

# **THE CRYSTAL SPIRAL**

**By**

**T.K. Lebeau**

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In the night  
When the stars cry out  
In the night

In the silent night  
When the stars die out  
In the blinding light  
Of the twining strand  
And man  
Can steer his course  
And knows that he can  
In the night  
In the silent night  
Take a quiet stand

Then step back  
Bend  
In the afterglow  
Of the even flow  
And know  
That each dream  
Is a choice  
Made by soul's  
Single voice  
That we dream to reveal  
All the spokes in each wheel  
Spin the spark into flight  
From the void  
Towards the light

In the night  
In the silent night  
Take a quiet stand

I.W. Riney

## Chapter One

Last week, rain fell gently and steadily over a three-day period and today fresh green shoots of grass poked their heads through the moisture-softened earth. Stunted evergreens, washed fresh and shiny, welcomed the sunlight with water plumped needles. Everything grew with quick, eager bursts. This summer, it seemed that all of nature adopted a new life and expanded by leaps and bounds. And, if Johnny Evans were to be believed, even the rocks were growing.

He first brought them to my attention yesterday. After he finished unloading veterinary supplies from his pickup truck, he walked over and sat on a shaded wooden bench on my stone patio. Pulling the bandanna from around his neck, he wiped beads of sweat from his wide brown face.

"Branch," he began. "Did you ever see something that you knew wasn't right? Something you had done one way, but now it's some other way?"

I handed him a glass of iced tea I'd brought from the house and sat down at the picnic table, facing him. Johnny and I had known each other for over twenty-five years, having met first as opponents in the schoolyard. We'd later become friends, growing as

close as each of us would allow the other to come. I stared at him now, watched him wipe his hands across his plaid flannel covered stomach. Johnny wouldn't understand the term "pragmatic" if I used it to describe him. He would tell me that he did everything the practical way; if it didn't make sense, he wouldn't do it.

"Memory plays tricks on all of us," I said.

"This hasn't got nothing to do with memory, Branch Hackworth. It's got to do with how I do things. For instance, if I built a driveway between two cliffs, I'd build it wide enough to get a pickup and a heavy trailer through it."

"Go on," I encouraged, as I watched him curl his thick fingers around the glass of tea. "I agree with you. It would be foolish, considering the amount of work involved, to do it otherwise."

"Would you?" he asked eagerly. "Really?" He stood up, still holding the iced tea in his left hand, and shoved the red bandanna in the back pocket of his faded blue jeans. "You got time?"

I nodded

"Well, follow me. I'm gonna show you something you won't believe."

I had all the time in the world. Too much time and Johnny knew that. But, in his Navajo way, he wouldn't remind me of the fact.

"It's not far," he said, as I followed him down the dusty trail to the corral. Looking ahead of him, over his shoulder, I saw his patchy red pickup truck parked in the road that led to the pasture. He pointed to a position about a hundred yards to the left of the pickup.

"You can see it now," he said. He didn't slow his pace and I looked in the direction he had pointed.

"That clump of boulders to the north of the corral?" I asked. "Is that what you're talking about?"

He pulled off his brown, sweat-shaped Stetson and wiped his forehead. Halfway turning to me, he nodded, again picking up his pace. Noonday sun beat down on my bare head and I felt moisture accumulate under my arms. It had to be important. From experience, I knew that Johnny Evans didn't do anything he didn't have to do during the heat of the day.

By the time we reached the road, I still had no idea what Johnny had tried to point out to me. The road that he and I had built several years earlier between the boulders and the corral stretched lazily in front of us, two parallel bands of packed sand separated by a narrow hump of darker earth sprinkled with small clumps of drying vegetation.

"Now," he said, slowing his pace as we turned the curve coming up on the corral. "Tell me what you see!"

I stopped dead still, astonished with the sight my eyes relayed to my brain. Johnny was right. We had graded the road between three house-sized boulders on the left and the fence that formed the north boundary of the corral on the right. I had driven my pickup down to the pasture and back twice daily for six years now, easily passing between the large red rocks and the corral. Puzzled, I stared at the narrow passageway.

"It's almost like someone moved the boulders towards the road," Johnny said. "I know I didn't build that road that close to them rocks."

I nodded slowly, still trying to make sense of what I saw. The rut formed by the left wheels of my truck when I drove to the pasture was only inches from the nearest red rock. Surely I would have observed that fact at some earlier time. As I stepped closer, I

knew that there was no way that my pickup, left wheel in the rut, could have passed by here. The nearest boulder, much too close to the road, would have ripped off the entire left side of the truck. "You think someone moved them?" I asked Johnny, knowing the improbability of the statement the moment the words left my lips.

"Naw," Johnny said, hooking his thumbs in the belt loops of his pants and rocking back and forth on heels and toes of his cowboy boots. "Them rocks weigh tons each. Besides, if someone could of moved them, there would've been sign around. Ground would have been scuffed. Rocks would have been scratched."

"What are you trying to say?" I demanded, staring at his inscrutable face, searching his shiny black eyes for expression.

He looked down at the ground and kicked a pebble with the sharp toe of his boot. He cleared his throat. When he laughed, the tone of the sound that came from his throat was shaky, nervous.

"Branch, the only way I can see this happening is that them damned rocks grewed."

\* \* \*

Kate Branigan reminded me.

After our conversation up at the corral, Johnny Evans had left, heading back toward town. I knew he was going to Rosarita's Tavern and another all night binge. I considered calling Virgil, his brother, and warning Virgil to intercept Johnny, but then I would have to explain to Virgil the reason for Johnny's behavior.

As for myself, I knew without doubt that rocks didn't grow. Not like that. A few geology classes in college had shown me that this area had once been the bed of an

ancient sea. Over a period of millions of years, the sea had dried and the sediment in the bottom had hardened and become layers of rock. Even later, movement of the earth's crust had caused those layers to be lifted. Wind and water had accomplished the inevitable weathering process, breaking the solid layers into huge sandstone mesas and buttes scattered across the landscape. The same processes had further weakened these monoliths and gravity had pulled the broken portions down to the bases. Several of the huge boulders, propelled by the momentum of rolling from near the tops of some of the mesas, had traveled a great distance. The boulders on my ranch that were now in question were some of those. They had been too large for us to move when we had put the road there. Had they been as huge six years ago as they were today?

The question became moot as I remembered my horses and the fact that those animals depended on me. I led Athena, my favorite brood mare, out of the corral and walked her down to the pasture where she conversed in equine tones with the yearlings grazing the green pasture. After I had loosed her back into the corral, I loaded three large buckets of grain onto the electric cart I kept for convenience, and began the supplemental feeding process.

Late afternoon brought a misty pearl tone to the red sandstone cliffs that surrounded my lush valley. I was reminded of my good fortune in being able to acquire this land several years ago when it had come up for auction. The house, a large one-room wood and stone structure, I had designed myself; my foster father, Henry, had supervised the construction while I had played professional football a thousand miles away.

And a thousand years ago, I thought, as I washed my hands. Opening the refrigerator, I poured a glass of tea from the gallon jar I kept filled with my favorite

beverage. I then walked through the open doorway leading to the east patio, stepped out and sat down in a comfortable chair I'd bought to place in this very spot. Evenings had become my favorite time of the day; I spent hours of my life watching the sky turn deep blue, indigo, and then black before stars popped out to sprinkle the heavens with pinpoints of light. During those hours, my thoughts would eventually turn to Casey and I would probe the aching memories, searching for the diseased past of my present torment.

But not tonight. I heard a throbbing rumble and, after a few seconds, knew it to be a vehicle coming up my private road from the highway. My heartbeat increased and, leaving my chair, I walked around to the front of the house. I saw the car in the distance, a small, light-colored foreign car. When I realized it was Kate Branigan's white Toyota, I breathed more easily. Since the two reporters had located me in town a couple of years ago, I anticipated every car coming into what I considered my private space as carrying intruders who would disrupt my life.

Dust boiled into an inverted funnel of pink trailing behind the car. For a moment, as the road dipped through a wash, the small vehicle disappeared before it again reappeared. I heard the engine drop into a lower gear as Kate began the climb to my plateau.

I walked out to meet her at the parking area near the garage. She had parked near the large red boulders that formed a semi-circle separating the garage area from the house space. At sixty-plus, Kate Branigan still gave the impression of a redheaded teenager trying to drive her father's car. I watched her drop her keys as she reached for the door handle. When I pulled the door open, she smiled sheepishly, sliding her legs around and stepping out of the car.

"I can never remember where that foolish opener is," she said, flashing her white smile and taking my left hand into both of hers. "Thank goodness you were here to help."

"And you know that you could open it with no problem if there wasn't anyone here to do it for you," I chided.

My former mother-in-law laughed and I felt my heart warm with the sound. It was as if her vocal cords emitted, in addition to the laugh, the faraway chiming sound of a sweet bell. I had loved her from the first moment I'd heard her voice and, even today, the sound lifted my spirits.

Kate followed me to the east patio and I seated her before going into the house to get her a glass of tea. I had just closed the refrigerator door when I heard a crashing sound and Kate's stifled scream. I rushed out the patio door and found her sitting where I'd left her. The look she turned to me reflected consternation.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Are you alright?"

"Of course," she said. "It's just that the strangest thing happened. It startled me."

"I heard the crash," I told her, searching the patio to see what had fallen.

"No," she said, rising to her feet and touching my arm. She pointed toward the garage and her car. I felt coldness spread through my body. "Not here. Look out there at my car. I must have failed to put it in parking gear. It appears to have rolled into that boulder!"

I didn't need to remind Kate that, elevation wise, she had parked the car below the boulder. Even out of gear, the Toyota couldn't have rolled uphill. I saw the same thought reflected across her smooth face.

"It's not possible, is it?" she asked, her brow wrinkling above her clear hazel eyes.

"That rock couldn't have moved down the hill on its own volition. Could it?"

\* \* \*

Kate had left before dark. I knew she hated driving at night, so I didn't protest. Before she left, I examined her car's bumper for damage, but I saw nothing other than a few heavy smudges of red where the boulder had pressed against the shiny surface. Attempting to hide my concern from her, I hugged her and kidded about stopping at the bars on the way home. She, seeing right through my disguise, immediately felt my worry but attributed it to my usual depression.

"You need to get out more, Branch. Go places and meet new people. You can't spend the rest of your life here re-hashing the past."

I had remained silent. This time, I had wished for her to interpret my morosity as memories of my life with Casey. I watched her back up the small car and point it down the hill, toward town. A small wave, a cheerful smile, and she was gone.

The minute her car dropped from sight, I rushed into the house and opened the bottom drawer of my desk. Rummaging through the contents, my fingers felt the item for which I searched. A twelve-foot tape measure. Tearing a sheet of paper from the notebook on the desk's surface, I picked up a pencil and ran back outside.

The next hour, the hour before total darkness, I wound the tape measure around first one boulder and then another between the patio and the corral. I carefully noted the location and circumference of each stone. By the time that blackness cloaked the sky and one star peeked out to twinkle at me, I had charted both the location and size of twelve

boulders. Morning would provide me with the answer I sought.

\* \* \*

I didn't sleep. From my bed, I watched the eastern sky. Stars danced on the opaque surface, moving upward until they passed out of sight, only to be replaced by more stars, other patterns. Finally, on the horizon, I saw the initial fading of the black to a deep indigo. At this point, I rose and dressed.

With apprehension and dread, I postponed my comparative measurements by making a cup of instant coffee and sipping it before going outside. I rinsed the cup and left it in the sink. The sheet of paper, pencil, and tape measure were on the desktop where I had left them last night. I picked them up and, as an afterthought, reached for the solar calculator I kept in the top drawer.

The first mauve light of dawn colored the sky in the east as I knelt to measure the boulder nearest the house. When I removed the tape, I read the circumference measurement and then meticulously noted it next to last night's measurement. By the time I measured the last boulder, the one nearest the corral, full sun fell upon me and prickled my back through my dark denim shirt.

Pulling the calculator from my shirt pocket, I looked at the figures on the sheet and did a few quick calculations. I felt saliva lodge in my throat, blocked by knotted muscles. I forced myself to swallow and the sound was loud in my ears. Shaking my head, I punched in the figures again. The results were identical. I looked across the field of innocuous boulders between the house and where I knelt. It couldn't be! But the results were the same both times.

Overnight, the rocks had increased in size by ten percent!

## **Chapter Two**

My heart beat rapidly and I made a mental and physical effort to slow my shallow breathing. Dust fogged in through the open pickup windows and I watched the red speedometer needle creep up toward forty. Henry would know what to do about the rocks. Henry would understand and explain to me about my perceptions of the boulders.

At the highway intersection, I slowed only slightly before pulling up the steep incline and onto the smooth black asphalt of the highway. Twenty miles ahead of me lay another intersection I knew well. And, when I turned off the paved road there, I would be less than three miles from Henry's ranch.

I focused on the road. Ahead of me, in my lane, a large recreational vehicle slowed almost to a standstill before turning right on the road to the campground. As the rear end of the vehicle loomed large, I slammed my foot on the brake and silently cursed myself for my lack of attentiveness. I forced myself to concentrate on driving, on anything to take my mind off of those boulders.

Since it was almost ten in the morning, Henry would be back at the house, having his morning coffee with Amanda, his wife and my foster mother. He would have gone to the ruins early this morning and spent several hours excavating or detailing notes on the ancient civilization. For the same hours, Amanda would have been seated at her typewriter, her next best-selling historical romance taking shape in front of her, one page after another. They would share a couple of hours here in the middle of the day with Henry telling her about some exciting discovery and Amanda revealing her heroine's latest escapade. Even though they now had the most perfect and compatible of relationships, they hadn't always been lucky enough to have each other. When I had met Henry, he hadn't even known Amanda.

Most people recall 1957, an otherwise less than notable year, because of the launching of the Russian satellite, Sputnik. Maybe they noted the violent eruptions brought about by school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas. I remember 1957 with a fondness that still brings a warm glow to my heart. That was the year that I first met Henry Adams. Our paths came together in September of that year, two months after my ninth birthday.

Again, I slowed my pickup, this time backing off from the red pickup I'd caught up with. Today, Johnny Evans had a heavy load of sand in that pickup bed. He had left the tailgate down and a shovel bounced loosely on top of the load; dribbles of red sand trailed a waterfall off the bed of the pickup and onto the asphalt. Johnny always drove his pickup at forty-five miles per hour, regardless of road conditions or weather. We were almost to town, anyway, and I saw no gain in passing him so I slowed my own pickup and backed off. My thoughts drifted back to Henry and that day twenty-eight years ago.

That rough and tumble kid, fresh from the stock ranch that had doubled as a foster home, carried a chip on his shoulder almost as large as he was. Henry, perceptive and compassionate, saw the chip and made it his challenge to remove it.

Henry's white stucco ranch house had been the fifth house I'd gone to that day. The sun was still fresh in a morning sky when Henry opened his door and looked down at me. Right away, I took a look at the slender man wearing gray slacks and white shirt and figured I was set for another rejection.

"Mister, you need trash picked up or any errands done around?"

Through the thick lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses, Henry's gray eyes examined me. I swallowed and subjected myself to his scrutiny, forcing a calmness I didn't feel.

"Your car?" I ventured. "You need your car washed?"

"How old are you, young man?"

He had a firm, gentle voice. I hesitated for a moment. "Twelve," I lied. "I'm twelve years old and I can do almost anything a man can do."

He smiled at me then and I braced myself for how I would feel when he closed the door in my face, anticipating how the muscles of my stomach would tighten, dreading the incapacitating lump in my throat.

"I'm sure you can," he said, opening the door wider and motioning me in. "Why don't you come in and we can discuss this over some milk and cookies."

I followed him into the hallway, hesitating when I observed the Spartan cleanliness of the ranch house's interior. He continued toward the rear of the house and I wriggled my feet out of my dirty moccasins. My bare feet made sucking sounds on the

cool smoothness of the black tile and I lifted myself on tiptoe to follow the slender man down the long hall.

The smooth golden finish of the large kitchen table was covered with newspapers, books and lined sheets of paper. I looked around for the man's wife. He must not be married, I told myself. Mama never let Pop do anything like that. I felt my lip tremble. Pop had always talked about books and education and how he was going to make sure I had opportunities.

The man shoved some of the papers aside and pulled out a chair for me. Again, I hesitated. White, silky material covered the padded seat and I hadn't had a change of clothing for three days.

"Sit down, son. I'll get some cookies."

While he opened the refrigerator, I grabbed a blank sheet of paper off one of the stacks and laid it on the seat. Then I quickly scooted onto the chair. When he came back to the table, he set a large glass of milk and a platter of thick cookies in front of me. My stomach rumbled.

"There you go," he said, ignoring the sound. "A man needs food if he is going to work."

I ate one cookie and half of another before I remembered my manners. Rubbing my wrist across my mouth, I reached for a napkin, dabbing it on my lips like Mama had shown me. "Thank you, sir."

"Why, you're welcome," he said, smiling again. I lost myself in his wide, gentle gray eyes. This man is old, I thought, and yet he has the eyes of a three-week-old kitten.

"Tell me, young man. Do you have a name?"

"I'm Ji..." I hesitated. Then I answered, "I'm Branch." I used my uncle's name. He had died in Korea and didn't need it anymore.

"It's nice meeting you, Branch," he said, reaching for a cookie. "My name is Henry Adams."

Looking back now, I know that Henry had made a fairly accurate assessment of the tough little orphan who had shown up on his doorstep. He had likely surmised that I was a runaway and indigent. Yet, he had chosen to look beneath that, to search for the frightened, yet independent, spirit that lived within. After three more cookies, he had stopped me.

"Branch," he asked gently. "How long since you've eaten?"

"Last night," I said, pausing. How could I tell this fine man who lived in an enormous house such as this that I had eaten rotten fruit from a trash bin behind a grocery store? Could he understand that hunger had driven me to sneak between the strands of barbed wire and pull three ears of corn from a farmer's field the day before? I wondered if Henry Adams had ever eaten raw corn and felt the silks tangle around his teeth, not caring because the nourishment of the grain kept his stomach from caving in?

Johnny Evans braked his red pickup and turned into the large asphalt driveway leading to the Navajo Inn on the right. I pulled my concentration back to the present and watched sand trail from the pickup bed as Johnny hit a bump in the parking lot. The pickup passed by a large sign that drew my eye and I studied it, as always, with mixed feelings of pride and embarrassment. Two years ago, Henry had spoken at the groundbreaking ceremonies for this hundred-room resort and conference center. In his speech, he had praised his wife, Amanda, and his friend, Branch Hackworth. These two

people, Henry had said, had invested in this project that would not only provide employment for dozens in our economically depressed community, but would also bring another element to the community that would enhance all businesses -- that of tourism. An overeager public relations officer had issued some press releases and, before we had realized what was happening, reporters from two national magazines had shown up in town, seeking interviews with me about my life since the trial. I had gone into hiding and, at the groundbreaking, I had stood alone, away from the crowd, and listened to Henry provide excuses for my not being there to speak. I had driven off before he had ended his speech.

Henry covered for me that day, as he always had, as he did on that very first day we met. It had been only that evening, after I had spent the day washing windows at the university campus where he worked, that he had confronted me with his suspicions. We had stopped at a cafe for a hamburger and, midway through the meal, he had looked me straight in the eyes.

"What are your plans, now, Jim?"

"I don't know..." I paused, swallowing a French fry, almost choking. "How did you find out my name?" Angrily, I scooted out of the booth, but Henry grabbed my wrist.

"Sit down, son," he said, his tone casual. "I'm not going to turn you in."

My stomach churned. I tried to pull my wrist away from Henry's firm grasp. He looked at me with a steady gray stare.

"You might as well eat," he said. "When they get you back at the home, you'll probably be put on bread and water."

"You crazy old man," I stormed, pulling away from him and sitting back down in the booth. "They've had me on short rations for three weeks now. They'll just throw me in the cellar and forget about me!"

I grabbed the hamburger and tore off a bite with my teeth. My bitterness penetrated even to my taste buds and the hamburger tasted spoiled, the French fries rancid. Tears burned my eyes. Three days ago, I had sneaked out of that miserable tomb. Night had covered my escape and, with the help of a couple of motorists, I had made almost a hundred miles in three days. To come this far and have to return. I wouldn't do it!

"I'm not going back," I told Henry. "I'll eat this food. To let it go to waste would be dumb, because I don't know how long it'll be before I eat again. But, when I finish, I'm leaving."

"I can't condemn your feelings," Henry said. "But, it's conceivable that running is not the answer."

"I don't have a better one," I said, swiping a French fry in the puddle of catsup on my plate. "Life's not worth it back there. I'd rather starve to death."

Henry's eyes widened and he nodded slightly. He placed his elbows on the table and folded his hands together.

"Would you like to come and live with me?"

\* \* \*

Much more traffic than usual prowled the three blocks of business district through which I drove. I slowed my pickup and impatiently tapped my fingers on the steering wheel, waiting for the red light to change at the intersection. Having left my watch at

home, I looked at the sun, attempting to gauge the time. Allowing for daylight savings' time, it was near eleven. Since his retirement from the university faculty three years ago, Henry had adopted a schedule in which he was always home for a couple of hours around noon. I would be at Henry's before noon.

The day after I had met Henry, he had gone to the appropriate agencies and, within hours, had begun the paperwork that would allow him to become my foster parent. Defying the social worker who told him that I must return to the previous foster home until the forms had been approved, he had stated adamantly that I was to live with him from that point forth. The social worker had protested, but had backed away from the gray eyes gone steel.

When he had returned that afternoon, he had unloaded several paper bags from his black Chrysler and carried them toward the garage where I had been scrubbing oil spots from the concrete floor. I looked up as his long, slender shadow moved over the still-damp spot in front of me.

"Hi," I said hesitantly, attempting to keep my tone neutral. I didn't want Henry to know how eager I was to discover what had transpired that day, how much I desired to stay with this tall, gentle man. "I've got almost all the spots. There's three over by the door, but I'll have them cleaned before dark."

He smiled at me and nodded. Then he shifted the packages in his arms. "Come on inside, Branch," he said. "We need to talk."

I stood up and dried my hands on my blue jeans. I searched his face for clues. Finding none, my heart beat faster and my skin grew hot. It hadn't worked! They wouldn't let Henry have me! Then a small grin wrinkled the corners of his eyes and spread over his

face. He transferred all of the packages to his left hand and threw his right arm around my shoulder. "We did it, Branch," he cried joyously. "You're going to live with me!"

If I hadn't been nine years old and thought that I was almost grown, I would have cried with happiness. As it was, I simply closed my eyes and leaned against Henry's angular frame, smelling his bay rum aftershave.

"Come on, son. You've done enough for the day. This garage looks better than it did when it was new. It's time for us to celebrate!"

Inside the house, Henry thrust the packages into my arms and gently shoved me down the hall. I looked up at him.

"Go to your room and clean up. In those bags, you'll find some clothing I chose for you. We'll go to the ice cream parlor when you're dressed."

"I can't take..."

"Of course, you can. I owe you for two days' work, so I simply spent your money. Go on, now, and no fussing."

Three pairs of blue jeans. Four shirts. Several sets of underclothes and socks. A belt. New boots and tennis shoes. I hadn't had that many clothes since my very first day of school. My throat tightened. That had been first grade and Mama was still alive, before Pop had started drinking. After she died, he tried. But he just missed her too much and the wine helped him forget that she was gone.

I dropped my pants and tore the stiff paper tags off the blue jeans. Disregarding the harshness of the new denim fabric, I pulled them over my hips and worked the metal buttons of the fly through the new buttonholes. They fit perfectly. As I spread the new shirts on the bed, debating whether to wear the red and black plaid or the forest green

one, I felt something slip off the bed and fall to the floor near my bare foot. Bending over, I picked up the rectangular box. When I lifted the lid, I again felt my throat tighten. A brown leather wallet lay in the box, a wallet just like the one I'd seen Henry remove from his pocket last night to pay for our meals. Clear plastic protected a card with typewritten words. I blinked tears from my eyes and focused on the tiny print. It was a standard identification card, but Henry had done the one thing that could make such a card personal. He had filled in the blanks for me, listing his street address as my home address and himself as my parent. I squeezed my eyes closed, determined to make the tears stop. When I looked back at the wallet, I noticed that a piece of white paper poked from one of the compartments. When I pulled it out, I found a twenty-dollar bill folded with it. On the paper were the words: *We are a family, Branch. You and I. Happy Homecoming Day.* I sat on the bed and bawled. And when Henry and I had gone to the ice-cream parlor, he had pretended not to see my red-rimmed eyes.

Passing through the far outskirts of town, I slowed down at the elementary school and waited for the crossing guard and two children to walk across the street. Although built near the same site as the elementary school I had attended, this building was much larger than the old one. However, on the first day that Henry had taken me to the old school, it had seemed mighty formidable and impressive.

"Do you have any of his records, Dr. Adams?"

The dark-haired lady in the principal's office had glared across her desk at Henry. Three different times, I had watched her erase words she had written on the form in front of her. Now, she simply turned the pencil upside down and impatiently tapped the eraser

on a nearby pad. I watched a little black curl spring loose from her carefully groomed hair. Tiny beads of perspiration appeared on her forehead.

"Henry! How are you?"

I turned at the sound of the female voice behind us. Here appeared an angel from heaven, a lady prettier than the picture of the Virgin Mary that Mama had kept on our living room wall. Henry stood up and turned to the beautiful lady. She grabbed his hand and held it tightly between her own two hands.

"Hello, Kate," he said. "I'm pleased to see you. I've brought my son to enroll in school here and I must return to campus for my ten o'clock class. Do you suppose..."

"Certainly, Henry," the wonderful lady with the voice of music said. Her pupils had enlarged when Henry had said son; otherwise, she had displayed no surprise. "Run along, I'll take care of..."

"Jim," Henry said. "Jim Hackworth." He looked at me. "He also goes by Branch Hackworth and if he wishes to be called by that name, then I would like his school records to reflect that."

Then he turned back to me. He placed his hand on my shoulder the same way I would have touched a horse to keep it from shying away.

"Branch, this is my good friend, Mrs. Branigan. She's the school principal and she's going to help you. I'll be back at four this afternoon to pick you up."

And Mrs. Branigan had taken care of me. With a curt nod of dismissal to the black-haired lady at the desk, she had picked up the folder Henry had brought in and invited me into her office. Within an hour, I had been installed in the fourth grade classroom with twenty-two other boys and girls of my age. I had tried not to look at them

as the teacher, Mrs. Lundy, had led me to my desk. I had reminded myself that, two years before, when I had ridden in the rodeo, many more people than this had watched me and they had been just as eager to see me make a mistake or embarrass myself.

True to his word, Henry had picked me up at four and we had driven down the very road that I now drove today. In those days, it had not been paved and the trip had taken longer. At that time, there had been no comfortable ranch house at the end of the driveway. But, there had been the mile-long path. And, the path led to the ruins.

Within four miles of the turnoff to Henry's ranch, the road curved and grew steeper. A few scrub pines appeared, giving promise to the great ponderosa pines that sheltered Henry's house. As a child, I had not appreciated the climatic and ecological changes brought about by a two to three thousand foot change in elevation. Only after living in the southern lowlands for many years had I returned and viewed my native New Mexico with fresh eyes.

The next few years after I had gone to live with Henry had passed quickly and thoughts of those years always flooded me with nostalgic warmth. Henry had, upon discovering my mother's background, suggested that I have the opportunity to study Native American culture and participate, if I wished, in the ceremonials. Such opportunities, he had told me, come about rarely and must be appreciated; he reminded me that few individuals have access to or choices between the advantages of two cultures. He had insisted that I consider myself a fine example of the best of both peoples, to forget the taunts and cruelties imposed on me by those who had called me a half-breed.

"You make your life what you want it to be," he had told me. "You are the raw material genetically given to you by your parents. Study that material. Analyze the

components. Keep what you want and nourish those aspects. Only you can determine what you become."

Again, he had told me of the contributions of my father in Germany and about my Navajo Code Talker grandfather during World War II. He showed me a paragraph about Mama's brother, Branch, and how he saved a bunch of men in the Korean War. Henry never pointed, directed, nor insisted that I follow a certain pattern. The only subject on which he was adamant was opportunity; he felt that, given the opportunity, I would choose the best and become the best.

By the end of our first year together, Henry had begun work on the house at the ranch. He had drawn up the plans himself and the two of us had spent our after school and summer hours clearing and building fences. For July 4, we had planned a special celebration out at the site. The well had been drilled and the corral completed. On the way out, Henry had been filled with a barely suppressed excitement that puzzled me. Henry never seemed to be the type of person who became emotional over any holiday.

After he pulled the black Chrysler into the clearing where the foundation for the house would soon be, he turned off the engine. Jumping from the driver's seat, he rushed around to pull my door open.

"Come on, Branch," he cried, almost pulling me out of the car. "You thought I had forgotten your tenth birthday!"

I followed him down the slope to the west, toward the corral. As we rounded the curve, my eyes caught movement and I strained to make it out. Could it be? Then the animal loped up to the fence and I saw it for what it was. A horse! Henry, who knew absolutely nothing about animals, had bought a horse!

"Here, Branch," he said, digging in his black jacket pocket and bringing out some crumbly sugar cubes. "Why don't you go and make friends with him?"

I ran to the fence and, within minutes, had climbed to the horse's bare back. With pride, I turned back to Henry, startled to find a worried expression on his face.

"Shouldn't you train him first, Branch? Isn't this a bit soon to be riding him?"

Stifling my impulse to tell Henry that this horse had been someone's pet, I slid off the horse and crawled underneath the bottom board of the corral. Henry's face reflected relief.

"Good boy," he said. "I told the man I bought him from that your father was a rodeo cowboy and that you had grown up with horses."

I nodded.

"He was concerned that you might not be able to handle such a spirited horse."

Even today, I felt a grin spread across my face as I remembered that old horse. Topper, I had named him, after a character in a television show. Both Henry and I had mourned his loss when Topper had died only six years later. I never told Henry that Topper had been at least sixteen years old when he bought him. I let him go ahead thinking that Topper had died with his best years ahead of him.

### **Chapter Three**

Looking back now, I could see that Henry, a quiet, middle-aged college professor, must have been at wits' end, trying to provide chores for a young boy. Topper had been Henry's answer both to helping me keep my memory of Pop and to my assuming responsibility for myself.

Over on the left, on a low knoll somewhere between the highway and the Indian ruins, Topper rested. He had just lain down one day and slept. We hired John Samuels to help us move him out to the knoll and I dug the grave. There had been times in the weeks after losing Topper that Henry and I had wandered down this main road to this point and hiked up to the knoll to visit Topper.

I squinted my eyes, startled to see another person in this isolated area. A man walked down the highway just as I had those years past. As I drew closer, I pulled the pickup over on the shoulder and stopped. It was not unusual to see a man walking in this part of the country; but this man was different. In his late forties or early fifties, he wore a

crisply tailored light brown suit and darker tie. He carried a leather briefcase and red sand had dusted his highly polished dress shoes.

"Hello, there," he yelled, waving his hand and walking more quickly. When he reached my pickup, he moved to the driver's side and scowled up at me.

"I need to get to the town," he said, pointing back behind me. "I'll pay you to take me."

"How did you get out here?" I asked. "Is your car up ahead?"

"Not exactly," he replied. I watched him struggle with his desire to order me to take him to town and his wish to placate me for the same purpose. A military man, I thought. One who is unaccustomed to having to explain any statement. I waited for him to continue.

"It's a tour bus," he said. "We're stalled on the next road that turns off the highway. It's about a mile from here. Our group is due at the home of the archaeologist, Dr. Henry Adams, and ..."

"Jump in," I told him. "I'll go check it out."

I had forgotten about that group. Henry had spent two years gathering an eclectic group of celebrities to help raise funds for his dig and it had completely slipped my mind. Today began the two-day tour he planned to impress them with the necessity for recovering information buried within the ruins. This man, then, must be Jim Kirby, the astronaut.

I watched his self-assured, composed movements as he walked around the front of the pickup. He opened the door to the passenger's side and balanced the briefcase on the

floor before he stepped in. He stared at me for a moment before he closed the door. Not once did he release his grip on the handle of the briefcase.

I pulled the pickup back onto the highway. The man rolled his window part of the way up and smoothed his thinning hair with his free hand. Regardless of his outward composure, I sensed a certain tenseness in his careful movements. If he had been a horse I tried to saddle, I could have deduced the cause of his nervousness. But human behavior was outside my realm; I had proven that too many times in my life...

An unbidden image of Casey came to mind. Casey had told me one thing with her body and another with her actions. At one point I had deluded myself into thinking I was in love with her and she with me. We had spoken the words and I had believed what I'd said.

"I'm sorry," I said, dragging myself back to the present. "I didn't hear you."

"Where are you going? This is not the way to town!"

"We're going to the tour bus," I said. "I need to know what's wrong before I drag the mechanic out here."

"The mechanic?"

"We have only one mechanic who works on diesel engines."

He sighed.

"How long ago did this happen?" I asked.

"Probably an hour or so," he said, looking at his watch. "We were due to meet Dr. Adams at eleven and I recall one of the group saying that we were going to be early. Do you know Dr. Adams?"

"I do."

"I suppose everybody knows everybody else in a community like this," he said, his tone almost wistful. "I grew up in a small town."

"I know."

"You know? How do you know? Who are you?"

"Like you said. Everybody knows everybody. I read an article in the paper last week that told about the members of your group and the tour. You're Jim Kirby, aren't you? The man who was lost in space?"

"Damn!" he exploded. "Will I never hear the end of that? I lost communications with NASA for fourteen minutes of a hundred hour assignment. Nobody sees fit to recall the discoveries that I made! They don't want to remember the experiments I successfully performed nor the new information I brought back!"

I nodded and pulled the lever for the left turn signal. Henry's road veered off sharply to the left just over the crest of the upcoming hill.

"Sorry," Jim mumbled. "It must be the heat."

"Probably," I said, slowing and negotiating the turn. I didn't want to delve into defense mechanisms with this man; I had enough of my own.

"Did you turn on this road?" I asked. I couldn't see the bus.

"It's not far," he said. "Just keep driving. There! Just ahead!"

An apt place to stall, I thought with irony. The large bus seemed to be wedged in a road cut between two head-high cliffs about a hundred feet ahead. There would be no way for me to drive on to Henry's and, by the same token, if Henry came to meet them, there was no way for him to get around to the highway. I chose a wide spot in the road and pulled my pickup over to the far right. Before I turned off the engine, Jim had the

door opened and was climbing out, his briefcase clutched to his chest. He turned and hurried toward two men who stood talking at the rear of the bus. One turned as I came near and I saw his name tag. He would be the bus driver. His white shirt had oil stains rubbed across the front.

"Are you a mechanic?" he asked.

"I know a little."

"I hope you know more than a little," he said, lowering his voice and leading me to the far side of the bus, away from the men and women who had gathered near the rear. "This is one weird bunch of people. I've been with them four days now and it's aged me ten years."

Walking behind him, I bent over to check the tires and axles. Leaning over a second time, my eyes met frolicking blue eyes and a friendly smile from the other side of the bus. I returned the wave. Pink hair?

"That girl is the only sane one in the bunch," the driver said, turning to me. "By the way, I've lost my manners. My name is Mike Peterson and I'm the driver for this tour."

"Branch," I said, holding out my hand. "Branch Hackworth."

Mike grasped my hand firmly before releasing it. Then he pointed to a spot underneath the front of the bus, near the tire on the driver's side. An oily substance pooled on the ground, darkening the sand.

"I'm not sure where it came from," Mike said, wiping a handkerchief across his forehead. "But I'm positive that's the cause of the breakdown."

"We'll have to get a wrecker out here," I said. "Carson can't work on this bus unless it's in town."

Mike grimaced. He shrugged his shoulders and ducked his head toward the other side of the bus. "What about them?"

"Dr. Adams can come and pick them up," I told him. "I think they're scheduled to stay at his ranch. Have you tried calling him on your two-way radio?"

He looked at me, his brown eyes, for a moment, frightened. Then he looked away. Finally, he turned and spoke, his eyes avoiding mine.

"That radio worked just fine up on the freeway," he said. "But I haven't been able to get a thing on it since we turned off on the state highway."

"Did you try channel fourteen? He keeps his radio set there."

Peterson stepped closer to me. When he spoke, his lips barely moved.

"I tried all the channels," he whispered. "And I tried them more than once. And you want to know something else, mister? These cliffs weren't this close to the bus when I stepped out after it stalled."

\* \* \*

Mike Peterson's observation reminded me all too clearly of my primary purpose in being here. I must talk to Henry about the boulders at my ranch that were growing. Yet, at the same time, I also owed it to him to lend assistance with this group of tourists. Especially if Peterson's comment about their unusual qualities held water.

"I can't get my truck around the bus," I told Peterson. "I'll have to walk up to Dr. Adams' house and call a wrecker."

A skeptical look passed over his face and disappeared. He glanced back toward the highway.

"It's not quite two miles from here," I assured him. "And I'm a fast walker."

"I don't have much choice," he said. "I can't leave. My first responsibility is to these people. At least, until Dr. Adams takes over."

"Sure," I agreed. "You just keep them calm and I'll have help here before you know it."

At that moment, the tall, black-haired man Peterson had been talking with when I arrived walked around the front of the bus. I held my features neutral, hoping that he couldn't read the astonishment in my eyes. The tall, athletic build of his body belied the obviously Oriental features of his face. Mentally, I ran down the list of Henry's expected guests. No Oriental names had appeared there.

"I'm Check McCall," he said, answering my unspoken question. He held out his hand and I shook it.

"Branch Hackworth," I said. I recognized his name. Somehow, I hadn't expected the owner of one of Seattle's largest computer companies to be Japanese. "Nice meeting you."

"Will you be able to repair the bus?"

"I'm walking up to Dr. Adams' house," I told him. "There will be someone here within a short time after I make the call. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

Walking quickly, with long strides, I left the tour bus behind me in a matter of seconds. My moccasins created dust puffs with every step. After a few minutes, I sensed that someone followed me and I slowed my steps, moving to the edge of the road. Taking

advantage of a sharp curve, I stepped off the road and behind the mellow brown trunk of a large pine. Breathing slowly, I watched the wide trail. Moments passed and no one appeared. I had almost decided that my imagination worked overtime when a woman came into view.

Slender and petite, with long blond hair tied back from her face, the woman appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties. She wore a khaki-colored t-shirt and olive green shorts that looked as if they had come from an army surplus store. Completing the picture, high topped hiking boots encased her feet and ankles. Obviously from the tour bus, she fit no description on Henry's list. I stepped from behind the tree.

"You startled me," she accused. Her full lower lip pouted and she looked at me from underneath heavily fringed brown eyes. "Why were you hiding behind that tree?"

"Why were you following me?"

She smiled, showing even teeth white in contrast to her golden tanned face. She made an apologetic gesture with her shoulders and hands.

"I just had to get away," she said. "That group back there is like a cast of characters in a murder mystery. You don't mind if I walk with you, do you?"

I did. But these people were Henry's guests.

"Come on," I said. "But I don't intend to slow down. If you can't keep up with me, I'll leave you behind."

"That's fine," she said, falling into step beside me. "I walk every day. I'm in shape."

She paced me well and I soon realized she hadn't been exaggerating. Even with her heavy hiking boots, she matched my stride. Then I remembered her earlier observation.

"Why did you say that the group reminded you of characters in a murder mystery?"

She hesitated and I turned to look at her. Surprised eyes stared at me.

"You mean you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?" I demanded.

"We've already lost two members of the group."

She waited for me to absorb the statement. Then she turned to walk on down the road.

"Hold it," I said. "Slow down for a minute and tell me what you're talking about. Do you mean that two members of the group have been murdered?"

She slowed her step. I caught up with her and she smiled, a smile that struggled to find balance between coyness and slyness. "I didn't say that they were murdered."

"Well, it's just a short way to the Adams house," I said. "Perhaps you ought to tell me what you did mean. And, while you're doing that, you can tell me who you are."

"You seem awfully curious for a local Native American with no interest in this tour," she said.

I bit my tongue. She saw me exactly as I wished to be seen. An anonymous entity. Why, then, did I feel the urge to shake her? We walked a few feet farther and I considered the phrasing of my next question.

"I know Dr. Adams," I said. "I've done odd jobs for him for several years. I'm somewhat familiar with the tour plans and I do know that, after one initial cancellation, only two women planned to make this tour."

She tossed her blond ponytail and thrust her hands into her pockets. Her breasts pushed tight against the fabric of the snug t-shirt.

"I'm a woman."

"I won't argue with that," I said. "But, you're not Angel, the rock star. I saw her earlier when we both looked underneath the bus at the same time. Ellen Madison is the other woman and I've seen pictures of her. You're not Ellen Madison."

"Ellen is old enough to be my mother," the girl said scornfully. "I'm Tina, Angel's private secretary. At the last minute, she decided she wanted me along."

"That's a simple enough explanation."

"Now, Mister Know-It-All, who are you?"

"I'm Branch. I've already told you that I occasionally work with Dr. Adams."

"Is that a name? Branch?"

"Branch Hackworth," I said.

"Hackworth," she mused. "Hackworth. Now, where have I heard that name?"

"It's common enough," I said.

"Not really. Not like Smith or Jones. I know I've heard it recently."

We crested the last rise and I breathed a sigh of relief as Henry's brick ranch house came into sight. I would find out from Henry about the deaths. Amanda stood on the front lawn, near the pear tree, shading her eyes with a hand and looking toward us. I

would be pleased to relinquish Tina to Amanda's capable hands. Her questions had already raised my discomfort level an inordinate amount.

"Branch," Amanda cried, setting her watering pail on the ground and walking toward the gate. Her wide blue eyes looked questioningly at Tina.

"Hello, Amanda," I said, taking her offered hands and brushing her cheek with my lips. "This is Tina. She's a member of Henry's tour. Their bus is stalled down near the highway."

"How unfortunate," Amanda said, turning to Tina. "I'm Amanda Adams, Henry's wife. Won't you come in and allow me to fix you something cool to drink? Then Branch can call the service station and have them send out help."

Amanda bustled more than usual, I thought, watching her bring tea. Actually, when I thought about it, I couldn't remember ever having seen Amanda bustle. I sat on a chair across the coffee table from Tina who had molded her shapely body to the sofa as if it had been designed for her. When Amanda set the tea tray holding the glasses of iced tea on the table, she looked at me. "Branch," she said, "I've been having some trouble with my stove. Can you come look at it with me?"

I stood and followed her to the kitchen, impressed as much as I had been when Henry had first brought her home, with her poise and regal bearing. But, once she was out of Tina's sight, her shoulders dropped and she turned to me, grabbing my hands. Tears threatened to overflow her blue eyes.

"Branch, it's Henry. I have no idea where he is! He was gone when I awakened this morning and he didn't come back for lunch! That's not like him! You know that!"

For a moment, I felt as if my heart had leaped up to my throat and threatened to choke me. Then it dropped back into place and thudded wildly against my rib cage. Amanda was right. To my knowledge, Henry had never failed to keep an appointment. Unfailingly attentive to Amanda, he had never left the house without notifying her.

"A note? Amanda, perhaps he left a message."

"I've looked everywhere," she said. "Except his study. I just couldn't bring myself to rummage through his personal things. I can't believe he would leave something for me in there."

"What about the outbuildings?"

"I've looked through all the sheds and the barn. Branch, I even walked to the ruins. There's no sign. I'm worried sick."

"I know you are, Amanda. And you have cause. If you'll allow me, I'll see if I can find something in the study after I call the service station."

"Please do," she said. "And I'll attempt entertaining that girl in the living room."

"I'll take care of her," I said grimly.

\* \* \*

Carson Jones answered the telephone on the second ring and promised to have his wrecker at the site of the bus breakdown within the hour. After protesting that there was no need, Tina finally gave in and agreed to take Amanda's car back and tell the group that help was on the way. Amanda had filled a large thermos with iced water and sent paper cups. Together, she and I stood on the porch and watched Tina drive down the road away from the house.

"I hope you're not taken with all those physical charms," Amanda said. "She reminds me of..."

"I know, Amanda. Me, too. She's a dead ringer for Casey."

I put my arm around her shoulder and squeezed. She smiled up at me and pushed back her golden brown hair from her face. I detected concern for me in her eyes.

"I've had experience," I consoled her. "I won't fall into that trap again."

Casey Branigan had been the first friend I had made after Henry had enrolled me in school those long years ago. She had taken me under her protective wing and had championed and nurtured me during those days when I was the new kid, vulnerable as a kitten.

Daughter of Mrs. Branigan, the school principal, Casey led a charmed life as princess of the playground and ruler of the classroom. The other students quickly learned that to cross Casey was tantamount to exile. And no one had wanted to feel the chill of that slender cold shoulder.

At lunch that very first day, Casey brought her tray to the cafeteria table I had chosen to occupy alone near the back of the lunchroom. Within minutes, all of the chairs at the table were filled with chattering fourth graders, each vying for attention from Casey. Mrs. Branigan had stopped by the table and placed her soft hand on my shoulder.

"Hello, Branch," she said, her voice reminding me of the tinkle of piano keys. "I see that you've already made friends. Casey, did you know that Branch is our neighbor? He's living with Dr. Adams."

The Branigan's back yard joined Henry's fence and the start of a long friendship had begun. Before the ranch house had been completed, when we were still living in

town, Henry had bought a gate and Mr. Branigan had sunk the posts; Casey and I had become inseparable. When Mr. Branigan had died the year after I came to live with Henry, Casey and I knew that it was only a matter of time before Henry and Kate married and we would all be a real family.

Amanda's touch on my arm brought me back to the present. I flinched and she pulled back.

"Forgive me, Branch. I didn't mean to startle you. I'm sorry that I mentioned Casey."

"Don't apologize, Amanda. It's like a blister. After the blister has been broken a number of times, the skin becomes calloused."

"Branch, I'm so sorry."

I strode back into the house. I didn't want Amanda's sympathy. I didn't want anybody's sympathy. I had enough of my own self-pity to last me throughout this life.

Henry's office smelled of leather and paper. I would never be able to smell that odor without remembering the man who had taken it upon himself to raise me. Where could he be? Could he have made an appointment and forgotten to tell Amanda? I dropped into the leather-covered captain's chair behind his desk and pulled his appointment book toward me. August 15, today, was blocked out with a red magic marker, as was tomorrow. He had carefully written the words TOUR OF RUINS across both pages.

I felt my brow furrow. I tried to place myself in Henry's methodical shoes. After having made sure that his lecture notes were precise and organized, he would have

walked the trail he intended to take the group. Then he would have tidied the bunkhouse where the men of the group were scheduled to sleep.

"Amanda?"

"Yes, Branch?"

She stood in the doorway, her silhouette stiff. Worried about possibilities, she had been waiting for my call.

"Did you look in the bunkhouse?"

She nodded. Suddenly her shoulders lifted. "I forgot to look in the well house!"

"Let's go," I said, standing up. "He could have fallen on that slippery floor."

Amanda rushed ahead of me and I watched her carefully place her sturdy walking shoes on the steeper areas of the path. Mentally, I chastised myself. This path desperately needed some work done on it. I should have been here earlier with a shovel and a rake.

Amanda stopped suddenly. She gasped and I moved around her to see the cause. Splintered and broken, the well house door lay on the ground beside the small building.

"Please, God, no," she whispered. "Branch?"

"He's not in there, Amanda," I said, taking her by the shoulders and pulling her to my chest. "Henry's okay. He's not in the well house."

Over Amanda's head, I stared at what was left of the sturdy little outbuilding. The door, torn from its hinges, lay on the ground, and I could see the crumpled holding tank inside. But the asbestos shingled roof that Henry and I had worked on so diligently lay hidden under the enormous weight of a large red boulder! I scanned the hill. Almost fifty feet away, I spotted the roughened earth left by the boulder's passage. A tremendous

force had been required to initiate the movement of that boulder. I thought of Henry and felt an involuntary shiver pass through my body.

\* \* \*

Back at the house, Amanda and I checked the water pressure. Water ran slowly through the faucets and then dribbled, finally ceasing any flow.

"I don't understand, Branch. I watered the roses shortly before you arrived."

"That rock could have rolled down only minutes ago and crushed the holding tank," I told her. "The important thing is that those people from that tour bus can't stay here now. It'll be a couple of days before we can get that rock moved and the pump repaired."

"Oh, Henry," she moaned. "Where are you?"

"I'll find Henry," I said. "I have a feeling that he's okay. But we've got to change plans on housing those people."

"I trust your feelings, Branch. You've always been right about Henry."

And I had. Henry and I had developed the kind of closeness that old married couples possess. I had always known when he was in trouble and he had sensed the same about me. This time, I felt uneasy, but not worried.

"What about the Navajo Inn?" Amanda asked. "Could we get rooms for the group there?"

"You know we can, Amanda. If they can't find a room for us, we'll go to the owners." She smiled. I felt easier.

"That was a pretty good investment," she said. "I wish Henry had planned to house them there initially."

"It would have been simpler," I agreed. "Let me use Henry's phone. I'll call and have the staff set aside some rooms for a couple of days."

Lights flickered as I walked through the door to Henry's study. I stared at the lamp on his desk; it seemed to be functioning properly. Those boulders were really stirring my imagination. As I picked up the receiver to call, my hand hit Henry's appointment diary and flipped the page back to the previous day. Only one word appeared on the calendar for the fourteenth, but it made my blood cold and my fingers go numb on the telephone dial. I turned the book around to make sure I had read clearly.

I had not been mistaken. The neat handwriting belonged to Henry. The word belonged to Purgatory.

Rachel.

## Chapter Four

I felt a chill pass over me, originating with my head and traveling down my body, out to my extremities. Had Henry seen Rachel again? Did he plan to see her again? Could he be, even now, trapped in that limbo between worlds, that evil land of uncertain return that he and I had visited fifteen years ago? I had been there only that one night and I had no desire ever to return. But Henry insisted that Rachel was still there somewhere and he felt he had to find her.

It had been almost this time of the year. August, late summer of 1970. Home for a few weeks after college graduation, I had visited with Amanda and Henry before going south to begin my professional football career. Already, at that early date, Henry had devoted much of his spare time to his "dig," as he called it. Even though the tumbled stones and rotted timbers had been on his own private land, Henry had earlier requested approval from the state and federal authorities to conduct the excavation himself. Because of his reputation and expertise in the area of archaeology, he had received assurance that he could proceed to do so exclusively.

On that particular afternoon, Henry, digging a few feet from me, had uncovered a pottery shard and I heard his audible gasp. Rushing over to where he sat, holding the palm-sized fragment, I was astounded at his expression. Surprised, yet hopeful, the gray eyes had looked up at me, blinking rapidly.

"Do you know what this is, Branch?" he asked shakily, holding the shard toward me. "Do you know what this means?"

I took the grayish-brown piece from him and examined it, turning it over in my hands and studying the markings. It resembled no design with which I was familiar. I handed it back to Henry and he shook his head apologetically.

"I can't expect you to understand the significance, Branch. I've never told you why I bought this particular piece of property. I haven't bothered to explain or try to justify my obsession with these ruins. Not to you, or to Amanda. Especially not to Amanda."

I stared at him, knowing that my face must convey my puzzlement. Finally, I spoke, "Henry, you don't owe me any explanations. As for what goes on between you and Amanda..."

"That's not true," he interrupted. "The two of you are more important to me than words can ever describe. Without you, my life would mean nothing. And yet I would continue living. Because this," he waved his arm over the ruins, "has become my reason for living."

Not sure I wanted to hear what Henry wanted to tell me, I backed off and picked up the brush I had dropped earlier. I squatted and dusted some sand away from another shard. Wordlessly, I handed it to him. Every move I had made in my life since I had met

Henry I had gauged according to the calmness and surety with which he acted. I didn't want to hear any revelations about rash decisions or judgments. At this point in my life, I had no wish to discover that my idol might have feet of clay.

"Branch, I want to tell you about Rachel."

No, I silently protested, I don't want to hear about another woman. Kate Branigan loved you and you wouldn't have her. Instead, you brought home a young British novelist you had known only two months. But she made a home for you and your eleven-year-old foster son. I grew to love her and she was the closest thing to a natural mother I would ever have.

Aloud, I said, "I don't want to hear about Rachel."

"Look at me, Branch."

Surprised at the stern tone in his voice, I turned to look at Henry. His slight frame seemed to have taken on substance and his steely gray eyes held my eyes for a long time before I dropped mine.

"It was 1955," he began, "two years before you came into my life. At that time, this land didn't belong to me. It was only later that I managed to purchase the property. In those days, I was still considered a new professor at the college; I hadn't even attained tenure. Of prime importance at the time was an article I was working on to be published, the first of the Chaco culture series."

"I remember those pieces."

"I had driven out this road a dozen times, searching for some undisturbed ruins. On that particular afternoon, I parked my car down on the main road and hiked up over the ledge."

His eyes wandered over to the red sandstone ledge that blocked our view of the house. I stood up, stretched my legs, and wandered over to a rock. When I sat down on it, I still faced Henry.

"My heart jumped to my throat when I saw the jumble," Henry continued. "Always, I had felt as if there should have been something here, but this was my proof. It was dusk before I had an idea as to the size and the layout of my discovery. My small ledger was full of notes and speculative drawings. I knew that I should be starting back to the car and home, but I felt a pull to remain.

"I had just removed the cap from my canteen and taken a drink when I heard movement behind me. It could have been a coyote or smaller animal but, somehow, I knew a human had made the sound I heard. Slowly, so as not to frighten the person, I turned. Imagine my surprise, Branch! Over in the shadows, there by the ledge, a woman stood!

"She was dressed in a long, toga-style dress of a color between fuchsia and purple, a color I have never seen in our reality and which I have since named copera. She moved toward me and, as she came closer, I sensed that her surprise at finding me here was as great as my own upon discovering her presence.

"I have always been a shy person, Branch. I had known few women in my life and had never been alone with a woman as beautiful as this. She wore her shining brown hair piled on top of her head. Soft curls edged her oval-shaped face. Underneath her high, perfectly arched brows, large, violet blue eyes frowned at me.

"'You are intruding,' she told me in halting English and I agreed with her that I didn't own the land. I explained my mission to her and she seemed to understand what I

was saying, but her agitation grew. 'It is not of land that I speak,' she said. 'You are intruding in a time that is not your own.'

"A time?" I questioned Henry. "How can someone intrude in somebody else's time?"

"She was correct, Branch," Henry went on. "After her initial concern, she sat with me and we conversed for hours. It seems that she came from another time and this area right here is the area in which her time and mine could meet."

"You mean she came from another dimension?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Henry said. "I think she was trying to explain to me that her reality and mine exist here together, concurrently. We share the same space, but each of us has our own time."

"I don't understand," I said. "I think that someone played a practical joke on you."

"It was too real," Henry said, shaking his head. "She told me that I exist in her reality as one object and, in my reality, as the human being that I see myself. In her reality, she exists the way I saw her that night but, in my reality, she could be seen as something as ordinary as a tree, grass, water, even a rock."

"And these ruins provided common ground on which both of you could meet as human beings?"

Henry nodded. His eyes were full of hope and a tentative smile began at the corners of his mouth. It was almost dark, I was twenty-two, in love with Casey Branigan, and we had plans for a movie that night. My love and respect for the man did not permit me to verbalize my doubt about the story he told. I left him sitting in the dusk, holding the two pottery shards. He had not explained their significance and I was too caught up in

the glamour of my own world to query him. At the last moment, curiosity compelled me to stop on the ridge and turn back to him.

"Her name?" I had asked.

"Rachel," he had replied, almost reverently.

\* \* \*

The computer-like voice on the telephone reminded me of my reason for being here in Henry's study. I pushed the button to disengage the line and dialed the number for the Navajo Inn. The desk clerk reserved the section of rooms I asked for, then she agreed to track down two of the courtesy vans and have them driven out to Henry's. My first thought was to get Amanda and the tour group into town. Then I would, if necessary, tear those ruins apart to find Henry. Hearing a small noise, I turned. Amanda stood by the door.

"Go and pack a bag, Amanda," I told her. "Take enough for two or three days. You go in with the group and I'll continue our search."

"You don't think that he's..."

"He's still alive, Amanda. I'm speculating that he might have become disoriented at the ruins and wandered off."

"It can't be!" she exclaimed. "Henry knows those ruins as well as if he had created them himself!"

"I have to try," I told her. "And you'll be the most help to Henry by entertaining the group."

"Very well," she said, turning and walking away, her steps prim and stiff.

I didn't want to deceive Amanda. Yet, if Henry had gone where I feared, he was going to need some help getting back. I remembered the struggle that night so long ago. After a wretched discussion with Casey, I had taken her home early. Worried about Henry, Amanda had asked me to go up to the ruins and see if he needed help. When I had topped the ledge, I had seen his silhouette against the gray sky beyond, still sitting where I had left him. He must have heard me coming because he raised his head as I stumbled down the slope.

"Rachel?" Henry whispered, his voice tremulous.

"It's me, Henry. Branch."

I had brought a lantern with me and, after a few pumps, lit it. In the artificial light, Henry's face took on a grayish cast. He gripped the pottery shards tightly.

"She'll be here tonight, Branch. I just know it. This is like the time before when she came here."

"How's that?" I could barely keep the disbelief out of my trembling voice.

"Rachel explained that there were spaces in time, spaces where time, as we know it, does not pass. During those periods, if we're in the right areas, there is no demarcation between our reality and theirs."

"And the previous encounter was during a 'right time'?"

Henry nodded. Again, he stared at the pottery shards, fingering them gently. He looked up at me and lamplight flickered off his thick-lensed glasses.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Why shouldn't I?" I asked, lowering my gaze, trying to hide my true feelings. "If you tell me it's so, I believe you."

"Initially, it was very difficult for me to accept," Henry said. "I told myself that it was a dream, that none of it had actually happened. But there were things that happened that caused me to re-evaluate."

"Such as?"

"I was never asleep, Branch. It was a fully conscious experience. Rachel came at dusk and left at dawn. Yet, the moment that she walked back to the overhang and disappeared, complete darkness surrounded me. I spent quite some time searching those ruins, looking for the way she departed; I fully intended to follow her, to return with her to her time. But, I suddenly realized that I was thirsty and my canteen was empty, as I had dropped it earlier when I had first seen Rachel.

"I looked at my watch. It had stopped and I was unbelievably tired, so I hiked back to my car and drove into town. When I stopped at the gasoline station, the attendant told me it was Friday night. Not Saturday, as I had thought, but Friday!"

"Wait," I said. "If you spent the whole night here and then searched for Rachel, it had to be Saturday." I hesitated and then asked him, "Are you sure it was Friday afternoon when you came to the ruins? Could it have been Thursday?"

"It was Friday, Branch. Despite my surety, I questioned the same thing- initially."

"What made you change your mind and believe it?"

"I began thinking about what Rachel had said. She had talked of right areas and spaces in time. Following her postulation, we had met in a bubble in which there was no time. How else could I explain our long conversation? How else could I compress those hours spent with her into time amounting to less than a paltry minute?"

I said nothing. An educated man, Henry knew about dreams. He understood about hallucinations and delusions. Who, in fact, was I to question his experience?

"Rachel was the woman of my dreams, Branch. She had everything I ever desired in a woman--compassion, humor, understanding, intelligence, beauty. But, it was three years before I saw her again."

"You saw her again?"

"For such a short time," Henry said. The wistfulness in his voice made my eyes sting. "You were in school and I was alone here. At noon, I had stopped to eat a sandwich and she appeared beside me, in the middle of the ruins. She handed me an exquisitely crafted vase of the finest crystal. I started to speak, but she interrupted me. 'It is dangerous for me to be here,' she said. 'I cannot come to this zone again. Take this gift and know that I love you.' Then she disappeared. I stared at the vase in my hand and watched as, before my eyes, it took on the crude lines of a pottery bowl. In anger, I threw it to the ground and it shattered into dozens of fragments. Again, I searched, but I could find no trace of the path by which Rachel traveled between her reality and mine."

"Have you seen her since that time?" I asked.

"No. It was, as she said, dangerous for her to come here again."

"Why do you keep searching?" I asked. "You have Amanda. She has all of the qualities you admired in Rachel. Lots of men would gladly sacrifice a limb to share their life with someone like Amanda."

"Rachel is coming back."

"How do you know that?"

"Do you remember the layer I sifted through earlier today?" he asked. "The one where I found this shard?"

"I do."

"That layer of ash and soil was deposited tenth or eleventh century," he said, his angular face intense with emotion. "And the vase I told you about? The one I tossed away when Rachel left?"

I nodded, failing to comprehend what Henry was trying to explain. He held up one of the pottery shards to the lamplight.

"Look carefully," he said. "This is a fragment of the bowl that I threw away. Don't you see, Branch? I had the bowl in my hands twelve years ago and yet I just unearthed it among other nine hundred year old fragments. There's going to be another time bubble here at any moment! I'll be with Rachel again!"

I stifled my desire to leave. Whatever Henry expected to experience, I decided to be with him. I told myself that I would be the sanity factor in the experiment, that we could later discuss the event and Henry would come to grips with the pranks his mind played. If I had known then the horror, the repugnance, the terror I was letting myself in for, I'm not sure I would have followed through. And now, as I stood in Henry's study, I realized what disturbed me at this moment. While I stood at the window and watched the cream colored van pull into the driveway, the thing that bothered me was that the last few days had the same surrealistic feel to them as that time in the ruins, the minutes immediately before Henry and I experienced Hell.

\* \* \*

"Branch, the bus is here. Won't you come?"

Amanda's pretense at cheeriness and confidence impressed me. No one would know what worries trailed through her mind. She had prepared herself to be the perfect hostess and nothing could impinge on her control.

"Give me a couple of hours, Amanda."

I walked into the hall and put my arm around her red silk-clad shoulder. She looped her arm around my waist and squeezed. Then she pulled away and straightened her long gray skirt. Handing her bag to me, she reached to pick up her purse and gloves from a table in the hall. When she looked up at me, concern reflected in her blue eyes.

"Call me if he shows up in town." I told her. "This could all be due to poor communication."

"I hope so, Branch. I truly pray that is the cause."

As soon as the van drove out of sight, I walked back to the study and dropped into Henry's comfortable leather chair. Running my fingers through my hair, I studied the single word that composed Henry's entry for the previous day. Why, after all these years, did he still search for her? After that fateful night in 1970, why would he even wish to try and find Rachel?

On that night, after Henry had told me about Rachel and the pottery shards, we had sat in silence for long minutes, each lost in his own thoughts. Slowly, I became aware of a sound that didn't belong to the familiar night sounds, a piercing, whining sound alien to my ears. Henry heard it, too.

"That's it, Branch," he cried, pulling himself to his feet. "That's the sound I heard before she arrived!"

I watched his face turn toward shadow after shadow, searching for the familiar form. The sound rapidly grew to a pitch and intensity so great that my skin twitched and I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I covered my ears with my hands to dim the noise, the sound of a million crickets dancing on tuning forks.

Just as abruptly as it had begun, the noise ended. And there was no sound, a circumstance almost as painful to the system as the previous cacophony. Henry turned to me and the light from the lamp magnified the gleam of excitement in his eyes. I took my hands from my ears.

"Any time, Branch. Any time, now."

I didn't like any of this. Henry's revelation of his long, although celibate, affair with Rachel had disturbed me. His hypothesis that the pottery fragments he had held years ago were related to the shards uncovered just this afternoon had disturbed me. And these supernatural extremes of sound frustrated me; I couldn't connect the noises to anything concrete such as wind, animals, or insects. Neither did the complete absence of sound fit any pattern with which I was familiar.

Then a dim, lavender glow spread over the ruins and the surrounding boulders. At almost the same moment, I became conscious of another sensation. An odor penetrated my nostrils, a smell so foul that I gagged and stepped back, but there was no escaping it.

"God, Henry! This is terrible!"

"I know. I don't quite understand what it is. This has never happened before."

"I'll tell you what it is, Henry. This is the smell of decay. More specifically, we're smelling putrefied flesh."

Behind the thick glasses, Henry's eyes widened. He shook his head in disbelief.

"It can't be," he protested. "Not Rachel. She can't be dead."

"I didn't say that Rachel was dead. We might be smelling a dead animal."

Or five hundred dead animals, I thought. Everywhere I moved, the smell blanketed me; there seemed to be no escape. My shoe touched something soft and slick and I jerked my foot away, almost losing my balance as the lavender light increased and I saw the large grayish lump I had pulled away from.

"Holy Jesus, Henry. God almighty!" I tried tearing my eyes away from the slimy mass that began to take form as the light intensified. "Henry, this is a man! Lord knows how long he's been dead!"

Henry remained silent. Horrified by the sight before me, I raved on, "God, Henry. There are maggots working all through him! Henry?"

I turned to my friend and understood his silence. Both hands held tightly across his mouth, Henry stood trembling, staring in bewilderment at the decaying bodies scattered at his feet and across the ruins. Weaving my way between carcasses, I reached his side. I grasped his shoulders.

"Henry, we've got to get out of here!"

"No," he mumbled. He kept his fingers clutched over his mouth.

"What?"

He looked up at me and I saw twin threads of liquid weaving down his cheeks. Limply, he dropped his hands to his sides.

"We can't, Branch. We can't leave here. This is one of the time bubbles and we must stay here until it passes."

\* \* \*

"No, sir," I said. "Not me. I'm leaving and you're coming with me."

Henry squeezed his eyes closed and wiped the tears from his face. Resolutely, he straightened his shoulders and nodded. "I'll follow you, son."

Taking his hand in mine, I began threading a path through the bodies. Never protesting, he trailed behind me. Corpses stacked three deep blocked our familiar path over the ledge. I turned toward the forest, knowing that once there, I could find my way to the house.

The gray-lavender light sprayed all around us. I stopped and looked up at the sky, searching for the source, but could find none. For hours, it seemed, we walked the battlefield. That was how I began thinking of it, the hundreds of men and women at my feet as soldiers. Then the light grew dim. Darkness shrouded us and I gripped Henry's hand, stopping in my tracks.

"It's gone," he whispered hoarsely. "The time bubble is gone."

The smell had disappeared from the air, but I knew that I would carry it in my memory forever. Turning and looking behind us, I realized that we had walked only a few feet from the point at which we had started. The lantern spewed out a feeble light, but enough to show us the way was clear to take the path over the ledge.

"Come on, Henry. Let's get out of here."

Wordlessly, he followed and I reached down to pick up the lantern. As I grabbed the handle, the world around us grew lighter.

"Damn, Henry. Here it comes again."

\* \* \*

This time, no discernible odor accompanied the eerie light. Only the moans of agony and the cries of pain and hopelessness. Sheltered by the overhang, Henry and I remained hidden from the action. I couldn't understand the language, the words being spoken. Yet the tone, the despair, penetrated to the very fibers of my existence. Keeping Henry behind me, I leaned to peer out. Squinting my eyes to focus through the smoky, hazy atmosphere, I discovered the source of the sounds. In the corner of one of the large rooms of the ruins, a group of women and children huddled, the women weakly sheltering the children with their bodies from some sort of brownish looking gas that swirled toward them. As I watched, the gas thinned for a moment and I saw the fallen figures of men near the perimeter of the structure.

A fresh wave of the brownish gas moved toward the ruins and I watched helplessly as one of the women keeled over, an infant rolling lethargically from her grasp. These people were being gassed! I stood, unmoving, paralyzed by disbelief at the atrocity.

Then I felt Henry move from behind me. I watched him stumble toward the ruin, fall, pick himself up, and move forward. I shook the paralysis from my legs and ran toward him. Suddenly, a weight fell upon my arm. I attempted to shake it off. Where were the victims of the gas attack? They had disappeared. Moments passed before I realized that, again, the time bubble had passed. Except for Henry and myself, the ruins were deserted. I finally understood what Henry had tried to describe to me, the reality of the unreal.

"Why did you stop me?" I asked, shaking his hands off my right forearm. "You could have been killed!"

"I knew the time bubble was ending," he replied. "I didn't want you to be close enough to become trapped in that reality."

"Trapped?" I snorted, aghast at the possibility. "You were the one rushing to meet destiny! Whatever possessed you to step out from cover that way?"

"It was Rachel," he said. "I think that she was one of the women in that ruin."

"Damn, Henry. And that's the reality you wanted to go to? All I want is to go home..."

"It's too late, Branch. Here comes another one."

\* \* \*

The lavender light swept over us coolly, peacefully, almost playfully. None of the horrors of the gas attack or its aftermath remained. A thought flitted through my mind and I trapped it. Why did I insist on thinking of the first time bubble as following the second? My previously ordered world, already a shambles as to the concept of space, might have to make room for a new concept of time. Could time flow backwards? Could blocks of events be taken out of chronological time and be held in suspension?

"Look," Henry whispered excitedly. "In the draw over there behind the ruins. See the group of women?"

My eyes followed his pointing finger to five women who stood together, conversing solemnly. In surprise, I watched their bearing, their patrician manners, their calmness. They seemed to be of the same race or tribe as the dying women in the previous bubble. Didn't they know what was happening to their sisters? These women were clothed in some lightweight flowing fabric; the beautiful rosy color Henry had named copera. A little to the left, three toddlers sat on a light colored blanket. As I

watched, two men clothed in short robes of the same color came quietly down a slope toward the women. Fine limbed and tightly muscled, they carried no weapons. Could a people become so highly developed as to need no physical means of defense?

My question became rhetoric as I watched several men run into the draw from the opposite side. Two of the men supported a third between them, his steps halting, his head lowered. Although I saw no blood, I knew he was injured in some way. One of the women left the group and helped the man to the blanket. She spoke to the children and they moved away as she began bathing the man's forehead with a damp cloth.

"Is she down there?" I asked. "Is Rachel one of those women? If so, and you want to save her, we're going to have to get her out before the gas attack."

"She's not there," he said, shaking his head.

The lavender light grew gray. Like a sponge soaking up water, the sky around us grew darker and darker at the horizon, the gray color moving from the edges of my vision toward the center. So this was how Henry knew when the time bubbles ended. Before he could answer me, darkness cloaked us again. Our only light, the lantern, had gone out.

"We can't wait around here," I told Henry. "If Rachel was not in that group, then you must have mistaken one of the other women for her."

I started up the path over the ledge, pulling Henry behind me. Getting him away before another time bubble swept over us became my prime focus. I felt his rebellion and knew he wanted to stay. I also knew that my physical strength was greater than his and, if necessary, I could carry him away from the scene. It was only when the lights from the ranch house came into sight that I slowed, allowing both Henry and myself to catch our breaths. I sensed that Henry had turned to look back over his shoulder.

"I should have waited," he said.

"Waited for what?" I asked. "To become trapped in one of those bubbles?"

"I should have stayed. Rachel might have come."

"What are you talking about?"

"Those men, Branch. One of them was very ill. Surely, he had escaped from the area where they were being gassed. Rachel may be somewhere dying."

"No, Henry. The gas attack we saw took place where we saw the women and the children in the last bubble."

"But there were no bodies," he protested.

"Because the attack had not yet occurred."

I felt his disbelief. His body stiffened.

"Look at it this way, Henry. Take away our concept of time. We experience events happening in chronological order, beginning with our births and ending with our deaths. Tonight, I sacrificed my idea of this being the only reality that there is. If space can exist in all directions, why can't time?"

"Are you trying to say...?" he stuttered.

"Why not, Henry?" I had questioned. "Why can't time run backwards as well as forward? Why do blocks of events have to occur in chronological order?"

By that time, my eyes had adjusted somewhat to the darkness and I had watched Henry's slump disappear, his bearing grow erect. When he had spoken, his voice had contained the confidence of old.

"Then Rachel is still alive. I can find her."

## Chapter Five

The light from the lamp on Henry's desk blinked, sputtered, and then ceased. First the water. Now the electricity. I stared out the window at the late afternoon sun, mentally bracing myself for a task I'd dreaded these past fifteen years. If Henry had gone over, had become trapped in one of those time bubbles, then I owed it to him to attempt a rescue.

Henry had changed, almost imperceptibly, in the years I'd been away. His compulsion to excavate the ruins had grown into a full-blown obsession. Only Amanda actually knew how many hours he now spent at the ruins, although I had strong suspicions. Several times since my return, I had dropped by, almost never at the same hour, and she had apologized for Henry's absence. But never, since that horror filled night, had she asked me to return to the ruins.

If she had suspected what had happened, she had never indicated it to me and I knew that Henry would never reveal the events. But somehow, the happy, compatible couple with whom I had passed through puberty and into adulthood had grown into parodies of themselves. As much time as Henry had spent at the ruins, Amanda had

devoted to the historical romance sagas that she turned out yearly. While Henry became absent-minded and preoccupied, Amanda grew restive and nervous.

I chastised myself. After having moved back to New Mexico six years earlier, I had isolated myself from both Henry and Amanda, preferring to work through my grief alone rather than allowing both of them to suffer along with me. I had moved back to the forty acres I had bought the first year I had played professional football. The forty acres, I recalled bitterly, on which I had built a home for Casey and myself, a house never occupied until my solitary return.

Initially, Amanda had made gestures to bring me out of my self-imposed state of social withdrawal and pull me back into the family circle. On occasion, Henry had driven his station wagon up the rutted road to my house. At those times, he had chatted about his classes and Amanda. He had never talked of the night at the ruins. Nor, had he mentioned Rachel.

Gradually, over the years, the poison caused by Casey's betrayal had begun seeping from my system and I had allowed myself to again accept the love and kindness shown to me by the two people who had offered me so much in life. Scarcely a day now passed that I did not drive to see them. And yet, as I had locked away a part of myself and hidden it from them, Amanda and Henry kept portions of themselves unavailable and undetected.

Amanda should be at the Navajo Inn by now, I thought, looking at my watch in the dimming light. Perhaps she has already seen Henry or discovered his whereabouts. I picked up the telephone and dialed the desk.

"Navajo Inn."

The telephone went dead in my hand. I rose from the leather chair and squeezed the receiver. First the water and then the electricity. Now, the telephone.

"Damn!" I shouted.

I dropped the receiver from my hand and it fell on the desk. No, I had to be honest with myself. First, the rocks had started growing. But, even as I admitted that, I realized that it had begun years ago, at the ruins, when Henry had met Rachel.

I replaced the receiver and walked over to the walnut chest underneath the window. Henry kept some of his digging tools in the chest and his flashlight always rested in a small compartment to the right. As my hand gripped the smooth metal cylinder, I glanced out the window in the direction of the ruins. From behind the tall sandstone ledge that hid the ruins from the house, I imagined a faint glow.

Setting the flashlight on Henry's desk, I turned back to close the chest lid. As I did, I saw a manila folder marked around the edges with red magic marker. The red marked folders were part of Henry's highly technical filing system, the red indicating both danger and urgency. Chills spread over my body. This folder had my name blocked out in inch-high letters in Henry's own firm printing.

I picked up the folder and walked back to Henry's desk. Here I opened it and spread out the five inner sheets of paper on the smooth leather surface. In the dimming light, I observed that the first sheet of paper was headed by the phrase Familiar Locale. It contained a list of names of the members of the tour group.

#### **Familiar Locale**

Ellen Madison	St. Louis, Chicago	World Traveler
Mary E. Meyers (Angel)	Los Angeles	World Traveler

Chad Carter	New York City	World Traveler
Jim Kirby	Kansas, Wash.D.C.	World Traveler
Kevin Eklander	Vail, Colorado	World Traveler
Check McCall	Japan, California	World Traveler
Earnest Simpson	Memphis, Dallas	World Traveler
Kyle Northrup	Denver, Vietnam	World Traveler
Millie London	Boston, Miami	World Traveler

The last name on the list was crossed out. It was typical of Henry's specialized files that he had written nothing else on this sheet. He planned, of course, to tell me the significance of this list when he gave it to me. Now certain that his current erratic behavior was in some way connected with this file, I examined the next sheet. Mode of Powerlessness headed the names on this sheet.

#### **Mode of Powerlessness**

Ellen Madison	Loss of Youth and Beauty
Angel	Loss of Confidence
Chad Carter	Loss of Credibility
Jim Kirby	Loss of Self
Kevin Eklander	Loss of Life
Check McCall	Loss of Identity
Earnest Simpson	Loss of Values
Kyle Northrup	Loss of Dignity
Millie London	Loss of Social Standing
Mike Peterson	Loss of Self Respect

Again, Millie London's name had been crossed out. But the surprising entry on this list was the name of the bus driver, Mike Peterson. More than ever, I wished Henry were here to explain this to me.

Fascinated, I turned to the third sheet. Henry's categories puzzled me, reading remarkably like notes for a sociological thesis. What theory did he propose to speculate using these obviously subjective categories? Picking up the third sheet of paper, I walked to the window in order to read the small print. This was an older, yellowed sheet of paper and simply listed dates and events. Blood rushed to my head as I read the name at the top: Casey Branigan.

**Casey Branigan**

- 1958    Father drowns
- 1963    Mother's friend accused of molestation
- 1968    Major professor commits suicide
- 1970    Best friend disfigured in fire
- 1976    Representative Rogers assassinated
- 1978    Branch accused of murder

Sickened by the reminders which would have meant nothing to anyone other than me, I clutched the paper tightly, tempted to tear it to pieces. Memories of Kate Branigan's heartbreak when Mr. Branigan's body was pulled from the lake came to mind. I recalled her stoic refusal five years later to believe the accusation that Blake Abernathy, the editor of the newspaper and the man she planned to marry, had molested three elementary school girls. To my knowledge, Kate still carried on her correspondence with Mr.

Abernathy. Why would Henry make this list? Why had he kept it? Why was it in this folder along with the information about the members of the tour group?

I re-examined the dates and incidences. Newspaper headlines had been made nationwide when Casey's major professor had slain his family and then committed suicide. And Marta, Casey's best friend, who had dropped in to visit me in Florida while Casey was on her world tour. Poor Marta. After a lobster dinner, we had laughed and talked for hours before she returned to her motel room. The next time I heard her name was weeks later when Amanda called to tell me of the horrible explosion and fire.

My head pounded. Over the years, I had conditioned myself to remain numb, to show no emotions about anything with which Casey had been involved. I had suppressed memories in which she played a part. Henry, why? I heard Casey's trilling laughter and I looked around the room, searching the corners. But no, the laugh was part of my memory.

"I'm pregnant, Branch. I'm going to have a baby. Don't look so astonished. Naturally, it's not yours. But you'll care for it as if it were. I know you. You'll do the proper and honorable thing."

She sat on the floor in front of the television, her long, tanned legs crossed at the ankles. She patted her firm, trim stomach and then turned back to the screen. She laughed again. I had not seen her so animated in years.

"Paul Rogers was just assassinated," she cried gleefully. "You know him."

I moved closer in order to make sense of the chaos on the television screen. "Rogers?" I asked. "The black presidential candidate? The guy whose wife you designed the wardrobe for?"

That was when I had seen his face on the screen, the man being led off, the assassin surrounded by plain-clothes lawmen. Ed Warner, Casey's partner and, I suspected, her long time lover. The cameraman turned quickly to the right and figures blurred and jerked on the screen before stabilizing on the prostrate figure of Representative Paul Rogers. Mrs. Rogers sat on the floor beside him, cradling his head in her lap, her face a mirror of disbelief, horror and shock.

"Stupid bitch," Casey laughed. "She told me that no woman could tempt him to be disloyal to her."

It was as if I had been given a jigsaw puzzle with only a few pieces fitted in and, as I was handed each piece, I suddenly knew exactly where it fit. Paul Rogers, his wife, Ed Warner. And Casey. This was exactly the scenario she would have envisioned for the maximum emotional effects from all three.

"Did you have anything to do with that?" I demanded, dread sharpening my tone.

"This is his baby," she said, patting her stomach, still watching the screen.

"Representative Paul Rogers' baby."

Spots danced in front of my eyes and my head felt light. I stepped toward her and she turned to face me.

"You told Ed," I said.

She didn't have to answer. The victory was in her eyes. At that moment I had hated her. Not for her disloyalty to me, not for the affair, for there had been too many of those to count. I had hated her for the lack of value she had placed on human life.

Why did you make this list, Henry? What did you want to tell me? Is there some connection between the tour members and those emotion-laden events of Casey's history?

I looked at the last entry, the one made in 1978. I even remembered the cold February day, two weeks after the Pro Bowl, my last game as a superstar. And those two cold little babies.

The telephone rang. I turned and stared at it. It was dead. A dead telephone couldn't ring. But it jangled again. Cautiously, I picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Branch, is that you?" It was Henry's voice.

"Henry, where are you? Amanda is worried sick!"

"Why, I'm here at the Navajo Inn, son. Amanda is right here beside me. She told me that the pump is broken and that we have no water out there. Get on in here, boy. I need your help with this group."

\* \* \*

I had needed no further encouragement. I picked up the loose sheets of the file I had been reading and tucked them back in the folder. As I did so, one sheet that had been folded many times fell to the floor. There were only a few lines of print on the small paper and I found myself reading the typed words, wondering if they were Henry's or if this sheet of paper had come from another person. It was as if this were the second sheet of a letter, the beginning and the end missing. I read it again and knew it to be Henry's letter. But to whom had he written it?

"I fear that I have lost my beloved Branch. I've watched an exuberant, emotional boy grow into a tight, rigid, numb man. He seems to feel nothing. Sorrow does not pain him nor does joy warm his heart. It is as if he is a shell of himself. I look back and enumerate his moments of tragedy and yet, when I attempt to pull my little boy out to

talk, the stranger with the cold eyes refuses to converse, does not remember. Can he be gone? I know that it is dangerous for me to feel this way in this area, but I detest that woman for what she has stolen from me. Oh, my son.”

More puzzled than ever about the contents of the file folder, I shuffled through the papers and pulled out the only sheet I hadn't read. There was only one sentence, triple-spaced and typed in bold letters: **THEY CAN ONLY STEAL TIME IF THE EMOTIONS OF THAT MOMENT ARE ABOVE THE ESTABLISHED BASELINE.**

An established baseline for what? And who were they? Now I was determined to talk to Henry at the first possible moment, not only about the growing rocks, but also about this file. I didn't care what kind of conference or party the tour group had going at the hotel, Henry and I were going to have our own conference.

## Chapter Six

After straightening the file, I placed it back in the walnut chest and closed the lid. Pacing myself at a slow run, it took me only a few minutes to reach my pickup. It was after I was back on the highway leading to town that I thought about the call from Henry.

How had he gotten to town? His station wagon still sat underneath the carport at the ranch house. Why hadn't he told Amanda where he would be? If nothing else, Henry's meticulous attention to schedule would have necessitated his being at the house when the bus arrived. What could be transpiring in that well-ordered mind of his? I knew one thing, for sure. Tonight, Henry would answer some of my long unasked questions.

On the straight stretch of highway dipping through the foothills, I pushed the pickup to fifty-five. I passed the spot where I had earlier picked up the astronaut and again found myself wondering about the members of the tour group, an assortment that included figures completely unlike in personality, age and occupation. The one trait, as far as I could figure, that they all had in common and the factor Henry counted on was their unique ability to raise funds. For two years, Henry had cajoled and recruited, had

interviewed and politicked, finally paring the group down to nine individuals that he felt could obtain the money that would enable him to restore the ruins behind the house.

Each member, much in demand for speaking or acting performances, promised support from a select core group. Jim Kirby, the astronaut, toured schools and universities, discussing his experiments in space. I had read that the majority of questions that buffeted him in the discussion period after each of his speeches concerned his lost minutes in space, the minutes in which he had no contact with earth. I remembered the briefcase he clutched so tightly and found myself speculating about what he carried in it that was so important that he couldn't turn it loose.

Angel, the rock star, had the adoration of hundreds of thousands of young people who would cheerfully spend their last ten dollars for a glimpse of her pink and yellow striped hair, her short leather skirts and her fishnet stockings. Silently, I commended Henry. Most people seeking funds never even approached the group that Angel could touch.

And there was Kevin Eklander, who had been the United States' prime contender for a gold medal in the winter Olympics a few years earlier. Kevin still commanded crowds wherever he performed or spoke. But I had seen films of Kevin's followers and had wondered if they watched because of his talent or because he and four other skiers had been trapped by a landslide three years ago and Kevin had been the sole survivor. Again, Henry's perception surprised me. How many other people considered enlisting the aid of someone that voyeurs would pay to see?

Chad Carter, who possessed not only youthful good looks, but had talent and money, still remained a bachelor and his nightly television newscasts had the highest

ratings of any among the female audience. The mere mention of Henry's need should result in thousands of envelopes mailed to Chad's network in short hours.

I couldn't remember a lot about Ellen Madison, other than she was a wealthy widow and patron of the arts. Check McCall had made millions developing computer games, while Earnest Simpson had built his fortune with discount stores. Kyle Northrup, a Vietnam veteran and ex-prisoner of war, had written several books. Millie London, one of Boston's blue bloods, had canceled only last week. I knew nothing of Tina, Angel's personal secretary. According to the papers I had observed in the file, Henry knew nothing about her, either.

"How do you plan to convince these people to support your project?" I had asked Henry last month.

"I'm going to offer a tour of the ruins," he had replied. "After they've gone through and I've explained the significance of some of my finds, they won't be able to deny their support."

Since that night fifteen years ago, I had not asked Henry about any new discoveries. I hadn't wanted to know. I had never intended going there again. Then he had asked me, "Branch, I need you. Will you be there?"

Henry had never asked me to do anything for him. He had never expressed the need for my help. As much as that particular area of the earth repelled me, I had known that I would return.

"You can count on me, Henry," I told him.

\* \* \*

Attempting to postpone attending the social event Henry had planned, I pulled in at the gas station on the block north of the Navajo Inn. I had just removed the cap from the gas tank and reached for the hose at the pump when I heard sirens. It was seconds before three vehicles, two ambulances and a police car, passed by on the street, moving south. Then the sirens stopped. My heart skipped a beat as I realized they must have pulled into the parking lot at the Navajo Inn. Even though dozens of rooms had been reserved tonight for other travelers, my thoughts raced to Henry and his group.

I pumped five gallons of gas into the tank before I replaced the nozzle on the pump and rushed into the station. I placed a twenty-dollar bill on the counter as my eyes searched for Clyde, the owner. Clyde kept his two-way radio tuned to the emergency channel and he would have heard what, if anything, had happened. The young man behind the counter placed the change in my open palm and, not seeing Clyde, I turned toward the door to leave. Halfway to the pickup, I heard Clyde's voice.

"Hackworth!" he yelled. "What are you doing here? Thought for sure you'd be at the motel."

I turned to look at Clyde. His grossly overweight body, stuffed into a pair of faded denim overalls, moved toward me. Light from the station bay reflected off his bald head; hands the size of small hams reached for me, grabbing the flesh of my upper arms.

"Where you been keeping yourself, boy?" he asked, friendly blue eyes scanning me. "I saw more of you when you was playing pro ball. Least," he added, smiling a toothy grin, "I saw you on television."

"Just working, Clyde," I told him. "Just working at the ranch. What happened at the Inn?"

"You wasn't there?"

I shook my head. Dropping his large hands from my arms, Clyde reached up to rub his forehead. I flexed my muscles to remove the numbness.

"Seems that a fellow drowned in the swimming pool."

"Drowned?" I gasped. How could that have happened? From the beginning, I had insisted on employing a full-time lifeguard during pool hours. "Where was Dennis?"

"You had better move on down there," Clyde said. "Seems that somebody must have hit Dennis over the head. They found him in the laundry room, all bloody and bruised. That's why the ambulance is in such a hurry. They may be able to save Dennis. Can't do nothing for the poor fool that drowned."

\* \* \*

As unobtrusively as possible, I parked at the side of the Navajo Inn, away from the lights. Using a key, I let myself in through a maintenance door and walked deliberately to the office behind the desk clerk's booth. Opening the door a crack, I peered into the lobby. Looking past the clerk's neat gray bun, I saw Henry talking to Forsyth Barlow, the sheriff. At that moment, Mandy Petross, the relief clerk, opened the large glass doors that faced the parking lot and walked in, an inquisitive expression wrinkling her smooth face.

"Helen," I hissed, attempting to get the attention of the desk clerk.

She turned, surprised, and then moved toward the office door when she realized I was there. Unconsciously, she lifted her right hand and patted her carefully coifed hair.

"Mr. Hackworth," she exclaimed, and then dropped her voice to a whisper, "Sheriff Barlow wants to see you."

"Not yet," I returned, keeping my voice lowered. "Get Mandy on the desk right away and then I want to talk to you here in the office."

"Certainly," she said, turning back to the lobby and motioning Mandy over.

In less than five minutes, Helen Chandler, one of the most efficient and reliable people I've ever known, sat in the chair across the desk from me. A single lady in her fifties, Helen always managed to leave her shift looking as spotless and cool as she had upon coming to work. Only a careful inspection by someone who had known Helen for years would have revealed the ink spot on her mauve shirtsleeve and the coffee spill on her white shoe.

"Bad night, huh?"

"It's that group you called about, Branch. They've been nothing but trouble since they arrived."

"Just calm down, Helen. I've locked the office door. Tell me the entire story."

She sighed. Removing her silver-rimmed glasses, she placed them on the desk and rubbed the bridge of her nose with her right thumb and forefinger. "They unloaded out front a little before four," she began, "the seven of them and Amanda Adams."

"Seven? Are you sure?"

Helen's eyes widened. The look she awarded me spoke of scorn that I should doubt her observation. Perhaps Tina had been telling the truth about two deaths on the tour.

"Sorry, Helen. It was my understanding that there were to be nine in the group. Even though one member canceled, another was added. Go on."

"First, that crazy girl with the striped hair, the rock star, wanted a suite with two bedrooms. I told her that we didn't have one available for tonight, but we would move her first thing in the morning. You would have thought that I was putting her in a room with an outhouse. She fussed and complained until the sweet girl with her, her secretary, calmed her down."

Helen paused for a moment. The sweet girl she described would be Tina. I should have expected as much, though, remembering that Casey could always wrap older women around her finger.

"Then Mr. Kirby, the astronaut," Helen continued, "took a swing at Oliver when Oliver picked up his bags to carry them to his room."

"He's very concerned about anyone touching his briefcase," I commented.

"The Japanese man complained about how long it took for the computer to work. Chad Carter, beautiful man that he is, attempted to explain how the machine worked and the Japanese man got real irritated and said something snotty about knowing his business even if Chad didn't know his.

"Then that Ellen Madison. What a witch! Pardon me, Branch, but that hoity toity society lady thinks she's better than anyone else because she has money."

I didn't ask my clerk what Ellen Madison had said or done. There was no time for that. Thus far, Helen had accounted for everyone except Earnest Simpson, Kevin Eklander, and Kyle Northrup. Two of these men would be the ones that Tina had implied were murdered. And one of them would have drowned in the Navajo Inn pool only minutes earlier.

"That skier," Helen continued. "He was weird. He kept staring at that rock star's secretary." Helen lowered her voice and leaned toward me. "Do you suppose it's true, what they say about him? Did he really eat those people when he was trapped on that mountain?"

"Helen, you said he was weird..."

"Yes," she said. "He was the one. They just carried him out to the ambulance. Kevin Eklander was the one who drowned."

So, Simpson and Northrup were the two members of the group who had died earlier. Or, as Tina had suggested, they had been murdered. What were the odds against three out of nine members of any group dying in less than a week?

"I know you weren't there, Helen, but you must have some idea as to what happened."

Helen frowned. She picked up her glasses and then placed them back on the desk. Finally, she looked up at me.

"The way I understood it was that the pool had been closed off to anyone not in Dr. Adams' party. Some snacks and drinks had been sent out to poolside, but none of the staff was there when it happened."

"Dennis?" I questioned.

"Oh, Dennis was there earlier. But he left to get help when the lights went out. He..."

"The electricity was off?" I interrupted. "For how long?"

"It couldn't have been more than five minutes," Helen replied. "It was still late afternoon outside and things couldn't have been that dark at the pool area, especially with that big skylight."

"And yet, during that five minutes, Dennis was attacked and Kevin Eklander drowned."

"I know," she spoke haltingly. "It doesn't seem quite right."

\* \* \*

I scanned the group before me as I entered the lobby. Forsyth Barlow, his badge gleaming on his blue uniformed chest, appeared properly authoritative as he talked with a slimly elegant fifty something woman in carefully casual brown silk pants and blouse. When he saw me, he waved and the woman turned. Her slanting green eyes appraised me, carefully, coolly, before she walked back to the knot of people milling around near the coffee shop. I could empathize with Helen's chagrin about dealing with Ellen Madison. From experience, I knew that women like that could be pretty darn condescending if they saw that you were of no use to them.

"Afraid this kind of throws a monkey wrench in Dr. Adams' plans to get money," Forsyth said, his heavy dark brows drawing together over his nose. He wiped a hand over his thick white hair

"What do you mean?" I asked, holding his gaze.

His eyes shifted, seeming to change from brown to black. "Hackworth," he said, "we're going to have to keep this group here in the area and I'm not sure how we can do it. They're a pretty influential group and they're sure not going to be pleased with Henry."

"Forsyth, what are you trying to tell me?"

"Look at it this way," he said. "Dennis Montoya is going to intensive care and we have another boy in that ambulance that just left. That one's dead. I'm thinking that the drowning may not have been an accident."

Again, I remembered Tina's comment about the other two deaths. Murders, she had called them. Perhaps that had been the case. If so, then someone in Henry's group was efficiently and surely decimating the remainder of the members.

\* \* \*

So, now there were six, five original members, plus Tina. And one of them was a cold and calculating murderer, someone who, judging from the deaths of Earnest Simpson and Kyle Northrup, must have planned this from the beginning of the tour. As yet, I had no information about the circumstances surrounding the deaths of those two men and possessed absolutely no inclination to reveal my information to the sheriff. First, I wanted to talk to Henry.

But, as my eyes searched the lobby for his gaunt frame, I realized that Henry was gone. While I had been talking to Forsyth Barlow, he had made his exit. Amanda stood inconspicuously by a potted plant near the entrance and I hurriedly made my way to her side. Her blue eyes widened with surprise when she saw the expression on my face.

"Where is he, Amanda?" I asked, taking her cold hand in mine. "Where did Henry go?"

She brushed an imaginary piece of lint from her pink cotton shirtdress and cast her eyes toward the floor. I watched a tiny muscle twitch the porcelain flesh underneath her cheekbone. When she looked back up at me, tears swam in her eyes.

"Branch, I think you and I should talk."

"We'll talk later, Amanda. At this moment, it's of the utmost importance that I talk to Henry. It's not just this drowning. It's..."

"I know," she interrupted. "It's also those other two men who died."

I swallowed. As far as I knew, throughout all those years, Henry had never confided to Amanda his theories and experiences in the ruins. I would not be the one to bring up the subject now.

"Branch?"

I looked at Amanda, this woman who had been a mother to me. Except for the gray streaking her golden brown hair, she could have been my age rather than fifty-three. Few wrinkles had encroached upon her skin and her flesh had defied the age-old law of gravity, clinging smoothly to the muscles of her well-toned body.

"Branch, I'm concerned about Henry. I must talk with you. If only..."

Her eyes widened with dislike as she looked over my shoulder. I turned sharply, almost colliding with the slender blond who blocked my way. Draped in some filmy, see through fabric that covered little more of her curvaceous body than the skimpy bikini underneath, Tina stirred the amber liquid in her glass with her forefinger.

"Mr. Hackworth," she purred, slowly drawing her tongue over her lower lip. "I hope you didn't come here to use the pool. You'll be sorely disappointed."

"Excuse us, Tina," Amanda asserted. She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the checkout desk. "Branch, you have to stop Henry. Don't allow him to go through with this tour tomorrow."

"Why are you asking this of me, Amanda? What do you know or suspect?"

"It's too complicated," she said. "Too long. We have no privacy."

She shrugged her right shoulder and I watched a light haired man with the face and body of a Greek idol stroll toward us. His professional smile, although aimed at Amanda, was not lost on me. Having had my share of teeth knocked out on the playing field, I knew the work of a good cosmetic dentist.

"Amanda Adams," he said, holding out his hand. "I've been looking for an opportunity to talk with you all evening. I read each of your books the moment it hits the shelves in my local bookstore."

Amanda stretched out her right hand and I watched her face, read her boredom with this man who fascinated millions of American women. Her blue eyes met his brown ones and, after a few moments, he blinked first. Then he seemed to observe me and his eyes glimmered with something akin to recognition.

"Say," he began, "aren't you...?"

"Chad," Amanda interrupted, "this is my son, Branch. Branch, I'd like you to meet Chad Carter. Chad has a nightly newscast on television. I'm sure you've seen him."

"Nice meeting you," I said, backing away. Even with Amanda's misleading introduction, I wouldn't be able to keep that news hound at bay for very long. I had dropped from public sight six years ago, but some reporters who had come to town when the Navajo Inn opened had informed the world of my whereabouts. Chad Carter would relish bringing up the old scandal and rehashing it for a couple of weeks. Especially if he could tie it in with the excitement over the current murders. I felt Amanda's stare and looked into eyes that mirrored my helplessness.

"Henry is waiting for you at his office," she said softly. "He told me he would be working on the model of the ruins."

\* \* \*

I wasted a few minutes searching for my pickup in the parking lot before I realized that Henry must have borrowed it to go to the university campus. Knowing that my keys would be in the ignition, he would not have thought twice about taking it. If he was, as Amanda had implied in her last statement, working on his model, then he was at the university library. Rather than return to the lobby for the keys to a courtesy van, I walked out to the highway. By cutting through the old fairgrounds area, I could be at the library in ten minutes.

Earlier tonight, Henry had deliberately avoided me. Amanda had been reluctant to reveal his whereabouts, telling me only as a last resort. She had wanted to discuss something with me. Had it been about Henry? Had she some foreknowledge of disaster at the ruins tomorrow?

I chastised myself about my speculations. Most likely, when she had discovered that two other members of the group had died, she had become concerned about Henry's association with the group, fearing for his fate. I felt a kindred weakness in the pit of my stomach, a gnawing fear that the deaths and the ruins were somehow connected. I had to make Henry understand that whatever he was doing with that other reality was affecting this one. I remembered his retelling of his first meeting with Rachel; she had told him that our realities exist concurrently, in the same space. In her reality, she existed as he saw her. But, in this reality, she could be something as innocuous as a tree, a blade of grass, even a rock.

And the rocks at both Henry's place and mine were growing.

\* \* \*

Ghostly buildings leaned toward me as I hurried down the wide, unused road that bisected the fairgrounds. Memories of neon lights, canned music and the taste of hot dogs flirted with my concentration. Every fall, from the time I was ten, Casey and I had wandered down this same path, hand in hand, our eyes reflecting the sparkle of blinking lights as we attempted every carnival game our budgets allowed.

It had been here, at the edge of a green and yellow tent, that I had first kissed Casey, a tentative peck on the cheek. We had been fourteen years old and enraptured with the idea of young love. I still remembered the incredible softness of her cheek as I touched my lips to it.

She laughed. I pulled away, embarrassed and defensive.

"No, Branch," she giggled, throwing her arms around my neck, moving her body so close to mine that I felt her budding breasts flame against my chest, through her lightweight sweater and my own plaid shirt. "Like this."

She touched her lips to mine and I flashed hot and cold, dizzy with the effect. My entire body felt weak and I pushed her away. "Don't do that," I said. My voice was hoarse and I held her at arm's length, adoring her liquid brown eyes and her parted lips, still moist from my kiss.

"Why not?" she challenged, tossing her long blond hair. "Don't you like kissing me?"

The canned music increased in volume and I held my hands over my ears, numbing the sound and the memories. I shook my head, realizing that the circus tent was gone, the lights had faded, and the only sound was that made by a loose sheet of tin scratching on another one as the breeze caressed the ancient structure.

Damn you, Casey, I thought, looking across the field toward the lights of the campus in the distance. You've monopolized my memories too long.

Increasing my pace to a trot, I moved toward the lighted area. In the basement of the nearest building, Henry sat, even now erecting a miniature version of the way he speculated his ruined city to have appeared before its abandonment.

## Chapter Seven

Hanging from a cord that dropped from the ceiling, a large utility light spotlighted Henry's small city. The buildings stretched out several square feet over the wooden base he had built. As nearly as I could determine, the terrain faithfully duplicated the topography of the area on which the ruins lay. Tonight marked the first time I had seen the model since he had begun the timestaking task of carving the red stone rocks into small building blocks for the structures. I caught my breath. This city Henry had constructed bore little resemblance to any known reconstruction of local Chaco culture dwellings. Upon hearing my gasp of surprise, Henry looked up from his work. His face showed less shock than irritation when he saw me.

"What are you doing here?" he asked sharply. "I counted on you to stay with the group back at the hotel."

I moved to a stool opposite him at the table and sat down, staring in fascination at the project. The buildings resembled an artist's interpretation of a futuristic city, all

curves and angles, large low buildings and tall, narrow ones. Atop the tall building at the center, Henry had angled a piece of glass-like substance.

"I have to complete this tonight, Branch. I want to bring the group to see it tomorrow."

"By tomorrow, Henry, you may not have a group."

He scooted his stool back from the table, glaring at me. His narrowed eyes reflected disbelief. "Of course, there will be a group. I've already planned it. The people are here in town, at the motel!"

"Henry, stop for a moment and think. How many people signed up for the group?"

"Nine," he said. "But, wait. Millie London canceled a few days before they left Chicago, so that leaves eight."

"Henry, three members of that group are dead. You have only five of the original members left."

"Five?" he exclaimed. "How could that be?"

"Earnest Simpson and Kyle Northrup died after leaving Chicago and before the arrival here of the bus. I don't know how. I had hoped that you had the information. And you must remember that Kevin Eklander drowned just before you left the Navajo Inn."

"Yes, yes. Earnest Simpson had a heart attack the first day out and Northrup was struck by another vehicle as the passengers were unloading in a parking lot. It had slipped my mind."

"Slipped your mind? Henry, this is not at all like you. You weren't even at the ranch to meet the group when they arrived! Where have you been? What is going on?"

Henry's eyes dropped, refusing to meet my own. Absentmindedly, he reached over and straightened a small, meticulously designed juniper tree near the sandstone ledge.

"Henry," I began, determined to shock him to attention, "are those murders connected in any way with something that is going on at the ruins?"

A barely noticeable spasm passed over Henry; the trunk of the tiny juniper tree snapped as his fingers squeezed it. He pulled his hand away.

"What gives you the impression that the deaths were murders?" he demanded.

"Three accidental deaths in a group of eight people, Henry? Those odds are just too great. Let me tell you, when Forsyth Barlow finds out about Simpson and Northrup, he's going to come to the same conclusion that I have."

"And what is that?"

"Henry, someone in that group is killing off the other members!"

"If what you propose is true," Henry said, "and the deaths aren't accidental, on what grounds do you accuse someone in the group?"

I hadn't thought about that. But, again, I hadn't been with the group the entire time. Sure, someone could have followed the tour bus, waiting for opportunities to eliminate members in ways that could be construed as natural or even accidental. If that were the case, what could be the motive?

"Henry, can you think of anyone who would go to such lengths to prevent your obtaining funding for the project? Are you aware of anyone who might not wish to see the restoration take place?"

Henry's face whitened and he clutched both hands tightly together. I watched him struggle to control his breathing. Fearful that he might be having a heart attack, I rose from the stool.

"Sit down, Branch," he said hoarsely. "Your suggestion is absurd."

"Why is it absurd?" I asked, watching the color return to his face.

"This project is a benefit to mankind. Those ruins are of cultural, historical and social significance. There are no recorded documents to describe any other ruin such as this! It is the only one of its kind! Even the scientific community will be astounded."

I looked at Henry's model city. If his thesis had documentation to suggest this advanced city, all disciplines would be altered, if only in minor ways. I could not find it in myself to imagine any members of academia going to such drastic lengths as murder to prevent the exposure of a postulation that most people would regard as quackery. I couldn't say the same for the corporate world, or the military. Suddenly, I remembered what I needed to tell Henry.

"Henry, the boulders are growing at your place and mine."

"Boulders? Rocks growing? Nonsense!"

"They're growing, Henry, just as if they are living things. I'm not crazy. Hear me out. I measured some in my yard. And the big one behind your well house? It spread out enough that it rolled off the ledge and onto the building."

Henry swallowed. I heard the sound across the table. Behind his thick-lensed glasses, I watched his eyes widen. Now, I had his attention.

"Henry, that night fifteen years ago, at the ruins. You told me about Rachel's reality. You said that she might exist here as a rock."

"No," he whispered. "I won't believe it."

"If that is true," I continued, "perhaps the entities from that reality don't want this project to succeed. Perhaps they are the murderers!"

"No," Henry cried. "They are peaceful, gentle people. They do not kill. They don't even possess weapons!"

"Henry, that doesn't matter, if they don't know what they're destroying. I know a miner who is a pacifist. He wouldn't lift a finger to harm a living thing, but he thinks nothing of hammering away at a rock ledge to retrieve a chunk of gold ore."

"You're irrelevant, Branch."

"No, Henry, I'm not. If Rachel's people exist concurrently with us and we see them as rocks, couldn't they see us as rocks in their reality? If the rocks are in the way, wouldn't they want to be rid of them?"

"Oh, God."

Henry stood up and walked to a window. For minutes, he stood, seemingly staring at the lights that illuminated a walkway to another building. Then he turned, all traces of preoccupation and absentmindedness gone from his face.

"Branch, I must stop what I have begun."

"How?"

"I don't have time to explain. You must stay here and protect the remaining members of the group. If I'm not back by daybreak, come after me because I will need aid."

"To the ruins?" I asked, feeling a coldness invade my body.

"To the ruins," he answered.

\* \* \*

After several frustrated attempts to talk Henry out of the trip to the ruins, I had allowed him to drop me off in front of the Navajo Inn and I now stood watching the red tail lights of my pickup as Henry began the trip to the ranch. Adamantly, he had refused to give me any ideas as to his intent. My determination to question him about the folder with my name on it had been forgotten. Considering the idea now, however, I realized that he most likely would have avoided or ignored my query. As to his going to the ruins alone, it was, he had insisted, something that only he could do.

I was no longer sure of anything. I had always felt that I was a sane, intelligent man. Yet, Henry and I had just completed a conversation that would have been rejected by the average screenwriter for a B-Grade science fiction film. Here in the parking lot, with the smell of dust and fresh asphalt in my nostrils and the glow from the large neon light spraying over me, I questioned my previous stance. Had the rocks really grown? Was there something abnormal about three deaths among the tour group? Had that night fifteen years ago actually happened? What was real?

Is reality the experience of the moment? Does my reality change to view the experience of the moment? Or, is the experience changed because of the way I view it from my reality? I slapped at an annoying insect that buzzed near my ear and walked toward the lighted lobby.

On soft feet, I entered from the south hall. Joe Hawk, the security guard, sat on one of the sofas in the opposite hall, sipping coffee from a Navajo Inn mug and smoking a cigar. When he saw me, he jumped to his feet, dropping the cigar into a potted plant container.

"It's probably time for your rounds, Joe," I said, stepping around to the desk where Helen Chandler stood, the dark shadows underneath her eyes looking like great bruises. I knew she had worked too many hours and I would take care of her after I finished with my security guard. "Joe," I continued, "we've had two major accidents on the premises in the last eight hours. Your responsibility is to be alert as to the possibility of another."

"I understand. I'll do my best."

"For starters," I suggested, "why don't you make an extra patrol through E Wing. I told Dr. Adams that I would devote some extra attention to his group tonight."

"Sure thing. See you in an hour or so."

"And you, Helen Chandler," I said, turning my attention to the head clerk, "you pack up your things and get home. I'll cover at the desk. What happened to Mandy?"

"After she found out about Kevin drowning, she said she just couldn't stand being around here any longer."

"So you told her you would cover and sent her home?"

Helen tucked a wisp of white hair back into her smooth chignon. Finally, she shrugged her shoulders and nodded. "Here," she suggested, "let me make some fresh coffee for you. "

"Go," I ordered, taking the coffee pot from her. I rinsed it out and measured fresh grounds into the filter. What would Henry do at the ruins? He had, in excavating the dig, discovered a spot in which two realities shared the same space. The sharing of time, however, did not occur on a permanent basis; the three separate time bubbles of my experience confirmed that. Had Henry, in his search for Rachel, uncovered a method by

which the time bubbles could be called forth upon demand? I shuddered as I imagined the possibility.

Remembering his "reconstruction" of the ruins, I forced myself to consider the possibility that Henry had visited that other reality several times. If time in that other reality did indeed flow backwards, then he would have seen the city as it had existed before its destruction, before those last hours we had viewed in the time bubbles when the gases had annihilated the population.

A door opened down the hall and the sound brought me back to reality. My reality, I thought grimly, listening to the metallic click of high heels on the tile entryway. Turning my head to the right, I watched a woman approach the desk. She wore black slacks and a white shirt; her light brown hair fell softly around her round face. When she saw me, she smiled and her blue eyes twinkled. I gasped.

"Angel?"

"Ssh," she said, placing her right index finger on her rosy lips. "I had to bribe your security guard in order to get down here."

"I almost didn't recognize you," I said. "If I hadn't seen your eyes earlier today..."

"I know," she said. "Most celebrities put on wigs and sunglasses to remain anonymous. I just take them off. Which brings me to my reason for being here."

"Which is?"

"I sense that you feel it is of some importance for you to keep your identity private outside of this area."

I frowned at her. What did Angel know? Or, was she simply speculating?

"I talked to Chad Carter this evening," she continued, leaning her elbow on the desk and fiddling with a ballpoint pen. "I don't know who he thinks you are, but he's all puffed up with the idea of finding you and doing a story. I told him that I thought he was a genuine nerd, but he just smirked."

Six years shot to hell, I thought. The community here had protected me, shielded me, allowed me my anonymity. Now, a pretty boy with a cheap expose show can come in and destroy it all.

"I'm Jim Hackworth," I told her. What difference did it make now? "Until seven years ago, I was football's leading running back, part of the famous backfield that..."

"Now I remember!" Angel exclaimed. "You left football at the height of your career and retired! Well, this is a real treat for me. I didn't recognize you without your helmet!"

"Thanks," I said, watching a smile break her face. There were no words that could convey the gratitude I felt for her understanding. I hadn't expected that level of sensitivity from a stranger, certainly not from one who screamed the words of a song as she paraded up and down the stage, snapping a whip at members of her band.

The telephone rang and I picked up the receiver. Before I could say a word, Joe Hawk's voice came over the line.

"We've got a problem here in E Wing."

"What is it, Joe?"

"I don't know for certain, Mr. Hackworth. We may have another death."

\* \* \*

I rushed down the corridor to E Wing, my moccasins making soft thuds on the carpet. Angel had volunteered to watch the desk, claiming that she had been a desk clerk years ago at a motel in Las Vegas. I hadn't questioned her claim. Even if she had never done it, her abilities as an actress and human being had convinced me that she could fake her way through.

Afraid to speculate as to whom the victim might be, I had called for an ambulance and raced for the isolated wing. All of the guests in that secluded section of the inn belonged to Henry's party and, as I approached the sitting area, my eyes scanned the sleepy men and women who milled around the area.

Sitting on a sofa, shapely legs curled underneath her body, Tina smoothed imaginary strings from her black satin robe, her expression indifferent. The astronaut, Jim, perched on the edge of a recliner, back upright. He clutched his leather briefcase with both hands and looked straight ahead. Amanda, swaddled in a blue terry cloth wrapper, stood by the door to one of the rooms, talking with Joe Hawk. The remaining two members of the group, both fully dressed, stood near a window, looking out toward the highway. Although Ellen had changed from the brown silk of earlier tonight to a rich green jumpsuit, Check McCall wore the same gray sports jacket he'd had on all evening.

I quickly identified the missing member. Mentally sorting through the room reservations, I remembered that Chad Carter, the television newscaster, occupied Room 112, the door by which Amanda and Joe Hawk stood. They both turned as I approached them and Amanda's eyes held a question. She stepped aside to allow me to talk to Joe and I nodded to her in an attempt to provide reassurance about Henry. Then I turned my attention to Joe Hawk.

"Carter?" I asked him. He nodded and I continued, "How is he? Do you have any idea as to what happened?"

"Maybe you ought to go in and make sure," Joe said, his voice low. "I'm pretty certain he's dead."

I swallowed and wished for something liquid to moisten my dry mouth. I had been afraid of this. Part of me had known when I took the call from Joe. The other part of me had remained hopelessly optimistic. I pushed the door open and stared at the pale figure lying amidst the tousled bedcovers.

"Come on in, Joe," I said, and he followed me.

Chad's right hand dangled limply off the side of the bed and I forced myself to walk over and lift his wrist. I felt for a pulse and could find none. Bile rose in my throat and I fought to overcome an impulse to run out of the room and just keep going. I struggled against the memory of that limp hand in mine the other time. The hope that the cold body would revive beneath my ministrations. Casey had...

"He's dead, isn't he?"

Joe's voice returned me to the situation at hand. I dropped Chad's wrist and stepped back from the bed, staring at the corpse. No female fan of this man would find beauty in the twisted features of the man in red pajamas. His brown eyes bulged and I resisted the urge to close his eyelids. The rescue team could handle that.

"Have you talked to everyone outside?" I asked Joe. "Who discovered the body?"

"I found him," Joe said. "I was walking along the hall and noticed that his door was not completely closed. When I reached for the knob, I saw that all the lights were still on, just like they are now. I couldn't help but see him, just the way he is now."

"So, nothing was disturbed," I said. "That'll make the police investigation a little simpler."

"Police? You think it was murder?"

"Forsyth Barlow will," I said. Silently, I told myself that I probably agreed. Two in one night. The murderer must be gaining in confidence. Or, I suddenly thought, perhaps he was running out of time. A thought came to mind.

"Joe, did you awaken all those people?"

"No, sir, I didn't. It was Mrs. Madison. She came out of her room and looked around me just as I reached for the door. When she saw Chad Carter all stretched out like that, she screamed and everyone came running out into the hall."

I nodded. It had been convenient that Ellen Madison had also been completely dressed. But, I remembered that Check McCall still wore his street clothing. If I was going to suspect Ellen, then McCall was also a suspect. And, what about Angel?

"Joe, what time did Angel leave to go downstairs?"

"Angel?" Joe's look held puzzlement.

"Angel. The rock star."

"Oh, her," he replied. "Why, I haven't even seen her tonight. She must have slept through it all."

Yet, Angel had told me that she had bribed my security guard. I had no chance to further question Joe on that matter for, at that moment, two emergency medical technicians rushed into the room. A short examination was all that was needed to confirm my worst fears. I picked up the telephone and dialed the sheriff's home number. Forsyth Barlow would not be pleased to be called out at this hour.

\* \* \*

Two hours passed before things quieted down enough that I had the opportunity to speak to Amanda. Tina had already returned to her room after answering a few questions from the sheriff, as had Jim and Ellen. Check McCall stood near the vending machine, sipping coffee from a cup. Angel, having been replaced at the front desk, fidgeted under Forsyth Barlow's stern glare. Amanda moved over near me and touched my arm.

"I know it's against house rules, but I've made some coffee," she said. "It's in my room. Want some?"

"Sure, Amanda." I caught Forsyth's eyes and motioned to him that I would be in Amanda's room. He nodded curtly and returned to his conversation with Angel.

Slumping into a chair by the window, I watched Amanda pour two mugs of coffee. She handed one to me and then sat down in a chair facing me, cupping her mug between the palms of her hands.

"Where is Henry?" she asked.

I didn't know where to begin. I couldn't cover for Henry any longer. Too many things had happened and it had been taken out of my hands. But, where did I start?

"He's gone to the ruins, hasn't he?"

I nodded.

"That foolish man," she snapped. "What can he possibly hope to accomplish?"

I debated. Should I tell her about Rachel? Would she believe my recollection of the night with the time bubbles? Had she seen Henry's reconstruction of the ruins?

"Branch, darling. Don't be so hesitant. Nothing you say can surprise me."

I frowned at her. In the glow from the soft lights, Amanda's face looked so young, so fresh, so innocent. She couldn't mean what she had just said.

"It's not that simple, Amanda."

"Yes, Branch. It's simple. Few people would believe it, but Henry has fractured a barrier between dimensions, so to say. He has created an opening through which those in another reality can cross into this one and vice versa."

I felt a tremendous weight lift from my shoulders. Amanda understood! But, how?

"Your expression tells me that you assumed I was ignorant of that knowledge," she continued.

"Well, yes," I stuttered. "I hadn't thought that Henry..."

"Henry didn't tell me," Amanda said. "I, uh, discovered the facts another way. But we don't have time for that now. The most important thing you and I will ever do, Branch, must be accomplished immediately, before there is another death. We must go out and help Henry close that barrier!"

\* \* \*

It had taken fifteen minutes for Amanda to dress. In the meantime, I had talked to the sheriff and he had brusquely promised to get back to me in the morning with some questions. For the present, he informed me, he would leave two uniformed men on duty in this wing. Even though Carter had died of asphyxiation, the cause was still to be discovered. Reluctantly, he had agreed to allow Amanda and me to leave for the ranch, warning us to be back by ten in the morning.

Now, each of us silent with our own thoughts and fears, Amanda sat beside me as I drove her car toward the ranch. Once, when I felt her looking at me, I turned and

attempted a reassuring smile. She reached over and patted my right knee. "I'm sorry you had to see Chad Carter," she said. "I know it had to have been difficult after Casey..."

"Amanda, I don't want to talk about Casey. Especially not tonight. I don't even want to think about her."

Amanda said nothing. I felt a twinge of guilt for my sharp tone as I remembered her supportive stance seven years ago during those weeks of the trial. She, more than anyone else, had seemed to have understood the motivating force behind my actions. Even more than I, she had known Casey.

"She never wanted a family," I whispered, feeling my vocal cords tighten.

"Hush, Branch. Remember what I've always told you about guilt and blame. You can't fault yourself for a decision she made and actions she took. She had choices. She always had choices."

"If only I'd taken the time or insisted that she see a shrink," I ventured.

"In this reality, we move forward, Branch. With the information you had, I have complete confidence that your choices were the best possible ones."

Amanda's comment about time and this reality reminded me of the reason for this dark, lonely trip. How had Amanda known about the other reality?

"How long have you known about Henry's experimentation with that other reality?" I asked her.

I heard her sigh. Moments passed before she spoke. "I've known of it as long as Henry has been involved."

Did I sense hesitation in her answer? Avoidance?

"But you never went to the ruins with Henry! You were always working on a book!"

"Darling, please trust me. I didn't go with Henry. I went alone."

"Alone?"

"Yes. Even Henry has no idea that I know what I do about that other reality."

"What do you know, Amanda?"

"I doubt that I know more than you do. I've already told you about the barrier."

"I'll tell you what I know, Amanda. That other reality exists in the same space that we do. Normally, we are unaware of each other because each reality sees the other as some inconsequential object on the landscape."

I turned to glance at Amanda. She sat erectly, hands tightly clasped in her lap, eyes straight ahead. Then, I continued, "Except there are spaces in which both realities exist in the same time and are aware of each other. I've come to call those spaces 'time bubbles'."

"Time bubbles?" she gasped.

"I use that term for lack of a better expression," I explained. "In those spaces, there seems to be no time, not time as we think of it. We can observe years passing in that other reality, yet when we are returned to our own reality, only seconds have passed. It's as if gaps in their time have been pulled out and suspended in our reality."

"Are you sure of this?"

"Yes," I said. I related my experience with Henry fifteen years ago, leaving out the part about Rachel. "And another thing, Amanda. It seems that, in the other reality, time flows backwards."

She shifted her position on the seat. I sensed her restiveness. When she spoke, her voice trembled, "Perhaps it is all a matter of perspective, Branch."

"Perspective? What does that have to do with it? I know what I experienced!"

"I know that you do. The point I attempt to make is that to a person in that other reality, our time might appear to flow backwards. Think of yourself on a spiral staircase, Branch, with one other person. You are both climbing toward the top. However, when you are directly opposite this person on one of the loops of the spiral then, to you, he seems to be going backwards. To him, you seem to be going backwards. Yet, seen from the greater perspective, you are both traveling in the same direction."

"God, Amanda, I didn't need that thought thrown in to further confuse the issue."

"I would think it would clarify rather than confuse," Amanda said. "We've been talking about Henry's studies and what he hopes to show the world. He wants to publicize his findings through this group of people who are, one by one, dying."

"They're being murdered."

"All the more reason for seeking incentives," Amanda said. "It would seem to me that someone might not want Henry's discovery to become public knowledge. What better way to keep it secret than to eliminate anyone who might tell of it?"

I had, in my illogical way, suggested as much to Henry earlier tonight. He had scoffed at the idea.

"Most people won't even believe it," I said. "Even if they did, why would someone want to go to a reality where time moves backwards?"

“Think about what you just said, Branch. It’s not such a preposterous idea. Take a person who is ninety years old and afraid to die. Imagine a woman whose beauty and youth are fading. What about someone with a terminal illness? Even you, Branch.”

“What about me?”

“Seven years ago, if you had thought that going backwards in time would have enabled you to have prevented that tragedy, wouldn’t you have taken the chance?”

I didn’t know how to respond. Perhaps if I could have taken Casey back to the time she was ten and her father died. No, before that. Angrily, I gripped the steering wheel. How far would I have had to have gone with Casey in order to prevent something for which her whole life had prepared her?”

“See what I mean, Branch?”

Amanda’s words were soft and I sensed the pain and tears behind them. She knew about Rachel. And she probably speculated about the distance in the past she would have had to take Henry in order to eliminate that particular poison from his system.

## Chapter Eight

Once on Henry's road, I slowed the car, anticipating the narrowing space between the cliffs where the bus had stalled only yesterday. I debated mentioning the growing rocks, but discarded the thought. Amanda would observe the situation soon enough. At the moment, my major goal was to find Henry and do anything possible to close that gap in the barrier. Then we had to return to the motel and find the murderer.

The road cut had narrowed to about eight feet. When I drove the car through, I could reach my hand out the window and almost touch the cliff walls. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Amanda stiffen. My foster mother knew a lot more about what was happening than she was willing to tell me.

"What about the deaths, Amanda? Four deaths within the same group over a period of less than a week! Don't you think that's just a little too coincidental?"

"I'm sure we both consider those unfortunate people victims of a calculating murderer," she answered. "But, can we be certain that those deaths and Henry's mission at the ruins are connected?"

"They were all members of Henry's tour group," I argued.

"I know," she said, her voice low. "I've attempted to rationalize, to find other suspects, but it always comes back to the same thing."

"What's that, Amanda?"

"A feeling. I simply have a feeling that Henry has done something in the ruins that has prompted retaliation."

"You think that someone from the other reality is here in ours, murdering people who were to tour the ruins?"

"I don't necessarily mean to imply that the person responsible for those deaths is from that other reality," Amanda stated. "It could just as easily be one of our own."

"I don't understand. Why?"

"As we speculated earlier, Branch, some one of us might wish to go to that other reality. That person might wish to ensure that no one would be able to replicate his performance."

"In other words," I surmised, "that person would want no witnesses, no one to follow him. He would eliminate anyone who might relate Henry's discovery to the world."

"It's a possibility," Amanda said. "I just can't know, for certain."

"You said you've been there. When? How did you do it?"

"It was years ago, Branch. Before I ever knew you or Henry. So much time has passed that I'm not even sure I can remember how I did it."

Again, Amanda evaded my question. Again, I felt she knew more than she wished to divulge.

"Did you meet anyone there? What are they like?"

She hesitated for a long time. Moonlight shone through the tall pines and sprayed straight, parallel shadows on the car's hood. Although we were almost to the ranch house, I could see no lights; the electricity still remained off.

"Amanda?"

She flinched and I looked at her. She turned a thin, pinched face to me and shook her head. Then, she spoke, "The beings who inhabit that other reality are very much like you and me, Branch. They are humanoid in form and, although they might have evolved along cultural and sociological lines similar to ours, they have no concept of physical aggression. They..."

"Wait," I interrupted. "Earlier, I told you about the time bubbles and the gas attack. Someone in that reality understands physical aggression!"

"No, Branch. Those aggressors were not necessarily a part of the other reality with which I'm familiar."

Was she implying that I experienced an event in which even another reality had played the part of aggressor? My mouth felt dry. Each hair on my head seemed to be standing on a goose pimple. Dealing with one other reality had presented enough challenge. How could I even fit a third into my thinking?

"You said it yourself, Branch. You explained to me that those time bubbles had been pulled out of space and remained suspended apart from the reality of which they were a part."

"I know that I said that."

"If you and Henry were able to enter one of those bubbles, could not others do the same?"

"The premise sounds reasonable," I said. "But, you keep talking of the time bubbles as if you had never been in one."

"Only once," she said.

"Quit playing games with me, Amanda! You've already told me of your familiarity with those beings. You've talked as if you've been to that other reality several times."

"I've been there, Branch. But, aside from that one time, never through a time bubble."

\* \* \*

Before I could demand that Amanda be more specific, I glimpsed a flash in the rearview mirror. Peering back, I could distinguish nothing, but then it was there again. Not bright enough for a headlight, nonetheless I felt that someone followed us. Someone who did not wish us to know that he, or she, was back there. As I pulled the car into the driveway, I turned and stared at the road up which I'd just driven. Shutting off the engine, I sat for a moment, listening for the sound of another motor.

"What is it, Branch? What did you see?"

"I didn't really see anything. I glimpsed what could have been moonlight reflecting off the shiny surface of an automobile."

"The police?" she asked. "Do you think that Forsyth had us followed?"

"No," I said, keeping my voice low. "But I'd sure feel a lot safer if I knew we were followed by someone sent by the sheriff."

Amanda reached over and grabbed my right hand. I felt the coolness of her flesh. Her intensity charged through me like an electric current.

"We can't let anyone else get to the ruins, Branch. Henry's soul depends on it. Nobody else must be near!"

As I opened the car door, I thought about her words. Not Henry's life. Henry's *soul*. I felt beads of perspiration on my forehead and upper lip. The cool night air turned my skin clammy.

"Hurry, Branch," Amanda said, leaving the car and moving toward the sandstone ledge. Darkness surrounded me when I stumbled behind her as she sure-footedly climbed the trail. At the top of the ledge, I turned to look back toward the road. Nothing moved. It could have been my imagination but, deep down, I knew it was more than that.

"Follow me, Branch," Amanda coaxed, reaching back one of her hands for mine. I gratefully grabbed it and followed her. She must have eyes like a cat, I thought, wondering why I had never before observed Amanda's outstanding night vision.

After a few minutes, she stopped. The moon gave off enough light that I realized we were at the middle of the ruins in the area that Henry had called the ceremonial room. On his model, Henry had rebuilt this building as a round, silo-shaped structure with some sort of glass reflector on the top.

"Why are we stopping?" I asked Amanda. "Are we waiting for a time bubble?"

"We can't wait for anything, Branch. I'm going through."

Going through? Did Amanda know a direct path to that other reality?

"Wait, Amanda..."

"I can't," she said, cutting short my protest. "Henry doesn't realize what he has done. He's in danger."

"What about yourself?" I asked. "You'll be placing yourself in jeopardy."

"Not in the same way as Henry," she said. I felt her body brace itself as she pulled away from me.

"Guard this entrance," she instructed me. "Don't let anyone near until Henry is back."

Then she was gone. In the dim light, I searched for a clue, a marker, some kind of opening through which she had gone. I found nothing. How had she disappeared right under my nose? I leaned against a nearby boulder, relieving my shaky legs of some of their weight.

And, at that point, I heard a sound that turned my already chill body frigid. It was the sound of footsteps. Soft, furtive footsteps. And whoever made those sounds was coming down the path toward the ruins.

\* \* \*

"Who's there?" I called, steadying my voice. I moved from the position I had occupied and walked toward the ledge. Even though I had found no opening, Amanda had entrusted me with guarding the entrance to that other reality and I would see to it that

any intruders kept well away from the area. I heard an occasional scrape of a leather sole on stone, but no answer to my question.

"Is someone out there?" I called. Still, no answer. Had I, without knowing it, walked into a time bubble? Suddenly, a rock tumbled down the side of the sandstone ledge, rolling to a stop a few inches from my feet. Following the path the stone must have taken, I raised my eyes and felt my heartbeat pause. Faintly silhouetted by the moonlight at his back, an enormously tall man stood at the highest point of the ledge. Judging by the tilt of his head, he stared at me. I ran my tongue over dry lips.

"What are you doing here? What do you want?"

He laughed, a low laugh with no evidence of humor. Then I knew the man. McCall, the computer mogul.

"I might ask the same of you, Hackworth," he said, his voice becoming louder as he climbed down the incline. "I thought the whole group of us was under house arrest."

"I have business here," I snapped.

"As do I."

We now stood face to face, if it could be termed such. His tremendous height dwarfed my six feet plus. I found myself staring at the knot of his tie and feeling frustrated with the intimidating effect of his nearness.

"Look, Hackworth. I'm not into bullying and playing games. Admittedly, I followed you and Mrs. Adams to this location, but I had a reason for doing so. Incidentally, where is the lady?"

Who did he think he was? What led him to believe that I would answer the questions he asked? Obviously, he had escaped Sheriff Barlow's guards at the motel. And, in my book, Check McCall was still a prime suspect in the murders.

"If I had a flashlight," he continued, "I'd show you a mile-long string of credentials..."

"And what would that accomplish?" I asked. "Your credentials won't impress me. There have been four deaths among your tour group. Your credentials can't guarantee that you're not the one who killed those men!"

"I would expect you to be more sensitive about making accusations," he said, "especially with your past history."

"Damn you," I spat. "What happened seven years ago is of absolutely no concern of yours and has no effect on what is going on now!"

"You're wrong," he said, "on at least one count. I'm on a special assignment and I have government clearance. So, you see, I do have a purpose in being here."

"And what is that?"

"Sheriff Barlow sent me after you."

Temporarily speechless, I grasped the impact of his words. I felt a sour taste in my mouth. Forsyth Barlow sent this man to follow me? Forsyth suspected me?

"It's not what you're thinking, Hackworth. Your sheriff is concerned for the safety of Dr. and Mrs. Adams. And you, also. But you haven't answered my earlier question. Where are they?"

"No!" I shouted. "You answer some questions for me. First of all, why does the sheriff suspect danger for the Adams and me?"

"Because I told him that there might be," McCall said. "Dr. Adams and I have communicated on this project for several months now..."

"I don't believe you. Henry would never reveal his project to a government agent!"

"Not in that capacity," he said. "Dr. Adams needed my skills in the computer field. Together, we set up a program in which all probabilities of the civilization he studied could be explored."

That sounded like Henry. It also helped to explain the futuristic model he had constructed of these ruins.

"Go on," I said.

"In layman's terms, we fed into computers the information that Dr. Adams gathered from these ruins, along with the so-called mystical experiences he related in which he thought he met with beings from another reality..."

"Those weren't fantasies," I argued. "They were real, as real as this moment right here is."

"I know that now," he said. "But it was only tonight, just before Carter's body was discovered, that I talked to my computer and that fact was confirmed."

"I still don't know if I believe you," I said.

"I don't care if you believe me or if you don't," McCall said stiffly. "The fact remains that we must get Dr. and Mrs. Adams out of these ruins and away from here."

"We can't."

"We have to. There can be no possibility of failure."

Throughout life, I had known fanatics of one kind or another. The one trait all had in common was that they refused to hear something they didn't want to hear.

"I'll say it again, McCall. We can't get them away from these ruins. They're gone."

"Gone? What do you mean?"

"They've both gone over to that other reality."

"No," he said. I watched him shake his head. "They can't have gone there. Not both of them. How could you have allowed this to happen?"

I suppose there comes a time in everybody's life when the desire arises to hit another just to see if that person's imperturbability can be shaken. Despite all of those years on the football field, I'd never wanted to harm someone simply for the sake of sadism. But, at that moment, I wanted to clobber Check McCall.

"Are you sure?" he asked, softening his voice.

"I can't be positive about anything," I told him. "The two of us, you and I, are standing here at the ruins in the middle of the night and discussing other realities the same way that most people would talk about favorite bestsellers. Maybe we're both crazy and we're both imagining all of this."

He sighed. I looked past him, over to the east, and observed the grayish indigo tint of the sky that foretold sunrise in the next hour. McCall held his wrist up and looked at his watch.

"We have, at the most, thirteen hours," he said. "We must find them within that time."

"Have at it, buddy," I said, sitting down on a nearby boulder. "These ruins cover five or more acres."

"Just a second," he said, moving threateningly toward me. "You tell me what gives you the idea that they both went over."

My body ached. My head pounded. My patience with this man had reached its limits. "You self-centered jerk!" I shouted. "You don't give a damn about those two people who are gone. Your only concern is for your stupid computer games and probabilities. The only reason you're upset now is because they've done something your computer told you they wouldn't!"

Abruptly, McCall turned away from me. He walked a few paces and then turned to come back to where I sat.

"After a fashion, you're right," he said. "My computers took the intelligence quotients of both Dr. and Mrs. Adams and matched them with personality and psychological profiles of the two. The result was that, all factors considered, one or the other of them would not allow this to happen."

"You keep talking about this happening," I said. "What, in God's name, are you alluding to?"

"It has absolutely nothing to do with God," McCall said. "If anything, this will be the purgatory described in some religions. An existence in which there is nothing."

"Nothing?" I questioned.

"Nothing," McCall confirmed. "My computer predicts that there is a third reality occupying this space. Neither Dr. Adams nor I had suspected such and..."

"You didn't believe him anyway," I accused.

"That is beside the point," he continued. "What counts is that my computer was objective."

Dawn was approaching earlier than I had expected. Already, I could distinguish Check McCall's features. Impatiently, I indicated he continue.

"The third reality, according to my computers, has been capturing segments of time from the reality that Dr. Adams has come to call Namuh."

"Namuh?"

"Human spelled backwards," he explained impatiently. "The results that came through earlier this morning confirmed that this third reality has usurped almost all of the time in the Namuh reality. And, when Namuh time no longer exists, that third reality will begin stealing human time."

"You can't be serious."

"I most certainly am," he said.

"If it is so easy to steal time, why hasn't that third reality already invaded here?" I asked.

"They had no way through the barrier that separates realities," he said. "Until now."

I thought of Henry telling me he had to stop what he had started. I remembered Amanda's concern about repairing the gap in the barrier. Closing my eyes, I fought with the probability of what must be done. We must close the opening that Henry had made in the barrier that separated our reality from the Namuh reality. And, to do that, we would be forced to leave Henry and Amanda over there, to abandon them.

"We have to find that gap, Hackworth. We must close it"

And how did Check McCall intend closing that gap? As I opened my mouth to ask him, I realized that the rocks around me cast shadows. Starting with McCall's dusty

loafers, I trailed my vision up to his frowning face. I felt my chest tighten as my lungs labored for air and the lavender light dropped around us.

It was another time bubble. And, this time, Check McCall and I were in it together.

\* \* \*

I watched McCall stare at the surrounding landscape. His puzzled look slowly changed to comprehension and he blinked his eyes several times, rapidly. When he turned back to me, his face wore a smug expression.

"This is it, isn't it?" he asked. "This is the other reality! The reality of the Namuhs!"

"It would seem to be," I said, standing and brushing dry matter from my blue jeans, "but it's not."

"It has to be! Look at this city! The buildings!"

Startled, I looked around me. The ruins existed no longer. What I now observed was the original from which Henry had made his model. At that same instant, I knew that Henry had visited this city several times, had become familiar with the operation and structure, the government and the people.

"I wonder where the Namuhs are," McCall said, walking down a wide, paved path toward the large tower that housed the ceremonial room. "This city appears to be deserted."

"This place has been abandoned," I told him. "We're not in the Namuh reality."

He turned back to me, his expression angry. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he challenged me.

"Suppose you tell me just where we are!"

I hesitated, despising his arrogance. At another time and in another place, I would have walked away. As it was, I had no choice. I couldn't walk away. No one walked away from a time bubble. And the fact remained that Check McCall and I needed each other. So I told him about Henry's early experiences and that August night fifteen years ago. As I talked, I saw a gleam come to his eyes.

"These time bubbles," he exclaimed when I had completed my explanation.

"These are the segments of time that have been pirated from the Namuhs by the third reality! What a fantastic discovery!"

"If we get out, you can tell about it," I said.

"Certainly, I'll get out. All I have to do is climb back up that hill and go down the trail to the automobile."

He turned and strode away from me. In amazement, I watched him, remembering the miles and miles that Henry and I had stumbled through that field of decaying bodies. Then McCall stopped in half-stride, his right foot almost to the ground, his left leg bent at the knee. His whole body took on a rigidity that startled me. It was as if he had, in the middle of that stride, become paralyzed. I remembered the Biblical tale of Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt.

"Check?" I called. If he heard me, he gave no indication.

Would I have heard a call the night I pulled Henry after me, attempting to get away from that horrible stench, the rotting corpses? Had that night progressed in the same way? Had my physical body stopped in the middle of a step while my mind continued

experiencing the events of the bubble, the step being completed only when that segment of time had ended?

I looked around me, studying the landscape. If my past experience held true, this bubble would end of its own volition and there was nothing I could do to speed the process. I felt a warped sense of humor arise as I contemplated the process of speeding up time in a space where no time existed. This would give McCall plenty of fodder for his computers.

Henry's model was amazingly accurate. Buildings of the city clustered around the tall ceremonial structure. The streets, although wide, had been built for foot traffic. I saw no evidence that anything with wheels had ever moved on them. The tall, narrow windows appeared to have no coverings, unusual for a culture seemingly so advanced. I wondered if that was due to the fact that the lavender light surrounding me provided some sort of climatic control; in that event, neither heat nor cooling would be necessary.

Again, I turned my eyes to McCall. I debated the feasibility of attempting to drag him back, pull him out of this state of suspension. At the same time, I knew it would be no easier to drag him back than it would have been to pull Henry and me back. Despite his physical state, Check McCall had already embroiled himself in an experience I had no desire to share. Moving slowly, I eased myself back to the stone on which I'd sat earlier and lowered myself to wait.

I thought about Amanda and Henry. They were in that other reality, even at this moment, and Check McCall proposed somehow closing the entrance, trapping them there. I remembered what he had said about the necessity for accomplishing that within a few hours, preventing the third reality from entering ours when Namuh time had all been

usurped. Then, what would happen to my dear friends? Would Henry's foreknowledge of the situation enable them to survive? What of Rachel?

I had forgotten her. Rachel. The woman to whom Henry compared every woman he'd ever known. Even Amanda, I thought angrily. Even when he had Amanda's devotion and adoration, he still pined for Rachel. Henry had brought this all about because the memory of that encounter with Rachel represented something that might have been. And Amanda had, blindly and faithfully, gone after him.

Would I have done as much for Casey? Would she have done as much for me? I'd never know the answer now. Why had I even thought of Casey? I attempted to find another topic in my mind, but I kept remembering Amanda's earlier question about taking Casey back in time. Would it have changed anything? Would I be a better person today?

There had never, in a romantic sense, been a woman in my life other than Casey. From the time I met her, I had worshipped her. Casey, who was everything with people that I was not. She knew how to talk, to move, to carry herself in such a manner that every word she spoke, every action she made conveyed grace, confidence, and assuredness. One knew that Casey was royalty; she was never questioned. And the plebeians of the world, myself at the head of the group, rushed to bow and pay homage to her.

I raised my head to look at the rigid figure a few feet away. Had McCall moved? His feet seemed to be in the same position but, in profile, I observed a bead of sweat dripping off his chin.

"McCall?" I cried. "Don't fight it. This time bubble will end! You're not trapped!"

He showed no sign that he heard me. I watched the sweat bead drip off his chin and be replaced by another. I returned to my thoughts.

I had wanted to marry Casey, I remembered, upon college graduation, before I had left to go south with the football team. She had refused, reminding me that her father's estate had included a tour of Europe and Asia for her upon her own graduation. I had wanted Casey but, even more, I had desired that she have what she wanted. It had been three years before she had appeared in my life again. On a cold, windy night in December, I had answered my door to find her standing there, wet, bedraggled, beautiful.

"Branch," she had cried, throwing her arms around my shoulders. "I knew I'd find you here. Mom said you'd be married, but I knew you would wait for me!"

I had pulled her inside, by the fireplace, and held her at arm's length. She was thinner, but the roundness of her breasts and hips reminded me that she was a mature woman of twenty-five. Her large brown eyes, heavily fringed with velvety lashes, looked dreamily into mine. I pulled away from her in order to search for a towel. When I found one, I returned and massaged her long blond hair dry. With the towel draped over her head, she peered up at me from underneath wet bangs.

"Do you still want to marry me, Branch?" she asked.

I had taken her in my arms and held her against me, warming her cold body with mine. Four days later, we had flown to Reno and I had begun my life as a family man.

I raised my head. Had I heard a sound? Glancing quickly at Check McCall, I saw that he had not moved. Remembering the gas attacks from the first time bubbles I had experienced, I stared toward the city. Had the aggressors who had gassed the Namuhs been representatives of the third reality? Had they captured an entire reality?

Subtly, the light around me dimmed. I watched Check's right foot slowly drop and his left one just as slowly leave the ground. He turned his head and looked at me over his shoulder, his face stiff with fright.

"Run," he said, the word sounding as if it had been recorded and then played back at a slower speed. "Hurry. The gas is almost here!"

The last word sounded almost normal and he had moved another three steps toward the path. Behind him, over the mountains, I watched the bluish-pink that preceded sunrise. Finally, we had returned to our own reality. I stood and moved toward him. Grabbing his arm, I yelled to him, "Stop! The time bubble is gone. We're back to our own reality!"

He pulled away, looking toward the ledge and then back at the ruins. His breath came hard, as if he had been sprinting or climbing for hours. Sweat dripped down his face and off the ends of his spiky black hair.

"Didn't you see it?" he cried. "A horrible brownish yellow gaseous substance that appeared to stalk me, as if it had a mind of its own. Are you positive it's not back there behind us? I ran as fast as I could, but it kept coming!"

We both heard the moan at the same time. A low sound of pain from somewhere behind and to the left of me.

"That's it!" McCall cried. "The gas! It's coming for us!"

I turned to look behind him, almost expecting, despite the gray morning light that proved we were back in our own reality, to see that brown gas creeping toward us. Instead, I saw a large shapeless lump that had not been there before. As I watched, it

moved and I felt McCall's strong fingers grip my right bicep. Shaking off his hand, I stared as a hand lifted from the ragged bundle and reached long fingers toward me.

"Branch, help me."

The voice was weak, but recognizable. Henry! Henry was alive and back in this reality! I shoved McCall away and ran toward my friend.

## Chapter Nine

Ignoring the possibility that another time bubble might descend upon us at any moment, I knelt beside Henry and cradled his shoulders in my arms, bracing his head against my chest. Watching the wind rustle his wispy gray hair, I studied the wounds and bruises on his body, bleeding cuts and massive contusions that began on his face and stretched over his flesh down to his ankles.

"Who did this to you, Henry? Henry?"

The frail, scraped flesh at the corners of his mouth quivered. A moan escaped his thin, pale lips as they parted slightly.

"What in the devil happened to him?"

I flinched at the voice. Check McCall had followed me over to where Henry lay. He now stood to my left, astonishment and disbelief in his eyes.

"I don't know," I said. "Right now, I don't care. I have to get him to the hospital."

"No," Henry whispered. He struggled weakly, attempting to raise his head. He lifted it approximately two inches before it fell back against my chest. "Amanda," he gasped. "Save Amanda."

"Where is she?" McCall asked. "How do we find her?"

Angrily, I stared up at him. Check McCall had no concern for Amanda. Nor for Henry, either, for that matter. His prime interest lay in locating that entrance to the other reality.

"Mirror," Henry said, struggling for words. "Go through mirror."

Admittedly, I felt a small amount of satisfaction when I watched disappointment cross Check McCall's features. Out of his head with pain, Henry was talking about mirrors. I lowered my eyes to hide the satisfaction I felt at McCall's consternation and observed Henry looking at me, eyes open and full of clarity.

"Branch, you must go after Amanda."

"I will, Henry. But, first I have to get some medical attention for you."

"No. Not enough time."

"I'll search for her, Dr. Adams," Check said, squatting down for Henry to see him.

"Tell me how to get to her."

"Check?" Henry exclaimed. "Check McCall? How did you get here? Did you find the entrance?"

Dear God, I thought. Henry thinks he is still in that other reality. The mirror he referred to then must be that glasslike structure at the top of the ceremonial building. I looked at McCall. I didn't need to see his smug expression to realize that he had grasped the same idea.

"Amanda!"

The cry was a scream of grief and I felt Henry's body tense as he shouted it. His breathing grew shallow and I felt the coldness of his body through his ragged jacket. As if he were a child, I picked him up in my arms and stood.

"I'm taking Henry to town," I told McCall. "Then I'll be back here. If you somehow manage to close that entrance with Amanda still in that other reality, you'll be committing cold-blooded murder."

Check's obsidian eyes held mine. "I'll try and find her," he promised, shrugging, "but, if time grows short, I'll do what I have to do to save our reality."

Henry moaned only twice throughout the rough climb from the ruins to the ranch house. I didn't even think as I raced to his station wagon and opened the tailgate. With one hand, I unrolled the sleeping bag he always carried in the car and gently placed Henry on it, arranging the other bundles around him so that his body wouldn't shift around so much on the way to the hospital.

Henry's keys were where he always left them, in the ashtray. I started the engine and allowed it a few moments to warm up before I backed the car from underneath the carport and started down the road to the highway. As an afterthought, even though it was almost dawn, I turned on the headlights. At the same time, a moan escaped from Henry as the car hit a bump in the road. I glanced over my shoulder and then back quickly, just in time to see that the road ahead of me ran directly into a cliff and disappeared! Stretching in an unbreakable barrier across the road, the rocks of the cliff walls had grown together, overlapping in spots!

I slammed my foot on the brake. The station wagon careened back and forth on the narrow road before coming to a stop just inches away from the rock barricade. My heart thudded wildly. Then I relaxed. I would simply carry Henry around the rocks and to the highway. Someone would pass by and pick us up.

The rocks of the road cut had grown in every direction and I stumbled for a hundred feet in the forest before I came to the end and saw a way around. My arm muscles trembled with the effect of Henry's dead weight. His breathing, still shallow, seemed regular. At this point, I could have turned through the forest and over the knoll where Topper lay buried. Instead, I decided to head for the road.

Almost through the forest, I noticed a lighter colored boulder in the distance that stood apart from the rest. As I drew closer, I realized that the lighter boulder was one of the cream colored Navajo Inn vans. At the same moment that I cursed McCall's arrogance in driving it out here, I felt relief that he had parked it here, on this side of the rock barricade, rather than in Henry's driveway with the other vehicles.

Testing the door, I discovered the van was unlocked and I slumped Henry on one of the wide seats that stretched along the back wall. I hoped McCall had been equally unconcerned with removing the keys. Holding my breath, I eased into the driver's seat and felt on the steering column. Elated, I relished the metallic feel of the keys and turned on the ignition.

Once I reached the highway, I allowed the sun's rays that came in the east window to warm and loosen my stiffened muscles. Occasionally, I looked back at Henry, watching his frail chest lift slowly up and down. Inadvertently, I thought about those two poor little babies, remembered their helpless struggles to draw oxygen into their lungs.

Casey had never wanted to be a parent. She had told me that many times and I had never questioned her desires. Casey had been everything that I had ever wanted. Because she had not desired to become pregnant and begin a family, I had felt no emptiness in my life. I had supported her in her career stance, feeling that her role as fashion designer had been equally as important as that of mother.

"Branch?"

I slowed the van, looking over my shoulder. Although the bleeding from the cut on his forehead had stopped, Henry's face contrasted white against the dried stain. He had raised his head and shoulders from the seat. I pulled off the highway, onto the shoulder, and turned off the ignition. Squeezing between the two front seats, I knelt beside Henry.

"Lie back and rest, Henry. We'll be there soon."

He shook his head violently. Shoving away my hands, he looked at me, intensity burning in his gray eyes. "Too late," he said. "Evil."

"I know," I said, gently pushing his narrow shoulders back to the bench. "We're going to take care of everything."

"Got to stop them," he cried, struggling against my touch. "All my fault. Magnets. I brought them here."

I felt the muscles in my hands go limp. What was he talking about? Who had he brought here? Was he taking responsibility for the monsters of the third reality? Cold enveloped me.

"Who, Henry? Who did you bring here?"

"Tour group," he whispered weakly. "Brought tour group here."

The struggle, the exertion, had been too much and Henry lapsed back into unconsciousness. I stood abruptly, bumping my head on the van ceiling, and moved back to the driver's seat. The tour group? A part of the tour group? To whom did Henry refer as evil? Evil in this reality, or evil in another reality?

Once I reached the straight stretch leading into town, I pushed the van to its limits, turning on the emergency lights and honking the horn. Someone had called ahead because, when I reached the emergency entrance to the hospital, two attendants awaited me. They carried a gurney.

Before I had the van stopped, they had opened the back doors and one of them had slipped inside. By the time I climbed out and ran around behind the van, both of them were inside. As if a spectator in a dream, I watched them lift Henry to the gurney and gently swaddle him in blankets. Carefully, they maneuvered the stretcher through the door of the van and I stood helplessly, staring at the still figure, the blanched features. The two young men hurried toward the sliding glass doors and I moved to follow them. A tug on my sleeve stopped me.

"Sorry, Mr. Hackworth, I need some information."

"What? Oh," I said, frowning at the girl who stood beside me, holding a clipboard. "About Henry? You have all the insurance information. He was in just last summer for a hernia operation..."

I felt the words trail away. A lump on the floor of the van teased my eye. I reached inside, pulling it toward me. A shoe. Henry's shoe. It had fallen off when the two young men had transferred him to the stretcher. I held it with my left hand and brushed the dust off with my right. Something dark had splotted a large portion of the toe. I

rubbed that part against my denim jeans. Henry was very particular about his appearance; I would have to see about getting the shoe cleaned.

"Mr. Hackworth?"

The girl was still there. Why didn't she go away? Why did she keep staring at me? I turned to go inside.

"Where are you going?" she squeaked.

"I'm taking this shoe to Henry," I said. "He'll want it when he regains consciousness."

The antiseptic smell of the hospital assailed my nostrils as I walked through the door leading to the emergency waiting room. I had the operating room door open when a tall woman in white stepped in front of me, blocking my way.

"You can't go in there, Branch."

Startled, I looked at her. I had gone to school with Rose Ferguson and considered her a good friend. Why did she stand in my way?

"I want to see Henry. He needs someone with him." I looked down at the brown Hush Puppy in my hand. "Besides, he'll need his shoe."

I watched Rose's blue eyes fill with liquid. She blinked quickly. Taking my hand, she pulled me into a small room beside the nurses' station.

"Sit down, Branch," she told me, pulling a chair out from against the wall and guiding me toward it. "Doctor Pinestatter is with Henry. Henry is getting the best possible care. What I need now is some information about Henry that the doctor can use to determine how to treat him."

Was this *deja vu*? Had another nurse just asked me the same question? Had she wanted the same information? No, I told myself, that nurse had wanted to know about Casey. She had kept asking me what kind of pills Casey had taken. She wanted to know when Casey had eaten last. Even at the time, I had thought it a stupid question. If someone were dying, why would it be necessary to know when she had last ingested food?

"Branch, can you tell us when Henry had his last meal?"

I blinked my eyes, bringing the woman who sat across the table from me into focus. I shook my head in an attempt to clear it. I knew this woman. Why was she asking me about Casey? She knew that Casey was dead.

"Doctor Pinestatter may have to perform surgery and..."

"For an overdose?" I questioned. "She thought they were aspirin. She was trying to scare me, to pretend she was dying. She didn't..."

I closed my eyes, allowing the familiar whirlpool of darkness to rush toward me.

"Branch, dear Branch. Come back, sweetie. You don't have to live that experience over."

I felt the warmth of consoling arms around me, smelled freshly shampooed hair. For a moment, I slumped into the embrace. Then, the arms pulled away and the coldness of the room penetrated to my bones.

"Branch. Open your eyes and look at me."

The demanding voice squeezed my eyes open. Rose Ferguson stood in front of me, her hands braced rigidly on her hips. Blue eyes flashed fire at me when she read the returning clarity in mine.

"Damn you, Branch Hackworth! Don't scare me like that!"

"I'm sorry, Rosie. I haven't had much sleep and this thing with Henry worries me."

"I know," she said softly. "But, don't call me Rosie again. Rosie grew up."

"I want to see Henry, Rose."

"Doctor Pinestatter..."

"I don't know Doctor Pinestatter, Rose. I don't know whether Henry knows him. Henry will want someone he knows with him."

At that moment a smudge of yellow appeared down the hall, at the door to the operating room. A young man in a yellow t-shirt and blue jeans. If he could be in the operating room, then I could, too. I rose from the chair and moved toward the door. When the young man saw me, he moved directly in front of me, blocking my way. Rose spoke from the room behind me.

"Doctor Pinestatter, this is Henry Adams' son," she said. "Branch Hackworth. You probably knew of him as Jim Hackworth. Branch, meet Doctor Pinestatter."

He couldn't be more than twenty, I thought, staring at his curly hair and casual clothing. Henry deserved someone with experience.

"Nice meeting you, Mr. Hackworth. I used to watch you on television when I was in medical school."

"Henry?" I felt my voice break.

Young Doctor Pinestatter looked at the shoe in my hand. His eyes took in my rumpled clothing, my disheveled appearance.

"I'm sorry Mr. Hackworth," he said. "I know your history and I think that you deserve someone being straight with you."

I swallowed as I watched his features seem to melt and pour down his face. I held my breath.

"We couldn't save Dr. Adams."

I felt my breath being pulled from my body. Black spots danced in front of my eyes. Not Henry. Henry couldn't be dead. Henry was my invincible hero, my model of invulnerability. What would I do now? I felt something cutting into my right hand and I looked down, realizing I had bent Henry's shoe almost double. A thousand images flashed through my mind, squeezing memories I had forgotten. Henry, on the day I had become his foster son, when he had presented me with the identification card with his address and phone number. Henry, on the day he'd given me Topper. Henry, who was there when I cried after Casey's refusal to marry me. I breathed deeply and handed the shoe to Rose Ferguson.

"Will you see that he gets this shoe, Rose?" I felt my voice weakening. I paused and breathed deeply before I continued, "Henry felt that a gentleman always wore shoes."

\* \* \*

When I left the hospital, I stepped out into the dry, cool air of a New Mexico morning. To the north, fifteen miles away, I observed the huge red sandstone monolith that marked the border of Henry's property. Check was there now, I thought numbly. At this moment, he plotted to seal Amanda into that tomb of nothingness. I forced myself to walk down the wide, concrete steps. A small car sped up the driveway toward the hospital parking lot. Squealing to a stop, the door opened and Kate Branigan climbed out.

"Branch," she cried, rushing toward me. "Is it true? Clyde heard it on his scanner and called me. I got here as soon as possible. Is Henry...?"

I looked into her concerned hazel eyes. I took her hand in mine, felt the strength of her grip and squeezed her fingers, despising the hope in her eyes that I must destroy.

"Henry is inside," I told her. "He needs someone..."

My voice broke. Tears spilled onto Kate's cheeks and I forced my voice steady.

"He needs someone to care for him," I finished.

## Chapter Ten

As I climbed into the Navajo Inn van, I tore through my grief and threw my feelings of sorrow aside to be dealt with later. I remembered Henry's insistence about the tour group and evil. Did he refer to those still at the motel? Or, had he tried to warn me of Check McCall who, even now, might be destroying Amanda's chance for life? Could the evil he talked of be something even greater, something that belonged to that third reality? He had used the term 'magnet.' Did Henry believe that those in the tour group were drawing the evil to them? To our reality?

Why had both Amanda and Henry, even Check McCall, insisted that the gap in the barrier be closed immediately? McCall's computers had confirmed the fear that Amanda had expressed, that of the existence of a third reality. A reality that had stolen time from the Namuhs and would turn to our reality when no more Namuh time was left.

Henry had left his office in the university library basement, telling me that only he could repair the gap he had created in the barrier that separated the two realities. Later, Amanda had informed me that she had the capability to do so. Even Check McCall,

blindly trusting his computer information, felt that he could close that entrance. Henry's final attempt to save his reality had met with failure; the broken body behind me in the hospital bore mute evidence of that fact. The evil that governed the third reality, then, must have possessed knowledge that the attempt was being made. What other reason for Henry's mutilation? Was Amanda destined for the same fate?

I had to get back out there, to the ruins. I must find that entrance and save Amanda. Then, distasteful as it might be, I would unite forces with Check McCall and we would bar that entrance from evil. But, what of the people left at the motel? Were they, or any one of them, part of this conspiracy to keep the barrier open?

Forsyth Barlow had the people at the motel under guarded observation, I told myself. And I had promised Henry that I would find Amanda. My first allegiance lay with my promise to Henry. At that moment, the sheriff's car, lights and siren activated, pulled up and parked near the emergency entrance. I watched the tall, stout, uniformed man look toward the sliding glass doors and then at me. Exasperated, Forsyth Barlow ran his right hand through his thick white hair and walked toward my van.

"Branch, I'm sorry," he said, pausing next to the driver's side and speaking to me through the open window. "I'm real sorry about Henry. He was close to the finest man I've ever known. Can you tell me what happened out there?"

"Someone killed Henry," I said, looking straight ahead. "Amanda is still out there someplace, in danger. I'm going to find her and then I'm going to find the person who murdered Henry."

"Now, Branch," Forsyth began, "this is a matter for the law. Three people have already died. There's a special investigating team coming this afternoon from the state police..."

"I know it's not just Henry," I interrupted. The sheriff didn't yet know about the two tour group members who died before the group reached town. "I can't wait for some special investigator who is going to recognize me and decide he has his perpetrator. You know that's so, Barlow. He's not going to remember the acquittal; he'll just recall my arrest for murder and the trial. Even if that were not so, I can't wait for this afternoon. That may be too late."

The sheriff lowered his head. He knew I spoke the truth. Would the special team even attempt looking for another suspect if they had me in their hands? I would have liked to have told Forsyth what was going on, but how could I have explained something that I didn't yet understand?

"Amanda is in danger out at the ranch," I told him. "I'm going back out there."

Forsyth frowned and, for a moment, I thought he might order me to stay in town. But, at some level, he recognized the plea behind my words, the truth of my argument. He must have been torn between his desire to help me find Amanda and his duty to watch the group at the motel, one of whom might be the murderer. He reached his right hand up, patted my shoulder and then backed away.

"Keep in touch with me."

I nodded and steered the van toward the exit. As I passed the cafeteria annex, a slender, middle-aged man in white raced from a side exit, barely missing the van before he turned sharply away and disappeared into the lot full of cars. The man's face almost

seemed familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. Why the furtive departure from the hospital?

I felt the van chug a little cough and looked at the gasoline gauge. The needle rested in the red. I would get gasoline at Clyde's service station a couple of blocks away. Then, back to the ruins and Amanda. And Check McCall.

\* \* \*

I had finished filling the van with gasoline and held the cap ready to screw on when Clyde rushed from the store, waving at me. His beefy face, redder even than usual, exuded a sort of ghoulish excitement. Hitching up his pants over his drooping belly, he stopped directly in front of me.

"Sorry about Doc," he said.

"I know."

"That's a bad group, huh?" he smirked. "Them people that Doc was going to show around? You think the same person that killed him killed them other two?"

I shrugged. Clyde's two-way radio broadcast every conversation he had to the surrounding area. I had no intentions of writing his script for today.

"Just heard that one of them got away from Forsyth Barlow's guards," he said, turning and walking back toward the store.

"Wait!" I yelled at his back.

He turned and ambled back toward me. Satisfaction glittered in his eyes.

"What are you talking about, Clyde?" I demanded. "Tell me!"

"Just heard it on the scanner," he said, gloating. "Seems that one of them tourists musta doped up some coffee and gave it to Ernie and Pete. They just passed out and the tourist slipped off."

"Who!" I demanded, grabbing his shoulders. "Which one of them was it?"

"I don't know, Hackworth. God help me, I don't. Wait! It was one of the women!"

Tina, Ellen, Angel. Whichever one it was, she couldn't have much of a head start on me. I pushed Clyde away and jumped into the van.

"I'll pay you later," I told the startled Clyde. "I can't waste any more time."

So, she had finally exposed her hand, I thought, pushing the van to the maximum speed once I reached the city limits. I felt a surge of confidence. I could deal with something I knew; it was the suspicion of everyone that had befuddled me before. Regardless of what she now tried, I could take care of her.

I didn't see any cars ahead of me on the highway and I pressed the accelerator harder. Henry had called her 'evil.' Check McCall speculated that an interloper from that third reality might be the murderer. If this Evil Woman, as I had quickly come to think of her, intended keeping the entrance open at any cost then Check McCall, as well as Amanda, was in danger.

Finally, coming onto the last straight stretch before the curves, I caught a glimpse of red in the distance. A car! I kept my eyes on it until it disappeared around a curve. I willed the van to move faster, hoping she hadn't seen me in her rear view mirror. This evil from the third reality, then, could exist in human form. My thinking had been governed on the basis of Henry's conversation with Rachel, in which she had told him that she normally existed in his reality as something very ordinary, but not as a human. If

these evil beings had the chameleon-like ability to appear in this reality as humans, could they not pass themselves off, in Rachel's reality, as Namuhs? Was that the method they were using to steal the time?

Suddenly, up ahead of me, in a dip in the highway, a large pile of sand appeared, blocking the right lane of the highway. I swerved across the centerline to avoid the sand and caught my breath when I saw the red pickup truck in that lane. Turning the steering wheel sharply to the left, I rolled down a steep incline and halfway up the side of the ditch before the van stood still, wedged in a four-foot crevice. I had bumped my head at some point and my vision was laced with parallel silver and black parallel stripes.

I heard the sound of running feet and someone pulled my door open. I leaned out and then stepped gingerly, still feeling queasy. That fool Johnny Evans! I should have stopped him yesterday when I saw that open tailgate. But, it wasn't Johnny who stood beside me. My eyes traveled from white hospital issue shoes up white slacks and shirt to a face I'd almost recognized earlier today at the hospital parking lot. How could I have forgotten this man? In all of my postulations and suppositions, I had neglected to include Mike Peterson, the bus driver, as a possible candidate for murderer. Peterson, who had been with the tour group from the very beginning. Peterson, who had had more opportunity than most to murder any of the members!

\* \* \*

I felt beads of sweat surface on my forehead as the implications of this fact sank in. Mike Peterson had made himself less than visible over the past twenty hours or so. He had been so inconspicuous and low-key that I hadn't even thought of him as part of the group. I remembered the second list Henry had made, the one entitled Modes of

Powerlessness. Peterson's name had been on that list. This told me that Henry had compiled a dossier on this man. My head cleared and the dizziness subsided. What had Peterson been doing at the hospital earlier today? I felt hot waves of rage weaken my body. Had he attempted to sabotage the efforts to save Henry? Why was he now trying to delay my return to the ruins? Where was the woman who had escaped from the guards at the motel? Were there two of them? Was Peterson hoping to distract me long enough for his partner to reach the ruins?

"I'm glad you're okay, Mr. Hackworth," he said nervously. "That's a nasty bump on your head."

"What the hell are you doing here? How did you get Johnny's pickup?"

He looked down for a moment and twisted his hands. I watched the muscles move in his throat as he swallowed. I reached for his shoulder.

"Answer me!" I demanded.

He flinched and I felt the thin sharpness of his bones all the way through his flesh and clothing. His mouth worked silently. I dropped my hand.

"I stole the pickup," he whispered. "It was right there in the lot with the keys in the ignition. I didn't have time to find someone and rent a vehicle. Lord knows I wouldn't have taken it if I'd known this would happen."

He waved his hand toward the pile of sand and I remembered why I'd been forced off the road. Although this highway had little traffic, the next motorist who passed this way might not be as lucky as I. Torn by the desire to get to the ruins and the knowledge of this present danger, I moved to the red pickup.

"There's a shovel somewhere in that sand," I told Peterson. "I'll drive Johnny's truck up the road a few feet and then you and I will move the bulk of this sand."

Mike Peterson wanted to protest. He balked for a few moments and then walked over to the pile of sand, kicking at it while I moved the pickup. When I returned, he had uncovered the wooden handle of the shovel and I pushed him aside, grabbing the shovel and jerking it from underneath the pile.

"Okay, Peterson," I said, using the shovel to scrape the sand to the side of the road. "What brings you out here? What is so important that you had to steal a vehicle to get it done?"

"I was following Ellen Madison."

I stopped my rhythmic removal of the sand. Had I heard correctly? If Mike Peterson and Ellen Madison were the evil people from another reality, why was he exposing his hand by telling me he was following her?

"Ellen Madison is at the Navajo Inn," I said.

"No, she's not," Peterson argued. "I saw her driving a blue car this direction maybe ten, fifteen minutes ago."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded and I returned to the task at hand. I should have the roadway cleared in a few minutes and then I'd be on my way. I'd take Mike Peterson with me; I'd keep him on such a tight leash that he couldn't possibly accomplish any more evil.

"Why were you following her?" I asked.

"Personal reasons," he said.

"Personal reasons!" I yelled. "Personal enough that you stole an automobile and almost killed me!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't count on this happening."

"What kind of personal reasons, Mike?"

I had leveled the sand out across the highway. The few cars in the next several hours would disperse some of it and, by morning, the wind would have blown most of it away. Looking at the van, I saw that it was far enough off the roadway, although hopelessly wedged in the ditch. I would have to drive Johnny's pickup the rest of the way.

"I'm waiting for an answer," I told Peterson. "And it had better be an answer I can believe."

"You'll find out soon enough," he said. "I may as well be the one to tell you. Ellen Madison is a murderer."

Did this mean that Peterson and Ellen Madison were not cooperating in the scheme I had envisioned? Did I now need to reverse my earlier decisions and again consider Mike Peterson an innocent bystander?

"I don't know your grounds for accusation," I said. "But, if you felt Ellen had killed someone, why didn't you call the police?"

"They wouldn't believe me," he said, his voice cracking. "Besides, in our family, we take care of things like this ourselves."

"Your family?"

"Ellen Madison is my wife."

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Once in the pickup, we were almost a mile down the highway before I recovered my senses to talk coherently. Mike Peterson sat on the seat beside me, knotting his fingers, stiffly vigilant as he stared out the window. Finally, I spoke, "I thought Ellen was a widow."

"That's what she wants everyone to think."

"You're Avery Madison?" I asked, studying him from the corner of my eye. I had met Madison once several years ago, while I was still in college. A huge bull of a man with a boisterous personality, he and this mild man could never be mistaken for each other. Did Peterson think he could deceive me so easily?

"No," he said, his voice almost a whisper. "I'm not Avery Madison. My name is not even Mike Peterson. I'm Gerald Covent."

"Why did you lie about being married to Ellen Madison?"

I sensed his startled move before I felt the bony fingers on my right kneecap. Looking into wild eyes, I wondered how I had ever misjudged this man and thought him meek.

"I didn't lie to you," he shouted. "She's my wife!"

"Okay, okay," I consoled, shoving his hand off my knee. "We have another four or five miles to go. Why don't you tell me about it?"

He leaned back, resting his head against the vinyl-covered seat. After a long, shuddering sigh, he began his story.

"I first met Ellen Thorpe in Missouri, around 1950. My father owned the hardware store in town and Ellen's grandfather traded with us. When I was just a little tyke, Ellen's parents moved back to Missouri from Chicago. They had lost all their

money and had no place else to go. The older Thorpes built a four-room house on their farm, but it was never good enough for Ellen's mother. All her life, Ellen was told about the wealth they'd once had. Ellen was never satisfied with the kind of life she had to live in that small town."

I nodded, attempting to follow his conversation and, at the same time, predict what might be happening at the ruins. By now, Ellen Madison should be searching for a pass through the rocks that had grown across the road cut.

"Ellen always held herself apart from the rest of the kids at school, so you can imagine my surprise when she started flirting with me. I was two years older than her and getting ready to graduate from high school. Everybody knew that I'd made plans to join the navy. I guess Ellen saw me as a way off of that farm, out of that town.

"We got married in 1965, right after I joined up, and moved directly to San Diego. Ellen loved San Diego. The people, the lights, the places to go, things to see. We were real happy there."

If I had ever talked about Casey, my voice might have carried that same note of wistfulness. I turned to Peterson. "Go on," I said.

"When my hitch was over in 1969, we went back to Missouri and I took over the hardware store from my father. Ellen just seemed to wilt. She got pale and sickly and took to staying home all the time, reading movie magazines. Then, three years later, she disappeared. Just up and left with no note or anything. I did what I could to find her. My younger brother, John, made it a lifetime project. He got in touch with the state police and wrote letters everywhere.

"It was eighteen years before he found her. I had long before given her up for dead. And, it was real strange, because he found her almost under our noses, in Chicago."

"John showed me a picture of Ellen in the paper. She was the wealthy widow of a man named Avery Madison. I was sure it was not her, but John said to go see her and find out for sure."

"She married Madison while she was still married to you?" I asked.

"He could give her all those things she wanted," Peterson said, his voice apologetic. "I guess she figured I might raise a fuss if she tried to get a divorce after being gone so long and not staying in touch."

His voice trailed to a whisper. My God, I thought, he still loves that woman.

"Did John see her?"

"He did," Peterson said, his voice hardening. "She invited him into her house and then killed him."

"That's a pretty strong accusation."

"It was in all the newspapers," he said. "She told the police that John was a burglar that she surprised in her house. She shot him through the head."

"What did the police do?"

"Nothing," Mike said. "John was a stranger. Ellen was a society lady with millions of dollars."

"Why didn't you go to the police and tell them the truth?"

"Would they have believed me?" he asked. "Don't bother answering that. I decided that I would have to take care of her myself. So, I sold the store and moved to

Chicago, to an apartment where I could watch almost all of her moves. I made up this name, Mike Peterson."

"What kind of punishment did you have in mind?"

"No punishment," he said. "Punishment is the Lord's business. I just wanted her to admit what she did and clear John's name, the family name."

"And you've been watching her and waiting for that opportunity for ten years?"

"Doesn't seem that long," he said. "I learned a lot. I bought all the books and newspapers that she bought and I read them. When Dr. Adams went to her and she decided to come on this tour, I got the job as driver. And you know something, Mr. Hackworth?"

"What's that?"

"When Ellen got on that bus, she didn't even recognize me."

I wondered briefly whether all men had the same masochistic tendencies where women were concerned as Mike Peterson and I. Compared to his years of suffering, my experiences paled.

"I understand why you want to confront Ellen," I told him. "But you could have done that at any time over the past ten years. Why all of the urgent moves right now?"

"Because I know why Ellen wanted to go on this tour," Peterson said. "I know that Dr. Adams told her about another place where time goes backwards."

I signaled and turned on the dirt road toward the ranch house and the ruins. Peterson must have observed the blank look on my face.

"Don't you see?" he said. "Ellen is the most beautiful woman in the world, but she's sixty years old. Even with plastic surgery and cosmetics, she can't stay young

forever. Mister Hackworth, Ellen is going to try to escape to that other place and, when she does, she won't ever have to tell what she did to Johnny!"

I had an insane man beside me in the pickup, a murderer ahead of us on the road, Amanda was lost in another reality and evil people from a third reality were threatening to invade our own. Check McCall was already at the ruins, three hours ahead of me in my search for Amanda. And my friend, the best friend I'd ever had... I shook my head, willing the tightening of my throat away. Later. Later, I would think of my future, a future without Henry.

"Mike, did Ellen kill those other people from the tour who died?"

"Why, no," he said, his tone conveying incredulity that I should ask. "Ellen was in the bus when both of those first two men died. And I was watching her from the hall at the motel when that boy drowned."

"Just curious," I said.

"I'm surprised you asked that," he said. "Ellen wouldn't kill anybody she didn't know."

I glanced at his sober face, his intense eyes, and realized that he found nothing incongruent in the statement he'd just made. Up ahead, the rocks stretched across the road and I slowed the pickup.

"If you ask me," Peterson said. "That Jap guy McCall is your best suspect. He was around every time one of those men died."

In sight now, Ellen's blue car rested at the side of the road and I parked the pickup beside it. Mike Peterson had alibied my one sure suspect and now I was back to

suspecting everybody. Even now, Check McCall might either have found Amanda or blocked her path of return.

\* \* \*

"Where is she?" Peterson exclaimed, pushing open the pickup door and staring with disbelief at the rocks stretched across the road. "Good grief, man! Is that where I parked the bus yesterday?"

His finger pointed at the spot where the dirt road seemed to disappear underneath the large boulders. Since my departure only a few hours ago, the rocks had spread noticeably further out.

"What happened here?" Peterson continued. "A landslide? Do you think Ellen found a way to get through?"

"You know her," I countered. "What do you think?"

"Yeah," he said. "Ellen would have found a way. If she didn't crawl over those rocks, then she went around them."

Now saddled with Peterson, my progress around the barricade slowed in comparison to the pace I'd have taken it alone. Unaccustomed to woods travel, my companion stumbled several times and, once, almost fell when he brushed close to a large boulder. I heard his startled yelp and turned around. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Damned if I know," he said, breathing hard as he rushed to catch up with me. "I walked next to that rock and it was almost like it pushed me!"

I stopped and stared at the tumble of boulders that lay between the ruins and us. Perhaps the boulder had pushed Peterson. If those rocks grew, and I knew they did, then

they had a life no one had predicted. Should that be the case, then could they not also possess intelligence? Emotions? I shuddered and pushed ahead, increasing my pace.

. "Follow me," I ordered Peterson. "Don't stray away from the path I take. And don't get near any of those boulders again!"

## Chapter Eleven

We passed most of an hour walking steadily before we reached the ranch house. I knew we needed water and remembered that the pump no longer worked. At the edge of the woods that hid the sandstone ledge from the house, I saw my pickup parked, just where Henry had left it when he drove out last night. Henry. The thought went from my mind and progressed down to my stomach, a heavy, nauseating throb.

"Do you suppose Ellen is in the house?" Peterson asked.

"I doubt it, but go and check. The door is always unlocked. I'm going over to get a canteen from my pickup."

I had just unloaded the metal water can I kept in the back of the pickup when Peterson came running up the hill toward me. Ignoring him, I filled one canteen and reached for another.

"She's not there," he cried. "Where are those ruins?"

"Here," I said, handing him the full canteen. "Carry this. We'll need water before the day is over."

Startled, he stared at the canteen. His brow furrowed and his nostrils looked pinched. Finally, he took the canteen from me. I screwed the lid on the one I'd just filled and slung the strap over my shoulder.

"This way," I said, stepping on the path to the ruins.

Perhaps I had forgotten how steep the path was up to the sandstone ledge. Perhaps I had never climbed it when I was this tired. But, the thought of the growing boulders and a third reality invaded my thoughts as I led the way. Had the mountains also grown? They were composed of rocks and the rate of growth of the mountains would be directly proportional to that of the boulders. I felt a chill travel across my shoulders and neck. Did I witness the beginning of the invasion by the third reality? Was this how it started, with unobtrusive, common rocks that gradually increased in size until they stifled the life form of the reality they sought to conquer? I quickened my pace. I had to find Amanda and get her to a place of safety, back to a world of sanity in which time moves forward and this space in which we exist is ours alone.

I knew I had been correct in my speculation when we crested the ledge and I looked down to the ruins, almost twice as far away as they had been in the early hours of the morning. I heard a gasp behind me and turned to Peterson. His dark eyes stared out of caverns in his white face and he breathed through his open mouth. I turned to follow his gaze and saw the blob of color on the path beneath us almost to the ruins.

Ellen Madison, wearing a red jumpsuit, nimbly avoided the rock outcroppings on the narrow trail as she hurriedly descended the path leading directly into the center of the ruins. But, at that moment, yet another movement captured my eyes. A tall figure in dark

colors moved near the middle of the ruins, seemingly appearing and disappearing. I narrowed my eyes, attempting to focus more clearly.

It was Check McCall. He stood in the large semi-circle of tumbled building stone, the same area in which Amanda and I had been early this morning when she had disappeared. The air around McCall shimmered with a silvery, reflective, almost wave like appearance. As I watched, his body grew transparent before again taking on substance. He alternated between real and unreal. I held my breath, concentrating on the process.

"Good God!"

I turned to look at Peterson. His eyes no longer followed Ellen. Like me, he had focused on McCall. Like me, he watched Check McCall disappear right before our eyes.

\* \* \*

Peterson grabbed my left forearm and I blandly dislodged his fingers. My actions, neutral and robotic, belied my inner agitation. McCall had discovered Amanda's entrance! He had passed through to that other reality, through the very opening I had promised to guard! My initial anxiety dulled to anger, a slow, throbbing emotion that increased my heartbeat and warmed my face. My hopes faded that Amanda would return. Now, more than ever before, I had to go to that other reality. Before Check McCall did, I had to find Amanda and return her to this time.

"Ellen!" Peterson choked. "No! Don't let her go!"

Numbly, I looked below and realized that Ellen Madison, still oblivious to the presence of Peterson and myself, nonetheless had observed McCall's disappearance. Her forward momentum, still careful, increased as she rushed to a spot near where McCall

had stood. From my position above the ruins, I detected that she had underestimated her distance; the actual entrance lay a few feet past her present position.

Tensing myself to go down there, I felt Peterson's absence before I looked to my right and saw him stumbling down the steep path. He fell to his knees and, grabbing at a spindly shrub, pulled himself upright and turned his eyes to me. His defiant glare told me nothing that I didn't already know: Mike Peterson would kill himself before he allowed Ellen Madison to escape from this reality. What I had just begun to grasp was that he would kill anyone who attempted to stop him!

"I'm not going to stop you," I told him, holding my voice down so as not to alert Ellen. "If you'll hold up a minute, I'll get in front. I know the way and that will help us get down more easily."

Consternation fought with disbelief and a frown etched itself across his forehead. Finally, he nodded and raised himself carefully to his feet. Shaking, he flattened his body against the rock wall next to the trail and allowed me to pass beside him.

We had gone almost halfway down the mountain before I again spotted the red of Ellen's jumpsuit. Seemingly disoriented, she paced in ever-widening circles around the area where McCall had stood. Her desperate intensity must have left no room in her thinking for the possibility that she might have been followed.

I had just passed the last bend in the path and stepped on the flat area near the ruins when I heard the uneven clicking sound of tumbling gravel. Turning, I saw that Peterson had fallen again. This time, his white face contorted with agony and I watched his prominent front teeth dig into his lower lip. His left leg, bent at an awkward angle, twisted underneath his buttocks.

"Don't stop!" he whispered, his chest heaving. "Go get Ellen! My leg is broken!"

I breathed deeply. He was right. I had to stop Ellen. Still, I hesitated, knowing the agony he must be experiencing, debating what I might do to help ease the pain.

"Go," he gritted. "Go on."

I nodded and turned back toward the ruins. I walked on level ground now and the large boulders that sheltered the ruins also obscured my view of Ellen Madison. I felt a lightness in my head; my throat tightened. I had always been able to see the ruins from here. Were the rocks growing at such a pace that they would block the entrance before I could get Amanda out?

Recalling the layout of Henry's reconstructed city, Ellen Madison must be to my right about a hundred feet. Carefully placing my moccasins on the dusty rock surface on which the city had been built, I moved in the direction of two man-sized boulders that appeared to have a passageway between them.

Reaching the smaller of the two boulders, I leaned against it and peered around. Ellen stood precisely in the middle of the semi-circle, just as McCall had earlier. And, even as I watched, her body grew translucent, the red jumpsuit fading to pink. Rushing through the opening between the boulders, I ran to her and grabbed her shoulders, pulling her from the center and toward one of the crumbling outer walls.

She screamed in frustration and viciously kicked my shin. Unprepared for both her strength and determination, I had gripped her lightly and, taking advantage of my loss of balance, she slipped past me, back to the center. Recovering quickly, I hobbled back toward her. When I reached for her hand, she chopped at my wrist with the edge of her own hand before she raised her long, red nails to my face.

"Leave me alone!" she screamed. "You can't stop me now!"

"Yes I can," I shouted, locking my still throbbing right arm around her waist. "If necessary, I'll carry you out of here!"

Her green eyes widened and flooded with hate. Then her features relaxed and triumph replaced the anger.

"You're too late," she said, her voice a low, throaty laugh. "Look at us! I can see through your body! We're both going!"

\* \* \*

At that precise moment, Ellen Madison and I stepped into a cyclone of nothingness. The ground beneath our feet disappeared and the rocks and trees that surrounded the ruins existed no longer. I felt Ellen's fingernails tear into my wrists before the pain in my head grew so great that I released her and pressed my palms to my temples, attempting to relieve the agony. Wave after wave of uneven vibrations passed over my body from head to foot and I felt every cell in my body split apart and move with the same irregular tempo.

A rainbow of colors sprayed across the insides of my eyelids, changing patterns so rapidly that I had no chance to identify the shapes. When the colors disappeared, blackness flooded my visual screen. Pinpoints of light appeared, swelling and exploding at random until one large explosion seared my eyelids white. I was falling and I tried to lift my hands from the sides of my head, but they seemed glued to my temples. I floated, drifting in a gray sea. White faces flashed by me, featureless and lifeless. Had I died?

Then it was over. I opened my eyes to a patch of lavender sky that appeared through a long, rectangular window several feet above me in a curving rock wall. I was

standing in the ceremonial room! I had made it to the other reality! I reached down to pat my arms, my legs, my body, to assure myself that I still existed. My eyes slowly adjusted to the dimness and I looked around the large room for Ellen Madison. Other than myself, the room was empty. If Ellen had entered this reality, then it had been at a point other than this one.

My ears picked up the sound of footsteps and I crouched against the wall, poised to defend myself. Directly opposite me, a narrow slot developed in the solid wall and gradually increased in size until it formed the shape of a door. A tall, athletically built man walked through the doorway. A woman, slightly shorter, followed him. Both wore flowing robes of the color Henry had named copera. Memories of Henry's recital of his first meeting with Rachel returned and my breath flowed more easily. I was safe. These were Rachel's people. The people Henry had labeled Namuh. The two stopped a few feet away, the upper parts of their faces remaining in the shadows.

"Who are you? What are you doing in our ceremonial room?"

The man spoke and yet his thin lips did not move. I stared at him, thinking my vision must be impaired.

"Your vision is fine," he said, lips again unmoving. "We have no need to communicate verbally. Answer me as to your purpose."

He is reading my mind, I thought. The beings in this reality communicate telepathically.

"You are correct," the woman said, moving from behind the man and into the pale light that came in from the window above. If she heard my startled gasp, she paid it no mind as she stepped closer to me.

"Amanda!"

Her bluish-violet eyes looked into mine. Sadness filled them and tears threatened to overflow onto her smooth cheeks. She gently placed her hand on my cheek and, this time, I felt her words rather than heard them. An infinite tenderness propelled the message to my mind.

"No," she communicated. "I am not Amanda. I am Rachel."

## Chapter Twelve

Had Amanda lost her memory? Was she suffering from amnesia? How had she known about Rachel? I wanted to think, to ruminate, to sort out my questions, my objectives. Why did she pretend to be Rachel? How could she possibly hope to deceive me? My head pounded and I wished the tall man who stood beside her would leave so that I could talk to her.

"He is going," she said, her clear thought flowing into my head with the smoothness of silk. I looked past her, toward the doorway, and watched the man move away. He turned as the door began to close and stared at me.

"You must not endanger her."

His thought penetrated my brain with the force of a thrown discus and, for a moment, I thought I might faint from the nauseous pain. Then he was gone. I turned back to Amanda, startled at the anger I saw in her eyes.

"Jericho was concerned only for your safety," her message to me translated. "And you must stop thinking of me as Amanda."

"But you are Amanda," I yelled. "Why are you pretending that you aren't?"

"There is no need to shout. I know your words before you speak them. Sit silently. We have little time and you have much to comprehend, for the sakes of both your reality and mine."

Either she read the compliance on my face or understood my verbal surrender. The anger disappeared from her eyes and she began communicating to me. "This reality into which you have intruded has little time left. Because of this fact, we are not free to display the courtesies that we normally provide for those from your reality."

"Damn it, I'm not a stranger..." I began, but a piercing whine shrieked in my ears, causing me to forget my protest. I watched liquid gather in her eyes.

"Our reality has coincided with your reality for all of time," she continued. "We have peacefully shared the same space and, occasionally, the same time, as evidenced by my meetings with your Dr. Adams.

"You will learn how an antagonistic reality came to share the space already inhabited by our two realities. A flaw existed in the time vacuum barrier that separates your reality from mine and, through that opening, the third reality invaded this one. That reality has stolen our past and, therefore, most of our future. We have only a few years of existence left. Then, it will be as if we never were."

"No," I thought. "I'm taking you back to my reality. I promised Henry. I'll take the others, too. Then, we'll find a way to seal the barrier and cut off the third reality."

She smiled, a sad smile, and shook her head. Her pure thought again entered my head. "I wish it were that simple. Millions of my fellows have already exiled themselves to another reality. There are only a few left here and our lives are of no importance if the last of our time is captured."

"I don't understand. You can come with me. All of your people can come with me, to my reality."

"How can I come with you if I do not exist? You must see, child, that if I never was and never will be, then I am not."

I looked around the large, circular room. The walls were barren of any adornment. Only the one high window broke the monotony of the muted rust colored stones. I had to get out of here, back to my own reality. But, how?

"That is what you must learn," the soothing tones came again. "You cannot leave until you have mastered certain thought techniques."

Anger burned through me, searing my stomach, my head, my chest. The arrogance of this woman! How could I ever have mistaken her for Amanda!

Rachel's eyes widened. Puzzlement flashed across her face for an instant before being replaced by calm acceptance.

"It is not of my choosing that you must learn the techniques. That was decided long ago, by the wise men who peopled both our realities. They formulated a ritual that must be performed before the barrier between the realities could be penetrated. The months of study required to perfect the ritual ensured that one would not begin that journey without a great deal of thought."

"You did it," I accused, remembering the crystal vase she had taken to Henry.

"Before I reached my thirty thousandth year, I acquired the knowledge. It was a part of the experience necessary to become a wise woman."

"Thirty thousand years!" I exclaimed. Pain flitted across Rachel's face and I realized that I had shouted at her. "I'm sorry I yelled. You don't understand. I don't have

months, only hours. I'd like to learn all of this, but I don't have that much time. I have to return to my reality. I have to find a murderer. I have to..."

"Our time is different," her voice flowed into my head. "You will find that the three months you spend learning this process in our reality will equivocate to only hours of your own time."

I didn't believe her. I could read her face and knew that she knew I didn't believe her. But, at that moment, I saw no choice other than to go along with her.

\* \* \*

And so began my weeks of exile with the Namuhs. Having lived my life in the manner I had for the last six years, the solitude and lack of companionship did not disturb me. Rachel had housed me in a small cottage some distance away from the city and my creature comforts were provided in a most elegant manner. Even though I didn't recognize the colorful food I ate, it had pleasant textures and tastes. My denim shirt and jeans, along with my moccasins, were taken away to be cleaned and a fresh copera-colored toga delivered every morning by the same child, a nine or ten year old blond boy with enthusiastic blue eyes, healthy skin, and perfect teeth.

I missed the sun. I missed the clear blue sky of a New Mexico morning. I missed the twinkling star patterns that inched across the sky at night. Nostalgia for my reality spurred me to learn, as quickly as possible, the technique to return to my familiar world.

The Namuhs had a particular method for keeping time. From my retreat, I had a good view of the large mirror atop the ceremonial room. It seemed to be hinged on either side. This enabled it to move one hundred eighty degrees, stop, and move back one hundred eighty degrees. One complete flip-flop of this mirror determined a Namuh day.

I had kept my wristwatch, even though the passage from my reality to this one seemed to have broken the timing mechanism. It was not until the third day, Namuh time, that I discovered the watch still worked.

At the beginning, Rachel had led me down a tunnel from the ceremonial room to this cottage. Upon stepping out of the tunnel, I had unconsciously glanced at my watch. 10:15. After she had settled me in the cottage and explained the operation of the video-type machine I would use for study, I had glanced again at my watch. 10:15. Removing the watch from my wrist, I had placed it on a small stone table near the door. When I picked it up the evening of the third day, I was amazed to read the time: 10:20. The next morning the watch read 10:21.

So, every minute of time in my reality equaled half a day of Namuh time. This was what Rachel meant about my months of study being equal to a few hours. I made a rough calculation in my head. Ninety days times two minutes came out to one hundred eighty minutes. Only three hours! But, did my own reality have even that much time left before a full-fledged invasion by the third reality?

\* \* \*

When she came to the cottage the morning of the fourth day, I was prepared for Rachel. For three days now, we had followed the same pattern for the lessons. She would sit in a chair across the table from me and I would recite a word, always a three-syllable word, in a language foreign to me. She said the word and I repeated it. Those were the only verbal sounds I ever heard issue from her lips. Quite the perfectionist, she repeated each word hundreds of times, until my accent and intonation were exactly correct. Then she left, so quickly I had no time for asking questions.

The handsome young man and beautiful young woman who brought my food, cleaned the house and cared for the yard refused to respond to any of my verbal requests for information and, when I attempted to think my questions, hoping for a telepathic response, they turned their backs.

When Rachel came for my studies, I never heard the door open. It was as if she simply walked through it. Today, I sat at the table, drinking a coffee-like liquid. When I looked up, Rachel stood beside me. Gracefully, she moved to a chair opposite me and sat down. Placing her palms flat on the table, she stared intensely at me and opened her mouth, "Ci-ten-gam," she said. "Ci-ten-gam."

This was it. This was my chance.

"Amanda," I said. "Henry is dead."

\* \* \*

Her smooth face crumpled and tears filled her eyes. She clasped her hands together tightly.

"No." The voice came faintly to my head. "No, you're trying to deceive me. You're trying to shock me and cause me to say that I'm Amanda."

"I do want to shock you. I definitely want you to admit that you're Amanda. Telling you about Henry seemed to be the only way I could get any response from you."

Tears ran down her cheeks. Her eyes held mine and I knew she realized the truth of what I told her. "He can't be dead," she said, her voice a whisper. "I watched him go through the barrier."

"I wouldn't lie to you. I carried him from the ruins. He had taken a severe beating. Bones were broken and he was bleeding internally."

She moaned and closed her eyes for a long moment. When she spoke again, it was the silent communication of before, "He must have walked out of here directly into a time bubble of human time."

"I promised him that I would find you and take you back, Amanda."

"You can't. This is where I belong, here in this reality. I am a Namuh, not human. I am Rachel."

I carefully made my mind blank when I looked at her. I saw no reason to forewarn her but, as soon as I learned the ritual, I would force Amanda to return to human reality with me.

\* \* \*

She had stood then, abruptly, walking away and leaving me with the thought that she had something of great urgency that demanded her to be elsewhere. When she had reached the door, she had turned to me and lifted my right hand with her left. Turning my palm toward the ceiling, she had placed a nickel-sized disc in my hand.

"You know how to operate the seeker," she had communicated. "If you use this disc, it may answer some of your questions."

"Wait," I protested. "Don't go. You have to tell me..."

Again, she had gone. I examined the tarnished metal object in my hand. Instead of being cold, as I had expected, the scratched yellow disc radiated a warmth, a body heat, as if it had been next to her skin. I remembered the hand forged gold chain that Amanda wore around her neck. This, then, was the locket I had always assumed hung from the chain.

My first day here, she had illustrated the use of the seeker, an antiquated, yet incredibly advanced, relative of the video cassette recorder. Tucked in an alcove behind the chair in which I usually sat, the small machine blipped an occasional blue dot that traveled across the screen from left to right. The first day, she had pointed to a shelf beside the seeker where row after row of tiny discs, like the one now in my hand, had been stacked.

"The history of the Namuhs," she had communicated.

Having had no interest in this reality into which I had fallen, I had not used the object. I had, instead, decided to walk outside, around the city, and try to find the entrance back to my reality. I had been surprised, then frustrated, and, finally angry when I had discovered that, try as I might, I was unable to escape the grounds of the cottage. Even though I could see the city, an invisible shield prohibited my getting any closer to it than the stone wall that stretched around the cottage yard.

Lethargy had overcome me and I had spent hours on the sleeping pallet, tossing and turning. When I had discovered that my watch worked, I had decided to keep some sort of record as to the number of Namuh days that had passed. Searching the entire cottage, I had found nothing on which to write, no writing implement. How did the Namuhs record information? Did they have such great mental capacities that making lists or calculating was not necessary?

Determined to keep a record, I had found a cylinder shaped rock and had begun scratching on one of the rocks that formed the floor of my sleeping room. I had made a mark for each Namuh day I was there. Now, I walked back into the room, lifted up the corner of the pad that hid my scratches, and marked another day. Four days. Eight

minutes? Where was Check McCall? What of Ellen Madison? I thought of poor Mike Peterson, suffering severe pain on the hillside. I stretched my body out on the pad, telling myself that there was nothing I could do about my own reality until I managed to escape from this one.

Escape? Had I used that word in my thinking? It was true; I considered myself a prisoner. Even though my cell was plush and the food of the highest quality, I was kept isolated except for the young man and woman and the child. And, Rachel. When I considered her my jailer, I thought of her as Rachel, not Amanda. I had been through the barrier safely when I came from my own reality. Why did she insist that I learn some ancient ritual to return?

Stalling. She was using the ritual as an excuse to prevent me from trying to return. When I considered the fact that the shield around the house accomplished that very thing, what purpose, then, did the lessons serve? I found myself feeling dizzy, my head growing light. It was the same way I felt when I tried to rationalize some of the things that Casey had done.

Why had she driven to the mountains in Vermont and gone inside, leaving the twins in the car? By the time I had received the phone call from her, those poor little infants had been lying on the back seat of her car all night. I had been aghast, horrified by what I considered her unconscionable behavior. But, it had never occurred to me to waste time confronting her, demanding that she tell me why she had done what she had done. Only one thing had stood out as being important: getting the babies to a doctor. Much later, she had goaded me.

"You're such a namby-pamby, Branch," she had laughed. "Why didn't you get mad? Didn't you feel helpless? Don't you ever wonder what you could have done?"

Numb with disbelief at her lack of contrition, I had made some foolish comment about choices. I told her that I could have yelled at her or I could have tried to save the babies. I told her that, out of all possible options I saw open to me, I had chosen the one that I had considered the most productive at the time. But, she hadn't listened. And, all the ranting and raving I could have done wouldn't have saved those babies.

The same thinking applies now, I thought. I can protest and balk, but I can't do anything about my own reality until I get back there. I can't return until I either learn the ritual or convince Rachel to help me return the way I came. I squeezed my fist, feeling the disc still warm in my hand. She had provided me with information. I could utilize it or I could lie on the pallet and fret about something over which I had no control.

I dragged myself from the pallet and staggered to the alcove that housed the seeker. I looked at the gray screen for a minute, watching the blue dot move across it. Then I found the small slot to the right and, just like dropping money into a vending machine, I dropped the disc that Rachel had handed me into the opening. The screen lightened and took on a lavender hue. Buildings flashed on the screen and I recognized the ceremonial room. But, there was something else familiar, something I hadn't counted on. Someone! A tall white-haired man stood in front of the building and I knew the man!

On the seeker screen, in front of the ceremonial building, squinting against the lavender hue, stood Sheriff Forsyth Barlow!

What was Barlow doing here in this reality? On this disc that Rachel had given me to answer my questions! Had he stumbled through the entrance the same way as I

had? Even as I watched, his form grew thin around the edges, the brown of his uniform fading to a puce color. Before my eyes, he grew translucent.

The seeker screen darkened to a deep indigo, the shadows of the buildings growing black. A series of black and white parallel lines laced the position in front of the ceremonial building where the sheriff had stood. Lavender dots appeared, seemingly at random, until the screen was almost obscured. Out of this, Rachel's face appeared.

Where was Barlow? What had happened to him? Had he, like I, come over to this reality? Was he, like me, at this very moment isolated in another 'retreat' somewhere near the city? Then, Rachel's voice came to me and I heard my name.

Astonished, I watched the image on the screen. I saw Rachel's lips move and heard her talking. No, this time it was not Rachel. This was Amanda and she spoke to me!

"You must learn something of the Namuhs, my son, in order to understand the predicament in your own reality. You must comprehend how dangerous the events now transpiring are to your soul. By following our history, you can prevent some of the same things occurring in the human reality."

With fascination, I watched Amanda's face, amazed at how much she resembled Rachel. Were they identical twins? It was, at that moment that I had finally accepted that Amanda was from the Namuh reality. She continued, "A spark thought from the soul that we all are-that's all that was required- generated the desire for experience in this space," she said. "In order to experience, time must exist. The entity took on flesh and the time spiral was created in order to allow the entity time to reflect, therefore building each experience on what it had learned from the last."

Was there a fast-forward on this machine? Until now, I had deliberately avoided the history lesson.

"My dear Branch, I know how you have always disliked history. I understand how you feel about whole nations and peoples doing the same thing over and over, never profiting from their experiences."

She knew me too well. Throughout life, I had stubbornly refused to accept the extrapolations put forth by teachers and professors of history that began with, 'Now, if we had done this instead of...' The event had always been clear in my mind. The lesson I had taken from history had been simple: if it didn't work, don't do it again; if it succeeded, do it again. Do it better. Do it more. Expand.

"That is why I want to tell you about the Namuhs," Amanda continued. "To show you something that didn't work. Just allow me a few minutes to explain the time spiral."

I nodded in acquiescence. As if she actually saw me, Amanda continued, "After millions of years, the entity determined that more events could be experienced if it became two, rather than one. That accomplished, the two parts of the entity that desired to continue experiencing the same space decided to create separate time lines following the same concepts and the same spiral."

Get on with this, Amanda, I thought. I pulled a bench in front of the screen and sat on it.

"In rough equivalents, the human year was equal to a little over seven hundred Namuh years."

Seven hundred thirty, I thought irritably. Two Namuh years pass in a little over twenty four hours human time. I had figured that out in my head when I had discovered that my watch worked.

"You can see that, by the time of the human cave man, there had been much more time for experience in the Namuh reality. In Namuh reality, as in human reality, a hierarchy was established with leadership positions having been attained primarily through physical characteristics: size, intellect, shape, beauty.

"Because of tremendous technological advances, it was discovered that implants could be surgically attached to the brain and that these implants, properly stimulated, would bring about an increase in any of the aforementioned qualities. This would, then, lead to an advance in that person's position in the hierarchy."

I thought about the steroids that some of my fellow athletes had poked into their bodies. At the same time, women had turned over their own bodies to plastic surgeons to increase certain portions to the baseline that society deemed desirable. I remembered Henry's mention of the word baseline in the folder marked with my name.

"Hundreds of years passed before the wise men and wise women began seeing the results of the procedures," Amanda went on. "They had, in human terms, 'created a monster.' This is the way it worked, Branch. Every time a Namuh accepted an implant, he admitted his powerlessness in being able to previously attain that standing

"Now, all thoughts carry an electrical charge. That thought of powerlessness, of having no control, is a thought alien to our souls. Therefore, it was rejected by the soul, thrown from our reality into the space that exists between our two realities. To us, it was 'excess garbage.' We never considered the possibility of like charges attracting and

combining into a mass pool of electromagnetic charges that actively began seeking out other like charges."

Was Amanda trying to tell me that this evil, hideous third reality was composed of cast-off atoms and molecules? How could something like that operate without the direction of a greater intellect, without a brain? Amanda answered my question.

"This electromagnetic reality, having no organization, no direction, no ability to experience, simply existed. As it attracted like charges, other particles were neutralized and returned to our reality as deadly gases that proved lethal to any Namuh they touched."

The gas attacks of the time bubbles. The Namuhs had, in effect, poisoned themselves! They were responsible for their own destruction.

"Lest you think that this is only a Namuh problem, Branch, let me hasten to warn you that the very same thing is happening in the human reality even as I tell you. Although there are no lethal gases, the rocks and boulders of the human reality are swelling at a tremendous rate, bloated by deadly radioactivity."

She had my attention. My full attention. If Amanda knew why the rocks were growing, she just might know how to stop the growth.

"By the time we Namuhs comprehended the damage to our time line, we were left with only a few thousand years. The electromagnetic reality, at that point, had grown to such a mass that it pulled entire blocks of highly charged emotional events out of our time spiral. Almost all of our past and future was gone. Entire groups of our beings migrated to your reality where they now lie in caves and crevices, as crystalline forms, waiting for your wise men to teach them the techniques and rituals for becoming human."

Our wise men? Was Amanda telling me that there were humans who already understood the ritual Rachel was trying to teach me?

"Yes, Branch. There have been crossovers between the two realities from the beginning. I am a Namuh who crossed to the human reality, managing to keep both my form and my soul intact. Henry is a human who has done the same here. At times of crisis in your reality, whole groups of humans, under the guidance of human wise men, migrated here and learned the techniques. Millions of our years ago, most of the inhabitants of an island continent that sank beneath the sea came here. As recently as five hundred thousand years ago, another group came here from the very ruins that Henry worked on excavating. Upon incorporation into Namuh reality, these people helped in the design of the city behind you. In effect, they rebuilt the city they left in human reality."

Over five hundred thousand Namuh years. That worked out to be only seven hundred human years. Did she refer to the Chaco Culture? The Anasazi? When she talked of time in these astronomical figures, Amanda made it seem so long ago. How old did these Namuhs grow to be?

"It is rare when a Namuh exists past fifty thousand years in this reality," she told me.

"You can hear me!" I accused.

"No, Branch. The disc, which you placed in the seeker, is programmed with all possible answers to any questions you may ask. The seeker records your telepathic message and recovers the proper response. That is what you perceive on the screen."

"Then, tell me how to get out of here."

"That question is not proper."

"I'll find another way to pose that question," I told her. "Let me try again. When I return, I need to know how to take care of the radioactive boulders. Is there a connection between the boulders and the murders?"

"Henry has that answer," Amanda responded. "If you have no more questions, I will continue..."

"Not yet, Amanda, please! Henry can't give me those answers. I told you earlier, Henry is dead!"

"That question is not proper."

Damn. Amanda had programmed the disc to answer every possible question she thought I could ask. She had never planned that, by the time I could use the disc, Henry would be dead.

"I will continue with the technique used to eliminate the excessive electromagnetic charges. The wise men and wise women met in council. After hundreds of years, it was determined that Namuh men and women would have the same general physical attributes within designated groups. This would be done by highly complicated genetic coding and would occur instantaneously. Therefore, six groups came about. The first two groups were composed of those who had attained thirty thousand years of Namuh experience. These were called the wise women and the wise men. The third and fourth groups were made up of those who had not yet attained thirty thousand years but had attained more than ten thousand; these would be called novice men and novice women. The fifth group, the aspirers, was composed of those between two thousand and ten thousand years, both male and female. The seeds, the sixth group, have not yet attained two thousand years and are composed of both male and female."

"Amanda," I protested. "You've lived in the human reality. You're not seriously proposing that we even attempt such a radical classification!"

"The human reality has not reached the emergency state that the Namuh reality had when that decision was reached. Neither does the human reality have the technology necessary to perform that measure. The purpose of the genetic coding in the Namuh reality was to neutralize the electromagnetic reality. Without competition, the Namuh had no reason to compare and, as a result, feel powerless. Therefore, there was no further theft of the Namuh present. However, the third reality could still steal blocks of time from the Namuh past. If a being's past is gone, then he cannot exist in the present. If there is no present, there can be no future."

"So you're saying that all we have to do is to neutralize the electromagnetic reality?" I asked. "It sounds simple, Amanda, but have you thought of how I'm going to convince everyone that the third reality exists? And, after that, I'm to tell them that they have to rid themselves of any feelings of powerlessness? And, maybe if they listen to me and do all of that, they'll be safe? That's not asking much at all. What if I decide to stay here in the Namuh reality?"

"You can't do that, Branch. We have only one year of existence left."

"One year?" I exclaimed. I made a quick mental calculation. "That's only about twelve hours, human time! What happens then? What about all of the Namuhs?"

"As mentioned before, most Namuhs have already migrated to other realities. We who are left have a plan that we think will permanently seal the entrance between your reality and ours. If we succeed, the third reality will be trapped here in this Namuh reality where there is no time left. It can then feed only on its own excrement."

"Then you will be going back with me."

"That depends on Henry."

Dear God, I thought. Amanda doesn't know about Henry. Is she planning for him to help her seal that entrance? I had to talk to her, not this machine. Then an inspiration hit me.

"Amanda, let me talk to Henry."

Within seconds, the screen grayed and Amanda's face disappeared. Replacing it on the screen was a beloved face I had thought never to see again-Henry!

### Chapter Thirteen

He wore the same suit he had worn at the library. Had it been only twelve hours ago? Always a meticulous dresser, at this moment, Henry looked unkempt, harried. His tie was askew and the carefully folded handkerchief in his breast pocket looked as if he had used it to clean something very dirty. I swallowed past a lump in my throat, remembering how he had looked when I had last seen him.

"Branch, thank God, you've found a seeker! I wasn't sure you would get here in time. I was wrong, son. Dead wrong. About you. About the people I brought here for the tour. About the ruins. When you told me the boulders were growing, I knew I'd made a mistake."

"Slow down, Henry," I said, finding myself talking to him as if he were actually in the room with me.

"That is not a proper question."

I sighed. In his agitation, Henry must have programmed his responses more rigidly than Amanda had. What did he mean when he said he had been wrong about me?

"Branch, my son, I'm so sorry that I doubted you. I watched Casey torture and tease you, terrorizing you in an attempt to make you question yourself. When I tried to talk to you about it, you acted as if you didn't know what I was talking about. I was afraid that those moments of emotion had been stolen from you. I was fearful that you had lost your soul."

Lost my soul? I remembered Amanda's comment right before she reached the entrance to the Namuh reality. She had been concerned, not for Henry's life, for his soul. I found myself wondering why Henry had thought that Casey had caused me to lose my soul.

"To answer that," he responded, "I must, first of all, tell you about my studies of the Namuh reality. I found the way over the first year that you played professional football, a few months after you and I experienced those ghastly time bubbles. After many Namuh months of study, I grasped what had happened with the Namuhs and the third reality. Upon that discovery, I looked around our reality and found similar problems. As of that date, our time barrier remained safe from damage. There was no way for that enormous electromagnetic charge to invade the human reality. However, the charges emitted by human beings began growing so powerful and massive that the attraction itself would soon be great enough to penetrate the barrier."

"Has it already happened, Henry? Has the third reality already begun its invasion of the human reality?"

"I pinpointed four spots on the globe where the feeling of powerlessness was so great that the barrier had fractured. Not yet destroyed, but damaged. This is one of those areas, Branch. If, as you say, the boulders are growing, then we may be witnessing the

beginning. That was why I contacted Check McCall. He had access to and knowledge of every kind of computer. And, I could trust him. You will later discover why I felt that way.

"To comprehend the larger picture, Branch, you must understand the analogy on a personal level. That is the reason I tell you about Casey. Casey wanted everything. As an infant, a toddler, she wanted all of everybody's love, devotion, adoration. As she grew up, she found other things she wanted: money, objects, social standing, importance, respect, physical appeal. She saw herself as unable to obtain any of those attributes just as she was. And, just as the Namuhs that Amanda told you about, when she admitted that, she admitted powerlessness."

I watched Henry, amazed. He had even programmed the disc to respond in the event that I had first talked to Amanda. He continued, "But Casey discovered a way to obtain the feeling of power. If she, by intimidation, coercion, trickery or bribery could convince someone that he or she had no control over what was happening, then she felt powerful. This, of course, reinforced the powerlessness base from which she worked.

"Every time that she perpetrated one of these events that allowed her to feel powerful, a large electrical charge was emitted. The third reality attracted the charge and pulled the entire event out of human reality. After a time, there was little of Casey's past left, just enough for her to remember that she craved that feeling that came from making someone else feel that they had no power. Eventually, even that was gone and an empty husk was left. The physical body went frantically from event to event trying to stir things up so that those electromagnetic charges would occur.

"The third reality, to anthropomorphize these electromagnetic charges, hung around waiting for just such events. Casey became a magnet, the space around her filled with pulsating charges. If, in her encounters with others, she initiated an event such as the one described, some of the electromagnetic energy around her would be attracted to her 'victim,' but much more than she lost would be pulled into the space around her. I'm sorry, son. I didn't give you the credit you deserved for your strength."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You always saw choices, Branch. Regardless of what she did, you knew you had options. You never felt trapped or out of control. It's easy for me to understand now that you repressed your emotions around Amanda and me, not wanting us to feel your pain with you. I'm ashamed to admit that I even wrote a letter to Check McCall, expressing my worries. His response negated my concern."

"It's okay, Henry," I said, remembering the letter I had found in Henry's file. "I understand."

"Let me tell you why I courted the people for the tour of the ruins. Each of those people had experienced a major encounter in his life that had caused him to feel powerless. Each person completely understood the concept of powerlessness. Northrup had been brainwashed in a P.O.W. camp, being told over and over that his country and his family had deserted him. Simpson had gone bankrupt several years ago, losing not only everything he owned, but also his family. The rock star, Angel, had become involved with a group of young people who were heavily into drugs and denial. Jim Kirby had an experience in space that he can't remember. In undergraduate school, Chad Carter was dismissed for plagiarism. Ellen Madison was afraid of the natural process of

aging. On the mountain, Kevin Eklander saw that he had no choice for survival other than cannibalism.

"I felt that, if I got them here and convinced them of the danger, they would help me tell the whole reality what was happening. Each of them had a following of loyal fans that respected his word. I didn't count on one of them being a magnet."

"A magnet?"

"Yes, Branch. I used the illustration of Casey to explain to you that some people here in this reality have abdicated their self- responsibility to such an extent that there is nothing of the self left. There is simply living flesh surrounded by electromagnetic energy."

"One of the people of the tour group is drawing that third reality to him? Which one?"

"I do not know," Henry said. "The electromagnetic reality is not evil, Branch, nor is it good. It simply exists. There are no feelings involved in the exchange of charges. The only evil involved is when we admit our powerlessness and give away those electrical charges."

I had to get out of this reality and back to my own. If nothing else, I had to find that person who was the magnet and secure our reality.

"There are many more in our reality, Branch. There is not just the one. Take the mass murderer or rapist, who can only feel powerful by making his victim feel powerless. There are leaders of countries and executives of giant corporations who can only feel 'alive' when they have destroyed an opponent. But the possessor of the most massive electromagnetic reality of all is the media and advertising world. Commercials and

advertisements advise you that you can't have a good time or be loved if you don't use their product. Add to this the commercials that warn you that you can't feel as good as you think you do because you put substances in your body that are unhealthful, undesirable, or just plain dangerous. These ideas undermine your feeling of confidence that you are in control; they ask you how can you possibly expect your body to survive when you are poking these contaminants into it?

"These beliefs are planted in the minds of millions of people through newspapers, magazines and across the air waves. The advertising media can't convince you to buy their product unless you feel that the person you are, without their product, is undesirable, unacceptable. In short, they want you to feel powerless, as you exist in this moment. When they undermine your confidence in yourself in the area they're selling, they're counting on you buying their product to restore that lost confidence.

"That powerlessness you felt, that undermining of confidence, created an electromagnetic charge that was drawn to like charges of the third reality. Add to that, the millions of other like charges created by all the other people watching or reading the same commercial and you can see why the third reality is becoming so large."

"How do we stop this?" I asked him.

"Simply by knowing that we're in control, that we chose this physical reality, this physical location, this physical body, this physical event because it was the perfect one through which we could experience the understandings of this lifetime. If we look at any of these-reality, location, physical body, event-and feel that it is unacceptable or undesirable, then we are saying that we accept someone else's definition of acceptability, desirability. When we chose this experience, we knew we had made the perfect choices.

When we begin to question those original choices, we are questioning the integrity of our soul. We are saying that that perfect entity might have made a mistake. We begin doubting ourselves. Millions of individuals make up the statistics compiled by the advertisers, politicians, executives, government agencies. This causes us to stop and think. Are we saying that those millions are wrong and we, a definite minority, are right?"

"Henry do you want me to go out and tell the world that all of these things they base their lives on are wrong? The advertising industry alone would have me locked up in a matter of hours."

"Son, I don't mean to imply that these folks are doing anything wrong. One of the doctrines on which our nation was built was the principle of laissez faire."

"Perhaps you ought to tell me exactly what you mean, Henry."

"There is no right nor wrong. There is only integrity. If you believe that you have no choice other than accepting the message that those millions send, even though that message is contradictory to what you know you are, a conflict of beliefs occurs, and you see yourself at the mercy of outside forces. You will begin looking in the past for events that reinforce your doubts. Each of these doubting thoughts carries its own electromagnetic charge. Like attracts like. Again, the third reality grabs the event."

"Recognize the perfection of the moment. I'm not telling you that you can't change. Neither would I say that you shouldn't change if you truly desire that change. You can "buy into" any aspect of society you choose. Feel free to wear designer jeans and expensive cologne, to cut your hair in the latest fashion or eat a diet of sprouts and roots. But, do so because you want to do it, not because you believe that you are unacceptable if

you don't do it. When you know that you have all options available, including the option of no change, and that the change came about because you wanted it, you feel powerful. When you see no options and you feel that you were forced into a particular choice because there was no other way to go, you feel powerless."

"That's a big task you propose, Henry. It involves revolutionizing the advertising industry and restructuring government. Even with cooperation, it could take decades."

"My greatest concern at the moment is to prevent the heavy charges of the third reality from entering the human reality, Branch. The next step involves neutralizing the magnets I described. Then, you and I and Check McCall will begin the experiment in earnest."

I opened my mouth to protest. Naturally, Henry couldn't have predicted his own death. His program wouldn't respond to my argument that he wouldn't be around for any of those changes. I watched his stern face, his intense gray eyes. I realized that it was time to tell him something I had neglected for the past few years.

"Henry, do you know how much I love you?"

"I almost didn't program a response to that question," he said slowly, the lines of worry in his face softening. "I think you love me almost as much as I do you, son."

This time, I made no effort to stop the tears. When I raised my head and blinked my eyes, the seeker screen had again gone gray, the blue dot making its way to the right side.

\* \* \*

I'm not sure how long I sat staring at that gray screen, mesmerized by the traveling blue dot. I began dozens of thoughts, but they all trailed into a common pool of

nothingness, leaving me with only memories of their success and an underlying sense of urgency. I might have sat there for days; it could have been weeks.

Then footsteps sounded behind me. Completely absorbed with my thoughts, I hadn't heard the door open. When I turned, shock flowed through the core of my being. Unsure as to whether I should be pleased or angry, I silently confronted the tall man who now stood in front of me, dressed in a copera-colored toga.

"McCall! What in hell's name are you doing here? How did you get through that shield around the yard?"

"You're going to have to use your vocal cords, Hackworth. I don't quite have the hang of this thought communication." He turned a quirky smile on me, lifting a thick black eyebrow in the process. "I think you asked me how I got here. I could ask you the same, but it seems to me that question would be somewhat redundant as we obviously came here in the same manner."

"There's some kind of force field or barrier around this house," I told him. "I haven't been able to leave the yard. How did you get through?"

"Oh, that," he said, shrugging his shoulders and sitting down on a bench. "I turned it off."

"How did you do that?"

"You must realize that I've been here longer than you have. I've picked up a few of the techniques."

"Do you know how to return to our reality?" I asked. "Have you learned that archaic ritual?"

He pulled the bench around so that he faced me across the table. He stared for a moment and then shook his head.

"No," he said. "I haven't. But, I've done a lot of thinking and I may know a way for us to return without it. If our time runs short, we may have to use my way."

"I'm ready," I said, standing up. "Let's go. We've got to stop that electromagnetic encroachment before it becomes a full-fledged invasion."

"Hold it," he said. "We're being taught that ritual for a purpose. After a certain amount of repetition, the syllables we're learning encode themselves in our cells and we can pass through the barrier without being pulled apart."

"We came through from the other side, didn't we?"

"You have a point there," McCall said. Then his eyes widened as he stared past me. "I don't believe it!"

I turned to look at the seeker screen and knew that my expression must reflect McCall's. Again, the buildings of the city silhouetted against the lavender sky formed the backdrop for the sturdy, uniformed man who scowled toward us from the seeker screen.

"Barlow!" McCall cried. "That's Sheriff Barlow!"

"Where are you?" the voice demanded. "I can hear you, but I can't see you." The last few words bubbled as if they traveled through water. Without even the transitional metamorphosis of before, Barlow disappeared, the buildings faded, and the seeker screen grayed.

"Forsyth!" I yelled. "Where are you?"

The blue dot flickered across the seeker screen, its movement erratic. It paused at the right edge of the screen, as if waiting, and moved back to the center of the screen

where it grew larger, seeming to swell from inside. I turned to look at McCall. The expression on his face, initially startled, settled into one of satisfaction. He looked at me and stretched his lips across his strong white teeth.

"You have an open-ended disc in your seeker," he said.

I sensed that his pride at having an explanation overrode his awe at finding such an item. It made no sense to me and I told him so.

"You can pick up anything in this reality," he said. "The person who programmed this disc is terrifically advanced."

"Amanda did it," I said.

"Amanda? Mrs. Adams?"

"Henry was on it, too," I said. "And, of course, Sheriff Barlow."

He nodded and we both stared at the screen. The blue dot had expanded until it covered the entirety of the screen except for the corners. Even as we watched, the corners took on a blue hue and the entire screen pulsed with the intensity of the color. A burst of white light flashed from the screen and I closed my eyes against the brilliance.

"My God, Hackworth! The seeker is answering you!"

I squeezed my eyes open. Again, I watched the throb of blue on the seeker screen. "What do you mean?" I asked crossly. "What is the seeker answering?"

The white light flashed again, stinging the surface of my eyeballs. My eyelids hurt and the muscles around my eyes ached with the strain of keeping them open.

"You asked Barlow where he was!"

I stared at McCall, trying to fathom the emotion lying behind the glitter in his eyes. I halfway turned back to the screen.

"I don't understand."

"He's alternating between the two realities," McCall said, excitement behind his words. "The blue and the flash! Don't you see? We're watching the reflector at the top of the ceremonial building--the point of entrance from human reality to here. Barlow is standing in the ruins exactly at the point we stood only days ago!"

"Minutes," I said. "Just about ten minutes ago."

"He must be looking for us," McCall said. "How did he discover the entrance?"

"Why would he be looking for us?"

"Uh," McCall stammered, "I'm afraid that's my fault. I told him what to do in the event anything happened either to Dr. Adams or myself."

"So, Forsyth Barlow is trying to find his way over to this reality? Pardon my skepticism, but that's a bit difficult for me to swallow. I've known the man for almost thirty years and I don't believe you could convince him to do that!"

"I simply told him where to be in the ruins," McCall defended. "Explaining about the two realities and the time spiral would have taken too much time and...."

"And you knew he wouldn't have believed you," I finished.

McCall raised his eyebrows, saying nothing. He kept his eyes glued on the seeker screen. I watched two furrows dig into his forehead.

"If he is alternating between, say, three seconds in each reality, how much Namuh time before he shows up again? Come on, Hackworth, you're the human calculator! How much more time?"

"A little over half an hour," I said, calculating rapidly. "Thirty-five, thirty-six minutes."

"How long do you estimate it's been since we saw him?"

"Maybe ten minutes," I said. "But I'm not waiting around here to see if he returns on that screen. I'm going down to that ceremonial building right now. I'll be there, in that very spot we saw Barlow, and I'm going back with him!"

"You can't do that."

I didn't stop to ask him to explain that statement. Before he could protest, I was through the door and out into the yard. Directly ahead of me, not more than a mile, I saw the ceremonial building, its reflector mirror at a ninety-degree angle to the ground's surface.

"Hackworth! Come back!"

"No! I'm going to the ceremonial building!"

As the words trailed over my lips, the buildings of the city began moving and changing. The shapes grew liquid and gray, pouring and piling together in an amorphous mass. I watched the gray mass take on earthy red hues, merge and mesh to form steep walls, at the top of which I spied the brilliant blue of the southwestern sky. Blue sky! Not lavender. We were back in human reality! I even recognized the area I was standing in. Red Tank Draw. We were five miles due west of the ruins.

"How did you do that?" I turned to ask McCall who stood a few feet behind me.

He shook his head and pointed. I followed the direction his finger indicated. To my right, down at the narrow end of the wash, two figures appeared--a tall, athletic man and a small girl, not quite teenaged. As they drew closer, my heart leaped to my throat. This was a ten-year-old Casey and her father, Mr. Branigan. Blood raced to my extremities. Casey's father had drowned at Red Tank Draw the summer she was ten.

"You've taken us back in time," I said, turning to McCall. "I can save Mr. Branigan!"

I didn't, again, wait to hear his response. My feet carried me toward the familiar trail, the muscles in my thighs and calves tightening as they had years before when I raced down this path with Casey. The two were still over a hundred yards from the calm, deep lake that lent its name to the draw.

"Hackworth, wait..." McCall's words dribbled to my ears, his distant voice an annoying whine.

I raised my eyes to the trail ahead. They were still there, not even to the cottonwoods that marked the spring that drained the water to fill the lake.

"Casey!" I yelled. "Mr. Branigan!"

They continued on, not having heard my voice, and I renewed my efforts to catch up with them. My chest heaved and my lungs burned. My legs grew weak and I felt beads of moisture pop through the pores of my skin.

"Haaaaaaackkkkworrth..."

McCall's voice, now the faintest of whispers, evoked a memory. With astounding clarity, I remembered my earlier attempt to pull him back from the time bubble. He was trying to do the same thing for me! I breathed deeply and stepped backward, freeing myself. Hot liquid burned my eyes as I watched the two figures disappear around a bend.

"My God," I whispered. "This is just like a time bubble."

"It is a time bubble," McCall said. I walked to the red sandstone ledge where he sat.

"No," I protested. "This is our reality--my reality. There's no purple light. No Namuhs."

"Your observations are correct," he said. "However, assume that you stepped directly from Namuh reality into a time bubble..."

"You're crazy," I interrupted. "I just saw Casey and Mr. Branigan going to Red Tank Lake. I also know that Mr. Branigan will drown unless one of us can save him."

"Quit fighting it and just observe," McCall ordered. "You'll discover that both Casey and her father are fine. At least, they are as long as they are within this bubble."

At that moment, I saw them walking back up the draw. Wet clothing plastered Casey's body and her blond hair hung in limp strands down her back. Mr. Branigan, soaked from the waist down, laughed about something and threw his arm around Casey's shoulder, hugging her. Then they were past me, climbing up the path to the Branigan's car.

"I don't understand," I gasped, leaning against the ledge on which McCall sat. "Mr. Branigan drowned trying to save Casey after she fell into the lake. I went to the funeral. I saw his body!"

"Are you ready to listen?"

"If you can explain that, yes."

"We're in a time bubble, Hackworth, just like the time bubbles we were trapped in earlier. What the two of us are experiencing here at this moment is a block of highly charged emotional time that was stolen from human reality."

"You're telling me that this is a period of time in which Mr. Branigan pulled Casey from the lake? He didn't drown? He pulled her out and then climbed out himself?"

McCall nodded. For the first time in our short acquaintance, I read concern for me in his eyes.

"And, because this block of time was stolen, then the events that transpired during this time didn't occur? Come on, McCall. There has to be a better explanation. Is this what Amanda--I mean, Rachel--meant when she said she wouldn't exist if she had no past?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that," he said. After a moment's hesitation, he continued, "I know it must be painful for you, but can you remember what Casey told the officials?"

"She and her father drove out to the lake for a walk," I said. "The story she told the sheriff was that she fell into the lake. When Mr. Branigan waded in to pull her out, he must have stepped into a deep hole and gone under."

"How did she get out of the water?" McCall asked.

"She didn't remember. She didn't remember anything until she was almost to the car. She said that she remembered looking up at the frog rock..."

I stopped my narration, sensing that McCall had jumped to his feet. I turned to follow the direction in which he looked. My blood froze. Together, we watched Casey and Mr. Branigan step into the shadow created by a large frog shaped sandstone formation. And, at that moment, the time bubble ended! The sky again became lavender and the walls around Rachel's retreat loomed large in front of me.

\* \* \*

I staggered to a bench near the small stone building and slumped down on it, feeling its coolness through the fabric of my robe. How would I ever manage to get out of

here? This must have been what had happened to Henry. Amanda/Rachel had speculated that Henry could have walked out of Namuh reality directly into a time bubble. I looked up when I felt McCall's presence.

"I'm sorry, Hackworth. It's just not that easy."

"You came in," I accused him. "Show me how to get out of this detention center."

His silence compelled me to look up at him. His large hands hung limply from the full sleeves of his copera toga; I watched his fingers curl and uncurl.

"I just tried it, Hackworth. In vain. I turned off the shield to come in, but my technique was ineffective from this side."

My heart felt as if it had dropped to the pit of my stomach and churned around for hours before I finally felt its heavy thud against the wall of my chest. I raised myself to my feet.

"Well, find a way," I snapped. "I know your precious experiment is important, but there are events going on right now in our reality that have to be stopped..."

"McCall! Hackworth! I hear you! Where are you?"

Barlow's voice came thinly from the cottage. I closed my mouth and ran toward the door. Check McCall followed me but, by the time we reached the seeker screen, it was again gray.

## Chapter Fourteen

With my back to the seeker, I sat down at the bench beside the table, stubbornly ignoring the movement of the blue dot. After a few minutes of silence, McCall walked to the other side of the table and sat on a bench. We stared at each other for an infinite amount of time before my ears made out the distant sound of voices. Barlow again? I turned to look at the screen. Blurry figures moved across it. Then the figures, although distant, sprang sharply into focus, several women moving in the street directly in front of the ceremonial building.

"Amanda," I whispered, when one of the women turned to face the screen. I recognized the pearly skin, the velvety-colored eyes. Or, was she Rachel? Then another woman turned and I gasped.

"Good God, McCall," I cried, turning away from the window as another woman faced me, displaying the same beloved features. "All of these women look like Amanda!"

"They all look like Rachel," he said, frowning.

"You already knew that!" I accused, ignoring the fact that he felt he had to correct Amanda's name.

He stood up and walked over to the shelf by the seeker, the shelf on which the discs were stacked. He picked up one and held it in his left hand. Then he lightly ran the index finger of his right hand over the shiny object.

"Have you previewed any of these discs?" he asked.

"No," I snapped, looking past him at the screen, almost mesmerized by the Amanda-like women who passed by. How would I ever find my Amanda?

"If you had," he said, "you would understand why all these women look alike."

"If you already understand all of this, then tell me!"

He touched something on the right side of the seeker and the screen blanked. At the same time, I heard a whirring noise and then a click. McCall reached underneath the seeker and pulled out a small object. He turned and walked over to where I sat.

"You'll want to keep this," he said, placing the tarnished disc on the tabletop in front of me. "Rachel would want you to have it."

"Amanda," I corrected him.

He stared at me, his brow furrowed. "You can't convince Rachel that she is Amanda," he stated flatly. "She may look like Amanda and move like Amanda, but she is Rachel. You saw all of those women out there. What will it take to convince you?"

I didn't believe him, but I saw no necessity to defend myself to Check McCall. There are ways, far subtler than physical appearance, mannerisms, or speech that identify a person we've grown to know almost as well as we know ourselves. Nobody would ever be able to convince me that the woman who had given me the disc was anyone other than

Amanda Adams. When I didn't respond, Check turned back to the seeker, found the slot into which I had earlier placed Amanda's disc and dropped into it the shiny disc he had in his hand.

"Look at the screen," he ordered, placing his large hand on my shoulder as if to physically turn me toward the seeker.

"Get your damned hand off of me," I said, slapping at his wrist. "I'll watch this, but you've got some heavy duty explaining to do when it's over!"

The figures on the seeker screen, startlingly clear, were, except for the infant, familiar to me. The first was the tall man who had been with Amanda when I entered this reality through the ceremonial room. Amanda had called him Jericho. Next in line was Amanda. Then, the young couple that came to tend the retreat. I recognized the fresh-faced child who brought my clean robe every day and, sitting on a pallet at Amanda's feet, was a smiling baby.

"Insert the reality."

I recognized Jericho's order even though, again, the communication was telepathic rather than vocal. He stared at me sternly from his position at the left of the screen.

"We are from the human reality," McCall said.

"I am Jericho," the thought continued smoothly, "a wise man of what you humans call the Namuh reality. Because I am a wise man, I will be able to enter the human reality with minimal effort and no loss of form or soul. Upon its release from the physical body, my soul will continue existence, in either reality, as a mineral with a hexagonal crystal and the richest of deep blue colors."

Out of the corner of my eye, I glanced at Check McCall. He seemed to be focused intently on the communication from the seeker.

"I am Rachel," the silky thought slipped into my mind. "I am a wise woman of the Namuh reality. As with wise men, I am able to fully function in either reality. Upon departure from the physical, my soul will continue, in both human and Namuh realities, as a mineral of copera color with a striated cylindrical crystal."

"I am Kinder, a novice man." This thought came from the tall, sandy-haired young man who worked in Rachel's yard. "I am able to fully function only in Namuh reality. In the human reality, I exist in cubic form, a mineral of the purest true blue color. I will eagerly await the awakening of my soul by a human wise man who will teach me the ritual to transform and exist in that reality."

I could see no significance, no importance, in this introduction to the family, or whatever this unit of people was called. Impatiently, I tapped my foot on the floor and McCall turned to frown at me. I looked back at the seeker screen and willed my foot to still.

"I am Dena." This came from the young lady with dark hair and olive skin who cleaned Rachel's retreat. "I am a novice woman who can exist only in mineral form in the human reality. As a cubic shaped crystal, I am of the purest of green colors. I will remain in that form until awakened by a wise man or woman of the human reality who will teach me the ritual whereby I can adapt to the human form and continue my existence."

I turned from Dena to the smiling child standing next to her. I had liked this kid from the first day my robe had been brought to me. His fascination with my wristwatch had provided my only true entertainment in the Namuh reality.

"I am an aspirer," the child communicated. "In the Namuh reality, I have not yet accumulated enough experience to function fully. When that time comes, I will choose my gender and become either a novice man or a novice woman."

The child broke off and looked at Jericho. I sensed a message between the two and the child looked back at me, a blush of pink tinting his cheeks. "The wise man reminds me that I will exist in your reality as a deep red crystal of cylindrical shape. A wise man or woman of the highest order will be required to awaken and transform my soul to function in your reality."

I watched the infant pull at Rachel/Amanda's skirt. She reached down, picked up the baby and lovingly gazed at it before looking at me.

"The seed is the hope for the future," she communicated. "Within this small body exists the soul that carries the knowledge of all Namuhs when awakened properly. This can be done only by a human wise person with the ability to teach the transformation and awakening ritual to the child, but with the added ability of stimulating the reminder spark of his Namuh reality. This being exists in the human reality as a white to clear hexagonal crystal."

Rachel/Amanda placed the child back on the pallet and stepped back to her original position. They all stared out the screen at me. Then Jericho communicated, "Several million Namuhs, mostly novice men, novice women, aspirers and seeds, exist in crystalline form in your reality at this very time. Because we share the same space with the human reality, these Namuhs cannot be awakened. Their soul is focused in Namuh reality. When Namuh time is no more, these souls must be properly transformed or they will be lost."

"What about the Namuh wise men and women who currently exist in the human reality with form and soul intact?" Check McCall asked. "Won't they be able to accomplish the process?"

I was pleasantly surprised. Even if I had forgotten, McCall had remembered that the discs were programmed to answer questions from the viewer.

"There are less than one hundred Namuhs who have attained the necessary experience to become wise men and wise women," Jericho communicated. "Sixty of them have migrated to realities other than human and twenty of them have stayed here to help with the preparations to seal the entrance between the realities."

"Perhaps, then, you should tell us how to identify these human wise people," McCall countered.

"You will know when the time is correct," Jericho communicated. "That information is not available until specific rituals have been completed."

The figures on the screen froze in their positions, staring at McCall and me as if they posed for a family photograph. An anonymous voice communicated from within the speaker: **PROTOTYPES. PROTOTYPES. PROTOTYPES.**

"What the hell?" I asked.

"Just what it says," McCall told me. "There are six physical forms that the Namuhs take."

"I know that," I said. "Amanda explained to me."

"Then, why are you refusing to make the connection?" McCall asked. "It was a rather drastic measure that the Namuhs opted to take, but it was the most workable of the

options they saw at the time. All wise men look like Jericho and all wise women look like Rachel. Novice men and novice women look like Kinder and Dena."

"All aspirers look like that friendly nameless child and the seeds look like the baby," I finished. "Dear God, Check. Have we reached that point in our reality?"

McCall breathed deeply. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I hope not," he said. "I sincerely hope we're in time with the information we will take to human reality from here."

\* \* \*

"Turn that thing off," I told McCall. "I've seen enough."

I stood up and looked around the utilitarian room. Each group of Namuh beings probably had the same type of dwelling, identical furnishings and lack of imaginative decor. Individualism, as I knew it, had been bred from their genes. I groped for the door control and stumbled outside.

The Namuhs had neutralized all but the most minute of charges with their genetic experimentation. But, what of creative impulses? What of the inspiration for progress, for movement? The aspirer smiled and the seed laughed and gurgled. But, by the time the aspirer decided to become male or female, for Christ's sake, all emotion had been left behind. What of feelings of joy and achievement? Could they never know the ecstasy of fulfillment, the glow of accomplishment?

I thought fondly of my reality, of people who knew despair and heart ache, yet continued the momentum of life, always remembering success and happiness, always sending out tendrils of exploration toward an anticipated ideal. Would I want to continue living if the only choice left me was a reality such as that of the Namuhs? But, both

Henry and Amanda had told me that the Namuhs had little past, therefore negligible experience on which to base personal expectations. They had few memories of the feeling of satisfaction brought about with the achievement of a goal that bettered mankind and, therefore, themselves.

Even with the information I had, what would I be able to do to help prevent the same type of future for humans? How would the Namuhs, when awakened in our reality, be able to adjust to emotion-laden lives? Would they become a race due for extinction as Darwin had hypothesized? Or, would I be too late? If the third reality invaded human time, would the Namuhs, rather than humans, be the survivors?

I sat down on a bench near the stone wall and stared out at the buildings of the city, watching the slow movement of the reflector mirror on the top of the ceremonial building. The seed, the baby, was the key to the future. Even Rachel had said that. A child with the experience of the Namuh in his genes. Yet, a child who could still experience emotions. But, at the same time, a being who had to be awakened by a wise man who understood both Namuh and human functioning. Where would I find such a wise person?

I looked back over my shoulder, at Rachel's retreat. McCall had little or no interest in helping me solve the dilemma facing humanity. Right now, he was most likely playing around with the seeker and the open disc he had been so amazed that Amanda had left me. He probably already had plans for developing it into one of his computer games. As to closing the entrance to the Namuh reality, Amanda had plans, but they had been contingent upon Henry's aid.

And Henry had told me that Check McCall would help. He had trusted McCall and told me that I would discover the reason for his trust. So far, McCall had illustrated to me nothing to inspire my trust. Then, I heard McCall's loud voice from inside. More weakly, Forsyth Barlow answered him. This time, instead of rushing to view the seeker screen, I remained on the bench and watched the reflector atop the ceremonial building. Did it move? Was it my imagination, or did I really see red sandstone ledges? I narrowed my eyes to slits, alert for the view to return.

Hoping that perhaps the invisible barrier around the retreat had been removed, I stood and raised my left hand above the wall. As before, my palm touched a smooth, invisible surface. At the same moment, the reflector flashed vibrantly off the face of the watch I'd strapped back to my arm. I stared at it for a long time before I lowered the arm to waist level. 10:40! Twenty minutes! Could it be possible? I had been here for ten Namuh days and, for the last six of those days, Check McCall and I had been practically glued to the seeker screen!

I slumped back to the bench. Was my physical exhaustion due to the fact that I had been six days without sleep? I leaned my cheek against the roughness of the rock wall and closed my eyes. The sound of running footsteps jolted me alert.

"Hackworth! What the devil are you doing sleeping at a time like this?"

Wordlessly, I stared at McCall and heaved a sigh. Slugging him wouldn't help the situation, but it might make me feel better. No one in our position should be so happy as he was acting.

"I used your disc and talked to Barlow the last time he materialized," he said, excitement raising his voice a few notes. "He's going to help!"

"Help? How can he help us? He can't even manage to get over here completely!"

"It's a machine," McCall said. "He's gone to Dr. Adams' house for a machine I built. I don't have time to explain right now, but it will help us return to our reality."

"You don't have time?" I questioned, laboring to keep the scorn from my voice.

"McCall, Henry's house is an hour's round trip from the ruins! That's thirty Namuh days! I don't know where you intend to be in four weeks, but I'm not going to be here!"

"Are you sure?" he asked, his face slowly crumpling in puzzlement. "Did you figure the time differences correctly?"

I nodded and turned away from him, back to face the city. I had previously railed against my forced confinement at Rachel's retreat. Now I had a fellow inmate, one whose presence did little to increase my pleasure. A small voice in my head told me to look at what was in front of me, that I had all the answers if I would only open my eyes.

"What do you suggest we do?" McCall asked. "I don't think we can afford to wait for a month."

"The discs, McCall. And the ritual. We'll alternate between reviewing Namuh history and practicing the ritual with Rachel."

"How is that going to help us get out of here before Sheriff Barlow returns?"

"Think about it, McCall. We came through the barrier and suffered no harm. Correct?"

"Sure."

"I'm positive that the same would hold true in reverse," I said.

"I agreed with you on that point earlier," McCall returned. "However, you and I both have tried to leave this fenced yard and neither of us has succeeded."

"What does that tell you?"

"Sounds to me as if the Namuhs are holding us here as prisoners," he speculated.

"Perhaps, hostages?"

"Use that brilliant mind, McCall. What are we being coerced to do?"

"The ritual," he said slowly. "The history lessons..."

"Don't you see?" I interrupted impatiently. "We don't need to know the ritual to return to human reality. They're trying to grill into us the techniques to awaken those seeds and aspirers when Namuh time is gone and we're back in our own reality."

"You may be correct," he said. "But the prototypes refused to tell us how to identify the wise people of our reality. How will we find them to impart this technique?"

"I don't know, McCall. Jericho told us we would know at the correct time. The faster we learn, the more quickly we'll be able to leave."

I stood up and headed for the stone cottage. After a few moments, I heard McCall's footsteps behind me.

\* \* \*

Except for the mark I scratched on the floor of the sleeping room every time my watch ticked off two minutes, I had no sense of time passing for the next three weeks. The reflector on top of the ceremonial building did its flip-flop twice daily and Check McCall and I forced ourselves into sleeping patterns which allowed one of us to observe the seeker screen at all times--just in case Forsyth Barlow returned earlier than I had calculated.

Rachel had come the day after McCall and I had made our decision. She had vocalized our word for the day and we had parroted it back the requisite number of times.

At the end of the session, McCall had communicated his desire for another seeker and one had been installed before the next lesson. That had allowed us to review the history discs and, at the same time, be on the lookout for Barlow's return.

It was during the latter part of the second week or early part of the third, shortly after one of Rachel's lessons, that McCall retrieved a disc that he had been previewing from the seeker and threw it against the wall. Afterwards, he pounded his fist on the table and stalked outside. Although my scheduled sleep time was due, I remained inside, watching the seeker in which McCall had left the open-ended disc.

I knew where he had gone. Every day I had, at some time or another, done the same. He had gone to try the mechanism he had successfully turned off to enter this compound. Yet, the wall remained impenetrable. Within each of us, there was a sense of urgency compelling us to return to our own reality.

"Where is he now, Hackworth?"

McCall's gruff voice snapped me from the semi-hypnotic state I had drifted into. I turned to look at him and wondered if my own physical body echoed the ravages of McCall's. He had lost weight, perhaps twenty pounds, mostly on his face, neck and upper body. An uneven growth of coarse black hair shadowed the lower part of his face. He had developed a troublesome tic underneath his right eye socket and, even now, he held the fingertips of his right hand at the edge of that eye, as if to stifle the tremor.

"You've been keeping up with him all along, Hackworth. You know exactly where he is. Has he reached the house?"

"If it doesn't take him too long to find the machine," I said, "he may have started back to the ruins yesterday or today. His trip may be halfway completed."

"Oh, God," he moaned.

McCall slumped on the bench facing me. He folded his arms on the table and dropped his head on them, as if he were a grammar school boy and not an almost middle-aged computer genius. I watched his wide shoulders shake.

"Damn it, McCall, don't fall apart on me! You've suffered worse than this!"

He raised his head and looked at me, his eyes still shiny with unshed tears. He silently moved his lips and I saw the muscles tighten in his throat as he swallowed.

"How would you know?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm just speculating. Like me, you're a man with mixed ancestry. I was nine when I came to live with Henry and he helped me understand that I would be a man with more experience than most because I had more obstacles to overcome. That was his way of telling me that I would grow stronger with each experience. You probably had similar experiences. I know the Japanese culture..."

I stopped abruptly. McCall's face had whitened and his eyes blazed. With fascination, I watched his chest heave underneath the loosely woven fabric of the toga he wore.

"You can take your assumptions and shove them, Hackworth. I may be Mongolian and Caucasian, but I never had parents. I was found abandoned in the Japanese countryside and raised by French nuns. I educated myself; I didn't have a Dr. Adams to pamper me."

I didn't bother to interrupt his tirade. Telling McCall my experiences wouldn't make him feel any better. Comparing his remembered pain to mine would only serve to increase his bitterness.

"When I came to the United States to attend graduate school, I borrowed the money and worked two full time jobs during the entire period to pay it back. Nobody offered me an education in return for playing games."

I said nothing. Before continuing, he stared at me defiantly.

"I met a girl my last semester. After her parents met me, she dropped out of school and disappeared. I tried, but I couldn't find her anywhere. When I graduated at the top of my class, the best jobs that year went to the second and third ranking students."

"But you made it, didn't you?" I asked him. "Have those students, the second and third ranking ones, come even close to doing with their lives what you've done with yours?"

"I don't need your counseling, Hackworth. About the only good thing I can say about my life is that I didn't marry a woman who murdered her kids and then accused me of doing it!"

I felt my body turn cold and then hot. Every nerve ending I possessed tingled and pulsed. I sprang off the bench and reached halfway across the table, grabbing for McCall's neck.

"Wait, Hackworth!" he yelled. "Listen, I'm sorry. I didn't know what I was saying."

"You knew," I said coldly, pulling myself back to a standing position. "You knew exactly what you were saying."

He backed away from me and looked toward the door. I grabbed the control and the door slid open. McCall edged past me.

"Get out," I said, the words spewing from my lips like cubes of ice. "Get away from me."

I sank back to the bench, my body limp. Years ago, I had cried and screamed the anger and frustration from my soul. I had moaned my agony and wallowed in my despair. When I had shed my last tear, it had taken with it the self-pity. After that, I had been able to accept my full responsibility for the role I had played. Until McCall understood that the things that had happened to him couldn't have occurred without his compliance, spoken or otherwise, he couldn't leave that bitterness behind. Until that time, even the best of experiences would be seen in that light and, therefore, tainted.

I paid silent thanks to the two women who had, each in her own individualistic manner, helped me. Despite his formative years with the Catholic nuns, Check had missed out on the nurturing of a strong female; I had had both Kate Branigan and Amanda.

It was Amanda who had stood beside me during the trial. Amanda, who had insisted on my innocence. Amanda, who had convinced my attorney to check the airline schedules which proved I couldn't have been near the babies when they died. She had driven the route to the cabin at the same time of night as Casey had, stopping at every cafe and gas station open during those hours. It was Amanda who had found the damning evidence that had precipitated Casey's courtroom confession. Amanda had seen me acquitted and, when Casey had been hospitalized for observation, Kate Branigan, in the background until then, had taken over.

Kate had sat with me for hours on end, listening to my fanatical ravings, wiping my egocentric tears. She had offered neither consolation nor chastisement. Without a

bone of judgment in her body, she had encouraged me to search my heart for any guilt and expunge it. She had reminded me that we often mistake obligation for commitment and, when we feel that we have not lived up to some idealized concept of responsibility, we feel guilty.

She had been a sounding board for my fluctuating emotions about whether to continue professional football. Never offering unsolicited advice, she had allowed me to talk it out, to discover that I hadn't really liked the sport for several months.

"Why don't you come back to New Mexico," she had suggested. "You already have the ranch and I can't think of anyone who knows horses better than you do."

"I need to wait around," I had protested. "I want to talk to the doctors about Casey."

"If you stay here," she had said, "look deeply within yourself. Decide whether you are staying because you want to stay or because you think you should stay."

Three days later, she had left for New Mexico. But, I had taken her words to heart; I had done some soul-searching, some deep examinations of the emotional motivations behind my actions. And, even before Casey's suicide, I had had my bags packed.

I closed my eyelids, resting the muscles that had held my eyes rigidly focused on the seeker. If McCall chose to use this time in the Namuh reality to come to grips with his own past, then I would make the commitment to be as good a listener to him as Kate had been to me.

My chin fell to my chest, the sharp jerk pulling me from a light sleep state. I looked around. McCall hadn't returned. But the seeker with the open-ended disc emitted a

crackling noise. McCall had programmed the disc to instantly pick up the human being who would be coming through the ceremonial building. Thus far, the screen remained gray. But, someone from our reality stood within the neutral area that marked the entrance from human to Namuh reality!

I scooted back the bench, invigorated by the thought that, ahead of my projected schedule for him, Sheriff Forsyth Barlow had returned with McCall's machine. The crackling noise grew louder. Where was McCall? At this point, calling for him might confuse the programming of the disc in the seeker, so I remained silent.

Slowly, the lavender hue spread across the screen and the buildings took on form. This time, there were no wavy lines, no blurring of outlines. The human who stood in front of the ceremonial building sprang into focus and looked directly at me.

"Stay where you are, Branch," Kate said. "I'll be with you right away."

## Chapter Fifteen

The smell. The wonderful, sweet, dry odor of warm red earth and desert vegetation. Birds chirped and trilled. In the turquoise sky, the sun shone with a brilliance I'd almost forgotten. Through slitted eyes, I watched a puffy white cumulus cloud expand slowly, the turbulent air currents inside swelling the outline. I closed my eyes against the dream. Limp. I felt as if every cell in my body had been stretched to its limit for a lifetime and now had relaxed. Underneath my back, loose rocks rolled as I adjusted my body. The warm fabric underneath my head smelled faintly of a pine forest after a summer rain. Kate's favorite fragrance.

Kate! She had found me and brought me back! But, how? I raised my head, looking first to the left and then to the right. Directly past my bare feet, I saw her. She stood on a ledge about two hundred feet away, looking over what I knew now to be the ruins. I was, then, still in the yard of Rachel's retreat. Staring at a row of loosely tumbled stones, I made out the irregular outline of the stone wall. The cottage itself would be

behind me but, when I turned to look, I saw only more rocks piled in such a manner that they could have been deposited by natural forces.

“Branch?”

Kate walked up the slope toward me, her long culotte skirt and her riding boots dusted with red sand. Pulling myself to a sitting position, I looked past her, toward the ruins. As if I looked at a photograph, every figure froze in its position and I examined the scene in front of me. On the red sandstone ledge that separated the ruins from Henry’s house, Sheriff Forsyth Barlow held a rectangular black box, about the size of a ream of typing paper. Three men in white stood behind him. On the path nearly to the ruins, Mike Peterson laid awkwardly, his features contorted in pain. At the edge of one of the crumbled walls of the ceremonial room, bright red drew my eye. Ellen Madison lay on her side in a fetal position, knees drawn to chest. So, she hadn’t gone over with me. But, Check McCall was still over there in the Namuh reality.

“Branch? How do you feel?”

The figures sprang into action. I watched Barlow step aside to allow the emergency medical technicians around him. Then he fell into step behind them, keeping the same quick, but careful, pace. Kate’s shadow fell across my body and I looked up at her.

“I’m okay, physically,” I said. “Mentally, I’m extremely disoriented. How did you do that? How did you get me back?”

She knelt down beside me and brushed the hair back from my moist forehead. Her hand felt cool and soft. I pulled it to my cheek and held it cupped in mine. With her other arm, she gently pulled my head to her shoulder.

“I’ll explain later, dear child. When we have more time.”

I pulled away, back to a sitting position. Barlow was almost to the ruins. Two of the medics lifted Peterson to a stretcher and one knelt near Ellen Madison’s still form.

“Is she dead?” I asked.

“No,” Kate said. She remained silent for a long time. “Ellen Madison has met with her worst fears. She will discover now that she will live despite them.”

“Check McCall,” I said. “He’s still in the Namuh reality. Amanda, too. She’s there.”

“I know,” she said, her delicate features troubled. “I could bring only one of you back. Now that I see you are uninjured, I’ll go back for McCall.”

She raised herself to her feet, bracing her slender frame against a wind that suddenly whipped across the plateau. I felt fear tighten the muscles of my stomach and I grabbed the hem of her skirt. Suppose Kate didn’t come back?

“I know what you’re thinking, Branch. I will return.

“But, Henry...”

“I have no one in the Namuh reality to split my intention,” Kate said. “My desire is fully focused right here in this reality.”

I felt my hand clench the fabric of her skirt. My entire body shook. Henry had been going over for almost twenty years and he had died. My heart heavy, I pleaded with her, “Kate, I don’t think I can stand to lose you, too.”

Her face crumpled and two thin tears trailed from her brilliant eyes down her cheeks. She leaned forward and cupped my chin in her hand, forcing me to look directly into her eyes.

“I understand, Branch. That’s the way I felt when I realized that you had gone over. I thought, ‘Not Henry *and* Branch.’ I can’t promise you that I’ll be back. I can assure you that I know what I’m doing. These ruins were part of my father’s ranch; I grew up here.”

Embarrassed, I released my grasp on her skirt and she stepped back. Annoyance crossed her face and I followed her gaze. A female figure rushed sure-footedly down the path. At this point, she was halfway between the crest of the red sandstone ledge and the ruins.

“There goes the only person who can sabotage this mission, Branch. Hold her in this reality!”

Sabotage Kate’s mission? This woman could hurt Kate, maybe even kill her. Someone had killed Henry. I turned back to Kate, but she had already gone. Struggling to my feet, I felt a surge of adrenaline and I picked a path between the piles of rocks, ignoring the messages of pain that my bare feet sent to my brain. I had to reach the ceremonial room before this woman did, this woman with the pink and yellow striped wig. I had to stop Angel!

\* \* \*

I had always prided myself on recognizing character in a person. How could I have misjudged Angel so greatly? I had liked her, this woman that Kate had identified as a saboteur. Her sense of humor, her positive outlook on life, her ability to assume responsibility had earned my respect. This event forced me to shift my thinking, to recognize her for the danger that she was. Henry had described to me the magnets, the

beings that attracted the huge electromagnetic charges to events where there were rampant feelings of powerlessness.

Halfway to the ruins now, I looked across the crumbling structures. The stretcher transporting Mike Peterson was almost to the crest of the sandstone ledge. The third medic had helped Ellen Madison to her feet and she stood beside him, hands covering her face, shoulders slumped. I could see neither Angel nor Sheriff Barlow. But, as I watched Ellen Madison and the medic, thousands of tiny pinpoints of gray behind them formed an outline that I knew to be Forsyth.

“Barlow!” I yelled. “Sheriff Barlow!”

Again, though, he was gone. The medic standing beside Ellen looked at me with puzzlement. I felt a laugh of hysteria bubble from my throat as I imagined what I looked like to him. Still wearing the copera robe from the Namuh reality, I hadn’t shaved for almost five weeks and I wore no shoes. I had seen this very man at the hospital a few hours earlier, but now he showed no sign of recognition. Protectively, he grasped Ellen’s arm and moved her toward the path that led away from the ruins.

Completely unconcerned with the two, I stepped over a low section of the ceremonial room wall. Must I choose whether to stay here and guard Barlow, who had the machine that could close the entrance, or whether to hunt for Angel, to keep her in this reality? At that moment, the decision was made for me. The tumbling sound of loose rocks came from my left, near the overhang. I stared at the three large rocks that blocked my view of the cavern at the foot of the bluff. Cautiously, quietly, I moved away from the ruins of the ceremonial room, keeping my eyes on the space between the second and third boulders.

Behind me, I knew that Forsyth Barlow alternated between seconds here and seconds in the Namuh reality, but I couldn't turn to look. I couldn't take a chance that Angel might slip away. Even when I heard the voices behind me, I continued looking at the three boulders.

"That direction, Barlow. Here, fold it out and point it in that direction!"

The voice belonged to Check McCall. He had made it back to this reality! Sheriff Barlow had taken the machine over to McCall and he had used it to return. Just then, what I had thought to be a portion of the side of the second rock moved. Angel!

"We only have one chance to make sure it works," McCall instructed. "Keep it pointed right at that wall. We won't be able to try it again."

God! They were trying to close that entrance and Kate and Amanda were still over there! Thoughts of catching Angel became secondary. I turned to the two kneeling men who concentrated on the machine between them, McCall's hand poised over a tiny red lever.

"No!" I screamed, stumbling toward them. "NO! Kate is over there!"

McCall's hand dropped to the lever and I fell to a position I had learned years ago, but had seldom used. Throwing my body toward Sheriff Forsyth Barlow, I grabbed his hand and forced the rod he held into the air.

"Hackworth!" McCall yelled, rage filling his voice. "Look what you've done!"

I struggled with Barlow for a few seconds before he dropped the rod and pulled away from me. He looked first at me, puzzlement filling his eyes, and then he turned to McCall.

“You have condemned the entire human reality, Hackworth,” McCall spat, struggling with the words. “Dr. Adams and I built this machine specifically to eliminate the passageway between human and Namuh reality.”

“Kate is over there now, searching for you!” I accused.

Sheriff Barlow alternated between looking at Check and then back to me. He stared at the melted metal on the ground in front of McCall’s feet.

“What is going on?” he demanded.

“We had one charge,” McCall said. “Look at that machine. It’ll take me months to build another one. By then, it’ll be too late to use it.”

I turned back to look at the three rocks where Angel had hidden a few minutes ago. My heartbeat increased when I observed that the gap between the second and third rocks no longer existed; they had grown together. With my foot, I nudged a baseball-sized stone over toward Barlow.

“It’s already too late,” I said, pointing to the rock.

“Look at that thing!” Barlow exclaimed. “It looks like it’s alive! It’s growing!”

\* \* \*

“It’s just as well you didn’t initiate that charge, McCall. You would have doomed us for sure.”

The male voice came from somewhere over my left shoulder and I swiveled my head. I couldn’t see anyone.

“That charge would have closed the entrance,” the strange, yet familiar, voice spoke, “but it would have drawn to us an excessive amount of electromagnetic charges

from the other reality. Even without directing it at the opening, look what you've produced. That rock has doubled in size since you set off that charge."

A frown etched its way across McCall's forehead. Sheriff Barlow shuffled his feet and his face looked as if he had developed indigestion. I kept scanning the rocks, looking for the source of the voice.

"I suppose you have a better idea, Kirby," McCall yelled. "Come on out of hiding and show us what you have. You can see for yourself how these rocks are growing."

So, the strange voice belonged to Jim Kirby, the astronaut. Did he also have a plan to stop the invasion by the third reality? Was that what he carried so protectively in his briefcase?

"Not until you have that woman under control!" Kirby yelled back. "I can't take a chance with her around!"

"What woman?" Sheriff Barlow called. "What woman are you talking about?"

I finally spotted Kirby. Dressed in a chocolate colored suit, he blended in with the boulders halfway up the slope from which I'd come. He stood near a juniper tree, his briefcase clutched to his chest. With all of the commotion going on, I had lost Angel. If Jim Kirby had a workable solution, we had to talk him down here to explain it to us, Angel or no Angel.

"He knows," Kirby told the sheriff, pointing at me. "Ask Hackworth."

At the same time that McCall and the sheriff turned to me, Angel ran into the clearing behind Jim Kirby, her pink and yellow hair flashing in the sun. I cupped my hands on either side of my mouth.

"Kirby!" I yelled. "She's behind you!"

Before he could turn to defend himself, Angel had thrown her weight into the small of his back and Kirby toppled forward, tumbling a few feet down the hill, but managing to hold onto the briefcase. With disbelief, I watched the woman bend down and pick up a limb the size of my wrist that had fallen from a tree. Both Sheriff Barlow and I moved toward the two at the same time. Check McCall, a little slower, climbed over the wall after us. I cursed my bare, lacerated feet as I sought clear pockets of sandy soil on which to step.

“Good God,” Barlow cried. “She’s trying to kill him! It’s that rock star!”

When we were halfway up the slope toward Kirby, I heard his high-pitched scream and felt chills rush over my flesh. I raised my eyes from the path long enough to see Angel tugging at the briefcase that Jim Kirby, even in a state of semi-consciousness, gripped tightly. With a mighty heave, she pulled it from him, almost losing her balance in the process. Behind me, I heard McCall’s shallow panting.

“Can’t you move faster, Hackworth? How did you ever become the nation’s leading running back?”

I ignored his acerbic comment, instead alternating my eyesight between the path and Angel, who appeared to be running on a path somewhere over to our right. Already, I could hear Kirby’s moans of pain. Barlow reached him first, kneeling down beside him and examining the bruised skin on his forehead. Angel had turned now, climbing over and between boulders, making a path directly toward the ruins of the ceremonial room.

She was going to the other reality! Damn, I should have anticipated that! Almost knocking over McCall in the process, I swerved and turned back, running toward the

ruins. This time, I didn't care if I left patches of torn skin on the sharp rocks, as long as I stopped Angel before she got to that entrance.

For a few hundred feet, we ran parallel paths. As I gained on her, I found myself speculating about her remarkable stamina. We were no more than a hundred yards from the ceremonial room when I realized what had been bothering me. Angel had told me that she wore the wigs for her audience; when she wanted to disguise herself, she took them off. This woman who had Jim Kirby's briefcase, the one who covered ground like a healthy deer, was the woman who had, only yesterday, walked with me on the road to Henry's house, matching me stride for stride. This was not Angel, as she wanted us to think. This woman was Angel's private secretary, Tina!

She had reached the ruins of the ceremonial room. Holding the briefcase with both hands, she paced the same pattern I had watched both McCall and Ellen walk earlier today, a tightly spaced series of steps, beginning with the circumference and moving inward. I found it more and more difficult to lift my legs; each foot felt weighted down with cement. But I had to stop Tina and I forced myself forward.

I was still a hundred feet away when she found the entrance. Her body grew translucent and then sharply focused. Her outline blurred and parallel stripes of black and gray transposed themselves over the rocks behind her. I had almost reached the wall. I could still stop her.

Running at full speed, I threw my right leg up to clear the wall and smashed directly into another invisible wall, just like the one around Rachel's compound in the Namuh reality. The force of my impact boomeranged me back a good six feet and I watched with frustration and then amazement as the entire circular room inside the wall

flashed bright orange and then yellow. What seemed to be the sparks from billions of fireworks lit the inside of the shielded area, stretching up fifty feet or so, the height of the ceremonial building in the Namuh reality. From the position I'd fallen, I squinted my eyes and watched the brilliant sparks shoot up from the center of the ceremonial room, spewing from that point as molten lava would from a volcano.

I felt tears fill my eyes and attempted blinking them away. Finally, I gave up and used the loose sleeve of my robe to wipe my eyes dry. A few minutes passed before I realized that silence surrounded me. I even heard McCall's voice, pitched high in excitement. I turned to look up the hill at him and he pointed toward the ruins of the ceremonial room. Belligerently, I stared at him; I didn't need to be reminded that I had allowed Tina to escape. When Barlow pointed, however, I turned.

Directly in the center of the ruins, draped in tendrils of orange and yellow smoke, stood a woman, her shoulders slumped with exhaustion.

It was Kate Branigan and she had Kirby's briefcase.

\* \* \*

She swayed slightly and I clamored to my feet. Kate had been gone for only an hour, but the time she had spent in Namuh reality had been almost a month. What had she been doing for those thirty days? When she lifted her chin and saw me, her hazel eyes gazed at me from shadowed sockets.

"Kate!" I cried. "Thank God, you've returned!"

She remained in the same position, her only movement the rise and fall of her chest. Cautiously, I moved to the wall, reaching out my hands to feel if the invisible wall was still there. My fingers met a spongy, resilient, jelly-like substance.

“Don’t attempt moving toward me, Branch.”

Kate’s words, bubbling to me as if we were underwater, carried a note of caution. I pulled my fingers from the invisible slimy mass and stepped back. The voices behind me were closer now; McCall and the sheriff would be almost down the slope. Although I had no such expectations about McCall, I knew that Forsyth would not leave the injured man. Had Kirby died?

My silent question was answered almost immediately as the astronaut broke into the clearing, running toward the wall at a position about twenty feet from where I stood. Before I could move, he had begun a leap that should have carried him over the wall and almost to the center of the ceremonial room ruins. Instead, he lodged, his feet a few inches above the crumbling rock, in the invisible, viscous shield, trapped like an insect on flypaper. As if he were in quicksand, the more he twisted and fought against it, the deeper he became embroiled. This was what Kate had cautioned me against.

“It’s a matter of only seconds, Branch. Calm him.”

Kate’s voice, again, bubbled to me. This time, her pace was faster and I began to see a pattern. But, calm down Jim Kirby? Already, his face turned a grayish-blue and he struggled to raise his hand to his throat.

“Don’t fight it, Kirby!” I yelled, moving toward him.

“Jumping Bejesus!” Forsyth said, coming up behind me and booming over my shoulder. “What in the name of tarnation has happened to him?”

“I think I know,” McCall said, his irregular breathing causing his words to come out in jerky monosyllables. “It’s a time bubble. Both Hackworth and I have been trapped in one. It’ll go away.”

“He’ll strangle first!” Forsyth bellowed, reaching for Kirby’s foot.

“Don’t!” I yelled, pushing the sheriff’s hand back. “You’ll get trapped in there, too!”

In that moment that I turned away, Kirby began sinking, slowly moving toward the earth. When his foot touched ground, the remainder of his body followed and crumpled in a pile on the floor of the ruins. At the same time, Kate moved toward him. Even though I knew her movement signified that the shield had dissolved, I reached out my hand and tested before I climbed over the wall.

When we reached Kate and Jim, she stood above him, holding the briefcase and breathing heavily. The astronaut’s chest raised rapidly up and down and I watched him struggle to speak.

“Briefcase,” he finally managed.

Kate set the leather case down beside him and lifted his left hand, placing it on the handle. His fingers squeezed the metal tightly and his breathing calmed. His rapid heartbeat no longer reflected in the pulse on his neck.

“Christ Almighty! What’s this?”

Forsyth’s voice came from the center of the room, the spot Kate had stood earlier. With the toe of his boot, he nudged a stiff, stringy, brownish mass.

“Ugh!” he said, squatting down and poking at it with his right forefinger. “Looks like some sort of carcass.”

We all heard Kate’s audible sigh. Even Jim Kirby opened his eyes and propped himself up on his elbows. Kate shook her head and shivered.

“That is Tina,” she said. Then she added, “or, her remains, if you prefer. Mr. Kirby and Mr. McCall, both the two of you and Dr. Adams speculated the possibility of beings that become magnets for the electromagnetic reality. Forsyth, I told you earlier today about the theory. Branch, you had direct experience. It seems that Tina was such a magnet. She had discovered the purpose of the tour and sensed that the experiences surrounding each of you would generate excess electromagnetic charges. She soon discovered that most of the members had reconciled old fears and had found a source of power within. At that point, she began eliminating members, one by one, in the hopes of obtaining the charges she sought.”

“Nordstrom, Simpson, Eklander, Carter,” Forsyth counted off the victims on his fingers. “What about Dr. Adams?”

“No,” Kate said, her voice dropping. “Dr. Adams felt an obligation to return to the human reality but, even more, he wanted to stay in the Namuh reality with Amanda. He saw that he had no choice other than to return to this reality.”

“Powerlessness,” McCall breathed. “Just that one simple thought.”

“Enough to suck him into a time bubble that beat him to death,” I said. I pointed at Tina’s remains. “Is that what happened to her?”

Kate nodded, averting her eyes from the lumpy mass on the ground. She moved from her position near Barlow to a spot by the curving wall. She folded her arms across her chest and stared at Jim Kirby. He pulled himself upright and patted his briefcase.

“I have the answer in here,” he said. “This is the material that will neutralize the electromagnetic reality. Because of his innuendoes, Tina concluded that McCall had the secret and decided that she must prevent his using the machine he had constructed. If it

had accomplished what he and Dr. Adams had planned, there would have been no more massive electromagnetic charges—presently, that is. Instead the charges McCall generated stimulated the electromagnetic reality and, in turn, Tina. After that failure...

“You came on the scene with your taunts and your brags,” McCall interrupted. “You had the answer. Naturally, she went for you!”

“Where did she intend taking the briefcase?” I asked. “What was she going to do with it?”

“I’m not sure she had a plan,” Kate said. “She simply wanted to prevent Mr. Kirby from using the material in the case. She stepped into the entrance between realities from this side at the same moment that I stepped in from the other side. The electromagnetic reality, stimulated by the earlier charge, immediately attracted the like charges from her. “That,” she pointed to the charred remains, “is what was left.”

“Damn,” McCall said, kicking a red rock with his sandaled foot. “I tried using an equal and opposite charge. What’s going to stop it?”

He stared at Kirby, anger blazing from his black eyes. He strode over to stand by the astronaut.

“That third reality attracts all charges,” Kirby began, looking away from McCall. “What I propose is that we reflect their own charges.”

“Reflect!” McCall burst out. “Reflect the charges? How? With a mirror?”

He chuckled grimly and turned his back on Kirby, walking toward the wall on the opposite side of the ceremonial room ruins. Leaning against the wall, copera robe ragged and stained, he would have, at another time, made a comical picture. At this moment, however, he resembled the grim reaper.

“Go ahead, Kirby,” he said. “I’m listening. All of us are listening.”

“The details are too technical for me to take the time and explain,” Kirby said.

“I’ve been studying this electromagnetic phenomenon for years and I’ve concluded that the charges are made up of waves similar to those of sound, but move much faster. My plan is to use the material inside my briefcase to reflect those waves back to them.”

“You intend to fool them,” Barlow said. “Allow them to think they see something else when they’re really seeing themselves. Like the mirrors in the carnival fun houses.”

Jim Kirby looked at the sheriff for a minute. He smiled then, the first sign of emotion I’d seen on his face since his anger with me the day before.

“Good analogy,” he said. “But the third reality won’t be seeing, they’ll simply be attracting like charges. The electromagnetic charge will be emitted, reflected off the aerospace blanket I’ve made, and sent right back. The massive charge has no brain, no controlling mind. It will ‘feel’ the charge that comes back and absorb it. Because of its ‘success,’ it will send out more charges. Those, too, will be sent back to be absorbed. Each successive charge will become greater until eventually there will be no charge left.”

“I’m ready to try anything,” Sheriff Barlow said. “Let’s spread that blanket out!”

“How do we know where to place it?” I asked.

Kirby carefully opened the briefcase. His hand stroked a gossamer thin, silvery substance that filled the case almost to overflowing. He turned a surprised expression to me. “We’ll spread it over this entire ceremonial area,” he said. “That way, the charges will be reflected back through the opening.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Haven’t you forgotten an important fact?”

“I don’t think so,” he said mildly. “I gather that you have something on your mind.”

The self-centered, asinine military man reigned. He had completely forgotten about the beings of the Namuh reality. When those charges were reflected back through the entrance, the path of least resistance would direct their flow straight into the Namuh reality and Rachel’s people!

“The Namuhs,” I said. “What do you propose doing about them?”

Two large rocks slid off the hill behind Kirby, picking up more loose stones and assorted debris as they tumbled down the hill, growing into a small landslide. We all watched the momentum slow and finally cease just a few feet from the wall of the ceremonial room. Kirby lifted his eyebrows when he looked back at me.

“There’s nothing I can do for or about the Namuhs,” he said, pulling the folds of the shiny, lightweight substance from the briefcase. “There’s just a few of them left and, according to Dr. Adams’ calculations, they have no time remaining after ten tonight. They’re going to die, anyway. Come on, guys, help me spread out this blanket.”

Rage boiled through me, weakening my muscles and heating my face. Only the gentle touch of a loving hand on my arm prevented me from grabbing Jim Kirby’s briefcase and smashing it into his smug face. I turned and found myself looking into deep blue eyes.

“Amanda?” I gasped. “You’ve come to stay?”

\* \* \*

She looked down at her tightly clasped hands. I watched liquid gather at the corners of her eyes. Placing my hands on her cheeks, I turned her face up to mine.

“My dear Branch,” she whispered, tears causing her voice to break, “I have come to tell you good-bye.”

“No! You can’t go back over there. You heard what Kirby plans to do!”

“I must return,” she said. “Almost all of the others have migrated. Other than myself, there are two wise men and another wise woman. It is necessary that we four be at the ceremonial building until the end.”

“Amanda,” I pleaded. “Look over there! See that lump of charred flesh? That is what is left of Tina, the girl who sat on the sofa in your house only yesterday. That is what the third reality did to her! It’ll do the same to you!”

I closed my eyes against the vision of Amanda being pummeled and pounded by the electromagnetic charges that had torn Henry apart and burned Tina to a crisp. She didn’t have to go back. She had just told me that only three other Namuhs remained, three wise ones who could easily come through to this reality. I opened my eyes.

“Why? Why do you feel you have to return?” I asked, removing my hands from her cheeks.

“Come with me,” she said, taking my left hand in her right and leading me from the ceremonial room ruins.

I hesitated, looking at the group within the walled ruin. Kirby had pulled himself to his feet and leaned against the wall, talking to Kate. McCall and the sheriff had lifted the thin, silvery fabric from the briefcase and were busily unfolding it. Nobody seemed even to notice Amanda and me. When I stumbled over a stone and muffled my exclamation of pain, Amanda stopped and looked down at my feet.

“Branch, what have you done to your poor feet?”

I briefly relayed the story of my futile chase scene with Tina earlier. She nodded, little wrinkles developing between her eyes.

“Rub them with aloe as soon as you get home,” she instructed me. “You’ll find some aloe lotion in my vanity at the...” Her voice broke. Even as I watched her, I sensed the conflict going on within her.

“Amanda...”

“No, Branch. Don’t offer me sympathy. Don’t be sweet to me. I’ll break apart into little pieces. Throughout all those years, I never thought it would be like this. I never knew it would...” Again, her voice broke, “...it would hurt this much. I learned to love the emotions of the humans, the sad ones as well as the joyful ones. Only in this reality have I ever felt every cell in my body come alive. Losing Henry has been the most painful event of my life. Yet, I find I will miss even that pain.”

“Then, stay,” I demanded. “Bring the others over.”

“No, sweetheart. I can’t do that. We Namuhs have to protect our race. We have a plan and a shield much like yours which we will activate at the proper time.”

“But there are only four of you! Wouldn’t it be simpler to evacuate than to try to protect an empty reality?”

“Each of the Namuhs who has migrated to another reality has a past in the Namuh reality. If we allow the third reality to run rampant, the charges will eventually begin seeking and consuming even the Namuh pasts that have only tiny electromagnetic charges.”

“Explain that to me, Amanda. You told me that the third reality had already stolen most of the Namuh past.”

“Branch, you must remember the millions of years of Namuh history. Admittedly, our revolutionary physical changes decreased the electromagnetic charges being generated by our beings. The electromagnetic reality has not actively sought out our present for the last forty thousand Namuh years. Yet that time, Branch, the time during which the novices, the aspirers, and the seeds were born and developed, still exists in the Namuh reality. That is the past that we must protect.”

“There must be dozens of other wise Namuhs who could do what you propose, Amanda. Get one of them to do it.”

“I couldn’t ask another to do what I, myself, would not.”

“You are Rachel,” I accused. “Rachel made that statement. You didn’t.”

She released my hand and reached in a pocket of her copera robe. When she pulled her hand out, her fingers gripped a deep blue stone about the size of a pocketknife.

“I brought this special crystal from my reality, because it belongs here with you. I would like it very much if you could find a place for it on your patio. Put it near the herbs, with the other pretty stones.”

I took it from her hand. She turned her head away and I knew she hid her tears.

“I won’t let you go back.”

“Branch, I must.”

At that moment, Kate came up behind us. Amanda heard the footsteps before I did. She turned and her face lit with a love I had previously seen her show only Henry and me. Silently, the two embraced and, when they pulled apart, Kate’s face was as damp as Amanda’s. Amanda looked at me.

“If I touch you, my dear son, I may lose my resolve.”

“Don’t go,” I pleaded.

“Please understand, my dear,” she said, her face crumpling. “You have always been correct. I am Rachel. I am the leader of the Namuhs.”

Before I could protest, before I could reach for her, she was gone. The space between Kate and me still held the warmth of her body, but Amanda was gone.

## Chapter Sixteen

A deep rumble shook the earth and I looked up to the graying sky, staring at the voluminous cumulonimbus clouds that had developed in the last half hour. A faint yellow haze screened the ominous anvil shape of the thunderheads, darkening the flat bottoms. Even as I watched, a jagged streak of lightening darted from the bottom of one of the nearer clouds and traced its way to the ground. I held my breath, waiting for the thunder I knew would follow the phenomenon.

In that silent moment, with stillness surrounding every cell in my body, I looked at Kate. Even in the dusk, I knew that her steady hazel gaze returned mine, hope for the future of the human race mitigated by sorrow at the loss of someone so dear. The explosive sound that reached our eardrums was accompanied by the sound of human voices pitched high with excitement.

"It's started," Kate said, her voice little more than a whisper. "The electrical charges in the thunderclouds. They'll attract the third reality."

The technicality of the operation of Kirby's blanket had been over my head, but I realized that we now had a situation that required cooperation from everybody at the ruins. Together, Kate and I hurriedly picked our way around the rocks on the trail leading back to the ceremonial room. As we drew closer, individual voices grew more distinct and I quickly recognized what I had come to call Kirby's "military tone."

"Pull it back," he shouted. "Leave the center of the room open!"

In amazement, I watched McCall and the sheriff roll yards of the shiny, gauzy fabric toward the crumbling walls. How had Kirby fit all of that material in his briefcase? Then he spotted me.

"Hackworth!" he ordered. "Get over there and help the men. I can't risk the aerospace blanket being exposed to a thunderstorm!"

I stared at him for a moment, watching his quick, efficient movements as he knelt and wound a white cord around a thin metal dowel that stood in the exact center of the ceremonial room. Another clap of thunder rocked the air and he flinched, turning to look up at the sky before rising to his feet and running to the corner of the blanket where I stood.

"Five years, Hackworth! It took five years to make this blanket. We won't get another chance! Grab the blanket end there at your feet and pull!"

I reached down for the glittery gossamer fabric and hefted mightily, astounded by its lightness. At the same instant that I pulled, the percussion of thunder vibrated my eardrums and I knew the lightning had struck someplace very near. Like mad men, we pulled the blanket toward the wall, McCall, Barlow, Kirby and I rolling and tucking it

underneath our arms, around our bodies, tearing it from the center of the ceremonial room.

Then Kate screamed, "Here it comes! Get off your feet! Don't give it a target!"

Instinctively, I fell to the ground and rolled toward the wall, pulling the aerospace blanket with me. My body shaking, I hunkered there watching the others, as if in slow motion, do the same. In one jagged motion, electricity traced its way down the metal post in the center of the ceremonial room, the air around it becoming alive with millions of tiny, sizzling particles. I felt the tingle as they wafted over me, touching my skin with pulsating vibrations.

The ground rolled beneath me and, at the center of the room, the earth opened up, tearing apart with a violent motion, and a wide band of bluish-white light shot up to the sky. It pulsed for a few seconds, spattering and fizzing, before it arced down upon itself and disappeared. Heavy raindrops pelted my face and body, rapidly muddying the area around the ruins.

"Holy Jesus," I heard Forsyth say. "What was that?"

"Later," Kirby shouted. "All of you grab the blanket and pull it over the hole."

Tugging at the webby fabric, I blinked the heavy rain from my eyelids and spread the blanket over the three foot wide wound in the center of the room. I knew, now, what had happened. The third reality had been attracted by the charges in the thunderstorm clouds and had surfaced to capture them. To me, this signified that the great charge had left the Namuh reality. We could trap it between realities!

"That's good," Kirby shouted. He paced around the outer perimeter of the blanket.

"I wish I knew for certain that we could hold it against the next charge."

"We can move some of the big rocks," Barlow suggested. "Pile them on top of the blanket."

"That's impossible," McCall's voice came through the dusk from my left. "I've never witnessed a charge that powerful. It would require tons of rock to hold that blanket in place!"

"We can't just sit here," Barlow protested. He stepped over the wall and picked up a basketball-sized stone. Lifting it to waist level, he heaved it onto the silver blanket. It bounced once before coming to rest near the covered hole in the center. "We've got to try."

Kate stepped out beside him and began gathering stones, using the tail of her shirt as a basket. I looked at the rock Forsyth had thrown onto the blanket and thought of how many stones that size it would take to prevent that enormous charge from lifting the blanket right off the ground. My right thigh grew warm and then hot. I slapped at the side of the robe I wore, as if to dislodge a burning coal, and felt something hard in my pocket. I reached inside the pocket and pulled out the crystal that Amanda had handed me earlier, the special one. It seemed to throb with a life of its own, quickly warming my chilled hand. Suddenly, I remembered a conversation I'd had with Henry when I was about thirteen years old.

We had stood at a point on the mountainside, about halfway between the ruins and the sandstone ledge. Proudly surveying the ruins, Henry had pointed out two boulders a few feet below us.

"Always keep an eye on those rocks, son," he had cautioned me. "There's a smaller one underneath. I climb up here each spring and make sure those two are still

braced because, if the small stone slipped, those two larger ones would start a landslide that would cover the ruins with tons of rock."

Tonight, I looked up the shadowy slope toward the two boulders. My eyes trailed down across the rubble beneath them. If I could dislodge those boulders, they would tumble down the mountain and bury the blanket, bury the ruins. Could I do it? The blue crystal throbbed warmly in my hand. I had to do it. Slipping the crystal back into my pocket, I moved toward the rest of the group.

\* \* \*

I expected protest, if not actual physical resistance, from the four strong-willed people I approached. Each, in his own way, would be hesitant to relinquish what he considered his responsibility and allow an ex-football player-turned rancher complete and final control over the outcome of the 'battle.' Perhaps, just because I had expected such an outburst, I was equally startled with their acquiescence as I explained my proposal.

"How long will it take you to climb up there?" Kirby asked.

"Assuming I have no problems," I said, "about twenty minutes."

"Can the rest of us reach the safety of the ledge in that length of time?" McCall asked.

Barlow and I looked at each other. Kate, however, spoke the words that neither of us wished to say. "If the trail is not blocked, twenty minutes should allow us sufficient time."

"Then it's settled," I said. "I'll work my way up the south slope and the rest of you hit the trail."

"Go on," Forsyth motioned to the others. "I'll be right behind you."

As McCall and Kirby, led by Kate, passed out of sight through a narrow opening between two large boulders, the sheriff sat down on the wall of the ceremonial room.

"Here," he said, stretching his legs in front of him. "It's far more important that you reach those rocks than it is for me to get to the ledge. Pull these boots off. You'll need them, so don't argue with me."

I didn't.

\* \* \*

My raw swollen feet swam around inside Barlow's boots, but I marched across the clearing and climbed across the first river of rocks. Using a juniper tree as a handhold, I scaled the smooth faces of the next series of boulders. Now, I was a third of the way to the boulders and I wiped the sweat off my clammy forehead with the loose edge of my sleeve. I should have borrowed the sheriff's pants, I thought grimly, and left him wearing the copera robe. Glancing over to my left, I observed that Kate, McCall and Kirby were almost halfway to the ledge. Sheriff Barlow was nowhere in sight; either he was hidden behind one of the large boulders that blocked my view of the lower trail or, my stomach lurched, the boulders near the overhang had grown together, blocking the trail.

I forced myself to keep climbing. The two boulders were now directly overhead, looming larger than they had ever seemed from the point at which Henry and I had viewed them. From where I stood, the dead trunk of a juniper obscured the smaller rock that braced the two larger ones. I breathed deeply, gathering my strength for the last fifty feet of the steep climb.

With every step now, my feet dislodged rocks that, once loosened, began their own small landslides. I had grown so accustomed to the sound of rocks rolling down over

the boulders that, initially, I failed to distinguish the other sounds below me. Then I heard a muffled curse and I turned to see the sheriff several yards directly behind me.

"Keep going, Branch," he cried. "Trail was blocked."

"You're crazy, Forsyth. I can't take that wedge out and roll those boulders over you!"

"I might make it," he shouted. "Don't wait on my account."

Ten more feet. Now, I saw the smaller stone that had held the boulders for so many years. It was a large table sized flat stone, no more than four inches thick. Even as I watched, the combined weight and pressure of the larger boulders pushed it forward, squeezing it from between them much as a large thumb and forefinger might squeeze toothpaste from a tube. The large boulder on the left rocked as it settled into its new position and a double handful of smaller stones rained down on my head. I looked back at Forsyth. The color of his face almost matched the luxuriant whiteness of his hair.

"Damn you, Branch!" he shouted. "Go on!"

I turned to watch the smaller wedge rock inch toward me. The boulder on the left would miss Forsyth. It was the larger one, the one on the right, that would hurtle down the hill toward the ruins, following the same route up which I'd come, the same path Forsyth now climbed. Suddenly, the wedge rock hurtled out, spewing from the position it had held for thousands, perhaps millions, of years. Before I could yell to Forsyth, before I could move, several hundred pounds of red stone slammed into my chest. I felt my body begin a downhill roll and, as the two large boulders started their descent, I sensed the mass of unleashed energy that raced past me.

Thousands of red dots danced across the blackness of my vision. I tried to breathe, but my chest hurt too much. Somewhere, far away, I heard the sheriff call my name and I reached out my hand toward the sound of his voice.

\* \* \*

"He can't talk yet, sir. We're still waiting for him to regain consciousness."

The patient, yet authoritative, voice belonged to Rose Ferguson. What was she doing out here at Henry's ranch? And who was the man to whom she talked, the man who conversed in low tones? How had they gotten out here on the mountainside? Maybe they could help me rescue the sheriff. I tried to open my eyes and see where the two were, but my eyelids wouldn't work. It was as if they were cemented closed. Had the boulder blinded me? When I tried to lift my hand to my face, I discovered that I couldn't raise my arm; it was pinned underneath something. I was trapped.

"Barlow," I croaked.

I heard the scurrying of soft-soled shoes on a tile floor. If I wasn't at the ruins, where was I? Soft fingers touched my lower cheek and I sniffed the woodsy smell. Kate?

"Branch," I heard her whisper. "Can you hear me?"

"Kate, where am I?"

"You're at the hospital, dear. You're going to make it."

"Barlow? Did he get out? How is he?"

She chuckled, a low sound that vibrated down to the fingertips that pressed against my cheek. "He most certainly did, Branch. As a matter of fact, he dragged you most of the rest of the way up the mountain."

"Did we stop it?" I asked. "Did the landslide work?"

A long silence passed. I felt her fingers leave my cheek and heard the soft slap of her leather soles on the floor as she walked away. A dull thud followed a quick whoosh as she pushed the door closed. Then she was back beside my bed.

"Branch, listen to me carefully. In his official report, Forsyth stated that an earth tremor of unknown origin caused the landslide that claimed the lives of Amanda and Tina. The fall that Henry had experienced earlier in the day had very likely disturbed the delicate balance of some of the boulders and the tremor caused them to roll into the ruins."

"How badly, Kate? How badly were the ruins disturbed?"

"The entire south slope caved in on the ruins. They must be buried underneath sixty feet of compacted rock."

Temporarily, at least, the tremendous electromagnetic charges had been contained. If the wise men of the human race could educate all of the rest of us, what had happened at the ruins might never have to be experienced again. I wanted to ask Kate about my eyes, but my chest pained me greatly when I talked. As I drifted back to the gray nothingness, I felt her lips touch my cheeks.

The next time I awakened, I again attempted to open my eyes. To my surprise, this presented no problem. Although the feeling was akin to scraping sandpaper over my eyeballs, I stretched my eyelids as far as I could, shrinking against the bright light that glared at me.

"Branch? Son, are you awake?"

"Forsyth," I mumbled, rolling the syllables over my cottony tongue. "Turn the lights off."

This time, I opened my eyes to a squint, gradually acclimating myself to the glare. Blinking rapidly several times, I forced tears to my eyes, lubricating the surface. Finally, forms began to take shape in the room as my eyes again accustomed themselves to light. Forsyth Barlow sat in a vinyl-covered chair to the left of my bed, his bushy white hair standing out from his scalp. Shiny with liquid, his brown eyes searched my face.

"It's a miracle, Branch," he said, his tone colored with wonderment. "When I pulled you out from under those boulders, I never thought you'd make it to the hospital, much less be talking to me two weeks later."

"Two weeks!" I tried to raise my head, but my neck and upper body were encased in something heavy and confining. As I darted my eyes from side to side, I saw metal rods, wires, plugs, and tubes that stretched from underneath and around my body to some sort of frame constructed above the bed.

"Don't move, Branch. You're all patched up, but you have to keep still because the doctors want to make sure your bones grow back together right."

"I've been unconscious for two weeks?"

"Almost. Kate Branigan told me you talked to her yesterday. Your skull was banged up and your brain got moved around some. At first, nobody gave you much of a chance."

"What about the special investigating team?" I asked. "What was their conclusion about the murders?"

A frown rippled across his forehead. He looked down at his hands and then back at me. "I shouldn't be telling you this, Branch, because they'll be wanting to question you."

"What shouldn't you tell me? That the landslide caused both Amanda's and Tina's deaths? That Henry fell? What about those others?"

"All accidents, Branch. The first two, before they got to town, were already classified that way. Eklander drowned at the Navajo Inn pool and Chad Carter had a heart attack. There was no evidence of foul play."

"Tina," I said.

"Yeah," the sheriff agreed. "'But, that's a secret we've got to live with. We can't take any chances that anyone is going to go out and try to move those rocks."

"What about Peterson and Ellen Madison?"

"The strangest thing happened, Branch. It seems that Mrs. Madison was married to Peterson years ago. When she was brought back to the hospital here, she looked like she was a hundred and fifty years old. Seems she took one look at herself in the mirror and confessed that a long time ago she had killed Peterson's brother."

So, Peterson had finally been vindicated. It had taken years and I wondered what he would do with his time now. The sheriff answered my unspoken question.

"You just can't tell about some people," he said. "Peterson has hired an expensive lawyer and he says he will stay beside her through the trial."

I ached to shift my position, but knew that the collection of wires and straps wouldn't allow that. Just my legs, I thought. If only I could move my legs. I thought about wiggling my toes and felt them curl against the sheet. I was tired, but I turned to the man who had saved my life.

"When I saw you climbing up that mountain behind me, I felt guilty, Forsyth. You were there because you had stayed behind to give me your boots. I was scared, really scared, because you might have lost your life and it would have been my fault."

Two irregular lines edged their way between the sheriff's thick eyebrows. "And, if I hadn't managed to save your life," he mused, "it would have been my fault."

"That's not the way it works," I said.

"It works that way when you put unrealistic demands on yourself, Branch. Nobody in this reality has all of those godlike responses you demand from yourself."

"Maybe," I said. "But I promise you one thing. As soon as I'm out of here, I'm taking you down to Harp's Western Store and I'm buying new boots for both of us!"

Forsyth reached down, cupping both hands under his right knee and lifting his plaster-encased foot into my line of vision. "I won't be wearing boots for some time," he said. "You're going to be in traction for quite awhile. We'll talk about the boots later, when you're rested up."

When I next opened my eyes, Rose Ferguson stood at the foot of my bed, adjusting some straps and checking the saline solution. She felt my glance and turned to smile at me.

"You lazybones," she chided me. "Sleep, sleep, sleep. How do you feel today?"

"How do you think I feel?" I grumbled. "I ache all over. I feel as if every bone in my body is broken."

"Most of them were," she said cheerfully, moving around to my side to slip on the cuff and take my blood pressure. "At least, you still have all your limbs, although you scrambled your brain around a little. Feel like company?"

"Not for very long," I admitted.

"The special investigator for the state police needs a statement from you," she said, straightening my sheets. "He's been here every day since you got here."

"Sure," I said. "Send him in."

Rose left and the man walked through the doorway, closing the door behind him. Despite the black and white hounds tooth jacket and the silk tie, despite the silver flecked mustache and brown contact lenses, despite the briefcase and official air, I recognized him.

"Jericho?" I asked.

His thin eyebrows lifted and his eyes widened. "No," he said. "I'm Captain Hinshaw." He held out a leather wallet, flashing a badge and identification. "I'm here to obtain a statement from you about the landslide."

"What do you need?" I asked, still staring at him. "It happened."

He set the briefcase down on the vinyl chair and opened it. Taking out a manila folder, he leafed through it, finally pulling out a sheet of paper. He handed it to me and I quickly scanned the two paragraphs.

"It's the same thing everyone else told me," he explained. "I just need your signature."

I frowned at my right arm, still elevated above my head. "Put a pencil between my fingers," I told him. "I'll scratch some sort of signature."

"I would shake your hand," he said, after he had removed the pencil from my grip and placed the paper back in his briefcase, "but that wouldn't be the wisest thing to do."

He moved to the doorway and paused, his hand on the knob. Clearing his throat, he spoke, "As a representative of all those from my reality who exist because you risked your life to ensure their past, thank you. Good-bye, Friend Branch."

\* \* \*

It was easy to lose track of time during the ensuing weeks. Days flowed into nights and back. I quickly became acquainted with the nurses and technicians of the three regular shifts and the weekend. Old friends and new filled my visiting hours with conversation and companionship. On the day that Dr. Ames detached me from the equipment that had almost become a part of me, both Check McCall and Jim Kirby flew into town to help me take my first tottering steps.

Early the next day, Rose Ferguson helped me hobble to a wheelchair and Angel pushed me to an outside garden where we sat beside a manmade pond and waited for Kate. Slender leaves from the willow tree, yellow now with fall colors, drifted down with each gust of wind to float on the water. I watched Angel pull a blue notebook from the satchel she carried. She opened it near the middle and wrote a few words before closing it and looking up at me, surprise lighting her blue eyes.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"That it's about time you returned home. Got on with your career."

She tossed her head and pointed her nose toward the sky. When she turned to look at me, the pink flesh around her eyes crinkled.

"Do I ever have news for you, Branch Hackworth!" She left her chair and came over to kneel beside the wheelchair in which I sat. "You know the old Gibbons ranch just south of yours?"

"Sure. What about it?"

A smug, childlike look pasted itself over her features. She pulled a long white envelope from a pocket in her plaid jacket. "See these papers?" she asked, blue eyes glinting with mischief. "That ranch belongs to me now. I just signed the papers today."

"You bought the Gibbons place? What are you going to do with it?"

She shrugged her shoulders and continued smiling. "I suppose I'll farm it, just like you do your ranch."

I laughed then, at the thought of the rock star turned farmer. The glee bubbled up from my stomach, quickening the cells of my body with an exuberance I hadn't felt in years. Amazement tempered the concern that filled Angel's eyes.

"Are you alright?" she asked, interrupting a chuckle.

"Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," she stuttered. "I've never heard you laugh like that. I like it. It's nice."

How long had it been since I had really laughed? I couldn't remember the last time. "I'll do it more often," I told her. "Especially when I look down past my pasture and see you plowing your fields!"

"I may hire someone to do that part," she said, grinning. "But this is my home now. So quit trying to send me back to California!"

"What about your career?" I asked.

"I just told you," she said, standing up and stamping her foot. "I'm a farmer now. Did you have someone pushing you like you do me when you left professional football?"

Angel was right. I had been pushing her. Because I enjoyed her companionship and adored her novel, optimistic outlook on life, I had felt that she had been sacrificing herself and her career to stay in New Mexico and baby-sit me. And I hadn't wanted to feel guilty about her sacrifice, just as I hadn't wanted to feel guilty about Forsyth.

"Sorry, Branch," she said, smiling her cherub's smile. "Believe me, I'm tired of show business. I've got more money than I'll ever be able to spend and there's nothing I want more than a home of my own in a community like this. I want a neighbor just like you that I can drink coffee with in the morning and chat in the afternoon while we watch the sunset. I've never had a best friend and I'm looking forward to my next few years."

"I know," I said. And I did. Within me, I felt the blossoming of a new kind of sharing and I looked forward to a future similar to the one she had just described. The only other commitment in my life would be to find the wise men of the human reality and impart to them the knowledge I had acquired in those weeks I spent in the Namuh reality.

## EPILOGUE

I sat in a cushioned recliner on my rock-floored patio, feet propped up on a redwood bench, sipping at a steaming cup of hot chocolate and anticipating the sunrise of late summer. A black band of sky across the eastern horizon changed to indigo, then from gray to blue; the bases of scattered cumulus clouds took on a pinkish-gold hue. I knew I could walk to the opposite side of my house and see the last few pinpricks of light in the still dark western sky, but I didn't. I had built this patio area to enjoy the seasons of dawn, my favorite part of the day. Now that I was able to read the words on the cover of the book Forsyth had left with me yesterday, I turned it in my hands and studied the picture on the back cover, feeling the same familiarity I had felt the day before when Forsyth suggested I read it. He seemed to think that I might know this Jackson Cody, or perhaps he thought I could relate to Cody's experiences in the book.

Faraway silhouettes transformed from dark featureless masses to familiar mesas and buttes, trees making darker clumps against the green-yellow ground vegetation that

covered the red rocks. My eyes trailed across the meadow directly in front of and below me where several dark-coated fillies scampered across the dewy freshness of the pasture.

Still past the pasture and to the right, I saw the old Gibbons ranch house that Angel had restored. I even made out the rooster wind vane on its steep-pitched roof. Except for six months spent in South America, most of her three years here had been devoted to returning it to its original nineteen-thirties condition, spending three times the money it would have cost her to tear it down and build a new one. But, as she had reminded me so often, along with the humanitarian agency she helped sponsor in South America, this was exactly what she wanted and she would continue working on her house and sending money to Harmony Village until she no longer could. Then, she had said, she would change her goals.

After that terror-filled weekend three years ago, we had all examined our lives and, as far as I knew, each of us had made new commitments within the range of experience we had chosen. Upon my release from the hospital, I had returned to my ranch and found Check McCall comfortably settled there. We had spent the next eight months interpreting, translating, and recording our weeks in the Namuh reality. Spending days on each word, we had struggled with the exact pronunciation and accent of the syllables Rachel had given us. McCall had taped them and given copies to each of us who had undergone the experience; when one of us recognized the wise men or women, we would have the information available to pass on to them. He continued his work with the government, returning several times to Henry's ranch to record the radioactivity, plug the figures into his computers, and figure probabilities. That was how he and Jim Kirby had eventually come to form a partnership.

Shortly after the landslide, Kirby had taken the responsibility for notifying the proper officials and cordoning off the area around the ruins. Almost all of Henry's ranch had been posted with yellow signs indicating the danger from radioactive exposure. During the months following that event, radioactive readings had grown higher with each report until a year ago when McCall and Kirby had announced a tremendous decrease. Finally, the electromagnetic reality had turned and was consuming itself. Each month thereafter, another decrease had been recorded.

The McCall-Kirby partnership came about, interestingly enough, due to their constant exposure to each other while working together on that project. Old animosities and rivalries had been discarded while both concerned themselves with the increasing radioactivity at the site, fearing that the blanket had failed. When the readings began dropping, the two had looked at each other, amazed at how much had been accomplished by diverting the energies from their earlier competitive behavior. Utilizing McCall's proven formula for computer games and Kirby's aeronautical expertise, a new computer game had been born, one in which only cooperation was involved. After a slow start, the sale of these games had grown so rapidly that both men now worked exclusively on developing new variations on that theme.

Kate had renewed an earlier commitment. She had devoted the greater part of the last three years to finding the three girls who, almost twenty years ago, had accused Blake Abernathy, Kate's friend and the local newspaper editor, of molestation, sending him to prison for the rest of his life. She had found the first girl quite easily. Shortly after the trial, the family had moved to Oklahoma City and Kate had no trouble locating them. The couple had revealed to Kate their suspicions that their daughter and the other two

girls had made up the incident, but they had no proof. When Kate inquired as to where the girl currently lived, the most agonizing revelation to date in her investigation arose: the girl was dead.

After a short setback, Kate returned to her investigation and traced another of the girls, this time to a Colorado mental institution. Kate's faith in Blake's innocence propelled her to search the United States and Canada for the next eighteen months, exhausting every lead, until she finally located the third girl, now a housewife living in Calgary, Alberta. This young woman was relieved to trade twelve years of psychotherapy for the healing grace of confession. Not only was she willing to tell the truth, but her diary and a note from Casey proved that the three girls had been bribed to make the accusation. Kate had left for Santa Fe three days ago to pick up Blake Abernathy, who had received a full pardon from the governor and the state.

Forsyth Barlow had volunteered to drive to Santa Fe with Kate but had gracefully backed away when she had explained that she wanted to be alone with Blake. After retiring from the sheriff's department last year, Forsyth had immersed himself completely in a project to which he had been able to devote himself only part time previously: working with troubled juveniles, boys aged nine to sixteen, who had been assigned to group homes because their parents couldn't, or wouldn't, provide the kind of environment the child needed at home. I had gone with him to the homes a few times and had been touched at the children's admiration and respect for my old friend. They called him Gramps and I could tell that his visit was the high point of their day.

Sometimes, Angel tagged along with Forsyth, utilizing her experience from South America. She left show business as she had promised, but she devoted at least two weeks

of every month to speaking at schools across the nation. She had charmed an increasing group of volunteers who presented colorful skits emphasizing self-esteem. She had just returned from her last engagement and I knew from experience that she would be up here before noon with a sparkling account of the last fourteen days.

As for myself, after the eight intense months with McCall, I had spent several weeks groping around the dark recesses of my mind, worrying about finding the wise men and women. Rachel had promised me that I would know them and, to that point, I hadn't run across anybody who seemed to be any wiser than I was. That was when I had come up with the idea of writing it all down, everything I could remember. Perhaps I had missed something important that Henry or Amanda had told me.

A light came on in one of the upper windows of the house down the slope; Angel had awakened. At that moment, the telephone rang. I lifted my legs off the bench on which my feet rested and walked toward the glass doors that led to the kitchen. Behind me, the sun had slipped up above the horizon and I felt its warmth on my back as I opened the door.

"Branch?" The resonant voice belonged to Forsyth Barlow. "Listen, son, I've got someone you need to meet. You doing anything today?"

"Nothing I can't set aside for you, Forsyth. Come on out."

I had just replaced the receiver when I heard the sound of a car's engine. Someone came up the steep front road to my house, the road from the highway. The engine dropped down into a lower gear as I walked to the front entrance. The small, light-colored car that pulled into the parking spot beside my pickup sputtered a moment before it came to a stop. Kate needed a new car.

When I rushed out to greet her a tall, slender, sixtyish man unfolded himself from the passenger's side. Over the roof of the car, he looked at me from clear, steady eyes. I felt my heart skip a beat before I remembered my encounter with Captain Hinshaw at the hospital three years ago when I had thought he was Jericho. It had been twenty years since I had seen Blake Abernathy and I hadn't known him that well, but I certainly hadn't expected him to look like this. Kate recognized my confusion and rushed to hug me, keeping her arm around my waist as she turned back to him.

"Branch, you remember Blake Abernathy."

The man walked around the car. The gray suit was wrong; he should have been wearing a copera robe. At any minute, I expected him to propel one of those piercing thoughts at me, cautioning me against endangering Kate. Instead, he smiled and held out his hand.

"It's good to see you again, Branch."

I couldn't escape those steady gray eyes. Laced with a twinkle of amusement, they examined me steadily. He couldn't be who he looked like. Blake Abernathy had spent his last twenty years in prison.

"Branch and I renewed our acquaintance more recently, Kate," he said, smiling at my former mother-in-law. "About three years ago, in the Namuh reality."

"You are Jericho," I said. "How can that be?"

Kate released me and headed toward the steps leading to the house. Halfway up, she turned and waved to Blake and me.

"Let's go in and have coffee," she said. "It's a long story, but Blake has an explanation."

\* \* \*

Over several cups of strong, black coffee, Blake Abernathy explained how he had met Kate over forty years ago when she had wandered from our time to Namuh time. Only a novice at the time, he had been unable to pass through the barrier and visit human reality. When he became a wise man, he had set up the newspaper here in town and he and Kate had renewed their friendship.

"The test of the wise man is to pass through the barrier while retaining full consciousness of his identity," he told me, looking at me as if he expected my agreement. When I didn't respond, he continued, "One is not born a wise man. One becomes a wise man through experience, not years. Kate was a wise woman at only twenty-five human years. Some become wise only in the instant before they pass from a reality."

"How could I have met you in the Namuh reality when you were incarcerated in this reality?" I questioned him, uninterested in the method by which one became a wise man. I wanted to know how to recognize a wise man; I had no concern in how he became one.

"Kate tells me that you easily grasped the concept of our time variances," he said, placing his coffee cup in the saucer and leaning back in the wooden recliner. "If I had spent only ten minutes of a human hour in the Namuh reality, I would have spent five days with the Namuhs."

"But you would be spending five times that amount of time away from the Namuh reality," I said, quickly calculating. "For every human hour, you would be in the Namuh reality for five days and then absent for twenty five days. Weren't you missed over there? Didn't anybody question your absence?"

"Our wise people were fully aware of my constraints," Blake explained. "Toward the end, my time periods were more concentrated. Having access to the research department of the prison library enabled me to spend eight to ten, sometimes twelve, hours of every human day in the Namuh reality."

"That's what Amanda must have done," I mused, staring down at the pattern made by the flat red stones I had used to build this patio years ago.

"Amanda and the sixteen other Namuh wise men and women who passed freely through the barrier to live in this reality."

"Why didn't she come back here?" I asked, verbalizing the inquiry that had been with me for three years. "What happened to her? What about the three who stayed behind with her?"

Blake looked at Kate and his eyebrows lifted. She smiled back at him and placed her hand on top of his.

"I was one of those four," he began. "We had constructed a shield similar to the one Kirby made that reflected back the electromagnetic charges. Utilizing a type of mind melding, we held the shield until it, for practical purposes, became the entrance. At that point, anything or anybody would have been repelled. We had a little over three weeks of Namuh time remaining and we were forced to attempt passing through the barrier the ancient way."

"The ancient way?" I questioned.

"Yes. Only one person per Namuh week could pass between our realities. It had been established that way by our ancestors who had anticipated the dangers of a permanent entrance."

"Three weeks and four people," I said, picking up the coffee pot and pouring coffee into all our cups. "As Rachel, she was the leader of the Namuhs and she would have been the last to pass."

"She would have it no other way," Blake said, nodding.

"So she was beaten to death like Henry," I said dully, the confirmation of my fear lying heavy on my stomach. "Her soul is lost somewhere between realities, like Henry's."

"No, Branch," Kate cried, rising to her feet. She took my hand and pulled me over to the herb garden where she pointed to the long blue crystal I had managed to save despite the landslide. "Henry's soul is not lost! Amanda gave you this crystal because it is the resting place for Henry's soul!"

I picked up the deep blue six-sided crystal, feeling the warmth and tingle of my palm as I held it. I remembered the evening I had held it at the ruins, feeling Henry's presence even then as he had reminded me of the boulders that would initiate the landslide. I recalled the disc that McCall and I had viewed in the Namuh reality, the one in which each of the prototypes had explained the form in which he would exist in human reality.

"It can't be," I told Kate. "The soul of the wise man of the Namuh reality continues existence in this form. Henry was human! Besides, what does that have to do with Amanda?"

"I can explain the crystal," Blake said, walking up behind Kate and speaking to me over her shoulder. "Wise men of both realities exist as such after they pass from physical existence."

"Then Henry was a wise man," I said, wondering why it had taken me so long to grasp that fact.

"Don't you see, Branch?" Kate said. "If Amanda had passed from physical existence, she would have arranged to be here with Henry. That's why she told you to put his crystal in the herb garden. Her soul should be right beside him in her crystalline form."

Blake frowned, staring at the blue crystal I held. "The crystal should be here," he said. "Rachel insisted that I leave because her time was almost gone. She assured me that she would pass before Namuh time ended."

I felt warmth spread from my pocket over the entire left side of my body. I reached my hand to feel the crystal I had found soon after my return and carried with me as a 'good luck stone.'

"I've forgotten what Amanda's crystal looks like," I said. "Describe it to me."

"It will be a long, slender cylinder of copera color," Blake said. "I see nothing here that even resembles it."

"That's because I've been carrying it in my pocket," I said, holding the crystal up to the light for them to see. The color ranged from pale lavender at one end to deep ruby red at the other end. As we looked at it, a rich glow emanated from it and I felt awash in the purest of loves.

"Where did you find it?" Kate asked. "I placed Henry's crystal here while you were in the hospital and I looked for Amanda's crystal. I knew it had to have been there even then, because I didn't get out with Henry's crystal until a week after the landslide."

"It was in the strawberry patch," I said, pointing to a large planter on the other side of the patio. "I was weeding one day and came up with the crystal in my hand. It made me feel so good that I began carrying it. Now that I know, I'll place it right here where it belongs, beside the blue one."

Kate smiled. Her eyes reflected nostalgia, but she squared her shoulders and laughed. "I should have looked over there. I should have remembered that Amanda couldn't distinguish a pear tree from a potato plant."

A car door slammed. Absorbed in our conversation, I had forgotten about Forsyth's call. I hadn't even been listening for the sound of an engine.

"That should be Forsyth," I told Kate and Blake. "I'll bring him out here to the patio."

Forsyth had someone he wanted me to meet, I remembered as I crossed the tiled kitchen floor toward the front door. I looked out the window on the left side of the wooden door and saw his battered green van. I didn't see Forsyth and I couldn't tell whether anyone was in the van.

"Branch," Kate called. "He's out here on the patio."

"Sneaked in the back way," I grumbled, tracing my way back to the patio.

I reached the door leading to the patio at the same moment that Angel, dressed in a red flannel shirt, Big Smith overalls and grimy tennis shoes, climbed over the wooden gate that separated the corral area from the pasture. While I watched her stride over to the green van and peer in, Forsyth and Blake reacquainted themselves after twenty years' separation. As soon as Angel reached the patio, Kate introduced her to Blake.

"It's so nice meeting you, Mr. Abernathy," Angel said, extending her right arm to shake hands with Blake. "I enjoy your books very much. I'm on my third reading of *Comparison Practices Among American Minorities*."

She always surprised me. I hadn't even known that Blake wrote books. When Angel chose to find out about someone or something, she went right to the heart of the condition. Out of a myriad of possibilities, she chose the facts that identified the soul of that person, ignoring the ones that society utilized to categorize him. Blake stared at her for a long time, returning her open smile. Then she turned to Forsyth.

"Who's that cute little boy out in your van?"

Forsyth hunched his shoulders in embarrassment, shoving his hands in his pockets before looking at me. He cleared his throat. "Branch," he began, "I've got a runaway out there. He's an orphan and, for the last three years, he's been in and out of more group homes than I can count."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"We just need a temporary home for him until they get an opening at a boys' ranch up in Colorado," Forsyth explained. "Just a few days."

"He can stay at my house," Angel volunteered. "I have plenty of room."

"Regulations, Angel," Forsyth said, regret coloring his tone. "I know you can identify with him because of your years in an orphanage, but we've got to put him either with a family," he paused and looked at me, "or with an adult male."

"Where would I put a kid?" I asked.

"What about that area you partitioned off when Check McCall stayed here for so long?" Kate asked. "I have a twin bed and sheets in my attic. Blake and I can bring them out..."

"Nonsense," Angel interrupted. "We'll take Branch's pickup and go right down the hill and load up one of my beds. That poor child is exhausted!"

"Hold it!" I said. "You're all so eager to make a decision for me. Let me think. I don't know how to care for a child! What does he eat? What does he wear? How do I entertain him? What about school? For God's sake, I'm forty years old!"

Silence followed my outburst. It was so quiet that I heard Forsyth's breathing and the pounding sound made by my fillies running through the lower pasture. Then Angel, her face pink, jangled her keys in a defiant gesture and stalked out toward Forsyth's van. Kate, however, was the one who spoke.

"Branch," she said, gentleness overlying the iron of her voice. "Henry was forty years old when he took you to live with him."

"Okay, he can live here temporarily," I said. "But, what if he runs away from here?"

"He won't," Barlow said, grinning. "He won't run away from here any quicker than you would have run away from Henry's."

"You expect a lot from me," I said, turning to look toward the parking area.

Angel, her light brown hair glinting in the sunlight, had a small boy by the hand, leading him toward us. His tousled blond head was bent. When they were still a few feet away, the child raised his head and looked at me. As if he couldn't believe what he saw, he stopped and turned loose of Angel's hand. He wiped his cheeks with the cuffs of his

faded shirt. Then his face lighted with joy and he ran toward me. I knelt down, spreading my arms wide and his pitifully thin body pressed against mine. I remembered the days in the Namuh reality when he brought my clean robes and sneaked peeks at my wristwatch. I recalled his role on the prototype disc that McCall and I had viewed. I looked up at the circle of friends around me.

"Does he remember?" I asked Blake.

Blake shook his head. "No," he said. "The child is an aberration. We have had only one before this, almost thirty years ago." He looked at Angel who smiled back at him. He continued, "Angel now knows her identity, as this aspirer will learn his, with your help. This child passed through the barrier as easily as you or I would have, completely bypassing the novice stage. He has retained this body and personality in order to experience the growth steps of human reality. He does have a faint memory of your love for him and his for you."

"He needs the guidance of a wise man of the highest order," I said, hugging the shaking child, stroking his back in an attempt to calm him. "You have to take him, Blake."

"He needs a human wise man, Branch."

"Kate," I suggested. "Kate is a human wise woman."

"What makes me a wise woman, Branch? My age?"

"No," I argued. "It's not years, it's experience, just as Blake told us. You passed through the barrier and retained your integrity." I felt my protest dwindle, my voice shake as I finally grasped what Blake had tried to tell me earlier. "My God, I'm a wise man. You are, Barlow! Even Check McCall!"

Over the child's head, I looked into Kate's eyes and then Blake's. Forsyth raised his head and stared at me defiantly. Angel's blue eyes twinkled and she grinned at me as if we shared some great joke. I gently disengaged the boy's arms and held him at arm's length. I examined his grimy, tear-streaked face and his swollen eyes.

"What's your name, son?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Haisle," he said. "But, could you call me Hank?"

I stood up and placed my hand on his shoulder, feeling the frail bones underneath. Kate's cooking will fatten him up, I thought. Johnny Evans and I can teach him to ride and rope. Forsyth can play Grandpa and Angel will love mothering him. McCall and Kirby will test their games on him. I looked down into his expectant blue eyes.

"Then Hank it will be," I said, liking the sound. "Hank Hackworth."

**THE END**

