Administrator for what's going on with me. It's like I've become his little pet project. I've not wanted to say too much to too many people, except the people I think I can trust. He's telling me I'm smart to keep my mouth shut. I honestly believe he hasn't yet made up his mind. I've told him I was actually out there beyond the range of all the billion dollar observatories that NASA's building. The Great Observatories Program in space which the Admiral has to make sure still get funded: the Hubble Space Telescope, the Compton Gamma Ray Observatory, the Chandra Advanced X-Ray Astronomy Facility,

and the Space Infrared Telescope Facility. They're all coming along and need the support of the President and the Congress or they won't fly. He doesn't need some yahoo saying he's already been out there to the far reaches of the universe. No, I don't really think the Admiral believes my dreams were real, but, for him, it somehow doesn't matter.

If that's not enough to make him wonder about my sanity, I've even told the Admiral I know there's life out there. In my mind's eye, I've seen it. He's listened and he's supported me in my efforts to come to grips with it. But how could he possibly support me if I were to be shouting from the mountaintops that we're not alone in the universe? And yet, he's had the grace and the wisdom to let me share it with whomever I think I can share it with. And so far, that's a pretty short list. Look what he's done for me in taking a personal interest in giving me the time and opportunity to work it out myself. And his using his personal connection to get me in front of the Vice President of the United States to protect me—and to protect Maria whom he's never met—is a gift from God. God bless that man!

And what about *God*? In this journal, I've struggled from the very first lines typed into the computer up in Vermont to articulate what I've learned about my creator. I've heard Buzz Aldrin is a very religious man and after he and Neil Armstrong landed on the Moon, Buzz surprised Neil by asking for a private moment before opening the door to a new world and stepping onto it. In a zippered pocket to his space suit, he pulled out a packet, which he'd kept secret from every single member of the NASA organization. In it were a tiny prayer card, a sliver of unleavened bread and a miniature vial of wine. Buzz's first conscious thought after barely making the historic landing was to thank God and to receive Holy Communion. I've met him and he's a smart and extremely energetic guy. If someone hadn't told me this story, I might never have known this element of his personality and of his faith.

People know me as a pretty hard working and conscientious naval officer and astronaut. I'd be completely happy to also have people

know I'm a man of faith, but do I want people talking about Mike St. Pierre, "the religious zealot?" No, a thousand times no. My faith is personal. Admiral Haley knows this is how I want to keep it, but I can't deny I've been privileged to have more than a vision of God. I've had an *experience of God*. Maria has a sense of this truth. Amy too. The Admiral, I think, wants to believe it, but he's holding himself back.

I suspect there's one person on this planet that can come closest to a true understanding of what I'm talking about—that wonderful old man, Brother Maurice. He listened to me and smiled. He's been there. I think he goes there all the time. He's having an experience of God every day and I suspect it's not a whole lot different from what I've experienced. He shared the historical perspective of the great Western philosophers, but I think this came from his mind, a mind that has studied at the seminary, and a mind that continues to be expanded by reading great books. But his smiling understanding of what I was asking him about didn't come from his mind. It came from his heart and from his life of contemplative prayer. He's having the experience of God in his life.

Now, what of my experience of God? I've struggled with putting into words what I believe—not from what I learned in religion classes, but from what I've seen and felt out there in the presence of God. I want to try one more time tonight as I sit here on Amy's back porch. It's a beautiful southern California night. It's three days to Christmas. The stars are shining above me. God is out there and He's right here. I don't really need to have an out-of-body experience. I need to be quiet and listen.

So I think when I had my sleep experience in the shuttle, I had an experience of sensing the presence of others and of God. As my body slept, I had the experience of knowing I was in contact with the other people on the shuttle and then I had somehow left the shuttle and wandered through the planets and the stars. At no time, though, did I feel I was alone. I knew I was still in the presence of my crewmates, and also of many, many other people I knew had either died in the past or

were still alive in the present. I also knew I was in the presence of...“others” who weren’t of the Earth. I knew I was now part of a unifying, knowing, intelligence that told me not to be afraid. That told me to be peaceful. That told me He was part of it. I called out to Him and I knew He was with me. I called out to Ghandi and Martin Luther King and my deceased parents and knew they were all with me. It wasn’t as though I was communicating in words. It wasn’t language. It was contact. I just knew.

I now believe what was out there among the stars was not my body or my human senses, but my spirit moving from “place of perception” to another. I could be anywhere I wanted to be. And although time was passing, as my body was flying through space in the shuttle, my movement of this perception was at no speed at all. I just went there. The space shuttle was flying at thousands of miles per hour and that light from the distant stars and from our own sun was traveling through space at some incredible speed humans have measured—millions of miles an hour—but I was moving not just *faster*, I was moving *instantly*. I’m realizing I wasn’t moving at all, though. I was already there.

I think God doesn’t have to send us signals using light or radio waves, but He’s just always with us to whisper into our spirit’s ear the message that He’s here with us and in us. And our spirit is one with His, but I’m afraid mostly we’re not listening.

Out there everywhere is a glow. It’s a glow of spirit and it’s when we’re one with that spirit, we not only become part of it, but we share the knowledge and peace and joy which comes from knowing we’re safe in the one-ness. It’s our spirit, and not our body, which is made “in the image and likeness of God.” God doesn’t have fingers and toes and long white hair. Like Him, we have an intellect that can perceive Him, and perceive the future and the past, and right and wrong. And while our human body is only made up of cells just like the grass and trees and birds and goats, it’s our spirit which makes us like God and

one with God. Our ability to know this is, I guess, our proof that we're like Him.

So why doesn't every human being on Earth already know this? Well, it's clear to me that truly holy people like Brother Moe and the saints—they do.

But we “normal people” are so preoccupied with our physical lives and needs that we don't pay attention. Our spirits are inside of us, but they aren't getting nurtured, because we're not paying attention. I wonder if they grow stronger by moving toward good or grow weaker by moving away from good. Is God the ultimate good? Is evil just the horrible, black absence of good? True darkness? The spirit's place of perception seems to stay with the body while we're alive. Maybe the body needs to hold the spirit's perception with us to keep us alive and moving in the right direction. And so the spirit and body seem to work together using the free will God gives us. The free will may be another of the unique things which makes the human spirit different from a goat's, I guess. What happens when we die? When the human body wears out and gives up its claim on its spirit, is it that the spirit is either strong from doing good, or it's weak from evil? Is it weak from having made the free choice of darkness over light? Do strong spirits make it back into union with God and weak spirits, those who lack the strength of good, just fade into that lack, into the nothing that evil really is? Eternal light or eternal darkness? Heaven or hell?

Heaven isn't a place up there in the sky at all. It's the state of one-ness with the infinite understanding, joy, peace and love of God. And the not-one-ness that goes on forever is the deepest black of nothing. It's hell. And I'm guessing there's somewhere in between, but because the spirit that's not completely evil still has something, it'll ultimately make it to all the way back to the Light. Maybe the soul's experience in death is like coming out of a cave into the brilliant light of God's presence and the eyes need to be acclimatized—to become ready for life forever in that light. Who'd have thought the theologians may have the concept of purgatory more or less right after all?

Whew! I started off a week ago not being able to do anything more than start writing a good old Navy memo header and I'm wandering though my views on what God, heaven, hell...even purgatory for God's sake...are all about. I'm realizing that I've been reborn. I came down from space to a planet that isn't the same anymore. We walk around worrying about the weather, our next meal, or any number of pretty ordinary things, thinking they're important. But, what's important is that we open our eyes to the possibility that we're infinite beings just passing through this place in space and time. I made an important decision in turning down Dr. Willoughby. Now, here I am three thousand miles away from that world, but in reality the distance across the country is nothing but a blink of the eye. What lies ahead? Where will I go? What will I do?

CHAPTER 34



Holy Spirit Priory—Midnight, Christmas Eve, 1985

The little chapel was packed. The brothers had taken their place on chairs on either side of the altar. Local friends, who had been coming to midnight Mass for years here, and a few visitors from as far away as Burlington, Concord, and Boston had come early to claim a pew, sing Christmas carols before Mass, and generally share in the perfect warmth of this loving community on a snowy Christmas eve.

Maria and her children, Juan and Epéranza, were given a place of honor in the first row, immediately before the altar. The children were both excited to stay up so late but their frequent yawning gave way to falling sound asleep on the floor by Maria's feet.

She was wearing the bright and colorful traditional dress and shawl of her native country—precious things she had not been able to bring with her, but that had been given to her as gifts by the brothers who had managed to find them somewhere. This was the first time she had dressed up since coming here and the first time she had helped the brothers greet their guests for the services. Joy abounded.

Maria had been redeemed. Her Savior came into the world as a tiny baby for her and then, by His life and death for her, had redeemed her. She also felt redeemed by the healing love and protection of these won-

derful men of God. The words of gladness and praise in the songs they were singing on this glorious night reverberated deep inside.

She closed her eyes and smiled now, to nobody in particular, thinking of the man who only last week had given her keys to escape from her deep and horribly black hell. She was lost in thought when a familiar voice asked, "Excuse me, *senōrita*, is this seat taken?"

"Michael! You've come back?" she cried out.

"Yes," he said. "I came back."

She looked at him and smiled, the tears streaming down her cheeks. They reached out and hugged each other. He gave each of her children a pat on the head and whispered "Feliz Navidad."

"My Christmas Angel," she said, as they held each other's hands

"Your Archangel," he said. And they laughed in the joy and peace of Christmas. And each other. Perfect joy.

CHAPTER 35



International Space Station Alpha—Present Day

“You never tire of that view, do you, Misha?” asks Boris Korelenko, Mike’s fellow crewmember as they gaze through the viewing port at the Earth, passing two hundred miles beneath them.

“I never will. It’s surreal,” Mike replies. They are crossing the terminator, flying eastward into the darkness, and through the Earth-viewing window, Mike is watching another spectacular sunset that he knows will be followed by another sunrise in forty-five minutes. Circling the globe every ninety minutes means astronauts are privileged to see both a sunrise and a sunset on every revolution. In the usually stressful fourteen-hour workdays for the International Space Station crew, these visual delights are a wonderful bonus.

Boris, floating head-to-head with Mike, also gazes at the lights of France and Italy now below them as they swiftly pass over the Mediterranean Sea. He breaks the momentary silence.

“You know, many years ago when we were operating our Salyut space station and then later the Mir station, our cosmonauts spent a lot of time looking down at the sea at night, just like this, but I’m sorry to say it wasn’t always for recreation,” he says, regretting that last phrase—a mistake.

"I know," Mike replies, looking up at Boris, with the hint of a smile.

"What?" the Russian asks, with the surprise clear in his tone. "We...we don't share much about those days with you Americans, Misha. How could you know about activities on the Russian space stations?" He lapses into silence with a confused look on his face.

With his grin broadening, Mike jumps in, "How could I about what you were doing up here? Well, let's just say that I can't tell you how I know for the same reason you can't tell me what your guys were doing. That was another time, wasn't it?"

Boris continues to look at Mike in puzzlement. He is far too young to have flown on the Soviet Union's successful space stations that they had kept almost continuously manned almost continuously through the nineteen eighties and nineties, after the Americans' brief encounter with long duration space flight on Skylab in the mid-seventies. But it's well known in today's Russian cosmonaut corps that the Soviet space stations were operated for more reasons than conducting engineering, physiology, and science experiments. There were intelligence programs, which carried far higher priority. Boris knows that they were trying to determine what trained eyes in the sky could see, and that one of those experiments was to look for the bioluminescent glow caused by ships' wakes. He had been told that Soviet reconnaissance satellite technology lagged far behind that of the Americans, but they had something the Americans had seemingly given up on—people in space. If cosmonauts—all military officers—could see ships, then maybe they could see submarines. And finding ballistic missile submarines so they could be sunk before they could launch their missiles was the ultimate challenge for Cold War navies. So Boris is wondering what Mike knows and what he's thinking behind his grin. Misha is a naval officer, of course. Of course he may know about the experiments.

Mike knows he can't leave his friend hanging. And so, looking again at the Earth below, he offers what he thinks will get him off the hook without revealing classified information, while regretting that he'd hinted at what he knows.

“Look Boris, we always wondered why you guys were working so hard to fly your space stations and to keep them manned for so long. We now know how dangerous it was. You cosmonauts sure as hell earned all those medals we see you wearing. I guess we just figured that because we beat you to the Moon, you’d set your sights on doing something new and really big. It was sort of your payback time, I guess. Your country’s experience with space station operations made a lot of this possible,” he says, gesturing around the brightly-lit module. He wonders if he’s covered himself well enough, because he still can’t talk about his past in naval intelligence. Boris is really now a close friend—his only friend up here with him for the next few months—and he truly likes the man he trained with and is risking his life with.

He thinks back to the year he spent as an Ensign, fresh out of Intelligence Officer School, when he’d been sent on a special detail to naval intelligence and the CIA. He reflects on how he spent that time analyzing patterns of communication activity between the Salyut crews and Soviet ships’ positioning at sea. Clearly, they were coordinating observations to quantify what the crews upstairs could see. What was never proven was whether or not the cosmonauts were ever successful in actually seeing the bioluminescent “wake” of submerged submarines, and not just the bright streams left behind surface ships that were easy to see. So the U.S. Navy developed its own program to determine the vulnerability of its ballistic missile subs. Mike has always been proud of his role, no matter how minor, in helping to ensure the security of the best deterrent strategic weapon system the United States had. He had reasoned that anytime you dig a hole and put a missile in it, you’ve created a target. Fleet ballistic missile submarines were moving their holes 24/7/365 and they’d never be found, not even by the best combination of optical sensors and image processing—human eyes and brains.

And then, Mike remembers that’s not true. He knows that eyes aren’t really the best sensors at all. All those years ago, he’d passed up the chance to change his career into one of learning how to use his own spirit to do the Cold War surveillance job. Did I do the right thing, he

wonders? Might it really have worked? And he smiles again at the thought that it just might have. Doubts creep in that he did the right thing in rejecting Willoughby's plan. What a crazy plan!

"What's so funny, Misha?" asks Boris, noticing the look on Mike's face.

"Nothing. I was just thinking about the crazy days of the Cold War. You're a young guy, but I'm old enough to remember those days when I was at sea worrying about you guys—excuse me worrying about the Soviets. And now look at us up here together. Amazing, isn't it?"

"Da, Misha, da. Look, here comes the dawn again," Boris says, pointing ahead of them to the east.

"Yeah, the dawn's a great metaphor for what's happened since the Cold War ended; light out of the darkness. Pretty profound, huh?" Both laugh at the irony. And the two friends, now off duty for ten hours to relax, read, or sleep, continue to watch the world below, lost in their private thoughts. Mike reflects on the past few years.

Mike had taken on a kind of special, senior advisor role in the Astronaut Office at the Johnson Space Center. The astronauts had always been ready, and would always stay ready, to fly in space in spite of the danger. Mike's rock solid belief in the program and his faith in God had gotten him through the tragic loss of *Challenger* shortly after his own near-disaster on *Discovery*. But his faith in NASA was challenged again when *Columbia* tore apart on re-entry over Texas. He'd been a team player through both catastrophes, and neither he nor any astronaut had looked at the danger of their jobs and stepped back. He helped to coordinate the fleet of ships engaged in the recovery of *Challenger's* debris off the Florida coast, and he'd taken time off from his space station training to visit the thousands of volunteers in Texas who were walking hundreds of square miles, step by step, to recover the fragments of *Columbia*. People in the space program were family. What this family did together was important, too important to give up on.

After his 1985 flight in *Discovery*, Mike had flown only two additional missions, both trips to the Hubble Space Telescope to do repairs and to install new science instruments. He'd become an expert in about every aspect of the Hubble, spending weeks at a time on the road to NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center and the Space Telescope Science Institute in Maryland and to contractor plants in Northern California and Colorado. He was also a visiting scientist *ex officio* at the Lunar and Planetary Institute nearby in Houston. For a guy who was never officially trained in either aerospace engineering or astronomy, he'd become an accomplished expert at both. But he had a lot of help.

Mike's best friend at NASA, Amy Minh, had left the astronaut corps ten years ago to become a professor at the University of Arizona and had become famous in her field for publishing scientific papers about the universe that amazed even the most established and respected members of the astronomy and astrophysics community. Mike was never listed as a co-author, in spite of the ideas for papers that she continued to glean from their ongoing dialog. Mike was perfectly happy to feed her bits and pieces of his recollection and they agreed to keep it just between them. Miracles are still hard to explain.

Mike loved dropping by Tucson to see her every time he took his once or twice-a-year camping trip up into the Chuska mountains out there in Navajo country, an area almost totally lacking in vegetation—or electromagnetic energy—but offering him so much else. He'd take his wife and kids out there with him every so often, but they always said it was too cold and the ground was too hard and they couldn't enjoy the experience as much as he did. So he usually went alone. Each time was very special because he would allow his spirit to soar and in the process, learning more about spirituality from his new Navajo friends. His personal journal now ran to over a thousand pages, including the first pages recovered years ago from Brother Mo's sock drawer. Nobody had ever read it, but in writing it he came to grips with his experiences among the spirits of the world, just as he had when he began it in Vermont, so many years and so many "flights" before. He'd

offered to let Maria read it, but she understood that it was private. He shared everything else in their marriage, and that was enough for her.

"Are you getting another mission, Michael?" Maria had asked ten months ago with an expectant look, recognizing the huge grin on his face the minute he had come through the door. "Are you going to the Space Telescope again?"

"No, not to the Hubble, but I'm going to work in space again. I'm going to the station," he added.

"Oh my God," she said, and then calling out to their youngest child. "Joy, guess what? Dad's going to the Space Station!" A grinning, pony-tailed girl of fifteen ran into the room.

"Cool, dad! When?" their daughter asked, a beaming smile on her face, which reflected the delicate Hispanic features of her mother and the rugged all-American look of her dad.

"I'm launching in nine months. But I'll be gone for what's supposed to be either five or six months. We're still working out the details."

Maria broke in, "Michael, this is wonderful. I was starting to think you'd not be going up again. You're not getting any younger, you know," she added with a smile. Mike was now fifty-four, but was still not completely gray and was fit and trim from exercise and good eating habits. He always wanted to be ready. And now he was.

"I guess this shows that if you stay on the payroll in the astronaut corps long enough, they've got to figure out how to use you. And I think I might have gotten a little help up in Washington."

"Senator Haley? Do you think he told NASA to give you a mission, Michael?" Maria asked.

"Asked maybe. He sits on the Space and Technology Appropriations Subcommittee. And when he makes suggestions, people tend to listen. I don't know if he had his hands in this, but he called me today to congratulate me just a few minutes after I found out from the center director."

"The admiral knows everything, doesn't he, Michael?" She asked. Mike knew what she meant.

“He’s known all along. After he left NASA and started his political career, he kept his eye on me. Even though he’s not very senior in the Senate, he’s respected in Washington. At any rate, he and I’ve been trying to find a way for NASA to do a mission that’ll set me free again. This is it, Maria. I’m going out *there*. I can’t wait!”

Maria had become a politician herself. Once the young wife of a martyred political candidate trying to help the poor people of her country, she was now the second term Mayor of Clear Lake, a small city just southeast of the Johnson Space Center and home to most of the astronauts. The city had embraced Maria’s campaign message of compassion and practical social solutions. In her husband’s NASA career, in her children, in her social service, and in her very strong faith, Maria had found a calling worthy of her intellect and her passion. When she felt joy, she gave joy in return.

“Oh, Michael, I’m happy. You’ve shared so much with me what you’ve discovered about God and about our place in the universe. Like the brothers at the Priory, there are people of prayer all over the Earth who feel the presence of God by quieting their souls and listening. But Michael, you *know* that He put life all over the universe. Every time you fly into space, I pray for you, but I know you’re doing something important and you’re going out there with our Creator. Go with the children and me in your heart. We all love you, Michael.”

“It’s going to be a long mission, my love,” Mike said. “You guys OK with that? I’ll be back in time for Faith’s wedding and Jack’s graduation from the academy.”

“We’ll be fine. Won’t we, Joy?” The teenager nodded, but with more than a hint of apprehension. “And Espérance and Juan will be fine too,” Maria added, sounding none too sure.

And they are, Mike thinks, as he and Boris look ahead to see who will see Australia come into view first.

“Well, Misha, it’s time for me to go to bed. It’ll be another big day tomorrow. You should get some sleep too.”

“They’re all big days up here, Boris. You go ahead and turn in. I’m going to maybe sleep here again tonight.”

“Ah, you do love this optical port, don’t you?”

“I should, I helped design it,” Mike says, instantly regretting that he’s introduced a new topic which will keep Boris from floating off and leaving him alone.

“I think I heard that, but you’ve never mentioned it before. Did I hear correctly that your designers were going to build this station with only a few tiny windows, or maybe none at all? How did this wonderful window get here?”

“You got that right, Boris. To a mechanical engineer, all viewing ports are just imperfections in structural integrity. I kept reminding everybody that the station is up here for people to live and work in, and nobody wants to live or work in a building without windows, right? It’s a good thing I’m not an engineer; I see things a little differently.”

“Ah, but what a magnificent window we have, thanks to you, Misha. The Window Observational Research Facility—what a crazy name—WORF! Fifty point eight centimeters of pure optical-quality quartz, or fused silica, as the engineers like to call it. It was expensive, yes?”

“Yes, but that’s the whole point. If you’re going to have this big a ‘structural imperfection’ you’d better have a good reason—lots of good reasons. The WORF is officially here for scientific remote sensing experiments—and of course for people to look out of. Unfortunately, only the people are up here so far; the remote sensing instruments won’t be sent up until we get the shuttle flying again and more crewmembers on board. They’re coming. You know as well as I do that we’ll get the shuttle flying again soon. But for now, I love this window, especially since we don’t have all kinds of cameras and equipment blocking the view. I like sleeping here. It reminds me of when I used to go topside on the aircraft carrier and sleep under the stars. Goodnight, Boris. See you in a few hours.”

With a wave, his Russian friend floats off to his tiny personal enclosure and a few hours of much needed sleep, tucked into a sleeping bag and Velcro'ed to the bulkhead. Mike looks below to the brilliant blue of the Pacific Ocean. Sunset lies ahead and, in twenty minutes, a nighttime pass over the States. He's very tired himself. Good, he thinks to himself, it's good to be really tired. That's when it works best.

From a nearby locker, Mike pulls out a nylon sack and, opening its drawstring, he withdraws what looks like a rolled-up blanket and begins to unfold it. Its official designation is Radiation Protection Blanket, or RPB. Like the optical viewing port, this equipment had also been largely Mike's idea, an idea he had been pushing to get funded and flown for the past several years. And it's now flying with him.

The RPB is, when fully unfolded, a square "blanket" six feet-six inches on each side. But it's a very special blanket, the product of very precise design and manufacturing. It is also a very expensive one. At its core is a very thin and tightly woven fabric of hair-thin titanium alloy wire, each strand coated with lead. Bonded to it on either side is a very thin sheet of Kevlar-reinforced polymer plastic and another layer of nylon fabric to protect and seal in the lead and keep it from ripping. On Earth at one Gee, the blanket weighs about forty-five pounds, with most of that weight coming from the lead. Here, in the microgravity of space, it is weightless and can be quickly opened up and wrapped around the human body. It is totally opaque to light—and to radiation. It is designed to be a last line of defense in an emergency should there be a surprise outburst of radiation from on the sun—a sunspot—and it can potentially save astronaut lives. Three RPBs had been flown up to the ISS on the last re-supply shuttle mission before the *Columbia* tragedy. Mike was in the training pipeline to become expedition commander for the three-person crew of which would be next up to the station. Now, limited to the two seats on a Russian Soyuz capsule, the third seat reserved for precious cargo, Mike and Boris had been selected

to come up and were now here with the new device placed here to ensure their survival of a solar flare.

It isn't the danger of radiation from a solar flare Mike has in mind, tonight, though. Once he has the RPB unfolded and spread out, instead of wrapping himself in it, he anchors the four corners with Velcro equidistantly from the center of the porthole and slips between it and the window, his head centered in the circle of its frame. Pulling on a padded eye-shade against the reflected blue-green glow from the sea below him and inserting earplugs into his ears to deaden the constant whir of fans and beeps of computers, he settles in for his sleep period. This procedure has become a ritual for Mike on this flight when the timing is just right. Boris has wondered what it's all about, but he had decided that Americans were strange and how they sleep is their own business.

When Mike had said goodbye to Maria and their three children at Houston's George H.W. Bush Intercontinental Airport for his flight to Washington and onward to Moscow and the Baikonur launch site in Khazakistan, he had for the briefest moment remembered saying goodbye to Meghan on that pier in Norfolk twenty-eight years earlier. He's now thinking about this as he waits for sleep to come.

His sendoff from Houston was nothing like that muggy summer day on the pier in Norfolk, he remembers. This time, he is truly and deeply in love. Maria had cried when he was leaving, and so had he. It was so different.

Just as the International Space Station crosses again into the darkness of night, Mike falls asleep and is quickly deep in dream-sleep, such is his exhaustion from the long day of work he's had. Tonight, with his body shielded from the bombarding electromagnetic fields being generated by the tons of equipment that is the space station, his mind and his soul are free again. In their home and in their bed, Maria is waiting for him. He sees her there and strokes the hair on her pillow with his imaginary hand. He can't touch her, but he settles his spirit with hers,

and her lips form into a smile. His spirit soars in the depth of the love he feels for her, and from her—but all too briefly.

A thought passes through his mind; an inescapable thought. Mike has a realization that in twenty minutes, still during the darkness of night, the station will be flying over the Mideast. He asks, can I NOT use this unique opportunity to move his spirit there to do what destiny has finally placed me here to do? Can I fail to use this opportunity to serve my country and the world? It's still a very dangerous world and a lot of bad guys are out there. He wonders what can I do? What must I do? What will I do? He now knows in his heart that Willoughby had really been right all along. Mike had traveled all over the universe in a mere fifteen short minutes long ago. He now has another chance—a chance to enjoy this sublime moment or to share his gift to do something real and important. And he realizes that Admiral, now Senator Jim Haley may have wanted him to have this chance all along, and knew he would take it when he was ready.

Here and now with Maria, they find each other spiritually embraced in the perfection of love, together touching the face of God. Above them lies the universe, and ahead lies a new challenge of the unknown, here on Earth. Mike flies on into the dark, dark night, but knowing he isn't going there alone.

The End