

2023.2

John Coby

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THE STORY OF 2023 CONTINUES

Chapter Thirty-One

SLATER

1

It was late afternoon on *Wednesday April 20 2005*. The day had been stinking hot without a cloud in the sky. The light south wind that blew perfectly offshore across the five points of the long peninsula that is Noosa Heads had done little to cool things down. The temperature of the crystal clear water, a bath-like twenty-five degrees, which was normal for that time of year, only made everything seem more perfect, more like it was all designed like that, like it was all meant to be for the surfers that were there.

Slater felt the overwhelming desire to leave the water. He looked around and saw that it was affecting everyone because everyone was paddling for shore and walking back to Teatree. He felt the powerful intrusion into his mind ... *'I've had enough ... I want to leave ... NOW!'* But the surf was perfect. Epic eight-foot barrels peeled off all the way to the beach, which was some six hundred yards away. This was no time to be leaving the water, this was a time to stay, but the desire was very strong, too strong, *'too strong for everyone else, that is.'*

He immediately discerned what was happening to him. He recognised it because he could do the same thing to others, just not nearly with as much industrial strength. He could control someone's behaviour with his mind if he wanted to. He had been able to do it for as long as he could remember, since he was a little kid. And as he became older, the technique refined itself and he became better at it, *'but nothing quite as dominating as this.'*

Slater felt that he could resist the foreign desire to leave if he chose to. He knew that he had that ability. But he was curious, inquisitive, *'what the hell is all this about?'* So he went along with it and paddled out of the water. He climbed up the steep cliff to the walking track and followed the rest of the zombies towards Teatree Bay. He felt the compulsion flush through him repeatedly, *'keep walking, don't look back ... keep walking, don't look back ... keep walking, don't look back.'* When he reached a spot along the track where there was some low scrub growing on the edge of the cliff and from where he could get a clear view of Granite Bay in its totality, he slipped off the track and hid himself and his

surfboard within the bushes. From there he observed the most astonishing event unfold, the most incredible thing that he had ever seen in his life.

2

The last rays of the setting sun had just shed their mystic glow across the water. The western sky lit up like it had caught fire. Spread out below him was Granite Bay, all painted in rich oranges and purples. The surface of the ocean undulated with line after line of clean eight-foot swells that receded towards the horizon like liquid corduroy.

Slater crouched hidden from view and waited for something to happen. There was no one anywhere. He wondered if this was going to end in some type of big anticlimax.

'Maybe I'm having myself on,' he thought.

Then he noticed him, the solitary surfer left in the bay. He saw him plainly, and even though the surfer was at least two hundred yards away, standing on the small beach that was semi-hidden nestled amongst large granite boulders half way out along the point, Slater recognised him immediately. It was Adam, his old, retired surfer friend-in-the-water. He liked Adam, he liked him a lot and he loved sharing a surf session with him. Adam was one of the oldest surfers out there, but *'he carved'*. Like Slater, Adam never missed a good day at Granite.

It seemed that Adam hadn't been affected by the foreign compulsion. Slater's brain made some rapid deductions.

'The old bastard is either the same as me, or he isn't being targeted by the compulsion. My guess is the latter, which means all this is about him. Wow, this is getting really interesting.'

He compressed himself into an even tighter ball and pulled his board closer to himself trying to make sure that he was as totally hidden as possible. He then actively silenced his brain. He felt, instinctively, that whoever was setting up this scenario might very well be able to locate him simply by hearing his thoughts. So he silenced them as best he could and observed.

He watched Adam, who was standing next to his surfboard, take a drink from his water bottle. Slater then noticed him gaze out to sea and hold that focus. He looked out in that direction and spotted the thing that was grabbing all of Adam's attention. It was a very bright star, just above the horizon. His eyes

shifted from the star to Adam, then back to the star, which seemed to have moved sideways, then back to Adam, who was still locked onto the star. Then everything started to happen. That star was no star and after a very short while it was no aeroplane either. Slater felt his heartbeat speed up and thump away inside his chest. He controlled his thoughts though.

The bright object approached Granite Bay in a snaking pattern, moving from side to side, about fifty feet above the water. As it got to within about a mile from shore it dimmed itself and shone with a softer, warmer light. Slater noticed how it lit the tops of the swells as it approached. He noticed how Adam just stood there, frozen like a statue, like he was hypnotised, and watched the craft as it parked itself right in front of him, hovering no more than a few feet above the water. It was almond disk shaped, made of some kind of polished silver metal and it made no sound whatsoever. A portion of it was over the sand. Slater estimated it to be about sixty feet in diameter. He observed how a panel opened beneath the craft and a ramp extended out and downward, until it nearly, but not quite, touched the edge of the beach, no more than ten feet in front of Adam.

Slater's eyeballs were literally popping out of their sockets. He was peaking with excitement. It took every ounce of self-discipline for him to keep his brain from exploding into an avalanche of thoughts. He couldn't believe what he was witnessing. He had never seen anything like this before.

He saw a man walk down the ramp and hop onto the dry sand of the beach. He watched the spaceman and Adam stand face to face to each other. They appeared to have a short conversation, then, as unbelievable as it seemed, they hugged each other for what seemed like forever.

After all the hugging, Slater watched Adam pick up his surfboard off the sand and carry it into the spaceship following behind the spaceman. After a couple of minutes, the ramp pulled up and the panel closed. The ship then slowly rose vertically into the air, not making a sound, becoming brighter and brighter the higher it got. When it reached an altitude of about a thousand feet, Slater suddenly clearly heard a laughing voice inside his head,

'Ha ha ha, I know you are there, Slater.'

Shocked and surprised, he then heard the voice recite a poem.

*'Secrets you, secrets me
Secrets honour, secrets be'*

As he watched the spaceship, it shot off at a near vertical angle and disappeared into the twilight night at what to him seemed like thousands of miles per hour.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

THE ACID QUEEN

1

After what seemed like forever, Slater's head finally bobbed up behind the broken National Park wave.

'Are you all right?' asked the American accented female voice.

Slater turned towards the pretty, young girl paddling her surfboard past him and replied,

'Yes, thank you, it was quite painless.'

'You certainly got worked over that time, didn't you?'

'I sure did. I thought that I was never going to make it up for air.'

'Yeah, you were under for ages.'

'Have you ever seen National this good?' he asked her.

'Not really, but that's because I'm not from around here. It's certainly an insane day though.'

As Slater started his paddle for Boiling Pot he said,

'Hey, thanks for caring.'

'Don't mention it,' she replied.

As he powered away from her he thought to himself,

'Wow, what a fox!'

When he was out of earshot, she whispered in a hushed voice that only she could hear,

'I hope I'll see you tomorrow?'

'I hope so too,' he replied in thought.

2

Slater was an only child. He was born in Noosa Heads on *January 1, 1991*. His father, Rhett, a keen surfer, moved up to Noosa from the far south coast of New South Wales with his parents after a surfing trip to Queensland back in '89. It was on that trip that he met, fell in love with and subsequently married Aina, Slater's ravishing Japanese mother who was the daughter of parents that survived the nuclear blast on Hiroshima. Unbeknownst to anyone on the planet,

the nuclear holocaust triggered a tsunami of genetic mutations amongst the surviving Japanese population.

Slater left school when he was fifteen, not because he was stupid, but because he was the victim of a series of tragic events. Firstly, his grandparents on his mother's side suddenly died back in Japan. Some said that the *nuke* hastened their deaths, but nothing could be proven. Then, on the same day that the World Trade Centre towers came down, Slater's mum, dad and his grandfather, while driving, were hit by an oncoming semi-trailer whose driver was distracted by a bee that flew in through the driver's-side window and stung him on the neck. Their bodies were crushed beyond recognition after all eighteen wheels of the heavy semi rolled right over their car converting it into a steel pancake. All that happened before Slater was even a teenager. He ended up living with his grandmother, Lucy, who remained his sole surviving relative.

School for Slater was a strange affair. His teachers just couldn't work out how he knew everything. He always passed all his exams with 100 percent despite the fact that no one ever saw him study. He didn't need to because he was either a one in a billion chance mutation, a mutation triggered by the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, or he was the grandson of a hybrid child, a child formed by the union of an Earth girl and a fully-telepathic alien male.

Thanks to his dad, Slater could swim before he could walk. He surfed his first Noosa barrel on his fifth birthday. He constantly got himself into trouble for missing school because he went surfing instead, but his 100 percent exam results tended to shut everyone up, or at least that was what it seemed like on the surface. No one, except for Slater and his grandmother, knew that when he needed to, he could control the thoughts and actions of his teachers at will. A typical visit to the principal's office went something like this.

'Slater, I don't know how much longer I am going to tolerate your total contempt for the rules of this school ... how do you do it, Slater? The school is so proud of your academic performance. Keep up the good work, son.'

It was *Thursday May 6 2010*. National Park, Noosa, was epic. It wasn't huge, but it was solid, and fast. Few surfers made the waves through to Johnson's. Actually, most of them couldn't even catch the speeding freight trains, and those

that could didn't last on them very long. A handful of the surfers, mostly the locals, however were revelling in the extreme conditions. Slater was one of *them*. He surfed like he was born on a surfboard, which isn't far from the truth because the first thing his dad, Rhett, did when he brought him home from the hospital, was lay him down on his surfboard and take a picture of him there.

Slater suffered some heavy wipeouts in-between the long, deep, slabbing barrels. The heaviest wipeout was the one where that stunning American girl came up to him and asked him if he was OK. He remembered how the wave just wouldn't relent, wouldn't allow him to get his bearings and come to the surface. It seemed like it took forever before the white-water abated and let him place his feet on the sandy bottom and push to the surface.

4

Slater's Nana liked to get her lunch at 2.00pm. That was her main meal of the day so he always tried to be on time and he always tried to make it something special. Caring for his Nana was moderately restricting for Slater, but not when it came to his surfing. His responsibilities allowed him to get away for up to about three hours at a time. That meant that he could surf every day if he wished. He just timed his go-outs between Nana's meals. As a result, his sessions in those days never lasted more than three hours. And so it was on this day, this bizarre, inexplicable day.

He paddled out at Johnson's after parking his car up the hill a bit, in a spot that only the locals knew about. He hit the water at exactly 9.45am. He knew the exact time because he wore a special, solar powered, surfer's watch on his left wrist. The watch had an analogue face with large, easy to read, hour, minute and second hands. He paddled out of the bay, past the pack sitting off the point at Johnson's, and out along the long point that is known as National Park. He paddled right to the tip of National, right to the spot called Boiling Pot, or *The Pot*, as the locals liked to refer to it. It was a dangerous place, very close to rocks and very unforgiving, and many injuries were sustained there. Only the best surfers took their waves from there, and the best of the best took them from furthest inside. That was where Slater surfed.

His plan for the day was to surf till ten minutes to one, get to his car at one, get home by ten past one and have Nana's lunch ready at exactly 2.00pm. Simple.

He kept checking his watch about every ten minutes. He rode barrel after grinding barrel getting *creamed* on at least one out of three waves. Then he had that monumental wipeout, the one where the girl came up to him. He surfed some more barrels, finally getting a rare one right around Johnson's Point, right through the Johnson's pack, all the way into the beach. He looked at his watch and saw that it was quarter to one, so he decided to end his session there and then. He had a few minutes to spare so he sat down on his board and just took a little time to soak up the idyllic scene.

He got to his car at exactly 1.00pm, as planned. He tied his board to the roof racks and then sat behind the steering wheel. Just as he was about to turn the ignition key, he noticed it. He released the key and looked at his wristwatch. It said 1.00pm. He then looked through the steering wheel at the clock in the dashboard. To his surprise, it said 2.00pm. His face screwed up in confusion. He looked at his watch again and focussed on the second hand. It was ticking away normally.

Slater sat behind the wheel of his car for a moment. He was totally confused. He thought that the most logical explanation for the discrepancy between the two timepieces must have been that his wristwatch stopped for exactly one hour while he was out in the surf. But that didn't make any sense to him because that would have meant that he would have surfed for four hours. If there was one thing Slater knew intimately it was his body and how it felt after one, two, three and four hours of surfing. He knew exactly how much muscle fatigue there was after three hours of constant paddling. He knew that he didn't surf for four hours, and anyway, he checked his wristwatch about every ten minutes while he was out there, and he knew that he would have noticed if his watch had stopped for an hour. He knew that he only surfed for three hours, there was no doubt of that in his mind.

In the end he decided that there was something wrong with the car clock, so he adjusted it back an hour to synchronise it with his wristwatch, started his car and drove home to make his Nana's lunch.

5

'Where have you been, Slater? Look at the time ... and I'm starving.'

'Sorry Nana, but something strange is happening. Let me see your clock.'

He checked the time on the clock on her bedside table. It said 2.10pm.

'This is incredible ... I can't work this out ... wait a minute ...'

He ran out of her bedroom and proceeded to check every timepiece in the house. They all agreed. It was about ten past two. He returned to her room, sat on the bed beside her, scratched the back of his head and showed her the time on his wristwatch.

'See, Nana, it's only meant to be ten past one, not ten past two. Something has happened to all the clocks in this house,' he thought for a moment, 'and in the car.'

Most of the time Nana liked to play the cantankerous granny. She thought it was funny. But just under the surface, just behind the façade, was an older woman of great wisdom. She was like a deep well, the depth of which was impossible to determine. When Slater showed her his watch, her face changed and became serious and serene, and full of experience.

'This is a pretty good watch,' she said. 'I should know, I bought it for you and I know how much I paid for it. Watches like this don't stop.'

'It didn't stop, Nana, because I kept checking it, and besides, I know that I only surfed for three hours ... my muscles get a lot sorer after four hours.'

'Look, you go and have your shower and make me my lunch before I starve to death. Leave your watch with me, I want to take a closer look at it.'

Slater gave her his wristwatch then raced upstairs to take a shower.

6

Her name was Lucy. She was *the* wild child. In June 1964, she was sixteen and she knew that she was special, different, separate from all the rest. She never knew her father because she was the result of a brief, but passionate, love affair, which lasted for a whole summer of travel all over Australia, *and beyond*. Her mother, *God bless her and her kind heart*, never lied to Lucy, never, even if the truth was unpalatable. She got *the father problem* out of the way early, as soon as Lucy could comprehend the truth.

'Your father was the most wonderful man I've ever met, Lucy, but he told me right from the start, right when I first met him, that he wasn't going to be able to stay. Well, that didn't matter to me. I packed up my stuff and took off with him

for the best, most amazing three months I've ever had in my life. And I got *you* out of it, and you keep my memory of him alive for me. I'm sorry my darling.'

'Don't be sorry, mum, I know that I've always had a date with destiny, even before I was born it seems.'

'You are such a wise little child, Lucy, and I know where you got that from, you got it from your daddy because he was,' she looked down and shook her head from side to side, 'something else.' She then looked Lucy directly into her eyes and whispered, 'and from somewhere else.'

'I know, mum.'

'That's *why* you know, that's *why* you're special, that's *why* you can hear people think and feel their feelings. And that's *why* you can control people's behaviour at your will. Your daddy could do all those things as well. He said that it would keep you safe from danger and help you see the path to follow.'

They hugged and had a short cry together. Lucy's mum continued,

'There was a risk in becoming pregnant to your daddy, Lucy. He told me so. He told me that there was a fifty percent chance that you would be born a schizophrenic, destined for a very difficult life. But he said that there was a one in four chance that you would be a super person with abilities way beyond everyone around you. Well, I took that chance, and here you are.'

'Thanks, mum, I'm glad you did. It was worth the gamble no matter how I would have turned out. I love you more than anything, mum, and I always will.'

7

Lucy was there at Sydney airport on June 17 1964, in the pouring rain, hanging off the wire fence screaming her head off because The Beatles were in town. She was outside the Sheraton Hotel that afternoon and she spent that night with the band in their room where things happened, not the way people think, not the way the reporters said, not the way anybody said, but another way, a much more secret way, a much more honourable way, because honour was important to Lucy, and as it turned out, as she found out personally, it was also important to the band as well.

So no matter how many stories have been written about the song, *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds*, which was penned by John Lennon, no matter who says

what the inspiration for it was, Lucy knew the truth and John knew it, and no one else ever did, or ever will.

Lucy left school at fifteen and lived with her mother between her many journeys to different parts of the world. On January 14 1967, she attended the *Human Be-In* in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco with 30,000 other tripped-out hippies. There she witnessed Timothy Leary utter the words, *Turn on, tune in, drop out*. That became one of her mantras for the rest of her life. On August 18 1969, she was there in Bethel on Max Yasgur's farm for the three days of peace and music at the *Woodstock Music and Art Fair* where she dropped acid with Jimi and danced naked to Carlos. Back in Australia, she became known as *The Acid Queen* amongst the clandestine, mind-trip culture of the late sixties.

By the age of twenty-two, she had slowed down somewhat, although that should be taken as a relative term only. In 1970, on a trip to Byron Bay, she met Tim the boutique cheese maker from Kangaroo Valley, just south of Wollongong. Tim was in Byron visiting some friends and scoring a few of the legendary barrels. The thing that attracted her to him right from the start was his calm and peaceful nature, as well as his looks. He was tall, over six feet, lean and muscular, because he was a *gun* surfer, and tanned like a native with long, past his shoulders, blond hair. The other thing that attracted her to him was his leather bag, which just happened to be full of dried *Psilocybin mushrooms*, all harvested out of the cow manure on his cheese farm.

Lucy and Tim got on like a house on fire and she moved in with him, on his farm, that same year. They made cheese together. She introduced a new line that they only ever sold to their friends. They called it *Blue Meaney*. That was one popular cheese around Kangaroo Valley and the surrounding South Coast.

8

Now, Dave and Ned were two local cops who used to get their lunchtime sandwiches from Thelma, the lady that owned the sandwich shop in town. Well, there is a story that might or might not be true, no one will ever know for sure, that Dave and Ned got their sandwich cheese swapped by the local town joker, named Frankie. Dave and Ned called him *fucked Frank* because they reckoned that he was *one tinny short of a six-pack cause he just took too many drugs*. They harassed him at every opportunity and made him the butt of all their jokes.

Sometimes they even slapped him around a bit for no particular reason and every now and then they locked him up overnight. One night, in a mindless blind-drunk stupor, they urinated on him through the prison bars and then made him mop up the mess afterwards.

Well, Frankie just loved his Blue Meaney cheese and he loved Thelma as well. That's why he hung around her shop so much, but she didn't mind because she was basically a simple girl, and very kindly. So, Frankie was hanging around Thelma's shop when he saw Dave and Ned roll up in their patrol car and it just so happened that Thelma was out the back doing something personal and private. Well, Frankie had a brand new packet of sliced Blue Meaney cheese that he had just bought off Lucy no more than an hour before. He remembered how Lucy warned him to be careful with that batch because it was at least five times more potent than the usual stuff, *cause I'm experimentin with it*. She reckoned,

'I wouldn't take more than about a quarter of a slice at a time, Frankie, if you know what's good for you, otherwise they might be picking you out of some tree somewhere, sometime next week.'

Frankie laughed because he really loved Lucy's sense of humour. So while Thelma was doing her stuff out back, Frankie noticed the two sandwiches, that she had already prepared for the two coppers, sitting on the counter all wrapped up nice and neat. All of a sudden, Frankie got the look of the devil about him and while nobody was looking he unwrapped the sandwiches, ate the cheese out of them and, while sniggering and chuckling to himself, replaced each slice with *two* slices of Lucy's Blue Meaney cheese. He did his best to re-wrap the sandwiches as neatly as possible and put them back where he found them. He then retired to the pinball machine in the corner of the shop and waited for the *bastard coppers* to come in.

'Hey Dave, look who's here, it's fucked Frank.' Ned placed his hand on his crotch, 'You want some of this, fucked Frank?'

The two coppers laughed out loud. They were about to go over to the pinball machine to give Frankie a couple of clips around the ears when Thelma appeared from out the back. Even though Thelma was a petite lady, she intimidated the two policemen and they always behaved themselves whenever

she was around. That might have been another reason why Frankie hung around Thelma so much.

Well, to cut a long story short, they found the patrol car two days later on the side of the road in the middle of the treeless Hay plain, out of gas. That was about a thousand kays away from Kangaroo valley. It took another three days after that before they found Dave and Ned. The policemen were discovered on top of a hill, near Lochiel, South Australia, by a hang glider pilot that went there to go flying. He found them shivering naked, both wrapped in one blanket, mumbling incessantly in some foreign language that no one could understand.

Dave and Ned never returned to police work. They were discharged on medical grounds. Dave became a longhair hippy and joined an ashram in Nimbin, in northern New South Wales. He went on to make some of the prettiest candles anyone had ever seen. Ned, after spending three years going walkabout all over the Australian outback with a swag on his back, began to study to become a Baptist Minister, but failed miserably at that and got kicked out of the course because he was too rebellious. He finally moved to King's Cross in Sydney, hooked up with the Mission there and devoted the rest of his life to helping the lost and downtrodden.

Frankie ended up marrying Thelma after she won twelve million dollars on the Lotto. They raised two beautiful kids on the dairy farm that Thelma bought with some of the money. They were truly the happiest family you could ever hope to meet in your life.

9

Lucy became pregnant and gave birth to Rhett in the spring of '71. They named him after Rhett Butler, the character from Margaret Mitchell's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Gone With The Wind*. They lived on the farm in Kangaroo Valley until 1989, which was the year that they moved to the warmer climate and perfect waves of Noosa. That was where Rhett met Aina, the Japanese beauty who was out there with a group of her Japanese friends on a three months surfing trip.

The keen Japanese surfers had Noosa wired. They used to rent a house for the whole surf season, usually from February to June, and dozens of them came and went and surfed the place for varying periods of time. The Aussie surfer boys

absolutely drooled over the stunning Japanese girls, but didn't know how to approach them. Rhett, however, had no such problems. He married Aina on March 30, 1990. Slater was born nine months later.

After the tragic death of Tim, Rhett and Aina in the car accident, Slater ended up living with his grandmother, Lucy, in the family house in Tewantin, the town located a few kays up the Noosa River. They lived there for about another five years, when on June 22, 2005, a man knocked on their front door. He was a local solicitor. He asked Lucy and Slater to make an appointment and come to his office as soon as was practicable. They visited the solicitor the next day. He informed them that he had been instructed to turn over trusteeship of a trust fund, which had previously been run by Slater's old mate in the water, Adam, to Slater. Slater and Lucy became the primary beneficiaries of the fund, which was worth over twenty million dollars. Adam had also left a recommendation of an excellent accountant who had been taking care of the family's affairs for over fifteen years. He would guide Slater in the finer points of running the trust. The solicitor also handed Slater a sealed envelope, which was a personal letter from Adam. It read,

Dear Slater,

I guess everything to do with me has come as a bit of a surprise to you. Let me assure you that everything that has happened has been no less a surprise to me as well. I was told that you witnessed my departure from Earth. I was also told that you were meant to see it. Look, it's a long story and I'll tell you about it someday, for sure.

Listen, Slater, I know you are telepathic because I've been told that you are. I am not, just so you understand, but my son, Ben, is. It was Ben who picked me up that day in Granite Bay, but that's another story as well. Something big is coming, Slater, something huge, and something is happening behind the scenes, between us and the ETs, who are human like us, but it's all good, mate, it's all really good. They've been on your case since you were born. Every full-telepath that is born on Earth attracts their attention. The telepaths are the golden seeds of our planet and you are one of them. They have done things to you and they have plans for you, all good plans, good for you and good for mother Earth. That's all I'm going to tell you

because someone is coming to look after you in the future. She will let you know when she arrives, so don't suspect everyone you meet, OK?

Slater, I can't tell you how much I enjoyed our surf sessions together, especially at Granite, and how much I miss them now, although you wouldn't believe the places I've surfed since the last time you saw me.

Enjoy the trust fund, boy, and I recommend that you and your grandmother move into my old house in Noosa Waters. It has a jetty and direct access to the river and the points. There's the rubber duck there on the slipway that you can use to go surfing in. You've seen me in it plenty of times. It's great for Granite; just drop the pick off the break and paddle over.

Listen to Andrew, who has been my accountant for many years. He is smart and totally trustworthy and will look after your interests as if they were his own. You might consider renting your Tewanin house. Andrew can help you with that.

Finally, we WILL meet again in the future, have no doubts about that, Slater, and we will surf together at breaks you can't even dream about right now, but that's another story as well. Wait for the girl, she is coming to be with you, although I understand that the meeting is still some years away. Take care of your grandmother and surf plenty of those perfect Noosa barrels for me,

Your friend in the water,

Adam.

PS. Show this letter to your grandmother and then burn it. No one else may see it.

Slater still remembered the poem he heard in his mind when Adam left the planet. He understood the importance of secrecy and did as he was instructed and burned the letter after Lucy read it. He and Lucy moved into Adam's old house at the end of July 2005. They rented the Tewanin house just as Adam had suggested. The management of that and everything else to do with the trust continued to be attended to by Andrew, the brilliant accountant with whom they enjoyed a pleasant business relationship, which included a delicious lunch once every year, in the middle of August. Andrew assured them both that they never ever needed to worry about money, ever again.

'You'll have to find something else to worry about, you poor things,' he always used to joke with them.

Lucy and Slater settled into their new lives quite effortlessly. Slater's main focus remained his surfing, while Lucy developed her interest in painting and the study of the history of art. Her favourite painters were the 19th-century impressionists, like van Gogh, Monet and Cezanne. She adored Modigliani. She read Irving Stone's classic 1934 biographical novel about Vincent van Gogh's life, titled *Lust For Life*, and to this day it remains one of her most inspirational books. She also saved an especially warm place in her heart for Jackson Pollock, the famous American abstract impressionist, *who set me free* she always used to say. She liked to make art like Pollock when she was *inspired out of my brain*. She liked the total freedom of the technique of *making paint fly onto the canvas* and she loved how she could use *whole body movement* while doing it. Watching her doing it, Slater thought that she looked like she was *tripping like a jazz dancer* around the giant canvas lying on the floor of her huge, paint-spattered studio. And she *was* dancing, usually to one of her favourite bands, like Santana, which she played very loudly through her top shelf, Bose surround-sound speaker system.

Unfortunately, Lucy's Jackson Pollock period came to an abrupt end in August 2009 after she was skittled by a police car, which was being driven by a drunk cop racing home to catch a football game on TV. It all started after Lucy and Slater moved into Adam's house. Lucy found Adam's old inline skates under the stairs and immediately tried them on. They were a couple of sizes too big, but they were OK, so she decided to go for a skate. She fell in love with the sport and ended up buying a pair of top-notch, Salomon skates for herself. She liked to go on long, thirty-kilometre, cross-country skates around Noosa. She always said how the Noosa area was like a Mecca for skating because it was so flat and there were so many cycleways everywhere.

Well, the cop that ran her down and the rest of his cop mates covered up the fact that he was intoxicated and even sent Lucy, who was laid out in hospital with a broken back, a double fine for skating on the road without a helmet and for obstructing a police officer on duty. Lucy refused to pay the fine and a court hearing was set for February 2010. The judge presiding over the hearing was old man Terry (take no prisoners) Lawson. His honour had the reputation of a junkyard dog. Andrew arranged for Lucy to be represented by one of the finest

barristers in Queensland, named Barnaby (the black rat) Bratt QC. Barnaby devoted a generous amount of his valuable time to Lucy's case because Andrew was one of his best friends, and he advised Lucy to plead guilty and pay an insignificant fine. Lucy pretended that she was going to go along with the tactic. On the day of the hearing, Barnaby himself wheeled her into the courtroom. When everyone was seated and a hushed silence descended over the courtroom, the charges were read out by the judge. Then he asked the question,

'How do you plead?'

Now Lucy made it a point to never use bad language. 'It's part of my yoga,' she always used to say. There was a silent pause in the courtroom as all eyes turned towards her. Then she gave her reply.

'Your honour, why don't you go and fuck yourself?'

Shocked gasps were heard all around the courtroom. Barnaby buried his face in his hands as everyone else faced the judge. His eyes looked like they were about to catch fire and then pop right out of their sockets. Everyone in the courtroom sat open mouthed as they watched old man Lawson puff up like he was about to explode. But instead of exploding in a fit of rage, he began to struggle with his speech as if he was being restrained in some way. Eventually he got the words out in a most courteous voice. He declared,

'Case dismissed, and the court wishes to apologise to the defendant for wasting her time.'

Then his face turned to rage as he glared at the two policemen sitting at the back of the room and growled,

'I'm going to get you bastard son of a bitch coppers if it's the last thing I do. I promise you that!'

He smashed his gavel down so hard on his bench that it broke into two pieces. After it was all over, his look changed again. His face took on the appearance of a man who couldn't believe that he'd just said what he did. He looked at Lucy and she looked at him, right in the eyes, and everyone in that courtroom saw how he physically shook as a wave of fear passed through him. In a much more subdued voice, like he was speaking to her only, he added, 'I'll get them, I promise.'

Lucy was out of rehab by the end of February 2010. She came back home where Slater continued to look after her. She spent all her time in bed, although she was able to toilet and shower herself. The doctors weren't sure how long it would take before she was up and about again, *if ever*. It was a credit to her how she kept up her spirits and how she never caved in to any kind of negative thinking. Although the doctors, or *quacks* as she preferred to call them, kept her on an extensive regimen of different coloured pills, she tended not to take any of them, preferring instead to *self-medicate* with the *stuff* she grew in two large pots in her backyard.

10

After Lucy ate her lunch she called Slater back into her room.

'Now Slatey, why don't you tell me exactly what happened today.'

Slater sat beside her on the side of her bed and commenced telling her about the great surf he had that day. He told her about the powerful, hollow waves that were on offer and the many wipeouts he had as a consequence. He told her about his *mega-wipeout*, the one where he got held under for so long, and he mentioned the girl that was there when he finally made it to the surface. Then he went into great detail about how he discovered the one-hour discrepancy between the time on his wristwatch and every other timepiece on land.

'Well, Nana, that's about it, except that I'm very sure that I wasn't in the water for four hours.'

'But you've been away for over four hours, Slatey, every clock in the house attests to that.'

'You know, I've been thinking about it while you've been eating, Nana, and that big wipeout and the girl keep popping up in my head. I'm starting to think that something could have happened during that wipeout, while I was being tumbled in the white water.'

'I'm listening.'

'Well, Nana, let's look at the possibilities. One, my watch stopped for exactly one hour. Two, my watch didn't stop for exactly one hour, or a minute, or even a second. It ran perfectly normally. Those are the only two possibilities of what might have happened.'

'Yeah?'

'OK. Now the possibility of my watch having stopped for exactly one hour is almost nil because I kept checking it about every ten minutes. Also, I can pretty accurately gauge how long I've been in the water by my muscle fatigue, especially after three hours, and I can say for sure, no doubts, that I didn't surf for three hours today.'

'So only the second possibility is ... ah ... possible, you reckon.'

'I think so. My watch ran perfectly, as one would expect from such a quality timepiece.'

'Whoah, Slater, this conversation is getting a bit spaced out. I think I need a smoke. Can you hand me my bowl from the side table, please?'

'Sure, Nana.'

Slater handed Lucy's mull bowl to her and while she proceeded to roll herself a *jayjay*, juicy joint, Slater continued the analysis of that day's bizarre event.

'It's like I was time shifted one hour into the future, in zero time. Boom, and it's an hour later, but my watch doesn't register it because it happened in zero time. But all the other clocks in the universe are an hour later because that was where I popped back in. That's definitely one possible scenario if my watch never stopped.'

'So you're thinking about a time shift, eh?'

'Yeah, and what better place to have it happen to me than in the turbulence of the white water of a broken wave, where I have no reference to anything, where I can't even tell which way is up or down. Leave in the white water and re-emerge in the white water of another wave, one hour later. It's perfect! It's the perfect way to introduce me to time shifting. I think that I got time shifted, Nana, one hour into the future.'

Lucy lit her *jayjay*, took a long drag of it, held in the smoke, blew it out and said,

'Slatey, that's so totally insanely out there, I can't tell you, but we both know about Adam and his connections, and only God knows what they are capable of. What gets me, though, is how they, or them, or whoever or whatever

they are, did it to you remotely, from a distance? How did they do that? How could they do that? And why an hour?’

‘Maybe it was a trial run, Nana. Maybe they were just testing their, ah, system, to make sure it works. I saw the spaceship take Adam away. Well, if they can travel to other planets, maybe they’ve got the technology to time travel to other time zones. If I got shifted into the future one hour, what says that it couldn’t have been one day, or month, or year, or a million years? I can’t see any difference. I wonder if they can shift back in time?’

Lucy finished her smoke and was getting pretty stoned. She observed,

‘Slatey, if I had you picked out for something special like time shifting and I had to give you a trial run without freaking you out at the same time, I couldn’t think of a better place to do it than inside a broken wave where you wouldn’t notice the shift as it happened. See, had you noticed it, you may have not handled it as well as you did, but now ...’ she took Slater’s hand in hers and looked him squarely in the eyes, ‘now that you’ve had this experience and had time to think about it, if it happens again in a more open situation where you actually witness the instant reality change that would happen around you as you shifted into another time, well, you might not freak out quite as much, because you are the benefactor of a prior similar experience. It’s just like acid trips, Slatey. It’s all about staying cool and that is all about your sum total of prior experience. Any kind of inexplicable reality change is the most potentially frightening thing because you don’t know if you’ve lost your mind or not. The loony bin is full of people that don’t realise that they have had a totally legitimate trip and that there is absolutely nothing wrong with them. The trouble is that they got freaked out, turned to the quacks and then got put on the psycho drugs. Once that happened it was all over for them ... but I digress ... that girl ... tell me more about her.’

‘Ooh, Nana, I’m not going to forget *her* in a hurry. She was *aaay* honey, I’ve got to tell you.’ Lucy smiled as Slater continued. ‘She was right there when I popped up out of the soup. I think she was American. I think she’s going to be there tomorrow. She is the reason I think the time shift might have happened during that wipeout because she asked me if I was all right when I came up. I wonder if she was part of it?’

'I reckon you better get to talking to her tomorrow, Slatey, that's what I reckon.'

'I reckon so as well, Nana. By the way, how did you enjoy your lunch today?'

.....

Chapter Thirty-Three

ALEXANDER

1

Alexander awoke to the sounds of the autumn tranquillity of Sydney Harbour. The morning sun streamed in through his wide-open balcony sliding doors and bathed his bed with warm light. He kicked off the doona and lay there, spreadeagled naked, and soaked up the warmth of the morning. It was *Saturday May 7 2005*. The phone rang. He rolled over, picked it up from the side table and put it to his ear.

'Hello?'

'Good morning, Alex. How is my favourite son?'

'Morning, mother. I am your *only* son.'

'How are you sweetheart? I'm so excited about our lunch today. Are we still on? Meet you at high noon at the Cosmo?'

'That's the plan. It will be nice to see you. It's been, what, three days?'

'Dinner at home doesn't count, Alex, you know that. Did you get any sleep last night?'

'I got a bit, but my brain is still racing.' He scanned around his bedroom and grimaced as he looked at his iMac on the desk in the corner. 'The work is making me mad, mum. I think that I'm going to lose my mind.'

'Well it was *you* that chose to do genetics, Alex. No one *made* you do it.'

'I know ...'

'Besides, if that bitch Mimi didn't make you go mad, nothing will.'

'I already asked you, mum, please don't call her that.'

'That's right, OK, I'm sorry ... but she *was* a bitch! *You're* the one who called her *Me-me*, not me. Anyway, let us not spoil our day, shall we? How did you go with your thesis last night?'

'How didn't I go, you mean.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. Why don't you forget about it this morning and think about our lunch. Rest is very important in hard work, Alex, and a correct balance is the only way to ensure an optimum result.'

'I'll take that on board, mother, and I'll see you at twelve. I love you.'

'Till then, Alex, I love you too.'

He flipped closed his phone, placed it back on the bedside table and sprang out of bed. He put on a pair of pyjama pants and stepped out onto the spacious balcony of his splendid, eleventh floor, two bedroom, Darling Point apartment. He did this every morning. He scanned his city, the harbour, the bridge and the Opera House. He sensed the *vibe* of the morning, while taking a couple of deep breaths, then picked up a pair of powerful binoculars and zoomed into the Cruising Yacht Club marina just down the road and checked if his old university mate, Marko, happened to be there messing about with his boat.

He couldn't see Marko on his boat so he stepped back into his apartment and wandered into the kitchen, past the Mac, to which he gave a nasty scowl, to his coffee machine to brew his morning's two mugs of coffee. With the mug in his hand, he sat in front of his computer and switched it on. His thesis appeared on the screen. It was titled, *Possible Functions Of Non-coding DNA*. The first sentence read, *Non-coding DNA, or junk DNA, the term coined by Susumu Ohno in 1972, makes up over 98 percent of all DNA and has a largely unknown function*. He began to feel nausea at the pit of his stomach so he put the Mac back to sleep.

He had been working on his thesis for eighteen months. He had compiled all the work from all the researchers, read it and reread it and organised it into a semblance of order, but he didn't feel happy. There was something wrong with all of it. He felt that the mass of research buried in his hard drive amounted to one big zero, one big pile of junk, just like the *junk DNA* they were studying. He felt, as well, that this whole waste of time was a symptom of a bigger sickness, a sickness of the whole body of academia, which was caused by the struggle for funding and fame. Alex perceived it as *a dog-eat-dog-stab-your-colleague-in-the-back-and-steal-his-work kind of academic insanity*. And they were all fighting over the same thing, *junk DNA*, and no one had a clue. The evidence of that fact was plain, and it was all right there in front of him, on his *bloody Mac*.

As he finished his coffee, he glanced at the kitchen clock. It was 10.00am as he closed the door to his bathroom and proceeded to take his shower. He showered quickly, about five minutes, dried himself, stepped out of his bathroom and went to his bedroom where he picked up his jeans and yesterday's T-shirt off the carpet and dressed himself. Just as he slipped his T-shirt over his head,

something strange caught his eye. It was the time on his bedside radio. It said, 11.06am. His face screwed up in surprise. He picked up his phone, which was lying next to the radio, and flipped it open to look at the time. It also said 11.06am. He walked into the kitchen and looked at the clock on the wall, which now said 11.07am. A shiver of fear flushed down his spine. He sat on a kitchen stool as he felt the rush of a fear induced mind spin distort his vision.

2

Later, at the Cosmopolitan Restaurant in Double Bay,

'You're late, Alex, where have you been? It's quarter past twelve and when are you going to buy some new clothes?'

'So sorry, mum, but you won't believe what just happened to me, and I have no explanation for it.'

'It wasn't that Mimi again, was it? Be careful with her, Alex, she ...'

'It wasn't Mimi, mum. It's all over between us. It has been for months. It was something completely different, something really bizarre. I might be losing my mind.'

His mother, whose name was Jikita, laughed out loud,

'I might not know much, but I know my son, and he is *not* losing his mind. Let's order before we begin to starve to death. I'm having the matzo dumpling soup and the Vienna schnitzels, how about you?'

'I'll go with that, and I *might* be losing my mind ... or something. I may have had a blackout in the shower this morning, mother. It lasted for exactly one hour. But the whole bizarre thing about it is that it just doesn't make any sense.'

'My poor boy, you have been working too hard. Chicken soup always helps, no matter what the ailment. Where is that Sofia?'

Jikita scanned around the restaurant for her favourite waitress. She had known Sofia for two years by then and they had become quite good friends, in the fashion that a waitress may become a friend to an elegant, wealthy lady who frequents the restaurant where she works. Sofia spotted her from the other side of the restaurant and came over.

'How do you do, madam, it is a pleasure to see you again.' Sofia was Lebanese and spoke her novice version of English with a seductive French accent. She was quite petite and, as Alexander noticed immediately, stunningly

attractive. Her perfect, slender figure was partially concealed by her uniform, but he noticed it all the same a moment later when she stepped away to attend to another table. He nearly fell off his chair taking a look at her when her back was turned.

‘This is my son, Sofia. His name is Alexander.’

She looked at him and came quite close to him as she introduced herself.

‘Hello, I am Sofia and I am from Lebanon.’

‘Er, hi Sofia, I’m Alex. It’s nice to meet you.’

He looked into her deep-brown eyes, which were full of warmth and emotion, and instantly became spellbound. There was something about this girl, something special and very attractive. His mother noticed the chemistry instantly and like the schemer she was, she began to hatch a plan, a plan that involved the acquisition of Sofia’s phone number and permission for Alex to use it.

As they were having their soup, and between moments of distraction when Alex tracked Sofia around the restaurant, he told his mum about the strange *time anomaly* that occurred to him during his shower.

‘I lost an hour in an instant. It’s as if I blacked out, but I don’t think I did because I can remember the whole shower, and nothing happened. I mean, if I had blacked out, especially for a whole hour, I should have woken up on the floor with the water running all over me. If I had been under the shower for an hour my skin would have looked like a prune. Maybe I sleepwalked? People sleepwalk. Maybe I went to sleep, turned off the shower, did something for an hour, then got back into the shower, turned it back on, woke up and finished having my shower. When I came out, it was an hour later.’

‘Your soup’s getting cold, sweetheart. Isn’t Sofia a lovely girl? You know what I think; I think I should invite her to lunch on one of her days off. Wouldn’t that be a nice idea?’

‘There’s no way I had a blackout. I don’t have blackouts. I don’t sleepwalk and I remember my whole shower. Nothing happened. It’s like my whole apartment, the whole bloody world, jumped one hour into the future while I was having my shower.’

‘Here she comes. I’m going to ask her for her number.’

‘So if I assume that I didn’t black out and go into some kind of sleepwalk, what other possibility could there be? This is what I’ve got to focus on after I finish my lunch here with you, mother, I must focus on some other possibility.’

Sofia came over to remove the soup plates. Jikita asked her,

‘Sweetheart, how many years have I known you?’

‘Two years, madam.’

‘You know, I think it’s time I invited you to lunch at my home, what do you think?’

‘Oh, madam, I would be honoured.’

‘That’s it then. If you give me your number I’ll call you and we’ll have a lovely relaxing lunch, and you can tell me all about yourself.’

‘Thank you, madam, I look forward to it already, with anticipation.’

A few moments later, Sofia brought over the main courses. She also brought a napkin with her phone number written on it, which she gave to Jikita.

After they had eaten their Vienna schnitzels and a nice round of dessert, followed by some coffee, Jikita insisted that she *take care of the check*. As they rose to leave, Jikita walked out of the restaurant by the way which took them past Sofia who was attending to another table. She thanked her for the service. As Alex walked past her, behind his mother, he whispered into her ear from behind,

‘Is it all right if I call you sometime?’

Sophia didn’t turn around or speak; she just waved her hand in a fashion that indicated to him that it would be okay to call her. No one saw the smug smile that appeared on Jikita’s face as they stepped out into Knox Street.

3

Alexander’s favourite professor at Sydney University was *Prof. Lloyd*. No one ever called him by his surname because hardly anyone knew it. Lloyd had been involved with Sydney Uni, off and on, for most of his life, not because he needed the money, Lloyd was loaded enough to buy the whole university a couple of times over, not even because he had a passion for genetics, which he did, but because he loved the stimulation of being surrounded by academic youth. He loved everything about campus life, but especially he loved his students. During his lectures he carried a five-foot-long, wooden ruler, which he

used as a pointer. The ruler also had another function. Prof. Lloyd kept his students on their toes by occasionally springing on them a surprise question. It could come at any time and be asked of anyone. If Prof. Lloyd asked you a question and you didn't know the answer, you knew what to expect. You had to stand up and walk down to the front of the lecture theatre. There, right in front of a couple of hundred of your fellow students, you had to bend over and receive your punishment, which was a light tap on your backside with Prof. Lloyd's long ruler. *The Prof*, which is what the students usually called him, performed his punishment without inflicting actual humiliation on his student. It was always done in the best of humour and it was not uncommon that a student occasionally purposefully gave an incorrect answer just so he could spend the rest of his life retelling the story of how he too was *honoured* by one of Prof. Lloyd's punishments. It is true to say that the students all shared a deep and respectful love for their *Prof*.

Alexander, who was now twenty-nine years old, had been under Prof. Lloyd's tutelage for his whole university career. Through their association over the years, the two men had become the best of friends. Their age difference, Lloyd was fifty-six years old, didn't seem to matter. Besides a passion for genetics, both men shared a number of other traits. They were both obscenely wealthy, as both were fortunate inheritors of generations' worth of astute business practice. They also both had a total contempt for any kind of artificiality. Life was too important to be wasted on *bullshit* and its *mono-dimensional, clone purveyors*. That was probably the reason why they both liked to dress a little scruffy. They both felt, deep inside, that a *poncy getup* was simply intended to conceal the *crap underneath*. As academics, their whole lives were devoted to uncovering hidden truths and bringing them out into the open.

Lloyd lived in his parents' old house in Wunulla Road, Point Piper. The house was situated on the Rose Bay side. There was a jetty at the back of the house and a custom-built slipway for his pride and joy, the Compass 28, named *Mecca*, which he built by hand out of Huon Pine, for the hull, and Queensland Beech, for the deck.

Lloyd lived with his ravishing wife, Eva, who came from a Hungarian migrant family. He met Eva when he was a student at Sydney University. They

had two sons, Leon and Russel, who were both agriculture students and who both preferred the life on the sprawling family cotton farm, which was situated near Warren in western New South Wales.

Lloyd's style of sailing was not the live-aboard-for-months type. He found that kind of lifestyle too restricting. He preferred day and overnight sails. A couple of times a year he planned longer trips lasting perhaps one or maybe two weeks. His one-week trips usually took him to The Hawkesbury. On his two-week trips he liked to sail up to Port Stephens and hang out up there. He particularly liked to be up there for the gathering of *salts* for the New-Years-Eve celebrations in Oyster Bay. The sailors built bonfires all around the bay and, with their yachts anchored in the middle of the bay, celebrated the coming of the New Year sitting around the fires, spinning the biggest sailing yarns they could think of. Alex regularly sailed with Lloyd and had been to Port Stephens with him on one occasion.

4

It was 8.00am on *Sunday May 8 2005*. Lloyd already had his boat in the water, tied up to the jetty, and was tinkering with things when his phone rang. He took it out of his pocket, flipped it open and said,

'It's your money.'

'Hi, Lloyd, it's Alex, have I called too early?'

'Alex, this isn't early, what's up?'

'I need to speak to you. Something bizarre happened to me yesterday and I need to bounce it off someone.'

'Bizarre you say. I like bizarre. But hey, this isn't another one of your female conundrums is it? I'm not your Dorothy Dix you know. It's not about that Mimi friend of yours is it?'

'What the hell, Lloyd, have you been talking to my mother? No! Mimi is history, thank God. She found another bloke, some guy with his own jet, I think, and disappeared off the face of the Earth with him. This is more like weird sci-fi, mate, and I need to run it past someone to see what they think. But it can wait if you're busy.'

'I'm just setting up for a day sail with Eva. We plan to sail around the harbour all day and have lunch at Doyle's. I'm towing the dinghy. Why don't you come with us and tell me your tale during the sail.'

'Jees, Lloyd, that sounds great, but wouldn't it be imposing?'

'Nonsense, we'd love to have you. Come on over. We'll wait for you.'

'How's half an hour sound?'

'Perfect, Alex, perfect.'

5

A light southwester filled Mecca's red sails as Lloyd silently glided her out of Rose Bay. Alex sat on the foredeck and immersed himself in the magic of the crisp, clear morning of the autumn day. Eva, who looked positively stunning in her faded-blue, Levi *Daisy Dukes* and one of Lloyd's old shirts, was below making the coffees and some tasty sandwiches for them all. Lloyd set a heading towards Manly, past The Heads where he intended to check out the swell because he was considering taking Mecca outside for an hour or two. If there was too much swell he wasn't going to bother because he just didn't feel like rolling around that day. As it turned out it was flat as a lake, so they jibed to starboard, unfurled the spinnaker and headed out to sea.

After they had their coffees and sandwiches, and were all sitting together in the cockpit behind the dodger, Lloyd asked,

'So what was it that you wanted to talk to us about, Alex?'

Alex described his strange *time anomaly* incident in great detail. He ended his description with,

'This has to be the weirdest thing that has ever happened to me.'

'I have never heard of any such thing before,' Eva replied.

'Neither have I,' Lloyd added. Alex continued,

'So I've come to the point of considering possibilities and I don't intend to limit myself only to things that might sound rational, no, I intend to explore the irrational as well.'

'Good idea, Alex, we both know that yesterday's irrational is often tomorrow's rational. You've obviously had some thoughts on the matter, what have you come up with?'

'Well, Lloyd, firstly I have decided to isolate the phenomenon and pretend that it is real and that it *can* happen. Now I intend to think of ways that it possibly *could* happen. What we are dealing with here is *time ... non-linear* time, and that takes us into the world of Einstein's general theory of relativity and his field equations and ...'

Eva suddenly butted in, mid Alexander's sentence.

'Sorry, Alex, but I just had a thought.'

Both men looked at Eva. Alex politely invited her to speak.

'Well, Alex, Lloyd and I both know how you've been struggling with your thesis. God knows you couldn't have chosen a more difficult topic. I mean, *junk DNA*, give me a break. But I had this thought. We only understand two percent of the human genome, right?' Both men nodded. 'We have not got a clue what the other ninety-eight percent is for, right?' Both men nodded again and began to smile. 'Well, DNA exists in the space-time continuum just like everything else, so do you think that the ninety-eight percent might have something to do with the living organism's existence in time?'

There was a stunned silence. Both men's jaws dropped open as they first looked at Eva then at each other. Eva smiled a semi-embarrassed smile and said,

'What? ... What did I say? ... Did I say something?'

Suddenly Alex exploded into a burst of laughter.

'Oh my God, oh my God, oh ... my ... God!'

'What?' Eva asked again grinning from ear to ear.

'Eva,' Lloyd announced, 'you may have just won yourself the Nobel Prize. That was possibly the most pertinent question asked in science in the whole bloody third millennium.'

'Oh, it couldn't have been *that* good ... could it?'

Alex began to rave.

'This changes everything. I have to re-start my thesis from scratch. God, I have to look into general relativity. God, what if all that *junk DNA* is like a time clock for the organism, like a groove in a record, which plays the organism through time. What if the morphing of the organism through time, which we call aging, is all programmed in the junk DNA?'

Lloyd added,

'Imagine if the junk DNA actually programs us into the specific window of time in history, like it programs some kind of a harmonic time sequence between two points of linear time, which we call birth and death. What if it allows us to exist in the time that we exist in because all our cells resonate with the ... ahh ... time-harmonic of the time-continuum around us?'

'I think you boys are going to need another mug of coffee. I wonder if I can make better coffee now that I have my Nobel Prize?'

They sailed in a north-easterly direction for about an hour, the whole time maintaining an average speed of six-to-seven knots under the spinnaker. A couple of miles east of Fairy Bower, they pulled in the kite, came about and tacked back into the south-wester with Mecca hard heeled over and still maintaining a steady six knots perfectly balanced and requiring only two fingers on the tiller to maintain her heading.

They *dropped the pick* in Watson's Bay at 12.30pm and putted through all the moored boats in the tiny dinghy in good time for their one o'clock booking in Doyle's restaurant. They sat down at one of the outside tables, in the sun, and ordered three *Lord Nelsons*.

'The John Dory is on special,' announced Eva reading the menu.

'I'll go with that,' said Alex.

'I like my Barra,' said Lloyd.

As they drank their beer, soaked up the sun and enjoyed the placid atmosphere of the bay, Lloyd commented,

'You know, Alex, if the junk DNA *was* connected with time, and if for some reason a small section of it *was* missing, or damaged, or inactive, that could explain how a person might experience an instant jump into the future.'

'There's so much to think about,' Alex replied, 'that I don't know where to begin.'

'But at least it has given you a whole new approach to your thesis, hasn't it?' Eva added.

'That it has, Eva my dear, that it has ... thanks to you.'

.....

Chapter Thirty-Four

THEBE

1

It was *Friday May 7 2010*. The easterly, long-period swell being generated by the powerful low-pressure system, which was centred just south of New Caledonia, had not abated at all overnight and, if anything, had actually cleaned up somewhat to break along the five points of Noosa even more perfectly than the day before. It was going to be another surfing *insane-a-thon* for the lucky surfers that were there that day.

Under normal circumstances, Slater would have taken his inflatable boat out to Granite on a day like that. On that day, however, circumstances were anything *but* normal. For one thing, he couldn't stop thinking about the time shift experience he had the day before, and for another, he couldn't stop thinking about her, the pretty, young American surfer girl. In fact she was mostly *all* he could think about.

He rolled up in the National Park car park early and immediately spotted her standing in front of a vacant parking space. She was waving him in. He smiled as he parked his (ex-Adam's) exquisite, jade-coloured VW Kombi and thought to himself,

'How did you know I was coming?'

He heard her thought reply as clearly as if she'd spoken it to him.

'A little birdie told me.'

Her name was Thebe. She was an extraterrestrial hailing from the planet Rama, from the Andromeda galaxy. She was a volunteer in a *grand plan* to save as many of the Earth's species as possible before the impending, catastrophic, extinction-level event, which will be caused by the collision between Earth and a rogue comet. The Rama have known about the coming disaster for nearly six thousand years. Slater was her project. She chose him because she loved him. All volunteers from Rama chose their Earth humans out of love. That was always their primary criterion.

He stepped out of his Kombi and walked around to where she was standing. She was wearing her short-sleeved, long-legged, all-black O'Neill

wetsuit. Slater tried not to stare, but her absolute beauty overpowered any self-control he tried to muster. She was tall, about 5'10" he guessed, lean and muscular. Her hair was sun-bleached cerulean, cut short, shorter than his, exposing her long, slender neck. Her childlike face and the parts of her body he could see were deeply suntanned. Her eyes, which looked like two deep sapphire pools, shone with an iridescence, as if they were powered by batteries.

'God, she looks like a goddess from the future ... God ... like she came from another planet ... so modern and cool!'

She smiled a broad smile, stuck her hand out to shake his and introduced herself in her American accent.

'Hi, my name's Thebe. So nice to meet you properly.'

He shook her hand, smiling, and commented,

'Phoebe, that is a nice name.'

She laughed, 'Phoebe *is* a nice name, but it's not *my* name. My name is Thebe.' She spelt it out. 'T-h-e-b-e, and what shall I call you?' She already knew his name, but thought it better to have him formally introduce himself.

'Slater,' he replied.

She smiled a warm smile, the kind of smile one smiles after one has reached the end of a long and difficult journey.

'We finally meet, Slater.'

'Finally?' he queried.

'Yes, finally. Our meeting is no accident, but now is not the time to venture into that conversation. Where are you surfing today?'

Feeling slightly confused by her reply he answered, 'Er ... I thought I'd go for some bigger ones out at Granite. How about you?'

'Granite sounds just fine, Slater. May I walk out with you?'

'Are you joking? Of course you *may*,' he laughed. 'Have you surfed Granite before?'

'No, I haven't.'

'Well, it will be my personal pleasure to show you some of the ins and outs of the place.'

'Ooh, I'm getting all excited already,' she responded as she pulled her *McTavish* pintail out of its bag.

'Whoah, that is some weapon you've got there,' he commented as he untied his *Tony Dragan* off the Kombi's roof racks.

'Yeah,' she replied, 'I bought it in Byron Bay while I was visiting there a couple of months ago. Bob made it for me *custom*. See, he even signed it for me.' She turned the spear over and showed Slater where Bob wrote, *Shaped by Bob especially for Thebe*.

2

Granite Bay was the outermost bay on the long Noosa peninsula. To get there one had to take the half hour walk along the narrow foot trail that wound its way past the Boiling Pot, along a cliff edge, through a tea tree forest, around Teatree Bay and up a hill to Dolphin Point.

Granite tended to be less crowded than the other breaks because it was so far away. It also tended to break bigger as it was more open to the easterly swells.

The day was clear and sunny with not a cloud in the sky. The twenty-knot south wind that blew directly offshore across all the points had an autumn chill in it, which made it a day for wetsuits.

As they rounded Dolphin Point she gasped in awe as she witnessed, for the first time in her *physical* (as distinct from *telepathic*) life, the absolute majestic utopia of eight-foot Granite on a perfect day. The huge swells smashed over the rocks on the tip of the point, then peaked and walled-up to break in a long tubular vortex for six hundred yards, with the strong offshore wind sending a huge plume of spray billowing behind each wave.

She had heard many stories about Granite from her Rama cousin, Ambriel. Ambriel had already been to Earth, as a volunteer. While here, she went by the name of Liberty. She chose Adam as her personal project. He was her small contribution to the *grand plan*. Thebe also knew Adam, who was at that time living with Ambriel's family on Rama. He was Ambriel's husband and father to her Earth-born, fully telepathic son, Ben. Ben, who was born in *October 1980*, lived on Earth for the first ten years of his life, at which time he and his mother were required to return back to Rama so that he could begin his compulsory training in the telepathic arts. When Thebe met him, Ben had just become *Master's Apprentice* to Iapetus, who was revered amongst the Rama as the *Master*

of Time. Iapetus had spent, some jokingly liked to say misspent, the last two hundred years of his life being a surfing beach bum, with a space ship.

Slater was selected for *relocation* when he was born because he was a rare, natural, Earth-born full-telepath. Being a full-telepath meant that he could, although not very well, slide into the *telepathic mind-plane*, the *mind-space* where just about everyone in the universe communicates with one another. Being a full-telepath on Earth meant that he was permanently surrounded by non-telepaths. It was like being the only sighted person in a world full of blind people.

3

They sat down on a large boulder on the edge of the sea cliff, on the tip of Dolphin Point. Dolphin Point was bathed in warm, morning sunlight. Granite Bay, which stretched out in a long crescent before them, glistened like a living azure crystal as a million diamonds shimmered. Beneath them, the large swells smashed over the rocky point and sent up huge plumes of sea-spray.

'I know Adam,' she said.

'Adam?' he queried, totally surprised.

'Yes, the older guy you used to surf with out here. I know him, and he told me all about you and how you two became such good friends.'

'Adam's been gone a while,' he said.

'I know all about how Ben picked him up and took him home,' she focussed her gaze across the bay at a small beach half way out along the point, 'from that small beach, I reckon.' There was a silence. She continued, 'I know it's meant to be a secret, but Adam told me all about it and he told me of a letter he wrote you and how he mentioned me in the letter. I am the one he wrote about.'

'So ... ah ...' Slater smiled, 'you've come to *look after* me?'

She laughed, 'Is *that* what he wrote?'

Thebe had already fallen in love with Slater through a telepathic link she made with him via the *Earth-born-full-telepath* program. The Rama fall in love with each other from the inside out, telepathically. It's kind of like two people falling in love with each other only through the Internet. So when they meet in their physical life they are already in love. Thebe was aiming at marriage and an Earth-born child, fully telepathic of course.

'I'm not sure that I am sure what letter you might be referring to,' Slater replied, attempting to keep the secret requested by Adam.

'Look, I'm going to go quiet for a moment. Don't speak to me, just look out there.' She pointed about a mile out to sea.

He felt his brain calm and his gaze become firmly fixed on a point in the ocean. He then observed everything turn into shades of blue. He felt his brain frozen because he couldn't generate any thoughts. He then noticed a smooth, round, polished, blue-metal object break the surface of the ocean and rise silently into the air. It was almond shaped and it radiated a beautiful blue light all around itself. The space ship flew up to them and hovered about fifty feet in front of them for about thirty seconds, in total silence. It then flew back and re-entered the ocean in the same place from which it emerged. The full spectrum of colours returned to Slater's vision and he was able to think again. All he could say was,

'Wow!'

'Nobody else could see that,' she whispered, 'because I vibrated my ship in the ultra-violet part of the spectrum, just out of sight of the non-telepath's view. That's why everything looked blue. I tranced you to see it. You could do it yourself with just a bit of practice, which is part of the reason I'm here.' She closed her eyes and declared, 'My ship looks absolutely magnificent in full-spectrum light.'

'You don't say. It looked pretty impressive in UV, I gotta tell you.'

'Yeah ... I just love it. ... So you see, I'm the girl Adam wrote about ... shocked?'

'Are you kidding?'

'It is unusual for us to reveal our true identities to Earthlings, but we are in the final phases of our work and final-phase protocol includes full disclosure.' She turned toward him, smiled a broad, cheesy smile and spread her arms wide,

'Ta-daaaaaaaaaaaa, I am an ...' she brought her hands forward and did the quotation marks hand sign with her fingers, '*ALIEN!!!*'

'Cr ... eye ... key!' he replied in a faltering voice.

She looked out to sea again.

'Check out the set,' she exclaimed pointing to a large set of five perfectly barrelling waves rolling into Granite Bay. 'We should take off and get into some of that.'

He looked at the surf and mumbled,

'Oh yeah, let's go.'

As they walked along the narrow foot trail around the perimeter of Granite Bay, he told her,

'You know, I love your blue hair, and the way you cut it.'

'Thank you.' She smiled. 'You know, I can make my hair any colour I like, at will. It's something some of us Rama can do. Have a look.'

He turned around as he walked ahead along the narrow track and had a look at her. He saw that her hair had changed into a shiny candy-apple red colour, almost like metal.

'Wow, that's stunning,' he commented, and as he watched, her hair changed back to the original cerulean blue with sun streaks.

'I can feel my hair,' she said.

'My poor little brain,' he whimpered.

'Aahhhh, you'll live,' she replied cheekily.

After about a minute of silent walking he thought to her,

'Thebe is a really nice name.'

'Thank you, and it's even my real name. Slater is nice as well. I like Slater,' she thought back.

4

They arrived at a point on the track from where a narrow foot trail led down a steep hundred-foot cliff to a small beach hidden amongst the rocks and boulders. The beach, which was located about half way out along the point, was a favourite place from which to launch into the water. The place was lush with subtropical vegetation amongst large coastal boulders and rocks.

'Don't ding the back of your board going down these rocks, Thebe.'

'I'll be careful.'

They climbed down onto the small beach and placed their boards on the sand.

'This is the spot that Adam left the Earth from,' he said.

'It's very special,' she replied.

They surfed for three hours. Thebe's surfing was something to behold. It was power with style and poise. He thought it was *high art, perfectly understated, a kind of minimalism*. Slater was *Mr. Deep*. He took off deep and he rode them deep. She liked his *purity*. It was all about the barrel for him. She also began to notice what a handsome young man he really was. He was tall with scruffy sun-bleached, medium length, straight black hair. He had bright iridescent-blue eyes that were slightly overlarge and subtly Asian shaped. They could bring a young lady to total submission with just one penetrating look. It was impossible to know his real skin colour because he was so tanned. He was very lean and superbly muscular, his body having grown in the midst of a surfing lifestyle. The iridescence in his eyes represented his telepathic ability, as in all telepaths. It became brighter as he got older and became more proficient in the *mind-plane*. Most telepaths wore tinted contact lenses over their irises when they needed to conceal the brightness of their eyes.

After their surf, as they walked back along the track, she asked him,

'Would you like to have dinner?'

'Dinner? Oh God ... yes.'

'Peachy.'

'Peachy?' he laughed.

'A great chef and fine wine?' she asked.

'And a view.' He thought about it for a moment. 'On second thoughts, who needs a view, I've got you to look at.'

'And I you,' she replied warmly.

They ended up having fish and chips and a couple of ginger beers on the lawn by the river in Noosaville, just over the road from Elvis's, bathed in warm afternoon sunshine. She asked him,

'How old are you, Slater?'

'Twenty,' he replied.

'How old do you think I am? Go on, have a guess. I bet you never get it.' She laughed playfully.

'How old do you look like or how old do I think you are?'

'How old do you think I am?'

'Well ... you don't look like a day over sixteen, but I reckon you keep your age well, so I reckon that you're about nineteen.' He watched for her reaction. There was none. She just matter-of-factly revealed that,

'I'm one hundred and twenty eight.'

Slater choked on a chip and began coughing and wheezing.

'One hundred and twenty eight?'

She gave him a couple of hefty slaps on the back and laughed.

'I am Rama and Rama can live to nine hundred years. Some are older than a thousand. So in relative terms we are about the same age, although I think that I am coming out of this with the better end of the deal.'

'Oh no,' he coughed a couple more times, 'I've got the good end, trust me.'

She changed the subject. 'I've brought some herbs with me, from Rama.'

'Herbs?' he replied, surprised.

She carried with her an ethnic-style shoulder bag. She took out of it a small golden box. They were sitting close to each other. She held the gold container between them. He noticed the infinitely intricate carving in the gold. She opened the top and showed him the brown crumble inside.

'We call it *Mana*. It is for health and longevity. I've been smoking it since I was seven.'

'Crikey,' he replied.

She closed the gold box and put it back in her bag. She then brought out a smaller, hexagonal container, the surfaces of which looked like crystal. She brought it between them and opened the top.

'This is *Fish*. This is a much more powerful herb. It is used for initiations mainly, and for deep healing.'

'Why do they call it *Fish*?' he enquired.

She looked him in the eye and smiled,

'Cause it makes you feel like a fish ...'

'A fish?'

'Yeah, no arms, no legs and no brain.'

Slater laughed out loud,

'Now that sounds like a trip.'

'You've got no idea,' she quipped.

She put away the crystal container then leaned toward him. She placed her arm around his left shoulder, gazed across the river at the far shore and said,

‘This is nice ... this place is really nice ... thanks Slater.’

She then kissed him lightly on his right cheek. As she backed away he turned his head, leaned over and, bold as bold can be, planted one right on her lips. After he kissed her he cleared his throat and mumbled,

‘Oh ... so sorry ... it must be something in this ginger beer.’

She kissed him back and whispered,

‘Yeah, I can feel it too.’

5

After dinner, they took a long sunset walk along the shore of the river. They started hand in hand but ended with their arms around one another. There was no doubting the chemistry. As they walked, they revealed more about their lives to each other. He asked her,

‘Are you sleeping in your van?’

‘Yes, for four months now. It’s perfect.’

Thebe was driving a pre-loved, modified, metallic-blue Bedford van with a 186 cubic inch, six-cylinder, Holden motor and a four-on-the-floor transmission. It had wide wheels, sports suspension and a custom, stainless steel exhaust. The best thing about the Bedford, she thought, was the fact that it was a full six feet wide inside, meaning that she could have her bed set across-ways at the back of the van. This left more room in the front. There was a pop-top roof with a set of *Rola* roof racks fitted to it. The best thing about the roof racks was that she didn’t have to remove her surfboard from them when she raised the top.

‘Where do you park?’ he asked.

‘Anywhere,’ she replied.

‘That doesn’t sound too safe.’

She smiled at him warmly, appreciating his concern, and replied reassuringly,

‘I am Rama and I’m always safe.’

‘Still’ He thought for a while, ‘... look Thebe, it’s still early, would you like to come over to my place and meet my Nana? I reckon she’d love to meet you. I’ve told her a bit about you already.’

'I'd like that very much, Slater.'

She followed his Kombi back to his house, which used to be Adam's old house, and parked the Bedford in the driveway.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

ZEKE

1

It was *Sunday March 22 1992*. Ambriel and her eleven-year-old son, Ben, hovered their family-sized intergalactic spaceship just above the vicious lightning storm that was flashing and thundering above Zeke's rusty, corrugated-iron shed, which was located about a mile to the west of a towering coastal escarpment, below which lay the quiet seaside hamlet of Stanwell Park. They had flown there from Rama, their home planet, which was located in the Andromeda Galaxy, two million light years from Earth. Their mission was to pick up Zeke.

The time was a couple of hours after sunset and the only light that was lighting up the area around Zeke's shed were the continual strobing flashes of intense staccato lightning.

Inside the shed, Zeke was preparing himself to become the first human to gravity fly in his own, home made, *gravity sail*. With him were his two stoned companions, Adam, the dentist, and Doyle, the detective. Zeke had built the gravity sail by copying and scaling up a small gravity sail, which was left behind by Adam's son, Ben, prior to his disappearance. Zeke had discovered that the gravity sail generated more *lift* the hotter it got. He had set up an elaborate method of heating his *man-sized* gravity sail with twenty-four electric bar heaters all hose-clamped to the tubing at regular intervals. These were all plugged into the mains and the sail was tethered to the concrete floor by one-foot-long lengths of seatbelt webbing. The hold-down straps were bolted into the concrete with expansion bolts.

His spaced-out companions waited for Zeke to become ready for the big experiment. His idea was to hang in a seat in the middle of the tubular contraption and have them switch on the heaters. He hoped that the *gravity sail* would generate enough lift to lift him off the ground to the limit of the hold-down straps. There wasn't enough ganja on the whole planet that could suppress their excitement at knowing that they were the first people in the history of the planet to partake in a bona-fide human gravity-flight experiment.

As the experiment began and Adam turned on the heaters, it was Ambriel who linked up telepathically with Zeke, via the *mind thread* she established with him through their friendship over the years, while she was on Earth posing as Liberty, the girl from California. Unbeknownst to Zeke, she arranged to have him *time chipped* before she left the planet with her son Ben. She did this because she needed to, because she had a plan. Zeke was *chipped* while he was asleep, by a Rama *time chip insertion specialist*, and he never knew a thing about it.

As the *gravity sail* heated up, Ambriel telepathically entered Zeke's psyche. When the sail reached critical temperature, she mind-activated the time chip, which was implanted in Zeke's body, into a *one-planetary-rotation time shift*.

To Adam and Doyle, it appeared as if Zeke and the gravity sail blasted vertically through the roof of the shed and disappeared off the face of the Earth. In reality, though, Zeke dematerialised from within the gravity sail a fraction of a second before the empty gravity sail shot through the corrugated iron roof into outer space.

Ambriel and Ben left Zeke's place and flew north towards Byron Bay for a day of sightseeing and maybe even surfing. They intended to be back in exactly twenty-four hours time.

2

Zeke suddenly found himself sitting on the ground, in the dark. The grass was damp, although it wasn't raining anymore. He couldn't make anything out, however the place felt strangely familiar. There was not a breath of wind at ground level where he was and as he looked up he noticed that the stars were all out, shining with the intensity that was common at his place. He felt a mild panic take a pathetic attempt at him, but it didn't last. After all, he *was* Zeke, and he *had* a history, a noble history. Just because his whole reality changed in a heartbeat was no basis for any sort of anxiety.

All was silent, however as his hearing adjusted, he began to hear some sounds. He heard a faint, intermittent sound of a Harley Davidson speeding along a distant highway. As he listened more intently, he heard the soft sound of a zephyr shushing through the leaves of nearby trees. He continued to sit, frozen where he was, not moving a muscle. Suddenly he realised that he loved this.

'This is ultimate,' he thought to himself. A grin appeared on his face. Something very strange was happening with the universe around him, but strangeness was what he craved and yearned for all his life. Strangeness was his nectar of life. He needed it like oxygen.

As his one eye, the right one, slowly adapted to the pitch black that surrounded him, he noticed the silhouettes of tall eucalypts faintly materialise out of the darkness. After a moment, he recognised their shape. They were the tall gum trees that grew in the bush behind his place. He could finally set his bearings as to his location. He realised that he was sitting in his own backyard.

Up to this point in time he still hadn't moved from his sitting position on the damp grass. He now knew that he was facing south. He knew that his shed should be on his right and his hut should be behind him. He turned his head to the right and noticed that his shed was gone. A low baritone chuckle broke the hushed silence of the tranquil night.

'Bull ... shit,' he whispered to himself, and then chuckled again.

He rose to his feet, turned around and saw that his hut was gone as well. He laughed out loud then stopped suddenly as he remembered,

'Me dope, the bastards have disintegrated me dope!!!!'

He looked in the direction of where his shed should have been when he noticed that the whole space he was in was beginning to lighten. Something was lighting up the night. Instinctively he looked up and spotted a light shining directly above him, like a lantern. It was lighting up his backyard with a soft light. As he observed the light, he saw it becoming larger. He thought to himself,

'It's either gettin bigger ... or it's comin down.'

He looked towards the space where his shed should have been and noticed, highlighted almost in a faint spotlight, his paint tin, which was full of his precious Illawarra Gold, and his hand-carved, walnut mull bowl and pipe. He stepped over and picked them up and thought,

'Whoever's done this mustn't be all that bad.'

His attention returned to the light above, which was getting fairly low now, he estimated about five hundred feet, and was dimming slightly now, as it descended. Zeke could see that this thing wanted to come down in his back yard so he moved himself off to one side in order to give it space.

By now he realized that the soft, round light, descending, was some kind of spacecraft. He could see that it was quite large, about a hundred feet in diameter he guessed. The craft descended to about ten feet above the ground, where it came to a silent, softly glowing stop right in front of him. He could now tell that it was almond shaped from the side and it appeared to him that the material it was made of, which appeared to him to be some kind of polished silver metal, itself glowed with a soft, yellow-white phosphorescence.

Thoughts of Liberty and Ben, and the gravity sail, flashed through his mind as he experienced one of his greatest life fantasies coming true. He stood back in awe, in animated wonderment, as the elegant spacecraft levitated in a soft glow right there in front of him. He chuckled as a panel opened underneath the ship and a thin ramp, which appeared to be covered in some sort of black, grippy rubber, descended at an angle towards the ground, finally almost, but not quite, making contact with it. Young Ben was first to run down the ramp and throw himself into Zeke's arms. He was closely followed by Ambriel. All three hugged each other and cried.

'What happened to you guys?' Zeke exclaimed. 'We missed you somethin terrible. Adam misses you somethin terrible. What happened to you guys?'

Ben just cried and hugged Zeke. Ambriel tried to explain between sobs,

'We are so, so sorry, Zeke. We never wanted it to be like this, but we had to go, we had to, we had no choice,' she kissed Zeke's cheek, 'but we are back, and we've come back for you, our friend, we've come back for you.'

'Yeah, Zeke, you're coming with us,' Ben cried into Zeke's black, Led Zeppelin T-shirt.

'Where we goin?' Zeke asked.

Ambriel stepped back and looked Zeke squarely in the eye. Her eyes shone bright iridescent green with the typical intensity of a full telepath. With a calm voice, like that of a person who had just successfully chewed through a tough piece of leather, she replied,

'Where *aren't* we going, Zeke, where *aren't* we going.'

Zeke's heart thumped in his chest. His concern focussed on his friend.

'What about Adam?'

Ben and Ambriel glanced at each other. Ambriel replied,

'Adam has to wait. It's not our idea, but it's how it has to be. We will all be together one day in the future however, and Adam will be kept safe until then. We'll explain everything. Come, come with us.'

Ambriel took Zeke's left hand while Ben took his right. As they led him up the ramp into the spacecraft, Zeke asked,

'Is it a gravity sail?'

'Why, yes it is, Zeke,' replied Ambriel proudly. 'We have no fuel and there is no engine. We are in great minority, we who choose to sail. However ours is the most ancient and purest of all forms of space travel, and we do it because of our love for it.'

After a few moments, the ship rose silently into the starry void and disappeared.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

MANA

1

Slater knocked on Lucy's bedroom door.

'Come in, Slatey.'

He entered the room.

'I've brought a visitor, Nana. She's just outside.'

'Where are your manners, Slatey. Haven't I taught you anything? Don't leave a guest standing outside the door. Ask them to come in.'

He beckoned Thebe in. She entered the room, shy as a doe.

'This is my new friend, Thebe, Nana.'

'Oh my Lord!' Lucy exclaimed reacting to Thebe's beauty. 'Come,' she beckoned to her, 'come closer, child, and let me take a proper look at you.'

Thebe smiled a sheepish smile as she came over to the bed and sat down next to Lucy. She gave her her hand to hold and said,

'It's a pleasure to meet you.'

'Call me Lucy, child.' As she held Thebe's hand, she looked her up and down and declared, 'My, my, you are a pretty one.' She then looked her straight in the eyes and whispered, 'and clear as a mountain stream as well.'

Slater sat on the opposite side of Lucy's bed. He reminded Lucy of the letter left by Adam five years earlier.

'Do you remember in that letter, Nana, from a few years ago, the one in which Adam said that a girl would come to look after me?' He looked at Thebe. 'Well, it seems that Thebe is that girl.'

'Really?' Lucy said with a surprised tone in her voice.

'There's more, though, Nana. How shall I put this?'

Everyone looked at everyone in turn.

'Er ... Thebe isn't actually from around here.'

'Well, I'm not stupid, Slatey. I can recognise an American accent when I hear one.'

Thebe stroked Lucy's hand and smiled as Slater revealed,

'Er ... oh, she's from a bit further away than that, Nana.'

'Well, Slatey, you can't get much further away than America, unless you come from the Moon.'

'Err ... further than that even, Nana.'

Lucy's jaw dropped. She looked at her grandson, and then at his new friend, then she whimpered,

'I think I need a bloody smoke. Could you hand me my stuff please, Slatey.'

Slater rose from his side of the bed and retrieved Lucy's old coffee tin containing her marijuana and paraphernalia to smoke it with. As she rolled her *jayjay*, she spoke calmly to Thebe.

'Slatey saw Adam get taken away in a space ship. Not long after, we received a letter from him. In it he mentioned a girl that would come, but he never mentioned from where. If you are that girl, where exactly are you from?'

'I am from Rama, from the stars Vesna and Vanja, from the galaxy Andromeda.'

Lucy's voice quivered slightly.

'That's a fair hike for a young girl like you. And your mum and dad, they don't mind you gallivanting all over the universe on your own, do they?'

Thebe smiled affectionately at Lucy. She took Lucy's hand to her mouth and kissed it, then replied,

'Dear no, not at all. Actually, they are quite proud of me. Also, I am not quite as young as I look.'

There was a momentary pause in the conversation as Lucy lit her smoke. After taking a big drag, holding it in for a while, then blowing it out, she asked,

'So do you mind me asking how old you actually are?'

Thebe replied matter-of-factly,

'As I told Slater earlier, I am one hundred and twenty-eight years old, which is quite young amongst my people.'

'That's more than double my age!' Lucy exclaimed. 'How the hell do you get to look so young?'

Slater, looking slightly uncomfortable, changed the topic.

'What is Rama like, Thebe?'

Thebe closed her eyes and sighed,

‘Well ... for a start, Rama is the most beautiful planet in the universe, and I love it like my mother. It is an almost carbon copy of the Earth, although there are far fewer people living on it. We don’t have cities or towns; we don’t have transportation networks such as roads and railways. We don’t have centralised anything, like power systems or governments. There are no jobs, no taxes and there is no money. Instead there is trading, sharing, doing favours and everyone has many skills. There is an abundance of everything. Also, on Rama, everyone makes their own power at home. Everything is powered by gravitation. This power is free, unlimited and ubiquitous. Everyone is free and independent. We also are all telepathic and we live for an average of 900, or so, years.’

Slater and Lucy sat there speechless, for a moment, as they attempted to assimilate the new reality. Finally, it was Lucy that broke the silence.

‘So pray tell, Thebe, what brings you to our neck of the woods?’

Thebe smiled. Her smile was a contradiction to Lucy as she recognised the wisdom of an elder in the face of a child.

‘I *will* tell you the truth that to this day has been a carefully guarded secret, but before I do, I seek permission from you to begin a healing process of your back injury.’

Lucy looked surprised. ‘So you reckon you can do what the quacks can’t do?’ She chuckled, ‘Yeah, OK.’

‘Thank you, Lucy.’ Thebe reached into her bag and produced her gold container of Mana. ‘It begins with the Mana, however it is not complete until we share the Fish.’ Opening the gold container, she took out of it a small, intricately carved, white, ceramic pipe and loaded it with a small amount of the brown, crumbly Mana. She handed it to Lucy saying, ‘One inhalation of this will double your lifespan, as well as make your back feel a whole lot better.’

Lucy gave Slater a *who’s your mate that you brought?* look.

Thebe smiled. ‘This is *part* of the reason I’m here, just a *small* part.’

Lucy scrutinized the Mana in the pipe and observed,

‘It looks like hash.’

‘Actually,’ replied Thebe, ‘it is made from the essence of a distant relative of the Cannabis sativa plant. We cultivate it on Rama. It grows wild on many other

planets. It is the reason why we live to nearly a thousand years. Without it, our lifespans would be similar to yours.'

'Will I feel anything?' Lucy enquired.

'You will feel life, Lucy, and the feeling won't leave. This high is permanent. Anyway, you must keep partaking of it to achieve your full lifespan potential.' She turned to Slater. 'I would like you to partake of it as well, Slater.'

Slater smiled, 'OK, Thebe, I will do as you recommend.'

They all smoked some Mana. Lucy offered to roll a joint for Thebe and she accepted. Slater brewed some tea, put on Jackson Browne's *Before The Deluge* and they all engaged themselves in blissful conversation, which went on well into the night. They told each other stories from their lives. To Lucy and Slater, Thebe's stories sounded like total science fiction. She told her stories with a skill that could best be described as that of a master storyteller. They became completely mesmerized by her.

Storytelling is considered a *high art* amongst the Rama. Although speech is the main component of it, it is by no means the only component. It must be remembered here that speech is not the main form of communication between the Rama, making up only about 30 percent of it, telepathy is. So, because speech is used fairly sparingly, it is considered special and has evolved a wide variety of very artistic styles. The storytellers create telepathic realities in the mind plane while they tell their stories and immerse their listeners within them.

2

Even though she was repeatedly invited to stay in the house that night, Thebe chose to sleep in her van. She wasn't sure how many nights she would need to sleep like that before she felt comfortable accepting their kind invitation.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

ADAM

1

It was *April 20th 2005*, on a tiny beach hidden deep amongst the boulders, located about half way out along the point of Granite Bay. Adam stood face to face with a handsome young man he thought he would never ever see again. The young man spoke first. The tone of his voice was soft and affectionate.

'Hi, dad.'

Adam's heart filled with emotion and his vision blurred as a tear streamed down his left cheek. He barely composed himself enough to utter the question,

'Ben ... is that you?'

2

The sixty-foot diameter, polished-silver space ship hovered silently about two feet above the broken waves rolling into the beach. On the beach side, a panel was open on the underside of the ship. A thin, sloping ramp almost, but not quite, touched the sand. There were barefoot footprints running from the ramp to Adam, who was standing there frozen like a statue.

'It's *me*, dad. You don't know how long I've dreamed of this moment. I've missed you so.' Ben moved forward and embraced his father with a bear hug. 'I love you so much, dad.'

Adam's emotions overwhelmed him and he began to cry.

'Don't cry, dad,' whispered Ben, kissing the side of his father's cheek, 'the days of us being apart are over.'

'Over?' Adam whimpered.

'Yeah, *over!*'

'And mum?'

'Mum too. She's waiting for us at home.'

'Home?'

'Oh dad, there's so much I've got to tell you, and to show you.'

'For the moment, Benny ... just don't stop hugging me.'

'OK dad, that's easy. Mum told me to tell you that she loves you very much and that she can't wait to see you.'

After a couple more minutes, giving his father time to compose himself, Ben released Adam from his bear hug and stepped back to look at him. He made an instant observation.

'You're looking in pretty good nick, dad.'

'You don't look like you're struggling either, son.'

After a brief period of catch-up conversation, Ben felt it important to reveal to his father the truth about his old friend Zeke who his father thought got killed in a gravity-flight experiment.

'Dad ...'

'Yeah?'

'There's something I've got to tell you about Zeke.'

'Zeke? I was there when he shot through the roof of his shed. I suppose that you found him floating somewhere between here and God knows where in space, frozen like a block of ice.'

Ben chuckled at the image Adam created, then revealed,

'He's not dead. He's alive.'

'What?'

'Yeah, mum and I, we picked him up that night. Actually, it was the night after.'

'Zeke is *alive*?'

'As strong as a bull. He's been living with us on Rama.'

'Where?'

'Rama, dad. It's our other home.'

'Home?'

'Yeah, dad. It's our planet ... in the Andromeda Galaxy.'

'The Andromeda Galaxy?'

'Oh dad, there's so much ... but listen, let's not hang around here too much longer, unless you want to. What's say we go back to your house.'

'I drove the Kombi.'

'Come with me. Let me take us home. We can get the van later.'

Adam looked up at the space ship that was hovering silently next to them.

'What, in *that*?'

'Yeah. I've got room for two, even your board.'

Adam instantly lost his melancholy and suddenly lit up with the excitement of a new adventure. He said,

‘Ooooh Benny, this has got to be fun.’

Ben walked up the ramp into the ship followed by Adam carrying his board and water bottle.

The inside of the ship was all lit up in a warm, easy on the eyes, light, but there were no light sources visible. The light was just there, in the air. The space inside was circular. There were no partitions. In the centre of the ship were two very comfortable looking, semi-supine, tan coloured, bucket seats. They did not appear unlike sports seats out of an expensive, exotic car, except that they extended all the way out to support the feet, like a dental chair. On closer inspection, Adam noticed later that the seats were covered in a material made of intricately woven, fine strands of what looked like leather. He could see no stitching however. Later still, Ben explained to Adam that the seat material was synthetic and was carbon based.

Ben pointed Adam to a few duffel bags and a surfboard, which was strapped to the wall above them, in the port side of the ship.

‘You can strap your board above mine over there, dad.’

Adam placed his surfboard into a specialised rack above Ben’s and strapped it down with what held like Velcro straps, although Adam could not see any Velcro on them. As he turned to face Ben, he noticed the ramp silently rise up and seal the ship.

‘Come, dad, come sit in your chair.’

Adam sat next to Ben in the passenger seat. Ben smiled as he watched Adam take in the detail of the inside of the ship. He noticed that on the opposite side to where the surfboards were, the starboard side, were two comfortable looking sofas, which could double as bunks. Between them was a small table cantilevered out of the wall. Next to them, in a separately defined area, was what looked like a galley with what Adam guessed was something like a small refrigerator and microwave oven. There were also some shelves with a variety of small packets of various things, Adam figured food, and there were some enclosures of various dimensions within which Adam imagined might be things like a garbage bin and a head. As he scanned the ship’s interior, Adam asked,

'How do you control this thing? I don't see any controls.'

'That's because there are no controls, dad. I control it with *mind control*.'

'Mind control?'

'Yeah, but it doesn't involve thinking. You do it too, dad, every time you move some part of your body. It's kind of the same. This is really, really ancient technology. To me the ship feels like a part of my body. I just will it, without even thinking.'

'Wow, Ben, that is amazing, but how can you see where you are going?'

'Aha, check this out.'

In an instant, the two men became surrounded with what appeared to be a translucent, spherical television screen. Suddenly Adam could see everything outside the ship, in whichever direction he looked. He could also partially see the inside of the ship through the screen.

'Ohh, you've got to be kidding me, Ben, this is the most insane thing I've ever seen.'

'I'll just dim the inside light, dad.'

As the ambient light of the interior of the ship dimmed to darkness, the screen lost its translucency. It appeared to Adam like there was now no ship surrounding them anymore, there was just the exterior, which was perfectly rendered on the most amazing spherical TV screen he'd ever seen, and them lounging on the comfortable chairs in the centre of it. It was as if they were levitating in their chairs. Adam got a brief flash of a feeling like he just needed to look at something and will himself towards it.

'It's called a *spherical, hologram display*, dad. It's supported by the air in the ship. There are cameras in the hull, and there is a, what would be called on Earth, central data processor, for the image. The whole deal is mind controlled. This is pretty ancient stuff as well, dad.'

'So when you fly places, you can see everything?'

'Yeah, in perfect colour and definition. Also we could see in X-ray, infra-red, or ultra-violet if we wanted to, all in full colour.'

'This is seriously a trip, Ben.'

'Are you ready to go?'

'Ready as I'll ever be.'

'Would you like to take a bit of a detour on the way home, dad?'

'A detour? Where to?'

'What's say we do a quick fly-past of the moon.'

'You're joking.'

'No, dad, for real.'

'I am now in your hands, son.' Adam hammed it up a bit, 'Oh yes, the moon sounds fine I think, Ben. Mars is such a *bitch* this time of year.'

'Funny, dad. OK, here we go.'

'How long will it take?'

'How long would you like it to take?'

'Are there any limits?'

'None.'

'All right, how about five minutes.'

Ben smiled. 'I wasn't thinking about crawling to the moon, dad, but OK, five minutes, give or take.'

'Will we feel anything?'

'Just one thing. We will feel massless. Neutralization of the mass of the ship and its contents is part of gravity flight. So we will feel ourselves become weightless and massless.'

'Yes, I can feel it now, Ben. What a strange feeling.'

They did not see the inside of the ship because it was completely dark. They only saw the outside view, perfectly rendered on the spherical holographic display all around them. Adam saw how they rose silently and rapidly, reaching the edge of the atmosphere in less than thirty seconds. He saw how the screen rotated, or the image on the screen, he wasn't sure, so that now they were facing directly at the moon. He suddenly realised that he couldn't feel any of the motion. There was no inertia or momentum. There was no feeling of acceleration. It felt like it wasn't real, like it was all happening on a very fancy TV inside a darkened room.

'I can't feel a thing,' he said to Ben.

'That's right, dad. This is massless flight. No sensation of acceleration or deceleration. That's why we don't have to wear seat belts and stuff doesn't fly around inside the ship.'

Adam watched the moon increase in size at a rapid rate. 'Are we in outer space?' he asked.

'Semi-outer. Technically we are in Earth-moon space. That is the space within the orbit-sphere of the moon. It's like a cell, kind of. True outer space, or *extracellular space*, is what you would understand as intergalactic space.'

'Ohhh, Ben, what is happening to me?'

'You're fine, dad. I'm here to take care of you and I'll never leave you again. And that's a promise.'

Within a few minutes they were fifty thousand feet above the moon's surface. Adam surmised,

'I suppose that we don't have to worry about going into any kind of orbit?'

'Correct, dad. In gravity flight, things like orbital dynamics don't exist. You just go where you want.'

Adam marvelled at the desolation of the moon. 'It's so dead.'

'Yeah.' Ben agreed.

Adam turned his head, 'And look at the Earth, wow, it looks bigger than I thought it would. And the stars, wow Ben, look at all the stars.'

Ben nodded, delighted at his father's obvious pleasure. 'Yeah, the cosmos is a most beautiful place.'

'Yeah.' Adam sighed, then he remembered, 'Hey Ben ...'

'Yeah, dad?'

'Can we go see Apollo 11?'

Ben looked at Adam. He paused for a moment before replying. Adam asked again,

'Well, can we?'

'Ahm, we could, dad ... if it was there ... but it isn't.'

'What happened to it?'

'Err, how shall I put this nicely, err, the whole Apollo program was a huge, err, military misdirection.'

'What?'

'Yeah, it's one of our favourite study subjects back on Rama. The moon landings never happened. They never went out of Earth orbit.'

'You're joking.'

'No, I'm not. To try to do it the way they pretended to do it was, and is, an impossibility. What they really did was put nukes into orbit after they found out about their electromagnetic pulse properties, EMP for short, and as a cover for the covert military missions, they made up the moon landings. It was the only way they could justify sending up the huge Saturn 5 rocket so many times, which they needed to place the heavy, multiple-nuke payloads into Earth orbit with. It also padded out NASA's budget very nicely and bought a lot of silence. After Apollo 17, they figured that they had enough nukes up there so they stopped the program. Not long after that, panic started to set in because they realised that they would have to bring those nukes back down some day. That's why they designed the shuttle. I don't think they can ever reveal the truth about the cover story because of the huge amount of embarrassment that would go with it. They still, to this day, justify the lie by classifying it as a military, ultra-top secret.'

'Are you sure about this, Ben?'

'Do you want to fly down to the *Sea of Tranquillity* and check it out?'

'Yeah, OK.'

Adam noticed two lines that looked like they were made of light appear on the surface of the moon. He could see that they intersected somewhere over the horizon. Ben flew the ship towards the area where the lines intersected. When they were directly above the cross he flew down to the surface. Adam noticed two co-ordinate numbers appear next to the cross. They were 0.8N and 23.5E. Above the numbers were the words *Eagle Landing*. They hovered about one hundred feet above the exact spot where Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were supposed to have walked on the moon. The crossed lines, numbers and words gradually faded away.

'This is the exact spot, dad. See ... nothing.'

Adam shook his head, bewildered by this shocking revelation.

'You know, Ben, I can still remember where I was when they landed here. I remember I was in first-year uni and I skipped a physics lecture to watch the landing on TV. It changed my whole life.'

'Do you want to go home now, dad?'

'Yeah,' Adam replied sounding somewhat confused and distant. He shook his head from side to side, then said, 'Yeah, let's do that, Benny.' After a short pause he commented, 'Wow, I can't believe what an exciting life you lead.'

'As will you, dad, as will you. Now watch this, and this is just a tiny fraction of the potential performance of this ship.'

Adam watched in awe as they returned to the top of the Earth's atmosphere in one second flat.

'Whoooooah, Ben, I ... am ... speechless. I am *totally* without speech.'

'Ha ha ha,' Ben laughed, 'that line's out of Seinfeld. You won't believe it, but it's one of our favourite shows on Rama. We love it. It's so funny. We even have Seinfeld get-togethers and laugh ourselves stupid.'

Adam was trying his best to assimilate the new reality and stay calm at the same time. He thought, '*There's absolutely no difference between all of this and the Nitrous trips I used to do, except that you got to come out of a gas trip.*'

Ben heard his father's thought as if he had spoken it to him.

'Mum told me about your involvement with Nitrous Oxide.'

'What? Did you read my thoughts?'

'I *am* a full telepath, dad.'

The ship descended through the atmosphere at many times free-fall speed.

'I never told your mother about the gas.'

'Well she knows all about it. She told me that it's what really got her interested in you. She said that you, a non-telepath, found a way into the mind plane and that she helped you along while you were in there. She said that she actually fell in love with you from two million light years away. She said that she came to Earth to marry you and have me. She said that I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for your adventurous spirit.'

Noosa was shrouded in total darkness by now. Ben brought the ship down vertically above Adam's house, slowing down as he approached closer. The exterior of the ship was almost invisible as it was the colour of pitch black. This was due to the *chameleon effect function* of the hull. The ship could mimic whatever environment it happened to be in and perfectly blend with the background, like a chameleon or octopus. This function was controlled by *non-thought mind control* as well, exactly like a chameleon or octopus does it.

3

Adam's house was located in Noosa Waters. It was said by many that Noosa Waters was the best waterfront development in the southern hemisphere. One of the reasons was that the expansive canal network was non-tidal. This was facilitated by a brilliantly designed lock system through which one had to pass in order to enter or exit Noosa Waters in a boat.

Adam's house was located in one of the most exclusive streets in Noosa. It was an architectural *tour de force*. The two-storey structure was custom designed for its location, the design taking into account sun angles in all seasons, prevailing winds and breezes, and seasonal variations in temperature. As a result the house could be kept open all year round without there ever being a need for heating or cooling. Also, because of the council's mosquito control program, the house had no fly screens.

The house was one of three structures on the property. The others were a two-car garage, incorporating a workshop and a two-bedroom, self-contained *granny flat*. The whole property was surrounded on three sides by a high wall.

The back of the house faced the water. There was a large L-shaped jetty there, as well as a beautifully engineered slipway, for Adam's boat.

'Someone might see us, Ben. I'm not sure how I would explain to my neighbours that I just arrived home in a UFO.'

Ben laughed, 'You crack me up, dad. Mum was right, you *are* a funny bloke. OK, firstly, we're in *camo mode* ...'

'Camo?'

'Camouflage. The outside of the ship is matt-black. Actually it's darker than the blackest black. It absorbs every photon that hits it, so it's pretty much invisible. Secondly, I'm telepathically tuned into every human that could possibly see us. I'm making sure that no one is watching. See, you've got nothing to worry about, dad, and if someone did happen to get a glimpse of something, well, I'd just expunge the memory from their poor little brains.' Ben smiled as he said that.

'Jees, Ben, how am I supposed to handle all this?'

'Well, dad, mum told me that you handled some pretty wild stuff in the past, and she told me not to worry about you and to give it to you straight-up, completely undiluted. She reckoned you'd be up to it, no problem.'

'Well, that was easy for her to say. I'm not as smart as you guys think, I don't think.'

'God love you, dad. I'll never let anything happen to you, ever, and you are plenty smart enough, don't you worry about that.'

The ship settled on the water, snugly fitting within the confines of the L shape of the jetty. Adam commented,

'It fits inside the jetty perfect.'

'Yeah, we made sure of that when the jetty was being built.'

'What, you got into the architect's head?'

'Well yeah, naturally.'

'Hey, I'm starting to feel heavy.'

'That's right, dad, we're getting our mass back.'

'Let me take a shot at this and then tell me how I went.'

'OK?'

'We are experiencing the effect of mass in our bodies because we are coming back under the influence of the ubiquitous graviton field all around us. Zeke taught me that. I'll never forget it.'

'That's pretty good, dad.'

Adam noticed through the spherical holographic display that the interior of the ship gradually illuminated with a soft light. Sitting in their seats, they faced the house. The display faded away and only the interior of the ship was now visible. A panel opened directly in front of them. It appeared to Adam that it was a section of the upper surface of the hull. The panel flipped up through nearly 180 degrees and fixed itself into position nearly, but not quite, touching the paving of Adam's terrace.

'Ta daaa,' exclaimed Ben cheerfully. 'After you, dad.'

'Oh no, Benny, you are *my* guest. After *you*.'

'Thanks, dad.'

Adam walked out of the ship behind Ben and then led him into the house. He switched on some lights and his iPod player. Boz Scaggs began to sing *Harborlights* at a low volume.

‘The first thing I want to do is get out of my board shorts and have a shower. Why don’t you look around and make yourself comfortable while I do that.’

‘OK, dad. I might bring your surfboard in while I wait for you.’

4

After Adam showered and dressed, he poured them a cold drink and sat down with Ben on the outside veranda overlooking the water. He began the conversation.

‘That was one of the most amazing things I’ve ever done, Ben.’

‘Yeah, I never tire of flying the ship either.’

‘You know, I was thinking about something while I was having my shower. Those nukes you mentioned, the ones you reckon they put into orbit, what’s all that about?’

‘You know, dad, the most bizarre thing about that is that we Rama know more about the orbiting nukes that you poor Earthlings do.’ Ben chuckled. ‘It all started back in the mid-forties, but the test that really woke them up was the high altitude test called the *Starfish Prime* test. In July 1962, they set off a 1.44-megaton nuclear device in space, 250 miles above the mid-Pacific Ocean. The resulting electromagnetic pulse knocked out a whole bunch of electronic equipment in Hawaii, nearly 900 miles away.

‘Starfish Prime was the first definitive test in a series of US high-altitude nuclear tests in 1962 known as *Operation Fishbowl*. Further tests gathered more data, which was definitive enough to enable the maniacs to accurately identify the physical mechanisms that were producing the EMPs.

‘That same year, 1962, the Soviets also performed a series of EMP tests in space over Kazakhstan, and found out, to their shock and surprise, about the *space bomb*’s incredible destructive power to all electronic systems.

‘If a bomb was set off in orbit above the US, say, the resulting EMP would fry all the electronics right across the whole continent. There would be no physical damage, no one would be hurt, but all communications, all energy

supplies and thus all food distribution would cease. A horror scenario would unfold where the population, unable to access fuel, food and water, would begin to die off in the most hellish way. An EMP attack is the worst-case scenario for any nation. It means death of the population, but not the destruction of the non-electronic infrastructure. A couple of months after the EMP, the attacking army would just roll in and take over without experiencing any resistance. They would repair the electronic networks and continue to thrive in the new land.'

'Jees, Ben!'

'Back in the sixties, there was a pretty frightening *cold war* going on between the Americans and the Soviets. There was a *total* lack of trust. They made each other believe that they could be blown up by nukes at any second. Remember the *duck and cover* routine they taught the kids in school? In the middle of this extreme distrust they both discovered the EMP. As it turned out, it was the Americans that took the big, bold step of putting nukes into orbit. This gave them a tactical advantage. A nuke flew over the USSR roughly every hour and a half. All it took was the push of a button and it would have been *bye bye Russkies*. It was serious stuff. That's why they needed a serious deception. The American people would have never accepted the truth about the *space bombs*, so they fed them a lie, the kind of lie they would never ever want to let go of, even if all evidence against it stared them right in their collective faces.'

'God, Ben, what a frightening story. So are there nukes up there now?'

'Yeah. It's like a Mexican standoff up there. Don't let all the lovey-dovey behaviour in the space station fool you. In truth the idiots have got their guns pointed at each other's heads, with the triggers cocked. The main thing that you need to know, dad, is that this planet has been taken over by certifiably mad people.'

'So the first thing most people will know about this is when their power goes out and their phones don't work? Jees, Ben, their refrigerators will go off.'

'Nothing will work. The cars won't start, petrol stations won't pump, supermarkets won't open and water won't come out of the taps. People will die of thirst and starve. After about a month, ninety plus percent of the population will be dead. It could be as high as ninety nine point nine.'

There was a pause while both men contemplated the horrendous scenario. Then Ben remembered, 'I brought you a gift, dad. It's something Zeke and I made for you.'

Adam's eyes lit up,

'A gift? For me? You and Zeke?'

'Yeah dad, let me go and get it.'

Ben zipped out of the house and returned a minute later carrying an oddly shaped, drawstring bag about the size of a small suitcase. He placed it on Adam's dining-room table and proceeded to extricate the contents.

'What is it?' Adam enquired, all excited.

'Nobody, dad, I mean absolutely nobody on Earth has one of these.'

Ben pulled the contraption out of the bag. The whole thing was coloured a deep matt black.

'It looks like something you put on your back,' observed Adam.

'This, oh father of mine,' said Ben proudly as he held up the strange object, 'is a *lev-pack*. Lev is short for levitation.'

Adam's eyes popped clear out of their sockets, his jaw hit the floor and his eyebrows hit the ceiling as he excitedly asked,

'For me?'

'Yeah, dad. It was all Zeke's idea. He's been working on it for years. First he made one for himself, then he made this one. It's especially designed for non-telepathic people.'

Ben passed the lev-pack to Adam who proceeded to closely examine its design.

'It's pretty neat for a Zeke design. He was usually a bit untidy with his constructions.'

'Zeke has come a long way since you last saw him, dad. You won't believe how much he has progressed, although fundamentally he's still the same Zeke.'

'So how does this thing work?' Adam pointed at two multi-triangular metal frames, which were attached to what appeared like an anatomically shaped back-plate from which hung six belts and two what appeared like control cables on the end of which were handgrips with brake-type levers.

'OK, dad, it goes on your back just like the jetpack I made for you. These triangular frames are *gravity sails*. The reason they have no apparent effect now is because they are neutralizing each other. You see, dad, each sail has a natural component of gravity lift of, I believe Zeke said, 412 kilograms. If both triangles are pointed at the ground in parallel, they will generate 824 kilograms of lift. The reason they aren't doing anything right now is because they are in a neutralizing position, 180 degrees relative to each other, pointed out, pushing against each other, horizontal to the ground when the lev-pack is being worn. Am I confusing you, dad? It's pretty simple really.'

'I can't believe it, but I got it. God, Ben, I am getting pretty excited here. So I assume that the hand control adjusts the angle of the sails away from the neutral position, towards the ground. And the more towards the ground the sails point, the greater the lift, with a maximum lift component of, what was it again?'

'824 kilograms. You're pretty smart, dad.'

'Not really, Ben, I've just already been through this trip with Zeke, all those years ago, with the gravity sail you left behind. This is amazing. And you reckon that I can fly this thing?'

'Oh yeah, dad. This pack is yours ... and nobody else's. Flying it will be a piece of cake. There's a suit I brought that goes with it. It's in the bag.'

Ben rummaged in the bag and retrieved a garment, which looked like it was made of a material similar to Neoprene. It was a deep matt black colour. He gave it to Adam who held it up in front of himself.

'Wow, Ben, but isn't it a bit small?'

'It stretches, dad, and there's a balaclava, a pair of booties, gloves and a pair of special goggles to go with it. It's designed to provide 100 percent body cover with no leaks. We couldn't give you chameleon effect, but the suit does have a thermo-control function. Basically, if you're too cold, it will warm you, and if you're too hot, it will cool you. It's the cold that is usually the problem.'

'Ben, you don't know how bizarre all this is to me.'

'Yeah, I figured that it might be, but mum assured me that you would adjust without any adverse effects. Get used to it, dad, this is the new reality and we're never going back to the old one again.'

'So my guess is that the suit is matt black in order to make it difficult to see in the dark.'

'That's correct, dad. I think that you will prefer to fly it at night in order to keep it a secret. The suit will keep you comfortable no matter how cold it gets outside, and the goggles will enhance your night vision.'

Zeke spent three years designing and building the lev-pack. Ben assisted, but only when asked to.

The lev-pack design was brilliant in its simplicity. It was worn on the back and held in place by a six-point harness. Two straps passed over the shoulders, two around the waist and two, wider, more anatomically shaped and padded ones, between the legs. It was extremely light, weighing in at just two and a half kilos. When worn, the two eight-inch-per-side, matt-black, metallic, multi-triangular frames located themselves at shoulder height and in neutral position pointed outwards, 180 degrees relative to each other. Thus their 412 kilograms of lift was being directed horizontally, parallel to the ground. And because they pointed in exactly the opposite direction to one another, they cancelled each other out, thus producing zero final component of lift.

There were two control cables, one for each hand. The right one controlled the amount of lift while the left one adjusted the vector angle of that lift.

The right hand control was like a lightly spring-loaded brake lever with a loop that passed around the fingers. This allowed the user to actively engage and disengage the lever. At the base of each handgrip was a wrist-strap. This ensured that the handgrip stayed in the user's hand if it was let go of. As the user squeezed the lever, he rotated the triangular gravity sails downward, via a cable, away from their 180-degree neutral position. The further downward the sails pointed, the greater the vertical vector of lift. Zeke designed a special *restrictor zone* at a point where the sails were angled roughly eight degrees downward. At that angle the lev-pack generated exactly 73.25 kilos of lift. Zeke figured that that was pretty close to Adam's weight. This angle of the sails was called the *hover angle*. He also designed a fine adjustment for this as well. He wanted Adam to be able to fine-tune the lev-pack's *hover setting* to precisely match his weight on any given flight. This would allow him to carry small loads if he needed to.

So the way it worked was like this. The user, called *the levitator*, strapped the lev-pack on his back. Initially there was no effect because the sails were at the neutralising angle. As the levitator squeezed the right lever, pulling on the cable and rotating the sails downward, he felt the pack begin to apply upward force on his body through the belts. As he continued to squeeze, the levitator felt the lever *fall into a hole* where it would stay without any pressure. This was the *hover position* of the control lever. In this position the levitator would hover at whatever altitude he set the pack into *hover mode*. So if, for example, the levitator had his lev-pack set in hover while standing on the ground and he jumped, say, one foot into the air, he would remain hovering one foot in the air over the same spot for as long as the lev-pack remained in the hover mode. He could let go of both hand controls and still remain hovering, as this was one of the *set positions* that Zeke designed into the control. If the levitator wanted to go straight up from there, he just squeezed the right lever. If he let go of the lever at any altitude, he reverted back to hover mode at that altitude.

If he wanted to go forward, the levitator squeezed the left lever. This angled the gravity sails outwards from his back introducing a forward horizontal vector of lift. Zeke designed three set positions into that lever. They were forward, hover and reverse. The reverse angling of the sails was facilitated by pushing the left lever forward of hover set position. The forward and reverse set positions could be adjusted out with a tensioning knob if the levitator wished. If the tensioning knob was set to loose, the forward and reverse components of lift increased and decreased in a smoothly progressive motion, like a car accelerator. Zeke put an adjustable stop on the right hand cable. It limited how far down the sails could be angled. He set it so that Adam's maximum climb rate would be no more than 2000 feet per minute. This also limited his maximum horizontal speed to about 210 miles per hour.

Turning and general body position was totally facilitated by air drag. The faster the levitator flew, the more horizontal his body position became because of the high shoulder placement of the gravity sails. His legs simply got blown back as he flew through the air. To turn, he stuck out either his left or right arm, or foot, using the air drag to change the direction of flight. Zeke designed the flying to feel very intuitive and birdlike.

Landing the lev-pack required the most skill. The levitator had to push the right lever forward from the hover position. This allowed him to descend. He had to be very careful, though, because he could easily land too hard and hurt himself. The best technique, while learning, was to come into a hover about a foot off the ground then push the right lever all the way forward and drop onto both feet.

5

'You know, Ben, that I am absolutely *starving*. I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast.'

'Oh, sorry dad, we should eat something. What do you suggest?'

'I'll make us some toasted sandwiches.'

'Great, dad, and afterwards we could fly and pick up your van.'

'Fly?'

'Yeah. I've got my levitation suit with me, and you've got your pack. You just need to practice a few landings first, but that shouldn't be a problem for you because mum told me what a gun hang glider pilot you were.'

'I'm not so sure that I would use the word *gun*, Ben.'

They enjoyed their sandwiches lost in catch-up conversation. Adam asked a million questions and Ben answered them as best as he could.

'We need to sort out your affairs, dad, permanently. Where you are going you won't need any of your stuff.'

Ben informed Adam that his young friend in the water, Slater, and his nana, Lucy, had been selected for future relocation. He told him that a Rama girl, named Thebe, would come to manage their case. He suggested that all of his father's assets could go to Slater and Lucy and that they might want to get cracking with the transfer so that they could leave Earth as soon as practicable. Adam shrugged his shoulders and said,

'I'm guessing that you know best, Ben. I can call Andrew, my accountant, tomorrow and make an appointment. He is very efficient and I'm sure that he can organise everything very quickly. I just don't know what he'll think about the whole thing.'

'Leave that to me, dad. He'll think that everything is perfectly normal. I could come with you when you go and see him.'

'You know, I can still remember how your mum could mess with peoples' minds. And Zeke told me about how one time you made some kid piss his pants up in Helensburgh. You telepaths could really wreak havoc if you wanted to.'

'You don't know the half of it, dad.'

6

After dinner, Ben suggested that Adam try on his *flight suit*.

'You don't wear any clothes underneath, dad.'

'What, not even my undies?'

'No, nothing. The suit reacts to the temperature differential between your body and the outside environment. You want it to be 100 percent efficient.'

Adam went upstairs to his room to put on the suit, while Ben slipped out to his ship to retrieve and put on his *levitation suit*.

Ben's levitation suit was standard issue for all Rama. They were given it when they were still little kids and it stretched with them as they grew. It was a one piece, body-hugging costume, with a hood, booties and gloves. The only parts of the body not covered by the suit material were the eyes. These were always protected by special, tightly-fitting, polychromatic, almond-shaped goggles. Basically, the brighter the glare, the darker the goggles became. At night, in total darkness, the goggles became completely clear, and if willed, gave him perfect, full colour, night vision. In flight, he, like most Rama, preferred to follow the contours of the ground, flying amongst the trees or between buildings.

Another useful feature of the suit was its chameleon effect. By changing colours it could blend with whatever environment it happened to be in. This pretty much rendered him invisible. Even the goggles harmonised their colour with the rest of the suit. For example, if he stood in front of a red brick wall, or a green leafy bush, the suit perfectly mimicked the bricks or leaves, making him appear to melt into the background.

All the functions of the suit were affected through *mind-control*. Thus it was almost impossible to see him if he was in camouflage mode. The kids on Rama, being kids, went in exactly the opposite direction. They loved to make elaborate colour patterns in their suits and always tried to outdo each other with more outrageous designs. The hood and goggles were mainly worn when the suit was

being used for flight, otherwise they were pulled off the head and allowed to hang behind the neck.

Incorporated into the material and running down the arms, across the shoulders, down the back, over the buttocks and down the back of the legs were panels of gravity membrane called *sails*. When activated, they began to develop gravity lift and began to move him as gently or as rapidly as he wanted. His non-thoughts were transmitted through the hood and down through the suit into the sails.

Adam was dressed first. He returned back downstairs to the kitchen and waited for Ben there. In total amazement, he observed Ben float into the house through the back door.

'Bloody hell, Ben.'

'Cool eh, dad.'

Ben touched down as light as a feather right in front of his father.

'I suppose it's got gravity sails in it.'

'Correct, dad, and it's mind-controlled. You couldn't fly it because you're not telepathic. That's why Zeke made you the lev-pack. Why don't you put it on.'

Adam strapped on his lev-pack and commented,

'It's so light that it almost feels like wearing nothing.'

Adam strapped the hand controls to his wrists. Ben began his instruction.

'Now dad, first I want you to try hover.'

'What, here in the kitchen?'

'Sure, hover's OK in here. Now, leave the left control alone. That is for forward and reverse motion. Slowly squeeze the right handgrip until you get to the *hover position*. You'll feel it settle in that position. You can even let go of the lever and it will stay there.'

Adam did as he was told. As he squeezed the hand control, he felt a lifting force on his body through the straps.

'This is just like hang gliding, Ben. It feels the same as when a hang glider lifts you in your harness.'

'That's very interesting because I've never flown a hang glider,' replied Ben.

Adam felt the hand lever slip into hover position. He could feel now how all his weight was being taken up by the lev-pack. Ben quickly instructed his father,

'Don't try to kangaroo hop, dad, because you won't come back down. You'll just float at whatever height you jumped to. If you adjust down the hover setting with the little round knob on your control, then you'll be able to do moon walks.'

Adam rotated the knob slightly. He suddenly rose to the ceiling and got tangled up in the ceiling fan. Ben laughed out loud,

'I think you should have turned the knob the other way, dad.'

Adam carefully turned the hover adjustment knob the other way and gently floated back to the floor. He then turned it down a fraction more and felt how his lev-pack was now supporting about 95 percent of his weight. He carefully, with just the spring of his toes, hopped about two feet into the air, then gently floated back to the floor.

'Oh Ben, I love *this* ... this is the best gift ... this is just ...'

Adam was lost for words.

'Zeke and I figured you'd like it. And dad, it will work forever because it's a gravity sail. No fuel, no engine.'

Adam began *moon hopping* around his house. He laughed continuously as he did it. Up to this stage Adam was wearing the matt-black, body-hugging suit, the booties, gloves and balaclava. He still needed to put on the goggles to be fully dressed for flight.

'Dad, put on your goggles and let's venture outside.'

Adam did as he was told. He exclaimed,

'Wow, I can see in the dark.'

There were ten steps from the back door of the house down to the terrace adjacent to the canal. Adam jumped them all in one, slow motion, floating bound.

'I've dreamt of things like this, Ben.'

He then focused on the roof of the house, which was two storeys up, and with a measured two-legged spring, jumped up and gently landed on the roof. He laughed some more then hopped off the roof and softly landed back on the terrace, some thirty feet below.

'A person could get addicted to this, Ben.'

'Tell me about it, dad. And this is nothing. Wait till you ...' Ben paused and regathered his thoughts. 'OK, listen dad, I think that it's a good idea at this stage to leave your hover setting at around where you've got it, about 95 percent, I

reckon. Here's the deal. When you squeeze the right handgrip further, you will generate more lift, heaps more if you're not careful. If that happens, just let go of the control and it will revert back to 95 percent hover and basically bring you back into control. It doesn't matter how high you are when you do that, you will float down to the ground like a feather every time. 95 percent is a good setting for landings when you are a novice. Later, when you are an expert, you'll be doing some really wild stuff. Wait till you see what Zeke gets up to, you won't believe it. Now dad, the left lever is for going forward and back. Once you are in the air, squeeze the left lever a touch and you will feel the forward motion. You will need a touch more than hover on the right lever when you want to go forward. To slow down, stop or go backwards, you push the left lever forward.'

'How do I turn?'

'To turn you need forward motion. You simply stick out your right or left arm or leg and the air drag will turn you. It helps if you launch facing in the direction you want to go. Why don't we try to fly across the water to the vacant block on the other side?'

'OK. So I face where I want to go, squeeze the right control, hop in the air, gently squeeze the left control and see you later, Ben.'

Adam hopped in the air and when he was about ten feet above the terrace began to drift across the canal, which was about 100 feet wide. Ben flew beside him mind-controlling his own levitation suit.

'That's it, dad, that's it. Now take it easy, don't speed up too much, that's it, OK we're over the landing zone, let go of the left control and go to hover with your right. Now push the left till you stop going forward.'

Adam did as he was told. His forward motion stopped and he floated down to the ground as lightly as a feather.

'Well done, dad. That was perfect.'

Adam pushed the right control all the way forward and neutralised the lev-pack. As they stood there together, in pitch darkness, he came over to his son and hugged him.

'Thank you, Benny, thank you for this gift and thank you for coming back.'

'I love you, dad, and mum loves you, more than you can even imagine. And Zeke too, dad, he loves you too and just you wait, you might think that you know

what adventure means, but you don't, not even in your wildest fantasies.' Ben stepped back from his dad, looked at him proudly and declared, 'I think that you are ready to fly to the National Park car park and pick up your van.'

They rose together to about one hundred feet then set off in a north-easterly direction towards the National Park. Adam's many years of hang gliding experience made him feel totally at home in the air and he adapted to the lev-pack at lightning speed. As they were both the colour of pitch black, they were almost totally invisible. They flew silently above the streetlights and traffic and glided into the car park from the ocean side. The Kombi was the only vehicle still parked there. Adam retrieved the keys from their hiding place and unlocked the van. He removed the lev-pack from his shoulders, placed it in the back of the van and sat in the driver's seat. Ben sat next to him and made a comment.

'This is a pretty cool van, dad.'

'Thanks, Ben, I spent years restoring it. I just love it. It's kind of like *my* space ship.'

The last thing Ben did that day was remotely fly his ship about a mile out into Laguna Bay and park it a couple of hundred feet underwater on the sandy bottom. It would remain hidden there until next required.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

JUNK

1

The sky-blue, De Tomaso Pantera rumbled into the underground, King's Cross, car-parking station. It was early Friday evening on *14th May 2010*. The whole parking station shook with the thunder coming out of the four stainless exhaust pipes. Alex parked *The Beast*, which was what he called it, and walked out into the street. It was a perfect, balmy, autumn evening, perfect for his and Sophia's special date.

That night was the five-year anniversary of their first date. He remembered it like it was yesterday. It was branded into his memory and the thing that stood out more than anything else was their very first kiss. He remembered every nanosecond of it because it was the most perfect, most romantic moment of his life. He remembered how they had a pleasant dinner at Jordon's Restaurant in Darling Harbour, and how she enjoyed a couple of champagnes and laughed at all his jokes, and how she let him know that she was a bit of a *cheap drunk*. He remembered how they walked along the water and how they were surrounded by all the lights everywhere, and how he somehow summoned up the courage to hug her there, in the midst of all the humanity, and kiss her warm, delectable lips, and feel them, like lips he'd never felt before, and he remembered how he heard her whisper, *'he knows how to kiss'*, and how they had been inseparable ever since.

He wore the same dark suit and tie, a rarity for him, and he carried a dozen red roses and a box of chocolates, just like the first time. She wore the same sexy little black dress and high heels, and she made him wait for her in the street, in front of the doorway of her building, just like the first time. It took quite a few dates before she allowed him up into her apartment. He loved that about her.

They retraced all the steps of their first date that night, and by the end of it, they weren't sure which night was more romantic. After five years, they were more in love with each other than ever. They still lived apart though. He suggested, from time to time, that she move in with him, but she always said, 'we will see.' She called it *shackling up* and always expressed concern about it

because it went against her Lebanese culture. To be truthful, he actually enjoyed the relationship they shared because it gave them both their independence and allowed them space to pursue their own respective interests. But they shared one constant, common longing, and that was to be with one another.

2

It was *Sunday 23rd September 2007*. It was late at night. Prof. Lloyd was ensconced in his study, buried in paper. His phone rang. He answered it,

'It's your money.'

'Hi, Lloyd?'

'Alex?'

'Sorry it's so late. What time is it?'

'It's eleven thirty. Did you call me to ask me the time?'

'No, Lloyd, I'm sorry, but I'm in a bit of a mindspin. I think that I found something. Did I wake you?'

'No. Lucky for you I'm reading mid-term papers. Actually, it's nice to get a break. So what is so important to call me so late, and where are you?'

'I'm still at the uni, in the lab. I think that I might have stumbled onto something.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. I'm so excited.'

'So what have you found?'

'OK, you know how I've been working through the thousands of samples we've got in store, and how I've been looking for repeating sequences in the non-coding DNA?'

'Yeah?'

'Well, just as it began to look like there were no repetitions, no patterns, I stumbled across one, but not in the way we thought. It was hidden in a miniscule part of the sequence. You could look for it all your life and not find it.'

'You have got my attention, Alex.'

'Good, cause you won't believe what I think I found.'

'So how did you find it?'

'Well, I just went on a wild hunch. I took a portion and amplified it, then I took a portion of that and amplified *it*. I did that twenty three times and what are

the odds that I would stumble onto a repeating pattern. It was there, staring me right in the face. There were exactly forty-seven repeats, then the sequence reverted back to apparent randomness.'

'That's pretty interesting, Alex, and probably the biggest fluke in the history of genetics. You should buy yourself a lottery ticket. What is your postulation?'

'Mate, I haven't told you the whole story. This is going to send shivers down your spine.'

'Shivers, eh?'

'Yeah. I checked the file on the person whose DNA I was analysing, and guess what.'

'What?'

'He was forty-seven years old when he died.'

'Bull ... shit!'

'Seriously. It completely blew my mind. I'm going to stop now. I'm totally rooted. I've been working for thirty-six hours straight. I'm going home to bed. I'll call you tomorrow. You ought to come in and check it out.'

'I will, Alex. This is huge news. The hairs are still standing on the back of my neck. Go get some sleep. I'll let Eva know. She'll be really happy for you.'

3

They couldn't get together on Monday the 24th, or Tuesday the 25th. They finally all met up in the lab at uni in the evening of the 26th. Eva brought dinner in a hamper. There was roast chicken, prosciutto, salami, three cheeses, a jar of olives, salad, two baguettes and three bottles of Brokenwood. Lloyd brought his iPod player. Sophia was there as well, as Alex had picked her up after work.

They sat on high stools around one of the lab benches, which Eva covered with a white tablecloth. As they ate and drank, they discussed Alexander's work.

'To tell you the truth, I'm actually glad that you guys couldn't make it the last couple of days. It gave me a chance to progress a little further with my work.'

'What else have you found?' Lloyd asked.

'Plenty. I continued the amplification process. What I found amazed me, and I reckon it will amaze you as well.'

'We're already amazed,' said Eva.

'I am not so amazed,' added Sophia cheerfully. 'I must be careful not to drink too much of this wine because it will go straight to my head.'

'Don't worry, Sophia,' said Eva, 'it is a party after all.'

'As I zoomed in between two of the repetitions, you wouldn't believe what emerged.'

'What?'

'There were thirteen sub-repetitions between each of the forty-seven repetitions. Do you know what that suggests?'

Lloyd guessed it immediately.

'Thirteen orbits of the moon in a year.'

'That was exactly what I thought of as well, Lloyd. Then I figured that if that was the case, then, if I continued the amplification process I should find ...'

Eva butted in, 'Twenty-eight sub-sub-repetitions, I bet, representing the twenty eight days in a month.'

Alex smiled, 'Eva is right, that is exactly what I found.'

'Great work, Alex. Have you come to any conclusions?'

'It's too early for that, except that it seems like living organisms are linked to time via the rotation of the Earth around its axis, the orbit of the Moon around the Earth and the orbit of the Earth around the Sun.'

'I wonder if there are sub-sub-sub-repetitions representing the hours?' Eva asked.

'I am beginning to suspect that there might be because of the one hour forward time shift I had in the shower. Remember?'

'How could we forget?' replied Lloyd. 'That was what started this whole business in the first place.'

'Would you like some chicken, Alex?'

'Yes please, Eva.'

'That is a lovely necklace, Sophia.'

'Thank you, Eva. Alex bought it for me for our second anniversary.'

'Hello, it looks like we have to open another bottle,' commented Lloyd.

'There's just one more thing I found out.'

Everyone looked at Alex.

'I had a close look at the repeats. There are forty-seven repeats. After the last repeat, there are five sub-repeats. After the last sub-repeat, there are twenty-one sub-sub-repeats. Then I had another look at the person's file, the person whose DNA this is, and found out that he was exactly forty-seven years, one hundred and sixty-one days old when he died. Well, 161 days is 28 times 5, which is 140, plus 21 is 161. Forty-seven, five, twenty-one. That is pretty mind blowing if you ask me.'

The group sat there completely stunned, except for Sophia, struggling to come to terms with the implications of the bizarre discovery.

'Am I missing something?' she asked. 'Does this mean that everything is destiny? I knew it was destiny when I met my Alexander.'

No one else spoke. They were all considering the apparent possibility that their moment of death was pre-determined when they were conceived because it was programmed into their *junk-DNA*, and that they could probably find out the year, month and day of their own death by simply performing a *DNA* analysis on themselves.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

FISH

1

It took seven nights before Thebe finally spent a night in the house, but when she did, it was in Slater's bed. Slater and Lucy became completely smitten by her. She was like a shining light, like an angel that had come and settled in their house.

It was early morning, *Saturday 15th May 2010*. It had been eight days since Thebe's arrival. They sat on high stools around the kitchen and sipped hot cups of coffee as the conversation rambled. The main topic was Lucy's back and its miraculous improvement.

'Mana is a most remarkable substance,' professed Thebe. 'I am still left in awe and amazement whenever I witness its healing quality.'

This morning was Lucy's third morning of having her breakfast in the kitchen. And she was spending more and more time out of bed and becoming active. Thebe continued to prepare Lucy for her Fish initiation by talking about it at opportune moments. She knew that Lucy's prior experience with psychedelics would now assist her with the Fish.

'Pretty soon, Lucy, when we are close enough, we may do the Fish together. Your back can be made like it was never broken. It happens in the Fish.'

'What, is it like an acid trip?'

'It's like an acid trip on top of an acid trip. You need a lot of control and absolute stillness of brain and body, and you need to practice the perfection of breath. That is my department. I will even breathe for both of us. Our breaths will be in perfect harmony. You will, in the main, be a passenger, although that won't diminish the experience. Your brain will calm to stillness, so you won't react. It's kind of a numb feeling. You'll start to slobber ...' Thebe began to laugh, then stopped herself, '... just kidding, nobody slobbers. I control the trip. You experience it, but I control it. You will feel me merge with you, through your back, and we will merge as one, and you will feel my control. You will feel your body straighten and the muscles in your spine tense. I will perceive your flow and ... ah ...' Thebe searched for a simple explanation of the natural process, but

gave up in the end, finally opting for, ‘... ah ... we will just let the *mother-flow* do her thing and ... ah ... straighten out the kinks. The Fish lets it happen. ... After, I thought we could go on a bit of a look-see.’

‘A look-see?’

2

May 2010 was a vintage month of classic perfection on the points of Noosa. Slater and Thebe hadn’t missed a day of barrels since they met. Each day revolved around the go-outs, and they revolved around the tides, winds and swells on any given day. They also revolved around Lucy’s meals, although she was beginning to cook up her own, and when told it was no trouble to prepare her meals for her she still insisted that she was happy to do it because she was really enjoying it.

They had to pay attention to their diet because they were using up so much energy. So most of the non-surfing time was spent congregating in the kitchen either preparing, cooking or cleaning up after meals.

They went surfing in Slater’s Kombi only once after they met. On all other occasions Slater suggested for them to go out in the boat. The ride out to Granite, on the average, took forty-five minutes, from jetty to anchor.

Slater had just recently become the proud owner of a new, Mercury 420 Ocean Runner rigid inflatable boat. He donated Adam’s old boat, which was also a Mercury, but was called Quicksilver, and which was still in excellent condition, to the Noosa surf club. The boat was powered by a 25hp Yamaha two stroke, tiller steered. It was a huge improvement on Adam’s old inflatable, which did not have a rigid keel. The new boat had a fibreglass centre section, which was deeply Veed, which made it perfect for running across the often-choppy water of Laguna Bay. The boat also performed much better across the treacherous bar at the mouth of Noosa River. Slater had made it out of the river through over two-metre-high swells. He always reckoned,

‘You just gotta wait for a lull.’

They strapped their boards in the bow of the boat, one on top of the other. They untied from the jetty in Slater’s back yard and motored off at four knots around the canals, past all the Noosa mansions, to the lock. That part of the trip took about 15 minutes. They passed through the mechanical wonder of the lock

and sped off down Noosa River towards the river-mouth. During lower tides he had to pay special attention to shallows and channels, particularly when crossing the bar. They then sped off across Laguna Bay on a straight trajectory to Granite Bay. He anchored off the break and they went surfing.

3

As it turned out, they had not missed a day together since they met. Slater especially loved the way she jumped into the shower with him every time he was in there.

‘It’s an old Rama custom to shower together,’ she explained.

‘It’s an old Earth custom to get horny,’ he replied.

Around about this point in time, Thebe began to introduce Slater to the art of *Creative Telepathy*. Even though Slater was a full-telepath, he was completely untrained. Virtually all of his meagre telepathic ability was used for reception. He only had a rudimentary idea of how to transmit, as did Lucy. They had learned to think to each other mainly because they could naturally hear each other all the time, like an open phone line. They also realised that they could manipulate other people’s thoughts and behaviours because fundamentally they were telepaths and their subjects weren’t.

Creative Telepathy involved the higher art of creating realities in one’s mind and holding them there. As one holds the reality in their focus, another telepath may experience it as well if there is a *mind-thread* established between them. But creative telepathy begins at the beginning, with the basics. Thebe began an early morning meditation session, every morning. She sat Slater on the floor of their room, facing the wall. She took a pencil and marked a small dot on the wall, at his eye level, then said,

‘Concentrate on that. I bet that I can distract you without touching you. Breathe deep and smooth. I will guide your breath from time to time. Now, make a bead on the dot and don’t let anything break it. If you break the bead, even for a second, even with one eye, it means that you have lost your concentration. Your opponent, whose task it is to be your telepathic distraction, becomes the winner of the game.’

The game was called *the concentration game*. It was played with highly creative enthusiasm by all telepaths. Thebe's favourite style of distraction was the *curiosity killed the cat* variety. 'Get them wondering,' she used to think.

Slater progressed quickly. At first she got him all the time. She once used a distraction that her Rama friend, Ambriel, had shown her.

A clenched hand appeared just above Slater's dot. He noticed it in his peripheral vision, but did not react. He remained zeroed in on the dot. Very gradually, the hand began to sprinkle fine black dust from within its clenched fingers. The black dust floated gently past Slater's dot and down to the floor. He maintained a steady, constant bead on the dot as the black dust floated enticingly past it, down, past his peripheral vision, to the floor. Suddenly he became aware of a thought that was beginning to germinate in his brain. His discipline to *not-think* was part of the stillness, part of the focus and part of the bead. To *think* was to break the bead on the dot, *because you were somewhere else*. Suddenly he thought, 'I wonder if the dust is settling on the floor?' He looked down and saw the dust disappear into thin air.

That was one of her favourite victories and one of his favourite defeats.

Creative telepathy was a deeper, much more intimate form of communication between humans. It was not diminished by distance as it occurred in the mind. When humans became telepathic, a new type of society developed, one with fewer machines. Also, the humans became more serene because as their telepathic ability emerged their perception changed. It broadened and deepened. They especially began to sense the *vibes* being emitted by all living things. To the telepath, the non-telepathic human was a hornet's nest of thoughts and reactive emotions. It felt like standing next to four jackhammers, not a place to loiter for too long. For a telepath, being on a non-telepathic planet felt like being the only sighted person in a sea of blind, deaf, mutes.

4

Seven weeks went by. They sat around on the veranda at night, overlooking the water, and smoked Thebe's Mana. Lucy's energy had returned and her pain was gone, and she only went to bed to go to sleep.

The three of them were like a close family now, and it felt to them like they had been together for much longer than they actually had. Thebe sensed that the

time for the Fish was getting close. There was not much preparation, except for fasting from meat for three days.

'You don't want to be doing Fish and digesting meat at the same time ... trust me!' Thebe's comment came with a cautioning tone, which was borne out of prior experience.

The only other thing Thebe requested was that they do the Fish behind a locked door.

'You don't want anybody walking in on you when you're on the Fish ... seriously ... you get pretty *non-comprende*, if you know what I mean. You definitely don't want anybody walking in on you when you're like that.'

They sat on two square, wooden, kitchen-table chairs that they placed next to each other in one of the bedrooms. They locked the door behind them and sat on the chairs.

'See how a whole bunch of alertness disperses from your brain as soon as you lock the door,' remarked Thebe.

Lucy sat on the left chair, Thebe on the right. Thebe produced her small, crystalline container of Fish and a pair of fine, gold tweezers, and placed them on the coffee table in front of them. It was early morning and they were both alert and fully switched-on. Thebe then produced her solid-gold box of Mana and the little ceramic white pipe. She breathed in deeply, closed her eyes and whispered,

'Feel the serenity.'

Lucy was already in passenger mode. She wasn't going to do, or say, anything. Thebe opened the containers and picked up the pipe. She loaded some Mana into the pipe and quipped,

'Welcome to Rama.'

She then picked up the tweezers and skilfully extracted a small grain of Fish, about the size of a small sugar crystal, and placed it in the centre of the pipe on top of the Mana.

'May I light it for you?'

She gave Lucy the pipe and lit it for her. Lucy smoked the whole load in one drag and held it in for a while before she blew it back out.

'It takes about five minutes to kick in. The whole Fish is done with the eyes closed, so close your eyes and don't open them for any reason.'

Lucy closed her eyes into blackness. The room was quite dark as all the blinds were closed.

'Now sit up straight and square. Spread your knees apart a bit, about a foot and a bit, and find your physical balance, with a really straight back. Breathe nice and steady, focus on your breath, no thoughts, nice and open, and trusting, and not apprehensive or curious. Open, receptive and still.' She paused, then continued in a slightly more philosophical tone, 'The cosmos, Lucy, is one infinite standing wave and an infinite number of standing waves all at the same time.' She paused for a moment as she perceived the Fish absorb into Lucy's body, then she said, 'I'm done talking. I am taking the Fish. I'll see you in there.'

Both women sat next to each other, with straight backs and closed eyes, breathing still, full of faith and courage, and waited for the Fish to arrive. It took about five minutes. Lucy's initial perception was all blackness all around, and perfect silence and stillness. Then she spotted, on one side of what to her all of a sudden appeared like a sphere of vision, a light, which began to glow a warm yellow. It just floated there in the blackness. And then she noticed the emergence of a faint light from within her as well. She felt her back stiffen and micro-adjust into ruler straightness. She felt her breath relax into a smooth rhythmical flow, and she felt herself lock into no-thought mode with much more intensity than ever before.

As she began to glow a brighter orange she began to lose sense of her physical body. As the light glowed brighter her physical body left her. She now saw them as two tiny lights floating in a huge spherical blackness.

She became faintly aware of a presence gently approach from behind. The ageless question was asked once again.

'Trust, or not trust?'

'Trust.'

There was a merging, and there was a healing, and there was a journey, impossible to describe with words, which passed through oceans of expansive, multi-dimensional realities, interspersed by *Mandelbrot-Set* roller-coaster rides.

She became aware of the mind-threads that had developed between her, Thebe and Slater, and the mind-plane, the plane of telepathic communication, and some of the advanced things that could be done in there.

They were gone for six hours. As the Fish wore off, they gradually returned to the reality of the room. They continued to deep breathe for a couple more minutes then gradually opened their eyes.

'Wow!' was all Lucy could muster.

'Back from the never-never,' was Thebe's first utterance.

Lucy's healing from the Fish manifested itself little by little, at its own natural pace. It took about three years to complete. Her understanding of reality rose to another level as did her realization of what creative telepathy really meant. She had resolved to devote herself to the study and improvement of her own telepathic skills.

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Chapter Forty

RAMA

1

Adam awoke to a perfect, crystal-clear sunrise. There was not a cloud in the sky. It was Thursday *21st April 2005*, the day after Ben's arrival. Adam's first task of every morning was to unlock all the doors of the house and open them. Ben chose to take up residence in the separate granny flat. It had a sizeable bedroom, a lounge room, a bathroom and separate toilet. It was joined to the main part of the house via a gazebo, as was the garage. The gazebo was a large, wooden structure, which was shaped like a pyramid and covered by a translucent roof. This allowed shaded light into, and kept the rain out of, the otherwise open, central courtyard. The courtyard perimeter was decorated with a myriad of potted palms. Golden Cane featured heavily. It was one of Adam's tasks to keep the palms alive by watering. The courtyard opened out onto the pool area. This was behind the outer wall, so was totally private, although it did afford a view of the canal across the veranda. All around the outer wall, within the property, was an exquisite landscaped garden. Adam's friend, Tom, the local landscape artist, kept it looking in top shape with his bi-annual visits. The house was surrounded with exotic plants and established palms, and living there felt altogether like living in a garden by the water.

On the opposite side of the courtyard was a large fishpond. It was full of water plants and goldfish. Adam used to say,

'I'm bloody *married* to this house. I've got all these living creatures that depend on me to keep them alive. I can't go anywhere.'

At night, the whole garden glowed warm in dimmed spotlights.

Adam heard the splash from the kitchen. He walked out to the pool and found Ben swimming in it.

'I love a swim first thing in the morning.'

'I hope you've had a shower, Ben. It's not a bath, you know.'

'I'm clean, dad.'

'So what do you want for breakfast? I usually have oats.'

'Oats is fine, dad, and mum told me that you make a pretty good cup of coffee.'

'Coffee's a natch, Ben.'

2

They sat around the bench in the kitchen, on the high stools, sipping their coffees and talking about whatever came to mind. Adam decided that the first thing he had to do was make an appointment with Andrew, his accountant. It usually took a few days to get in and see him, so Adam figured that they might get a few days of free, catch-up time.

Ben expressed a desire to go and see their old house in Stanwell Park. The ten blissful years he lived there left a deep impression on him. Adam expressed a desire to have another go with the levitation pack. Ben cautioned,

'Best you use it at night, dad.'

'No, I'll just stay inside the house with it. No one will see me.'

He raced upstairs to his room and retrieved his lev-pack.

'I can fly this without the suit, can't I?'

'Yeah, sure, no problem.'

Adam noticed that Ben seemed very casual about this so far. So he strapped on the pack and squeezed the control into 95% hover position. Suddenly he just floated there, lightly supporting the last 5% of his weight on his toes. He picked up his coffee mug, took a sip and quipped,

'Who needs barstools?'

Ben laughed, 'You've taken to it like a fish to water.'

'This is so *insane*, Ben, it's so *insane*!'

Adam hopped a foot in the air and gently floated back down. He turned and hopped ten feet into the central courtyard. He hopped around the whole house, even upstairs, taking ten steps at a time on the way up and the whole twenty on the way down. He settled back down in the kitchen and floated in his lev-pack like he was sitting on an invisible barstool.

'This is the craziest thing,' he exclaimed, 'and so well designed. I've got to hand it to Zeke ... and you.'

'Oh no, not *me* dad, it was mostly all Zeke.'

Adam turned around, levitating in his pack, and looked out the window over the water and said,

‘You know, Ben, the swell should still be around today and look at that sou’west wind, it’ll be perfect offshore. It’s been the cleanest swell. It’ll be smaller today, so we could go in the boat.’

This was Adam’s daily routine. Set the surf-session window and organise the rest of the day around it. These days he mostly went surfing by boat. He mainly drove and walked when the surf was too big to get the boat through the bar. He owned a 4.2 metre, Quicksilver Heavy Duty inflatable boat, which was powered by a 25hp, Yamaha, tiller-steered two-stroke. It was a quality craft, made of red Hypalon, however it did have one major drawback and that was its inflatable keel. Adam had to pump it up before every trip, and it shifted position when battered by side chop. Apart from those minor irritations, the boat, being quite fast, served Adam well. In the just over two year period he had owned the boat, he had calculated by the amount of oil he had used that he had averaged about 150 trips to Granite each year. And most of the sessions were quality.

Ben brought out a small, intricately-carved, gold box and a small, white, ceramic pipe.

‘Before we do anything, dad, let’s smoke the Mana.’

Adam looked at the gold container resting on the bench and exclaimed,

‘Ooooh, is that the same stuff your mum had?’

‘The very same. It’s called Mana. It is for health and longevity.’

‘I’m all for *them*, Ben.’

Ben loaded the pipe and handed it to his father. As he lit it for him he said,

‘Live long, my father.’

And as he smoked the pipe it was almost like he suddenly knew what to do. When he was finished, he reloaded the pipe for Ben, handed it to him and lit it up for him, saying,

‘Live long, my son.’

That was to become a daily ritual, and a kind of toast to their life together.

Unbeknownst to Adam, at that time, was the fact that his lifespan was already approaching 200 years. Most of that was due to the Mana he had smoked with Liberty. The more Mana he smoked, the longer his lifespan became, until it

levelled out at around about the 900 year mark, give or take a century. So even at this stage, Adam was still only a quarter of the way through his life, being 57, and was in reality more like an eighteen-year-old with most of his life in front of him. Learning of his life *elongation* changed Adam profoundly. There became less urgency for anything as there was so much more time to get it all done. *Laid-back* was an understatement when describing the future Adam.

3

After breakfast, they decided to hit the surf. As Ben's board was in his ship and his dad owned a fine quiver of surfboards, he opted for Adam's 9'1" Tolhurst. Adam took his 9'6" McTavish G2 pintail. He imagined it fitting perfectly into the head-high, long, fast-breaking, hollow walls they would encounter in Granite Bay. They loaded up the boat, cruised through all the canals, passed through the lock and sped off down Noosa River towards the river-mouth and its treacherous bar. Low tide was mid afternoon so they were nice and early. This meant some water over the bar and a safer shot through it.

When they turned the last bend in the river, what confronted them were thick lines of white-water crashing right across the bar, closing out right across the whole river mouth.

'It's all right, Ben, I know where the channel is.'

Ben was hanging onto his side of the boat thoroughly enjoying the experience. They slowed as they reached the white water.

'Here comes another set, I'll just go around,' said Adam as he carved the nimble inflatable through a 360-degree turn. He parked the boat in the deeper channel just behind the white-water line and waited for a lull between the sets. There seemed to be no end to the crashing waves and they began to wonder if they were ever going to get out that day, when all of a sudden there was a break in the swells.

'It's a lull!' Adam exclaimed as he shifted the gear lever into forward and throttled up the motor. The boat sprang from its stationary state with the bow high in the air. They hopped over the remains of the last set-wave and shot through the break at lightning speed. Just when they thought they were through unscathed, they saw the first big wave of the next set loom up in front of them.

'I got it,' said Adam calmly.

He full-throttled the boat and aimed directly at the wave. Just before reaching the feathering, six-foot monster, he dramatically slowed, but still not slow enough to prevent the boat from launching three feet into the air off the back of the near-vertical wave. Other big waves followed, but they were easier to get over. Once out, Adam stopped the boat and re-arranged everything that got tossed out of its place. He then took off across the magical, mystical waters of Laguna Bay to his favourite break in the world.

Unbeknownst to Adam, Ben made sure that Slater wouldn't be there that day.

4

That evening, they spoke about visiting the old house in Stanwell Park.

'We can take the ship.'

'Won't that be a bit conspicuous?'

'We'll go camo-mode.'

They left at three o'clock in the morning. Ben remotely flew his ship over from its hiding place in Laguna Bay and parked it inside the jetty.

'Don't worry, dad, nobody can see. Everybody's asleep.'

Ben suggested that his dad bring his lev-pack because he had an idea.

They entered the ship, settled into their seats and relaxed. Adam watched the ramp smoothly flip up and seal the upper hull. The inside of the ship was softly lit and Adam noticed, for the first time, how there were no windows of any kind.

'There are no windows, Ben?'

'None. The ship seals into a one-piece, solid shell.'

Adam watched the spherical display materialise all around them. They could see everything outside. As the interior lights dimmed to darkness the screen solidified to full opacity and became totally lifelike.

'Music?'

Adam, who was in a state of high excitement by now, turned to Ben and replied,

'Music? ... Sure, what have you got?'

'I've composed some stuff. Would you like to hear it?'

'Wow, now my son is also a *musical* genius. I would *love* to hear it. What are you going to play?'

'I call it *Streamers*. Listen.'

He heard slender, echoing chords of synthesized music begin to emanate from far out in the universe, approach him from all sides like snaking streamers, pass right through his body and recede away in the opposite direction.

'This is only the hearing version, dad, the telepathic version is a thousand times better.'

'It sounds like hundreds of people playing. Where is the sound coming from?'

'The whole interior of the hull is one giant speaker. Any part of it can vibrate sound.'

'So how is it stored? Is it digital?'

'Actually, this isn't stored. I'm playing it live. The ship is one huge mind-controlled musical instrument, and I can play it.'

Adam's amazement only grew as he became surrounded by a rich surge of spherical sound, highlighted with myriads of Mandelbrot rhythms and Fibonacci chords.

The ship rose slowly to three hundred feet. It's exterior was darkest matt black and it made no sound. They flew over Noosa, just above all the poles and wires, and looked at all the streetlights pass silently beneath them. The music softened in volume, but continued to play. They flew over a Harley Davidson and heard its iconic exhaust rumble as clearly as though they were sitting outside the ship.

'You can really clearly hear the outside sounds, Ben.'

'True volume, fracto-spherical, live sound, dad; crystal clear. The whole exterior of the hull is one microphone. There is a direct transference of audio code from the outer hull to the inner. So we hear it clear as a bell and from the direction the sound comes from.'

They flew slowly out above Laguna Bay and along the five points, which were silhouetted in a sea of shimmering silver diamonds. They were doing about 50mph at about 300 feet. As the ship flew across Granite Bay it made a 90 degree

change of direction to the south and picked up speed to about 110mph. Ben flew low above all the moonlit beaches of the Sunshine Coast and quipped,

'You know, dad, this is my favourite kind of flying; early morning, slow and low.'

'How can you play music and fly the ship, all hands free, all at the same time?'

'Easy, dad.'

They flew low over Brisbane, at about 300mph, then down to the strip of lights, which was the Gold Coast. As he crossed the Tweed River he rose to about 1000 feet and shot down the coast at about 500 miles per hour.

'This is like being in a Stanley Kubrick movie, Ben.'

'Yes, I like his style.'

They slowed down to about 100mph and dropped low as they crossed the Hawkesbury River. They skimmed above the northern beaches of Sydney, hopping each headland as they encountered it, and flew under the Harbour Bridge, 'just as a joke'. They picked up speed as they crossed Botany Bay and flew down the coast to Stanwell Park.

Ben approached the deep gap in the coastal escarpment from the ocean. He slowed to 20mph and dropped to 200 feet. The black disc glided silently over the beach and into the sleeping valley. It came to a complete stop hovering at about 200 feet in the centre of the valley. Although dark, the Park could plainly be seen from the light of all the streetlights. The music faded out. As they listened, they began to hear the sounds of the Park. They could hear the sounds of life waking up.

'This is the Park, dad, the place I grew up.'

'There's our house over there.' Adam pointed into the darkness.

'It's still too dark to see anything, but it will be dawn soon and we better hide the ship before it gets daylight.'

They rose vertically out of the Stanwell valley to eleven hundred feet, crossed the edge of the towering, 1000-foot escarpment with a hundred feet to spare and proceeded to track the road heading west. Adam noticed it first.

'There's Zeke's place, Ben ... with nothing on it.'

Suddenly Zeke's patch of land brightened up in a circle of light. A green cross of light appeared on the ground in the back of the property.

'Are you shining a spot on it, Ben?'

'Not full-spec light, just UV. Nobody can see it. This is where we park the ship.'

Ben hovered the ship into position in the back of the vacant field. He landed next to a low tree in front of a line of fairly high, wild bush scrub. The ship was about 100 yards back from the road and fairly much in plain sight.

'Won't they spot the ship from the road, Ben?'

'Not in camo-mode, and anyway, this site has been researched and this has been designated a *natural blind spot*. For the whole time since Zeke's been gone, no one has ever looked at this spot. If you're passing by on the road, it is counter-intuitive to look in this direction. There are hundreds of natural blind spots all over the Earth. They come in handy.'

The interior light of the ship faded up and the screen faded out. A panel opened in the lower hull of the ship, in front of them, and lowered as a thin, three-foot-wide ramp.

'Are you doing all this with your mind, Ben?'

'Yep, all of it. I can play music at the same time if you like?'

'Oh, that's OK, not that there's anything wrong with your music.'

They stepped out into the icy chill of an autumn, top-of-the-escarpment dawn.

'Look dad, the horizon is lightening. It won't be long till sunrise.'

'You know, Zeke would be having a raging fire on a morning like this.'

There was no wind and in the purple twilight they marvelled at the glistening dew on the grass and the fog lingering in the shadows between the trees.

'I thought we'd fly there from here,' said Ben.

'Fly?'

Ben smiled, 'Yeah, fly. That's why I got you to bring your pack. Let's go and get dressed for flight, and take off.'

'Can I just wear my jeans and jumper?'

'Sure, dad, we'll be flying low and slow.'

They stepped back into the ship and changed for flight. Ben dressed in his levitation suit while Adam strapped on his lev-pack. Adam got the feeling to fly barefoot, so that was what he did. When Ben noticed it he jibed,

‘A real nature boy, are we dad? You’re so from the seventies.’

‘Don’t knock the seventies, Ben.’

They stepped outside again and stood back as the panel closed and the ship melted into the background.

‘Wow,’ exclaimed Adam, ‘the ship is almost invisible.’

‘That’s camo-mode. The ship mimics whatever’s behind it and melds with the background. Even as you walk around it, it adjusts itself to your point of view. It’s uncanny, but ancient technology.’ Ben stepped up to his father and handed him the right control. ‘You might want to adjust your hover setting to 100%. You won’t want to be floating to the ground all the time, you’ll want to be hovering close to the ground.’

Adam adjusted the round knob until he felt all his body weight being supported by the pack. He now had to use the control to go up or down, otherwise he hovered in the same place.

‘We’re staying at ground level all the way, dad. Slow hover, just like in the house.’

There was enough purple light in the sky to the east of them for them to sufficiently make out the foggy path between the trees and shrubs. They floated through the tree trunks, snaking, hopping and ducking past obstacles as they went along. They followed the contours of the ground, remaining about two feet above it, and proceeded at approximately a walking pace. They carefully crossed a couple of streets, but there was no one awake to see them. After about ten minutes,

‘I can’t tell you how much I’m enjoying this flying, Ben. This flying through the trees is insane, and I have so much control. Good old Zeke. The cables really work. He never liked anything fancy.’

‘Here comes the edge of the escarpment, dad. Remember, you’ve got 100% hover. Here we go over the edge.’ They went from being two feet above the ground to being three hundred feet above the ground in one second.

‘Let’s fly down into the trees,’ Ben called out.

Adam had to push his control lever slightly forward of hover to begin gently floating into the treetops below. As they got down to ground level and began the steep descent below the trees, Ben observed,

'You know, this is the really handy thing about a levitation device, this being able to breeze over ground that can't even be traversed on foot. We can go places no one can go.'

'Definitely! No one could go down here where we are going, but for us it's easy.'

They could see through the trees that they were descending towards the Stanwell Park train station. Ben spotted a few people waiting for the train. Adam warned,

'And there'll be a few walking up the road to the station as well.'

They crossed the tracks to the north of the station and traversed the hill above the line of houses in the lower part of the valley. They hopped a couple of fences and landed in their old backyard. Ben said,

'There's no one home. There's no one around except for the old lady in there,' he pointed at the neighbouring house on the east side, 'but she seems pretty medicated.'

'That's Mary, my neighbour. I think she moved in just after you left.'

'I think that we got here without being detected, dad.'

'Bravo, Ben, that was the best flight I've ever had.'

Ben's suit changed colour. It had been black up to that point in time. He went for a very blending-in, leafy-olive look. He pulled his goggles off his eyes and the balaclava off his head and let them hang behind the back of his neck. Adam removed his pack and placed it on the back veranda.

'It looks a lot better than the last time I saw it, dad. Look at all the palms, and the landscaping, it's fully landscaped.' Ben pointed at the second bedroom, 'There's my room.' He turned around and sighed, 'God, I had a lot of fun in this yard. This is where I spent the first ten years of my life ... and you've made it look so nice.'

'The people are doing a fine job of keeping it nice. See all my rock walls and cobblestone paving?'

'Yeah dad, and did you do all this yourself?'

'On my own, with no power tools.'

They walked around to the front of the house and immediately noticed the spectacular view of the south coast. They then turned and faced the house from the front.

'I remember so many happy days here.'

'Me too.'

'Hello, Adam,' came a cheerful voice from over the fence.

'Oh, hello Mary,' replied Adam. 'It's been a few years since I've seen you.'

'Doug's dead, you know. He died a couple of years ago. I've been on my own ever since.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know.'

'I have to get help with the garden nowadays.'

'We just dropped in for a bit of a reminisce. We thought we'd remember the old days, Mary. This is my son, Ben, who I believe you've never met.'

'I can't bring up my shopping anymore. I've got to get them to bring it up for me?'

'We'll just look around, Mary, before anybody shows up.'

'OK, boys, you enjoy yourselves.'

As she walked away Adam said,

'Don't erase her brain, Ben. I would like her to remember me. Who's going to believe anything she says anyway?'

'OK, I'll leave her alone.'

'Remember how we sat on that veranda in the afternoons, in the sun, like time didn't exist?'

'Those are my best memories, dad.'

'We got ten years, that's not bad.'

'Not bad at all, dad.'

'I'm really missing your mum right now.'

'Me too, dad.'

'We were a family.'

'We still are, dad.'

Adam began to cry. This house also represented a whole lot of pain for him, the kind of pain that comes with the loss of one's loved ones. Ben consoled him.

'Sorry, dad.'

'It was just so hard, Ben, so hard. The emptiness was the worst part. But I kind of got used to it. And that Doyle kept distracting me.'

They sat around the house for about an hour and remembered mainly the good times. The house was there, and it was well maintained, but something was missing. There was a ghostly emptiness about it. Then it dawned upon them that the thing that was missing was *them*. It was just a house now, but whatever part of it they looked at, they saw it wallpapered with memories.

Adam heard the sounds of his young family and remembered all the people who spent an evening with them there. He remembered Libby and the first time she came up for dinner, and how they fell in love that night. He remembered the flying adventures and the heroic pilots, who were all personal friends of his, and he remembered Zeke, the big guy, who became his best friend. He remembered late afternoons in the park, sitting on the grass in the midst of a dozen colourful hang gliders, cheerfully listening to all the flying stories going round. He remembered how he particularly enjoyed the tranquillity of the sunsets there, when the whole valley was in shadow except for the pilots and their gliders. The filtered light made the gliders glow fluorescent in many bright colours, and made the pilots look like they were sitting in the midst of the warm orange glow of a cosmic spotlight.

When they felt satisfied that they had soaked up enough ambience of the old Park house, Adam strapped his lev-pack to his back and said,

'Where to, boss?'

'You're not really dressed for any speed or altitude, so we might go back the same way we came.'

They glided out of the bush, over a barbed-wire fence and into Zeke's old backyard. The ship remained in camo-mode as they entered it and undressed from their flying paraphernalia. Comfortable, they sat in their chairs, sealed the ship, materialised the screen, dimmed the inside light and took off straight up, and instantly froze to a hover at 4000 feet. One second later, they were doing 10,000mph on a heading straight for Noosa.

It was the middle of the day on *Friday 22 April 2005* and the sun was shining as Ben registered as a 10,000mph blip on every radar screen along 800

miles of the east coast of Australia between Sydney and Brisbane. They tracked him all the way up the coast. The whole trip took about eight minutes. He disappeared off their screens around about Caloundra. The hop from Caloundra to Noosa took the blink of an eye. They suddenly ended up in a silent hover above the jetty.

‘We’re in full camo-mode, dad. If we stay still or move very slowly we are almost invisible. People don’t look where there is nothing to look at.’

The ship, rendered in lifelike, point-of-view camouflage, was perfectly blended into the background as it slowly descended to the water. There was no noise or fuss to attract any attention.

They stepped onto Adam’s terrace and walked up the stairs into the house.

5

It took over a month to re-arrange Adam’s affairs. They surfed most of the good days and flew on many of the nights. Ben explained to Adam how they had to be careful not to bump into Slater, ‘because I want him to think that you are already gone. He won’t speak to anyone about it, though, because he’s keeping it a secret.’

Andrew was briefed and told that Adam’s son was taking Adam on a big trip lasting many years and that afterwards he would live with Ben’s family in their house.

They began preparing for their departure.

‘What do I take, Ben?’

‘Well, everything you want to have on Rama. Take all your favourite clothes and footwear. The climate around our house is warm, although the evenings and nights can become cool because it’s perched right on the edge of a two thousand foot escarpment.’

‘I’ll need a couple of suitcases. I’ve got them.’

‘I figured a couple of suitcases, dad.’

‘What about my music?’

‘We already have all the music ever recorded on Earth, so, ah, you know, I doubt that you have anything that we don’t already have. Bring your boards though.’

‘What about my bike?’

'You won't need your bike. There is nowhere to ride it on Rama because there are no roads, because everybody flies. Everyone takes a ship or wears their levitation suits whenever they go out. They wear normal clothes at home. You can't imagine how frustrated Zeke was before he made his first levitation pack.'

It was early evening on *25th May 2005* and all was tranquil around the canals of Noosa Waters as they silently stowed Adam's luggage into the ship. Adam locked the house and hid the keys in a prearranged spot.

They sat in their chairs, the panel sealed the ship, the screen appeared and the inside light dimmed to darkness.

'Getting out of here is a three stage process, dad,' Ben began. 'First we get above the atmosphere, then we get just outside moon orbit, then we get past the edge of the solar system, past the Kuiper Belt, and then finally we get to kick it into overdrive and fly *light-square speed* all the way to the edge of our solar system.'

The spherical holographic display, which surrounded them, glowed with crystal intensity as they softly lifted into the evening sky. Adam had a last, longing look at his beautiful house, with its boat up on the slipway, and declared,

'That place was the nicest place I've ever lived in.' He turned to Ben, 'You know, I'm starting to get a bit nervous about seeing your mother again after all this time, not to mention her family. I'm nervous as hell about meeting them.'

'Don't be, dad, they're just normal people. And they're just as much your family as mine.'

'Do I look OK?'

'You look fine, dad.'

'I've aged. I look older.'

'Here we go, dad. This is going to seem pretty quick, even though I'm going to cruise it. I could go a lot faster, but you wouldn't see anything.'

'I'm all for cruising it, Ben.'

They rose rapidly to 200 miles above the Earth. Ben took about 10 seconds to do that. They then flew straight towards the moon. At 8,100,000mph they got there in two minutes flat.

'Wow, Ben!'

From there they hopped from one planet to the next, taking about a minute between each, and hovered there for a few minutes admiring the view. Adam was getting quite excited.

'This is so amazing, Ben, so insane. It's like a bloody Stanley Kubrick movie on an acid trip. Is that Jupiter? It's a big bastard, isn't it?'

'And in a very fortunate location for the inner planets. It scoops up a lot of floating debris. Unfortunately for the Earth, though, it doesn't get it all.'

They flew above an ocean of floating rocks and boulders, which was known as the Kuiper Belt. They flew with such speed that it appeared like wavy sheets of foggy cloud glistening in the distant sun as it streamed by beneath them at unimaginable velocity. When they finally passed the Kuiper Belt, Ben declared,

'This is where it gets really fun, dad.'

Adam saw nothing but space all around them. There was nothing near them, although the cosmos all around them was filled with millions of stars. He felt like he was sitting outside the ship. There was just he and Ben lounging in their comfortable chairs and there was space all around. There was no ship that he was aware of. Adam was beginning to get pretty impressed by the illusory power of the holographic, spherical display. He spotted a lime-green cross appear out in the middle of deepest space.

'That's our heading, dad. Now, hang onto your hat, this'll take just under six minutes. It's a visual feast.'

The ship accelerated to *light-square speed* in one hundredth of a second. Suddenly they were in a long, straight tunnel of light, zooming along at unimaginable speed, like down the inside of a long, glowing fluorescent tube.

'What we are seeing, dad, are kind of like harmonic refractions of extracellular space at light-square speed. It's beautiful isn't it.'

'Yeah.'

'I still have to steer the ship, you know. This tunnel isn't always straight and I have to negotiate through it. We just basically fly towards the cross.'

Exactly 5 minutes and 46 seconds after they left Adam's solar system in the Milky Way Galaxy, they found themselves on the edge of Ben's solar system, which was located in the outer reaches of the Andromeda Galaxy, some two million light years away. Adam quipped,

'I don't think that I can relate to what just happened.'

'Oh, you don't?'

'No, not at all.'

They flew past a number of spheres, outer planets Adam figured. He next spotted the twin stars they were flying towards. He noticed how the larger star shone bright like his own sun, but the smaller star, which was connected to the larger one by what looked like a reddish coloured umbilical chord, shone in a warm orange light, much like the light just before sunset on Earth. He noticed the green cross settle on a tiny spot in the distance.

'That's Rama,' Ben said.

'That was fast, Ben,' exclaimed Adam. 'You wouldn't have enough time to listen through one album.'

As they approached the tiny blue pearl, Adam noticed two moons orbiting it in close proximity to one another. As they flew closer, he marvelled at how much the planet Rama resembled Earth. The landmasses were all strange, but essentially it was a mirror image of his home planet.

They made a rapid approach and settled just above the atmosphere.

'Here we are, dad.'

They fell through the atmosphere and levelled out at a couple of thousand feet in the centre of a large, vee-shaped valley. Adam's first remark was,

'We've flown to Switzerland!'

'I'll grant you, it does remotely resemble Switzerland, but notice, no roads.'

Adam noticed that there were sparse dwellings scattered around the valley and that there were no roads connecting them, just foot tracks in the grass, and he noticed the farmers tending fields along the banks of the river. He also noticed that there were no fences visible anywhere.

They flew up a broad valley with a 2000-foot-tall escarpment running up and down each side. Ben called them the *lower cliffs*. Behind and above the left escarpment there towered a mountain range with huge 30,000 foot, ice-covered peaks. Beyond the opposite escarpment, a broad, featureless, sparsely vegetated, high-desert plain spread out over the distant horizon.

Snaking down the middle of the lush valley was a pristine river, which, when the eyes followed it all the way up to the back of the valley, terminated at

the base of a two-thousand-foot waterfall. Straddled over the waterfall, at the top of the escarpment, right at the back of the valley, was Ben's house.

They flew up the front of the waterfall and came to a hover about one hundred feet above the house.

'This is a mansion, Ben. It's a fortress. It's huge.'

'We back up against the highest mountain on the planet.'

Adam noticed the circular design of the main part of the house. He noticed that there were other, smaller buildings scattered around the main residence.

They floated around the mountain side of the house, as distinct from the desert side, and manoeuvred into a large, open, 150-foot-wide, perfectly rectangular hole in the rock. The ship settled near the back wall, in hover mode, and proceeded to go through the screen off, light on, hatch open routine.

'I was going to park in the back courtyard and make it a big arrival, but I thought, why bother with the hassle, just stick it in the garage and go in through the back door.'

The hatch opened and they stepped out into the garage. Adam noticed that the whole back half of the sidewall was glass. On the other side of the glass was the interior of the most exquisite house, all lit up in soft ambient light.

6

Ambriel burst through the glass, like it was made of liquid, and ran into Adam's arms.

He hugged her and began to cry. 'You left me.' He'd been rehearsing that line for fifteen years.

'I know, I'm so sorry.'

'It wasn't easy, you know.'

'I know.' She felt like this day was never going to arrive. 'Fifteen years,' she sniffled into his collar. Ben stepped over and hugged them both.

'We are together *now*, that is what matters.'

They hugged and kissed for a while and told each other how good they looked. They then ambled off, all with their arms around each other, toward the spacious living room of the house. Adam suddenly stopped in front of the tinted glass wall. He looked for a door.

'It's *liquid-glass*, dad. It turns to liquid whenever anything solid comes in contact with it. You can just walk through any part of it. Come, put your hand on it.'

Adam reached out and put his hand on the glass.

'It feels like cold water. My hand goes straight through it.'

'Come, my darling,' said Ambriel putting her arm over Adam's shoulder, 'come into the house.'

They walked through the liquid-glass into a spacious, semi-circular room. Adam looked up at the high ceiling and all around the room. He then looked towards Ambriel and thought to himself,

'Is this for real?'

Ambriel heard his thought and laughed out loud. She jokingly put on a broad, snobby-English accent and quipped,

'I know it may appear a trifle ostentatious to an Earthling, but to us, it's just home.'

Everyone laughed. She was so funny the way she said it.

Adam looked around and took note of the architecture. He noticed that the big living room made up half of a large circle. The other half was an amazing stone veranda. Dividing the two was one large sheet of tinted liquid-glass, Adam surmised, sixty feet high and 150 feet wide. Suddenly he heard a familiar sounding, baritone voice emanate from the top of a stairway.

'Adam! ... Well bloody hooray, you made it at last!'

Zeke bounded down the curved stairway three steps at a time and nearly knocked Adam over throwing himself into a bear hug with him.

'You're a sight for sore eyes.' He looked into his eyes. 'Thirteen years, mate.'

'Thirteen bloody years, Zeke. For thirteen bloody years I thought you were a bloated, intergalactic block of ice.'

Zeke chuckled at the image, 'Nearly, but not quite, mate. You seem to have scrubbed up pretty good over the years.'

'I've been surfing.'

'I've been inventin, mate. Wait till you see the stuff I'm workin on, an me workshop ...'

Ambriel butted in, 'Plenty of time for that. Mum, dad, Albion and the twins will be home in a few minutes.' She turned to Adam, 'Let's wait for them before we bring your things in, sweetheart.'

She led them to the open kitchen and looked at a small, shiny, metallic plate on the wall. It lit up in cool blue light and music began to play throughout the whole house. Adam recognised the music. It was his favourite track from the album *Morning Of The Earth*, called *Bali Waters*, by *Taman Shud*.

'This is the first album you played me on the night that we met,' she said to him lovingly.

'I can't believe the things you women remember,' he replied. Her beauty entranced him for a moment as he glanced at her physique and said to her,

'You know, darling, you haven't aged a day.'

'Thank you, hunkster, you've kept well as well, and when you have some Mana, you will keep even better.'

'It seems to have done wonders for Zeke here.'

'Zeke passed through the Fish with me. That was the definitive healing.'

'Bloody amazin stuff that Fish, mate!' Zeke exclaimed. 'You wouldn't want nobody walkin in on ya.'

They stepped through the liquid-glass wall onto the semi-circular, stone veranda. Adam commented,

'It feels like going through water, but none of it stays on your clothes.' He smiled and joked, 'You must have saved a fortune on doors when you built this place.'

The perimeter of the veranda was surrounded by a low balustrade, which was intricately carved out of stone. As they stepped out onto the veranda, Adam turned in a circle and commented,

'I feel like I've been here before. I can remember this place.'

'Yes darling, you've been here in a dream, many times, and you have a vague memory of us all already.'

'I remember that dream.'

'It's so nice that we are finally together,' she said hugging him and strolling him to the front edge of the veranda. 'After a couple of hundred years, the fifteen years we were apart will seem like the blink of an eye.'

They looked out into the expansive valley, perched high above the cascading waterfall, cantilevered way out over the edge of the towering escarpment. To the right were the Alps along the base of which ran the *mountain cliffs*. To the left were the high plains. They could see for miles across the plains because their veranda was about 300 feet higher in elevation. The high plains came to an abrupt halt in the form of the *desert cliffs*. The cliffs, on both sides, dropped 2000 feet into the long, wide, lushly vegetated valley and merged together in a V at the upper reaches of it. And that was where they lived.

'Here come the oldies,' said Ambriel pointing at a spot of light flying low up the centre of the valley. As it approached, it closely followed the contours of the terrain. When it came to the base of the cliff, it started flying upward until it parked itself about a hundred feet out in front of them. They heard a speaker sound emanate from the ship.

'Hi Adam, welcome to Rama. We'll be there in two shakes of a lamb's tail.'

'That's grandad,' explained Ben. 'He's been brushing up on colloquialisms.'

They all met in the living area. Adam met his parents-in-law, Ada and Max. Max was an abbreviation for Maximillian. He reunited with Albion, who everyone called *Alby*, his brother-in-law, and met his two stunning, twin-sister wives, both tall blondes, named Evka and Lara.

'Adam and I go right back to Broken Head 1968 together,' explained Albion, 'but we won't talk about the girls, ey Adam?'

Everyone laughed. Lara jokingly hit him on the shoulder and said, 'You better not!'

After all the introductions were over, they all gravitated together between the central lounge area and the adjacent kitchen. Ambriel got busy with making everyone a cup of tea, while Ben and Albion unpacked Adam's luggage from the ship. The twins started making a fruit salad, mum and dad disappeared into their part of the house and Adam and Ambriel, who everyone called *Brie*, were left alone to catch up on fifteen years of estrangement.

That night, he lay next to her admiring a foreign sky from a foreign planet. There were many things he was unsure of, but he was positive of one thing, and that was that he was as happy as he'd ever been in his life because his one prayer

had been answered. He thanked God for the fact that he once again shared the same bed with her.

She backed snugly into his embrace and drifted off to sleep totally contented for the first time in fifteen years.

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Chapter Forty-One

THE TIME CHIP

1

In different times and different places, Ambriel told Adam and Thebe told Slater and Lucy the same story. It was a story about a great destruction on planet Earth and the Rama plan to save as many species as possible. And it was a story about a tiny chip, which well and truly represented the cutting edge of Rama technology. It was the ability to skip across time, but only in the forward direction. It was not widely practiced, except for short time shifts, because there was no way back. Whenever one shifted to, was where one stayed. There was no return ticket. As hard as they tried, the Rama could not figure out reverse time. They had, so far, accepted that time only flowed one way, forward, and that it could not be traversed in the reverse direction.

‘It seems that time destroys itself as soon as it has happened, so there is nothing there to go back to. It’s like a broken ocean wave that disappears forever. The actual breaking wave is *the present*. You can’t ride that wave again because it has disintegrated. There is no wave to ride. You can only ride future waves, and as they become your present, they are broken down and disappear as well. So the only way to go is forward. Did that make any sense?’ enquired Thebe, a little concerned.

‘That was *my* time shift, in the surf, the day you spoke to me.’

Lucy contributed, ‘Slater skipped an hour. He timed it with his watch.’

‘That was a test,’ revealed Thebe. ‘Everybody that’s chipped gets a test run to make sure that the time chip is working properly.’

‘So have I got a time chip implanted in me?’

‘You do Slater. It’s just above your left knee in the soft part. You can see a dimple there if you look closely.’

Slater looked at his knee while Thebe continued.

‘The time chip is microscopic. It resonates, in fractal ultra-frequencies, with the fractal ultra-frequency progression of time. Because the chip is locked into time and is controllable, it can be re-set to another part of the time track, and skipped forward in virtually an instant. It is like being able to skip forward to

another part of a musical track, but not being able to skip backwards. The main worry is that you never know what to expect to find on the other side of the time shift because no one has ever been there before and come back to tell you. You can only guess. It is the *chip* that actually does the time shift, and it drags whatever is loosely connected to it through the shift with it. It's like dragging something through custard. It is attuned to the Earth, the Moon and the Sun, and times in the future may be selected and physically shifted to. I've never done it. I've never had a reason. The first time I'll do it is with you guys.'

'With us guys?' asked Lucy.

'Yes, we are all going to do a skip into the future one day, before *the event*.'

'Are you chipped?' asked Slater.

'No, I am not. I am going to be pulled through by you, as will Lucy. We will only need to tie our hands together. We'll be in my ship because we'll want to take *it*, and everything in it, with us. The time chip will be triggered by a master chip, which will be controlled by a man called Noah.'

'Is that how my board came with me in the surf the other day, cause it was connected to me via my leg rope?'

'The chip pulled you through and you pulled the board through.'

'Aha ... and you were in on it, cause you were there.'

'That is correct, Slater.'

'What's wrong with just staying here?' Lucy asked mystified.

'Because the *here* will soon experience an event that will make the Earth uninhabitable for almost a century.'

'Uninhabitable?'

'Yes uninhabitable, and we have the technology to skip across all that death and destruction and pop back in when everything has settled down.'

'So what is *the event*?'

'A comet. There is a comet that is going to collide with the Earth. All the oxygen in the atmosphere will be consumed by the fire. The whole planet will become blanketed by a thick dust cloud and freeze up,' emotion crept into her voice, 'and everything will die. We have seen it happen to other planets.'

'Jesus!' Lucy exclaimed.

‘The first living creatures, on the other side of *the event*, will be those that will be time shifted there from this century.’

‘Whoah,’ exclaimed Lucy, ‘this is so mind-blowing that I think I need a bloody smoke.’

2

Five months had passed since Lucy and Thebe *did the Fish*. Lucy’s health had improved so much that Slater and Thebe started taking her out to Granite in the boat, on the smaller days, and teaching her how to surf a body-board. Her whole physical demeanour had changed. It was as though she had become thirty years younger. They all took to cycling and ended up going everywhere on their bikes.

Around about that time they received a visit from a time chip insertion specialist from Rama, named Adrian. He was on one of thousands of missions to Earth to time chip selected creatures for *the big time shift*.

He arrived at night and settled perfectly into the L shape of Slater’s jetty. His ship was matt black and silent, almost undetectable. He was there to time chip a flock of Red-tailed Black Cockatoos, *Calyptorhynchus banksii*. He also brought a gift for Slater. It was a levitation suit, custom made for him by Max and Ada.

Maximillian and Ada, the Sailsmiths, were known as the Sailsmiths because of their profession. Max’s family had been manufacturing gravity sails for hundreds of generations. It was their business to trade their sails for goods and services they desired. Ada specialised in making the suits, which were coalesced in a bath of clear liquid into a single piece of porous, stretch, silicon-like material. The material had embedded within it Max’s pride and joy, his thin, flexible, mind-controllable, gravity-sail panels. The colours and surface patterns of the material could be metamorphosed like a chameleon. The first time Slater put it on, the suit lit up in a blaze of staccato patterns, in what could best conservatively be described as a psychedelic, Jackson Pollock inspired, psycho display. He looked like a human shaped TV set, on acid. He had to *learn* how to tone it down.

Max and Ada were passing their skills on to Albion and Ambriel, though it was Ben who took the most interest in learning the lofty art of smithing a gravity

sail. Zeke paid pretty close attention as well, so Max was nevermore lost for company in his workshop, which pleased him well.

3

Adrian spent a few days sightseeing around Noosa on Slater's bicycle, while Thebe taught Slater how to fly the suit and control the camouflage function at the same time. He found it difficult to concentrate on both functions at first, but he got the hang of it eventually. It almost became second nature by the end of the three days. He was so excited by the flying that it was all he wanted to do. He spent all three days in the suit. He didn't want to take it off. As he floated in the kitchen, sipping his morning mug of coffee, he exclaimed,

'This is the best thing I've ever done. It's insane ... it's like three dimensional surfing ... and it's so natural ... I just feel myself around.'

She taught him how to blend into backgrounds. Black was the easiest.

'You do this most of the time, Slater. You have to be careful and stay in camo-mode so no one spots you. So you have to concentrate all the time. It'll become second nature.'

Adrian's ship was a compact three seater. It wasn't designed to carry too much cargo although there was camping gear stashed in the aft. The three recliner seats were arranged one in front and two behind. The seats were plushly upholstered in grey, leather-like material. Adrian suggested they all go in his ship.

Slater was used to the inside of a Rama space ship by now as he had been on many joy rides with Thebe.

They sat in their respective seats with Slater and Thebe sitting in the back. The panel closed, the light dimmed and the spherical screen came on. It was before dawn. They rose to eight thousand feet and slowly cruised off in a northerly direction doing about 200mph. They followed the long crescent of beach to Double Island Point, passed to the west of its lighthouse, and cruised north to Fraser Island. They flew up the east side of Fraser Island and hopped off the end across to the first of a chain of offshore coral islands. The sun was just rising. They flew north hopping from island to island. They flew over Lady Elliot and Lady Musgrave islands and marvelled at their silhouettes in the golden morning light. They then flew further north and over the Whitsundays where

they turned north-west. They picked up speed to about 500mph and flew over the Great Dividing Range. A green cross appeared, glowing on the ground up in the distance.

‘That’s our spot,’ said Adrian.

Slater noticed how the cross was totally isolated, miles from anywhere.

‘It’s at the base of the western slopes,’ explained Adrian. ‘Just enough water trickles down there to keep the billabongs from drying up.’

The disc dropped out of the sky in a fluid curve and came to a perfect spot landing in the middle of a bare patch of land. They parked in hover-mode, about a foot off the deck. The ship shimmered with the reflections of its surroundings. The interior light came on, the screen faded and a panel opened in the lower hull and extended out towards the ground. They stepped outside into the calm, cool, twilight dawn of a crisp, outback morning.

Their approach and landing was so silent and camouflaged that nothing was disturbed. Everything remained tranquil. They listened, smiling, as their hearing became acclimatised to the sounds of nature around them. The birds were the most prominent.

‘They’re Bellbirds,’ explained Adrian. He pointed down the slight slope at a crescent-shaped pond and said, ‘That’s the billabong where the Black Cockatoos drink. It’s a nice body of water and they are the dominant flock.’

‘Have you been studying them?’ Slater asked.

‘Yeah, for years. They’re the healthiest flock, and smart too. There are about 120 of them ... and I’ve got to chip *all* of them.’

‘What? So the *whole* flock gets shifted at the same time?’

‘Yeah. We figured that larger groups, especially families, will prosper better in a future environment.’

They were all already dressed in their levitation suits. They pulled their goggles over their eyes and rose together to 30 feet. They hovered there for a while as Adrian explained,

‘You see, we are at the edge of the eucalyptus woodlands, on the lower slopes of the Dividing Range. This is classic Red-tailed Black Cockatoo habitat. They are seedeaters and cavity nesters, and they love to hang around the water holes. This shouldn’t take too long, I’ve got them pretty well trained.’

'I was wondering how you were going to catch them?' asked Thebe.

'Ooooh, can't reveal tradesmen's secrets, can I?'

Adrian floated back down to his ship and brought out two tents.

Slater commented, 'Boy, you're really planning a stay.'

'Might as well set up and get relaxed,' Adrian replied.

The other two floated back to earth and began fidgeting with their tent.

'We have to make sure we get the dominant flock. Middle of the day, early afternoon, that's when they're around. Don't you just love this place?'

Slater admired the surroundings. 'It's such a vast land, isn't it?'

'By any measure,' replied Thebe, 'and so dry.'

They set their tents under the shade of a tall gum tree, about fifty feet to the east of the billabong. The tent material was made incorporating the same camouflage function as the flying suits. They just melted into the ground when they were set up. The trio sat inside the tents and waited for the Black Cockies to arrive.

They observed a large goanna come down to the water, hide amongst some green reeds and take a drink. They watched two wallabies hop over from further out on the grassland. The goanna scampered back up the bank and hid in some dried leaves under a bush.

By mid-morning, the sun had risen higher and it had become substantially warmer. The sky was a glaring blue and there was not a cloud to be seen anywhere. By mid-day, any moisture lingering in the atmosphere had long been baked out. It was becoming the kind of Queensland December day where it did one no good to be far from water.

'There they are,' whispered Adrian.

They observed a flock of about 120 Black Cockatoos swoop in from the north, along the edge of the tall eucalypts, fly a couple of circles around the billabong, screeching to each other, and then slowly, a few at a time, land, some on the ground and some in the surrounding trees.

'The ones landing in the trees are the *sentinel birds*. They will alarm-call and let all the other ones know if there are any predators around. They take turns at doing that.'

'They're organised,' commented Thebe.

'That's why they're so dominant around this waterhole. Most creatures can't even handle the screeching. You can tell the females by their more yellowy tails and their lighter coloured bills. They mate for life, you know. The females only lay one egg every two to three years. They have amazing lives.'

'It's a nice calm day,' said Slater entranced by the scene.

'That's good because windy days make them nervous.'

So far, the flock had not noticed their presence. They scratched for seeds under the gums, and drank and bathed in the cool water of the billabong.

'There are plenty of other waterholes for the other birds,' explained Adrian, 'but this is the best one. They like to make their nests in hollows of large old eucalypts and are generally not migratory, although they will move away from humidity, preferring the drier climate, and they will follow seasonal food sources. They nest in all the old gum trees around here. It's perfect for them here.'

'It's kind of like the last place Black Cockatoos go before they go to heaven,' commented Slater.

'Or it's the first place they go to when they get there,' added Thebe.

Adrian retrieved a small, silver, pistol-grip device and a bag of seeds from his backpack and whispered,

'Just sit quietly and watch. Be really still.'

He floated out of his tent flat on his stomach, with a couple of inches between him and the ground, snaked down the slight slope towards the water, stopped occasionally to calm the birds down, and finally sat himself on an old log by the water, on the opposite side of the billabong.

'Watch this,' whispered Thebe, 'he's a bird-master.'

As he sat there, he sprinkled the bag of seeds all over the ground in front of him, then stilled completely. A calm descended about the billabong. Suddenly, two cockies launched, flew over the water and landed at his feet. They nibbled on some seeds, then one of them hopped onto Adrian's left knee. Like a pet, it let Adrian insert the *time chip* in the soft tissue on the side of its neck. The insertion was painless. Then the bird hopped off his knee and the other one, the female, hopped on. He chipped her and they both flew back to the flock. Another pair

launched and went through the same procedure. Then a trio launched. Thebe whispered,

‘They must be a breeding pair, see, that must be their young male offspring. Look how cheeky he is ... the way he flies. I think they are coming as family groups, in order of seniority. I suspect that the dominant families are coming first.’

After about two hours of perfect, tranquil stillness, even the recalcitrant Cockies were finally enticed to hop over and receive their time chip.

When they were all back on the other side, Adrian lifted a finger.

‘Oh, he’s telling us to watch this,’ said Thebe.

In an instant, all the Black Cockatoos disappeared.

‘Oh look, he’s testing all the time chips.’

Adrian floated into the air and flew back to the tents.

‘They should re-appear in one hour.’

‘What? You mean you shifted them to one hour from now?’ Slater asked.

‘Yeah. Just to test the chips. They’ll re-emerge in the same place they were.’

And sure enough, exactly one hour later the flock re-appeared around the billabong and in the nearby eucalypts, completely calm and totally oblivious to what had just happened to it.’

Adrian smiled as he dropped his tent and remarked,

‘Next time, it’ll be a hundred years.’

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Chapter Forty-Two

THE BEAST

1

A young farmer stood sweating in the wide, featureless, harvested wheat field, located not far from Narromine, out in the flatlands of outback New South Wales. He gazed west, towards the afternoon sun, and soaked up the satisfaction of a successful harvest. Just as he took his hat off to wipe his brow with the back of his shirtsleeve, he observed the sun shift in the sky, towards the horizon, in basically zero time. 'Stone the crows!' he uttered. Then he looked all around him. Everything was the same, except it was about an hour later in the day. He looked at his Rolex and observed that the time no longer matched the time of day, which he could always tell to within five minutes by the angle of the sun.

2

A fourth generation Australian-Chinese father of three, who, through a few very lucky wagers, managed to procure three suburban blocks of land right next to Sydney airport and convert them into one thriving market garden, froze in his spot as he observed the shadow of a stone sundial, which stood in the centre of his garden, lengthen in an instant. The sundial suddenly showed the time to be 4.30pm. He looked at his watch. It said 3.30pm. He scratched his head then turned and walked into his house and noticed that all the clocks in the house were one hour fast. He mystified his family, that night, attempting to describe his *time jump* to them.

3

Jacko always said, 'If you can draw it, I can build it.' He was a master of everything. He liked his beer at the end of his workday, but had to be careful to not overdo it because there was a price to pay. If he misbehaved, the wrath of Henrietta *the Hun*, his once lovely German wife, who loved strudel too much and was now built like a Sherman tank, would come crashing down on his head like a ton of bricks.

Jacko's first shock came as, after only two beers, he stepped out of the pub toilet and noticed that it had gotten mighty dark outside all of a sudden. He looked at his watch. It said 5.30pm. He looked at the clock behind the bar and it

said 6.30pm. All of a sudden it seemed like he was an hour late. Mystified, he looked around the pub. No one was looking strange. Everybody was just sitting around as usual, drinking their beer and talking like nothing had happened. He didn't know what to make of it all, but he spent the whole way home trying to work out how he was going to evade the *wrath of the Hun*. He didn't have much luck as he tried to explain to her that the whole universe had just jumped forward an hour.

'It's true liebschen, see my watch?'

4

Deep in the bowels of a Sydney University biology lab, Alexander laboriously worked through his self-imposed excruciation. He chose a dozen numbered DNA samples from the lab's store of about three thousand and was in the process of analysing the *junk-DNA* part of the strands. He was looking for the *repeats sequence* in each of them. Now that he knew what he was looking for, it was a little easier to find them, although it took up to a week to find some of them. The strands were so long and the repeats sequences so short, that luck still had a big part to play in how quickly he zeroed in on the target.

He marked the sequence when he found it then counted the repeats, the sub-repeats and the sub-sub-repeats. He then noted the birth-date of the sample and calculated what he postulated was the exact date of death of the owner of that sample. He then compared it to the recorded death-date of the sample.

When the DNA samples were taken, anonymity was assured by the sample only being given a number. The only other information recorded was race, sex, birth-date and age. The death-date was recorded if the sample was taken from a deceased person. About ten percent of the samples had a death-date. These were usually acquired with the help of authorities, like the police, from fatal car accidents and such.

At this stage of his research Alex only used deceased samples. He used them to confirm his theory. And confirm it they did. The repeats, sub-repeats and sub-sub-repeats in the junk-DNA recorded the exact number of years, months and days of the owner of the sample's lifespan. It took him just over three months to finish analysing the twelve samples. He gathered his notes, scribbled up a summary and decided to take a few weeks off during the winter break. The

rest of the DNA samples were from people who were still alive when the samples were taken, and it was Alex's intention to begin analysing some of them when he returned to his task. He wanted to get a larger variety of samples so that he could gain a better statistical perspective.

5

It was a crisp Sunday morning, *early June 2008*. The cool south-wester made it chilly to be outside, especially out of the sun and exposed to the wind. The sky was a cloudless deep blue. Rose Bay shimmered with a million crystalline reflections and the main sounds that could be heard were those made by the gulls and by the tinkling of the halyards against the masts of the moored flotilla of gently rocking boats.

Lloyd had Mecca tied up in the water alongside his jetty. He was charging up the battery. Alex and Sophia were over for a visit. While he sat with Lloyd, chatting about his thesis, the girls, who were best friends by now, prepared coffees and morning snacks for them all.

'I've done twelve of them, all deceased, and they all confirm the postulate. Their life-spans are all recorded in the junk-DNA, to the day.'

'That's incredible, Alex, especially as most of them died in car accidents. How could *that* be recorded in the DNA?'

'I know, I can't work it out either. It's like something out there knew that those people were going to die in car accidents, even before they were born, and programmed it into the DNA. I mean car accidents, give me a break, there can't be anything more random than car accidents.'

'So your results suggest that nothing is ever random. They suggest that all car accidents, actually all phenomena, are totally predetermined, like watching a movie. It's all happening in front of you and you are reacting to everything, but you know that it's all predetermined because it's all programmed in a movie.'

Eva and Sophia joined the boys in the boat.

'Coffee everyone?'

'Thank you, Eva. A hot coffee will really hit the spot,' replied Alex.

Lloyd held up his cup of coffee and quipped,

'I wonder if this cup of coffee is programmed in my DNA?'

Everyone laughed.

'DNA sounds a lot like DVD, doesn't it?'

The boys both looked at Sophia with a look of surprise. Even though she was not the academic, her main interests being shoes and jewellery, she often uttered something that hinted at a far deeper understanding than anyone gave her credit for.

'Maybe the nature of death is not pre-determined, just the *day* of death,' suggested Lloyd.

'Yeah, you must have read my mind, Lloyd,' replied Alex, 'because I was just thinking that. I was thinking that only the date can be recorded, nothing else. The method of death could still be anything.'

'So the old saying, *when your time's up, it's up*, isn't far off the mark,' said Lloyd.

'You know,' blurted Alex, 'I just got a *Fibonacci flash* about DVD and DNA being fractals of one another.'

'Mate, this is so out-there, I think it could make you go crazy if you're not careful.'

'Too late for that, Lloyd.'

They relaxed sitting in the boat around the cockpit and enjoyed some sandwiches. They chatted about all sorts of things with everyone making an occasional comment about Alex's thesis. Then Lloyd remembered,

'I've got to take a run out to the cotton farm next week. I've got to see Leon and Russel and sort a few things out with them. Eva doesn't want to come ...'

Eva interjected, 'It's not that I *don't* want to come, sweetie, I do, but I have prior commitments, you know that.'

'Ahh, that's right, your tennis tournament. You know, darling, you ought to show those poor ladies some mercy and sit one out.'

'Not a chance. I'm so fired up I want to *kill* them all.'

'You know, she beat me at tennis when she was seven months pregnant with the twins.' Everyone laughed. Lloyd turned to Alex. 'What about you, Alex? How would you like to come for a ride out to the farm with me?'

'Who me? Hmm, I've never been as far west as Warren. Narromine is as far as I've ever been ... gliding.'

'Well, how about it? I could use the company and I'd love to show you around the property. It's awesome country. We can take the Aston ...'

'No darling,' Eva cut in, 'I'm sorry, but I need the Aston next week.'

'We could go in the Pantera,' suggested Alex. 'I'd love to open her up on a bit of outback road.'

'It's settled then; we'll go in Alex's Pantera. I was thinking of leaving on Tuesday morning. How is that for you, Alex?'

'Tuesday is fine, Lloyd. It'll give me a day to get ready.'

6

The sky-blue *De Tomaso Pantera* was one of the finest examples of its marque. Alex purchased it off a slightly shady character, a Swiss guy he met while having a coffee at the Cruising Yacht Club.

Alex had been noticing two Panteras, one blue and one red, occasionally parked just up the street from his building. When he saw them, he always had a closer look from his balcony through his binoculars. A couple of times he even stepped out of his apartment and walked up the street and had a proper ogle. He was completely mesmerised by the perfect proportions of the sleek, low-slung, muscular, rear-engined, ground-hugging missiles.

One morning, while spying through his binoculars, he spotted the owner as he walked out to his car. He spotted him again at an adjacent table at the sailing club while he was having a coffee. He leaned over and asked him,

'Are you the owner of those beautiful machines up the road?'

'My wife owns one of them,' came the reply.

'How do they go? ... I'm sorry ... do you mind me asking you?'

The man broke into a smile, picked up his cappuccino, rose from his table and walked over.

'May I sit at your table?' he asked in a subtle French accent.

Alex lit up, 'Please, be my guest.' He beckoned the man to sit down. 'My name is Alex.' They shook hands.

'I'm Manfred.'

'Do I detect an accent?' asked Alex.

'I'm Swiss,' he explained.

'I just love your cars.'

'My wife owns the blue one. That one is 300 horsepower. Mine is 500.'

'Wow!'

'My wife, the bitch, she has pissed off. I am in contemplation thinking about selling her car. I don't need two of them.'

'You're kidding?' Alex's eyeballs popped out of their sockets. 'You want to sell your wife's car?'

'Thirteen and a half ... cash!'

'The blue one is my favourite ... it's ... er ... more pure.'

'It is the original body shape, from before they introduced spoilers and big guards, like on mine.'

'I prefer the original shape ... although I love your car as well.'

'Well, you bring me the cash and I give you the car.'

'Thirteen and a half you say?'

'Yes, bring it up to my place and I give you the keys.'

'*What a bargain,*' thought Alex. '*It must be worth three times as much.* I'll take it. I can come over tomorrow ... with the money ... and pick it up.'

'Fantastico obbligato! Two o'clock?'

'I'll be there.'

7

As he walked up to the front door, Alex was confronted by a pandemonium of thumping disco music emanating from within the apartment. He rang the bell. The thumping stopped and the door opened.

Manfred stood in front of Alex dressed in baggy Moroccan harem pants and a Balinese, tie-dyed, rainbow-coloured singlet. Hanging around his neck were about half a dozen bead necklaces. Alex stepped into the spacious, luxuriously appointed apartment. It was situated on the first floor and had large windows with views of the city across Rushcutters Bay. In one corner was a white grand piano. In fact the whole place was white, including the furniture. The only things that were not white were a pair of conga drums in the middle of the room and a gargantuan sound system wailing disco music up against one wall.

'Welcome Alex.'

'Wow, this is some place you've got here.'

'Let me turn the music down.'

Manfred turned the music down and beckoned Alex towards a small, all white, bar. They sat on two stools.

'Beer?' Manfred asked.

'Ooh yeah ... beer ... sure, why not ... to celebrate ... I'm a bit excited, you know, Manfred ...'

'And so you should be. It is a fantastic automobile. In many ways it is better than mine.'

'I'm sold already, Manfred.'

Alex placed an envelope on the bar. Manfred handed him his beer, opened the envelope and counted the money. He picked up a set of keys lying on the bar and handed them over saying,

'It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Alex. Now, why don't we celebrate your purchase of my De Tomaso Pantera. I insist.'

Alex thought that he detected a subtly intimidating tone in the invitation, like the type one gets from a criminal.

They sat on white, Italian lounges upholstered in soft nappa leather. It was beginning to become obvious to Alex that Manfred had been *partying* for some time. He wondered about the potential cocktail of stimulants he might have been on. He looked around as if searching for something and commented,

'This is an exquisite place.'

'It's a rental. I don't stay anywhere too long.'

Alex had a sip of his beer as Manfred suddenly rose to his feet, stepped over to the sound system and cranked it up full volume. He then danced across the floor to his congas and began pounding to the approximate beat of the disco music. Alex noticed that the thumping noise was violently shaking the windows. He could feel the bass passing right through his body. Manfred danced like a Woodstock hippie and banged his congas, seemingly lost in some kind of tribal ritual. He yelled out at the top of his voice,

'This is how I relax.'

Then *Stayin' Alive* came on. Alex's jaw began to hang limp as Manfred kicked into overdrive and began disco dancing around the floor, imitating John Travolta. Alex noticed that he was actually a very fit man. He was about six feet tall. His thick, sun-bleached-blond mane hung past his broad shoulders. His

deeply tanned body was toned and muscular. When *Stayin' Alive* finished he turned the sound system back down and sprawled out on the lounge. He took a big swig of his beer and declared,

'I killed somebody once.'

The expression that appeared on Alex's face could best be described as a cleanly washed, white potato. He suddenly became concerned about the control of all the muscles in his face. He could feel a wave of panic surge through him.

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. I got into a fight once, in Bangkok. I hit a guy in the face and he fell backwards down a flight of stairs. It was the fall that killed him.'

'Ohhh ... absolutely!'

'They are chasing me, you know, all of them, the fucking pigs *and* the fucking mafia.'

'Are they?'

'Yeah. I done some good import deals and the fucking bastards bullshit that they didn't get paid. *I paid, baby*. And then a few whispers got around and the next thing I got is narcs all over me like bird shit on a statue, cause *they* didn't get paid. The stinking pigs. They never did anything, why should *they* get paid?' He screamed at the ceiling, 'Nothing!' He turned to Alex and revealed, 'Anyway, they all just want me *dead* now.'

Alex looked at his beer as he felt the room begin to spin. Manfred rose to his feet in a rage of anger and grabbed a baseball bat leaning against the piano and swung at the air a couple of times. Glaring out through the window, he raged,

'Come and get me, cunts!'

He then performed some type of martial arts routine with his bat, and when he was finished and completely calmed down, he put the bat back and asked Alex,

'Another beer?'

'Another beer sounds good, Manfred.'

Manfred opened two more beers, cranked up the volume and returned to the congas. He played and danced like he was in his own world, like Alex wasn't even there, for about an hour. Then he suddenly stopped, quietened the music, sat back down and declared,

'An appropriate celebration for such a magnifique machine, no?'

'Thanks, Manfred, I'll never forget it, trust me.'

Later, as Alex sat in the jet-like interior of the Pantera, all the latent static of his recent experience dissolved into the ether as the symphony orchestra of the throaty 351 Ford Cleveland V8 played behind his head.

8

It was well before dawn on *Tuesday 10 June 2008* as they rolled out of Point Piper. They made quick progress though the sparse city traffic. They snaked over the foothills of the Blue Mountains on the way up to Katoomba as the sun crested the easterly horizon behind them. They drove through some shaded valleys and along twisting roads that were often damp in places. The Pantera hugged the road with the agility of a big cat, its fully independent suspension absorbing the bumps with consummate Italian poise. Both men commented on the brilliant suspension and how the Pantera's axis of rotation was located right where they were sitting, meaning that they remained still while the car moved around them. As it was the middle of winter they drove through some sub-zero areas, but the two scientists remained warm as toast, comfortably ensconced within the air-conditioned, fully leather-trimmed opulence of the snug cockpit.

'What kind of rubber are you running?' asked Lloyd.

'Pirelli P Zeros. 245s in the front and 285s in the back,' replied Alex. 'I've done a lot of work on it since I bought it. I had new back axles machined because the splines were gone in the old ones. They vibrated the back of the car at 110mph. I also invested in a new, stainless exhaust system. All the headers, everything, is custom made.'

They stopped in Bathurst to top up the fuel. Lloyd mentioned that he had always wanted to drive around the Bathurst track. He told Alex how he had never missed a Bathurst race since they began back in the sixties.

'No matter how pressing things were, I always took the weekend off to watch Bathurst on TV. I love the thrill of victory and agony of defeat, which are so prominent in that race. There is always drama. Why don't we take a spin around the track, Alex? We've got time.'

'Sure. I love that race too, but I haven't seen as many as you have, Lloyd. I'm not ancient enough.'

'That's right, rub it in, but at least I've gotten this far. Let's see how far *you* get.'

They both laughed. Alex drove out to Mt. Panorama, which was located just south of the town. The first lap around the iconic, motor-racing track was taken in reconnaissance mode. The second and third were fast, but not reckless. Both men were surprised by the steepness of *the dipper* and *the esses*. As they flew down *Conrod Straight* at 140mph, the resounding *De Tomaso Orchestra* entertained everyone for miles around. After the third lap they drove back to town, turned left onto the Mitchell Highway and headed westwards.

They rolled into Narromine around the middle of the day. They decided that they would have lunch there because Alex had flown gliders there before and he reckoned that he knew his way around town 'pretty good'. They ended up having a delicious counter lunch at the local club.

Narromine was located right at the eastern edge of the wheat belt. The land to the west of there was like flat infinity, and the road was like some kind of time tunnel that pulled everything from the distant future closer to the present. For example, towns that were supposed to be fifteen minutes up the road grew out of the singularity in five.

They cruised down an endless, ruler-straight, anvil-flat road, towards the western horizon, sitting on 110mph. It was noticeable how much the conversation grew silent during those extended periods of above 100mph driving. Alex looked in the rear vision mirror and observed,

'Look, Lloyd, no cars.' He looked ahead up the road, all the way to the horizon and he looked all the way back as far as he could see in the rear vision mirror. 'No cars, horizon to horizon. We've got the whole road to ourselves.' He depressed the accelerator further and accelerated the Pantera to 130mph. 'This is its true cruising speed. Look, it's so stable I can drive it with two fingers.' He demonstrated his two-fingered technique. The stable *Beast*, which was what the boys named it on this trip, shot down the highway like a cruise missile on rails.

'This road was made for us, Lloyd. 130 is effortless.'

They flew into Trangie in what seemed like minutes. 35mph felt like going backwards as they crawled through town. They crossed the railway line west of

Trangie and rapidly disappeared into the distance accompanied by the *Cleveland Concerto*.

Alex turned the volume up on the *Orchestra*, and warped them through 100, 130, 140 and still accelerating to a top speed of 152mph. Although *The Beast* had more to give, Alex lost his nerve and finally settled into a 150mph cruise. He encountered the first bend, an open, left-hand kink, at the end of a twenty-mile straight. They approached it at unexpected velocity, making it look like a fast zoom. Alex lifted off the throttle, dabbed the brake and took the sweeping lefthander doing 110. He powered out of the bend and accelerated back to 150 again.

‘Nevertire is just up ahead, Alex. We have to turn right there.’

No sooner did Lloyd say that, and they were careening into the next town. They passed an 80km/h speed sign doing 130mph. Alex applied the discs and slowed to 50mph in as many yards.

‘Bloody good brakes,’ commented Lloyd.

They turned right onto the Oxley Highway and headed north. The straights were shorter and there were many bends that he had to slow down for, but it still only took him five minutes to get to Warren.

They rolled into the front yard of Lloyd’s old farmhouse. It was perfectly maintained and, when they eventually entered it, very spacious and comfortable. It was the middle of the afternoon.

‘There are the twins.’ Lloyd pointed out through a back window, across a flat field, at two young men on horseback riding towards the house. Alex was immediately struck by the horses’ spirited nature and elegant poise. ‘I haven’t seen Leon and Russel in months. It will be so good to see them again. Come Alex, let’s step outside.’

The twins rode up and dismounted. They both fell into their father’s arms and hugged and patted him on the back. After the emotional greeting, they all sat down on the back veranda, cracked a few stubbies and waited for the magic hour of twilight. They spoke about many things until Lloyd eventually broached the subject both Alex and he had been thinking about since they left Sydney.

‘So what do you think about knowing your own death day?’

Alex sighed, ‘Ohhhh ... I don’t know, Lloyd ... it scares the shit out of me.’

'Yeah, I know what you mean. I can't bear even thinking about it. So what's next?'

'With my work, you mean?'

'Yeah. What's next?'

'Thirty more cases, not deceased.'

'No death date, just a birth date?'

'That's right.'

'So you'll know when they are going to die in the future?'

'That's right. I want to get some statistics. This'll just be the first, small sample.'

'So you can't see yourself testing yourself?'

'Not at the moment, but give me time to wrap my brain around it and I might change my mind. What about you?'

'Not a chance, I'm closer to the big D than you are and I do not need to know my death date. Just saying it sends chills of fear down my spine.'

They sat on the back veranda, beers in hand, and admired the cosmic lightshow of the sunset. They leaned back against the chairs and put their feet up on the veranda rail. The twins' girlfriends were preparing dinner in the kitchen. There was tranquillity everywhere. Alex speculated,

'It's like the DNA is a fractal representation of time in 3D space. It's the DNA that links time with three-dimensional space. It actually *makes* the space. The DNA is the link and it's the same in every cell of the body, and the body is all cells.'

'Wouldn't each cell's DNA need to be slightly different to provide differentiation to that cell?'

'I hold to that assertion, Lloyd, however I doubt we will ever find *that* code. I don't know what we'll find.'

More silence, then,

'Knowledge always comes at a price, doesn't it?'

'It would seem so, Alex, it would seem so.'

.....

Chapter Forty-Three

D-DAY

1

Alex spent all of spring and half the summer of 2008 buried in the laboratory. He laboriously worked through the thirty DNA samples and noted the results. He drew some graphs and finally wrote up a summary.

Lloyds phone rang at 8.30 in the morning on *Saturday 20th December 2008*.

'It's your money.'

'Lloyd, it's Alex; I've got to see you. I've got something to show you.'

'Good morning, Alex. What a surprise. We were wondering what happened to you. You seemed to have disappeared off the face of the Earth.'

'I was in the lab up to my neck in process. Sorry that I've been a bit anti-social. I have some results and I've got to tell you that they raise more questions than provide answers.'

'You know my love of mystery, Alex. I'm on the boat out the back when you come over.'

'OK, Lloyd, I'll see you soon.'

Alex showered, gulped some toast and coffee then slipped out of his apartment into the lift with his thesis under his arm. He stepped out of the lift into the basement garages. Everyone in the building knew when Alex was going out. Old Mrs. Berkowitz on the ground floor, referring to Alex's Pantera, informed all the tenants that,

'That thing registers on my *sphincter scale*.'

He parked *The Beast* in Lloyd's driveway and walked through the open house down to the jetty out the back.

'Lloydie.'

'Alex.'

'Are you provisioning for a trip?'

'Yeah. We're sailing up to Bobbin Head. We might stay there for a couple of days. I thought I'd catch the southerly predicted on Monday and tailwind it all the way up. We thought we'd spend Christmas Day on the boat.'

'How lovely for you both.'

'We would have invited you ...'

'We couldn't have made it anyway. I am totally out of the loop and Sophia works on Christmas Day.'

'It would have been very crowded anyway. You look like you could use a coffee.'

'That would definitely hit the spot, Lloyd. So you'll be on the water for what, about a week?'

'Yeah, about that, give or take, depending on the winds. I'll wait for the nor-easter to sail back down. I've got a bit of a passion for downwind running.'

Alex followed Lloyd into the modern kitchen. He watched him brew the coffee and said,

'I've brought my summary.'

'I see it there under your arm.'

'There is something very perplexing about the picture that is emerging from the data, Lloyd.'

'Perplexing?'

'Yeah.'

'So, let me refresh my memory,' said Lloyd scratching his chin. 'You have now tested thirty more samples of numbered individuals who were alive when the samples were taken. And you have their dates of birth.' He paused for a few moments, shook his head and remembered, 'and now you have calculated their dates of death?'

'Yes, all thirty of them.'

Lloyd poured the coffee. 'One sugar and black for Alex ... so we must sit down and go through your results. I am quite curious to find out why they are so *perplexing*.'

They relaxed in Mecca's teak cockpit with their feet up on the bench seats taking sips of their coffees. The day was sunny, but pleasantly cool as it was still early. They both wore their peak caps and Polaroids and truly looked the part of gentlemen at leisure.

Alex became momentarily mesmerised by the aesthetics of the surroundings. To his left was a line of magnificent, harbour-side mansions. In front of him were the rustic wooden jetties with a small flotilla of expensive

recreational craft tied to them. On his right was the blue expanse of Rose Bay with all its moored boats and lively foreshore, which sparkled in a string of lights at night, and out in the distance was the magnificent harbour.

'I stuck to people under forty. There are ten teens and sub-teens, ten in their twenties and ten in their thirties.'

'Were those their ages when their samples were taken?'

'No, that is their age now. I went by the birthdays. A couple of them are already dead, going by the data. They died sometime between when their in-vitro samples were taken and now.'

'So ... what? ... You've got twenty-eight samples that are still alive and will die sometime in the future?'

'I know the exact day.'

'That is your postulate?'

'In a nutshell.'

'It will be impossible to prove as all the samples are anonymous. You won't be able to track their lives and wait for them to die.'

'No ... it's a problem.' Alex thought for a while, then remarked, 'The data revealed a statistical anomaly.'

'You don't say?'

Alex rummaged through his papers and produced a graph of the death-dates. He had the years going up the left side and the cases along the bottom.

'You see, Lloyd, the progression of deaths is as one would expect, fairly sparse and random, until you hit 2023, *when they all die.*'

'What?'

'*September 2023*, to be more exact. Out of the thirty samples, two are already dead, five die before 2023, and the other twenty-three of them all die on the same day, *September 23rd 2023.*'

'On the same day?'

'All twenty-three of them. I have not found a sample that will live beyond that day.'

'I'll just try to wrap my brain around that, Alex. Got any theories?'

'I don't have the data on where these samples originate from. They could all have come from one area or they could all be very far from each other. It's part of the anonymity protocol.'

'So they could be from all over Australia?'

'I think there was even an exchange program with California. It is possible that all of the samples might have come from there, but there is no way of knowing for sure because all that data has been deleted.'

'And they all die on the same day?'

'Yep!'

'What could kill all the people on the same day?'

'A plague could,' speculated Alex, 'propagated through the airlines. Something that is immune to all our antibiotics.'

'But would a plague kill everybody off on the same day? I don't think so. It would have to be something else.'

'Maybe a NEO finally hits the bullseye.'

'A near earth object, like a rouge comet or something, could definitely wreak enough havoc if it was big enough. I think ten miles across would pretty much do the trick.'

'A comet eh?'

Lloyd morphed into his *disaster-movie-fanatic* mode.

'All the oxygen would get sucked out of the atmosphere in the humungous fire. All the cities on Earth would crumble to dust in the off-the-chart earthquakes that would follow the impact. There would be tidal waves everywhere. Everything would come to a stop and everything would die. The atmosphere would turn black and the Earth would go into a fifty-year, mini ice age. After fifty or a hundred years, when all the dust had settled and the skies cleared and ice melted, life in the form of plants would gradually re-emerge from the barren ground. But there would be no animals or insects, or people for that matter. Some fish might make it.'

'So all my samples get taken out by some great global *event*?'

'Who is to know? No one will ever know until it happens.'

Alex gazed far into the distance and quietly assessed,

'So our numbers could be up, as well, on *September 23rd 2023*.'

'Logic would have it.'

'And the girls as well,' moaned Alex.

'2023 is not so far off,' whined Lloyd.

'Not *now* it isn't,' sighed Alex.

Lloyd rose to his feet, picked up the cups and declared, 'I think we're ready for another coffee.'

Alex followed him into the kitchen.

'You know, Lloyd, I've just about made up my mind to test my own sample.'

'Now *that* is the sort of statement that makes me think of movies about rooms with mattresses on the walls and buzz-saw crazy brain surgeons trying to squeeze in a quick lobotomy before golf. Nobody could handle knowing his or her death date. Why put yourself through the trauma?'

'My curiosity is my weakness, Lloyd. When it itches I can't settle until I've scratched it. And I have decided that I am not really afraid of death, whenever it comes, so stuff it all, I'll test myself.'

'This thesis of yours is far from finished, me thinks, Alex.'

'Yeah, if it's *ever* finished.'

2

The Royal National Park, just south of Sydney, echoed with the roar of a rampaging V8. It was 2.00am, *Saturday March 21 2009*. There was only one car negotiating the twenty miles of winding road through the Park and it sounded a lot like *The Beast*.

Behind the wheel of the supersonic projectile was Alex, caught oscillating between the heebie-jeebies and some type of strange euphoria. He had been working for a week analysing his own sample of junk-DNA. He completed his analysis just after midnight on Friday night and immediately felt like he needed to drive to clear his confused mind. He drove south out of town and through the National Park. He'd driven the road before and he loved it, although he thought it was a little *tight* for *The Beast*.

He stopped on Bald Hill and admired the glittering south coast from there. There was no one around. Only one thought passed through his brain, over and over.

'*What's it all mean?*'

He continued driving down the coast, all the way to Macquarie Pass. He snaked up the Pass and roared on to Robertson where he turned right onto the Hume Highway. He cruised down the empty freeway, back to Sydney, at a leisurely 130mph.

He either had his late dinner, or early breakfast, at McDonald's in Engadine. He drove to the Eastern Suburbs and sat through the sunrise on a park bench in Rose Bay. He was waiting for the hour to become civilised enough to call Lloyd.

He heard the familiar sound of tennis balls being hit. He turned around and spotted two athletic looking women warming up for a game. He glanced at his watch and thought to himself,

'Seven-thirty. Another bloody hour.'

He killed a bit more time by admiring the sleek, sculpted lines of the Pantera, which were exquisitely highlighted in the morning light. As the sun rose further, he watched the harbour come to life in a myriad of watercraft. He watched the Watson's Bay ferry round Point Piper and glide towards Rose Bay wharf. He could see Lloyd's house from where he was sitting. During all this time his brain kept echoing with the same questions,

'What's it all mean? ... How could it be possible?'

3

Lloyd's phone rang at exactly 8.30am.

'It's your money.'

'Hey Lloyd. Are you up yet?'

'I am now, Alex.'

'Oh, sorry.'

'Don't be, I was up already.'

'You good for a visit?'

'Is the Pope a Catholic?'

Alex took the two-minute drive to Lloyd's house, parked in the driveway, got out of the car carrying his notes, and rang the doorbell.

'That was quick,' came the greeting.

'Lloydie.'

'Good morning Alex,' said Eva from the kitchen. 'Come in and have a cup of coffee with us.'

'Thank you, Eva.'

Alex couldn't help but notice Eva. She still looked radiant for a lady in her early fifties. She had just been for a swim in the pool and her long blond hair was still wet. She looked tall, tanned and slim, only dressed in her sunglasses, bikini and tie-dyed sarong, which was seductively wrapped around her slender waist. Alex thought that she looked like a '*Nordic goddess*'.

'And to what do we owe this unexpected pleasure, Alex?' asked Lloyd.

Alex placed a folder full of papers on the kitchen bench and exclaimed,

'I am totally freaked out. I don't know whether to scream for joy or shudder in fear?'

'The old joy, fear conundrum, eh?' joked Lloyd.

'What could be so frightening?' asked Eva.

'Plenty, trust me.'

'Black with one sugar for Alex,' said Eva as she stirred the coffee.

'Yeah, I like my coffee like I like my women,' Alex quipped in humour.

'Wouldn't you say that Sophia's complexion is more ... cappuccino?'

'Yes that's true, but there *is* coffee in it,' replied Alex.

'So, what has Alex come up with this time? I assume it is the thesis that has brought him here so early on a Saturday morning? It usually is the thesis.'

'The *mongrel* thesis, Lloyd,' growled Alex.

'More conundrums? Should we start organising a funeral?'

'Conundrums? Try this on for size.' Eva and Lloyd listened with interest. 'I finally got the guts to test my own junk-DNA. I had accepted the consequences of knowing my death date. It took me a week to find the repeats. It was about nine o'clock last night when I finally got to count them. And guess how many there were, I bet anything that you never guess.'

'We're not going to guess,' said Eva. 'This is too serious.'

'I'll guess,' said Lloyd.

'No you won't! How many repeats was it, Alex?'

'Seven hundred and twenty-three.'

'Seven hundred and twenty three?' exclaimed both hosts at the tops of their voices. Lloyd broke into a belly laugh,

'You'll outlive us all, Alex.'

'That's impossible,' surmised Eva. 'What year will it be when you are 723?'

'I'm thirty-two now and it's 2009. When I'm 723 it will be the year 2700.'

'Clearly, this throws a spanner into your junk-DNA-slash-time theory.'

'It certainly does, Lloyd. The idea of me living that long is preposterous.'

'At least you don't get to check-out in 2023 along with the rest of us.'

'No. Except that this is all too surreal.'

'Something must be amiss. Are you sure that you followed correct procedure?'

'You know that I'm a stickler for detail, Lloyd. I checked and re-checked and re-checked, and it came out the same every time. But it's still impossible.'

'What now?' asked Eva.

'Well, I've got to analyse more samples. I need to expand the data base.'

'Maybe you are an aberration, Alex,' said Eva. 'Maybe you are a one in a million individual whose DNA doesn't behave like other people's. Maybe the repeats in your junk-DNA represent something else, something other than time.'

'Not too many maybes about it, it would seem,' replied Alex slightly dejected.

They sat there drinking their coffees and thinking about Alex's thesis when Lloyd suddenly perked up and said,

'What the hell, Alex, Eva and I have been talking it over and we've decided to volunteer as guinea pigs in your research.'

'And that was even before we found out that you were going to live for seven hundred odd years.'

'Yes, we definitely want to do it now.' They both nodded.

'Aren't you guys afraid of knowing? You don't have to volunteer. I've got plenty of samples.'

'We're intrigued.' Replied Eva.

'Yes, that's the word, we're intrigued,' Lloyd agreed.

4

Highly exhilarated by the fact that he hadn't been foreordained to an early grave by his research, Alex returned to the painstaking work of analysing the junk-DNA samples of another thirty anonymous individuals. As well as those, he also had Lloyd and Eva's cheek swabs.

It turned out that his personal relief at not being given an early death sentence outweighed his disappointment over his theory being potentially completely wrong. He thought about it for a very long time and figured that there were twelve deceased cases that supported his theory and only one that didn't. And that was only because he completely dismissed the possibility of him living for 723 years. He just couldn't conceive of a situation where that could be possible, so he discounted it out of hand.

He thought about his friends and wondered if he should perhaps conceal their results from them if they turned out to be too disturbing. In the end he decided to reveal everything to them because he knew that they trusted him implicitly, and that there was no way that he could break that trust.

For the thirty samples he chose ones with the most recent birth dates. He wanted all of them to be alive at the time of testing and he wanted them to have the greatest potential for a long life.

The arduous analysis ground on for months. He forged ahead slowly, determined to solve the problem one way or another. Even though he refused to allow himself to believe the stupidity of living for 723 years, he did find, particularly during those long, late-night sessions in the lab, that his mind drifted into fantasies about it. He imagined what a life like that would be like, and how many friends he would lose through their dying out on him. Then he would suddenly snap himself out of it, mumbling something like, 'That's so dumb! Concentrate on your work.'

He decided that he was in no hurry to analyse Lloyd and Eva's samples, and he told them so. He felt that he needed a deeper understanding, and more results, before he tackled their junk-DNA. *'If I tackle it?'* he thought.

He found the repeats, sub-repeats and sub-sub-repeats within the first sample and calculated its death date.

'23rd September 2023. Amazing!'

He analysed the second, third, fourth and fifth samples and their junk-DNA indicated that they would also all die on 23rd September 2023.

'Incredible.'

Alex sat and thought about it for a while. He had the original twelve results that confirmed his theory. They were all samples taken from deceased people. He

had another thirty results, two of which died between sampling and analysis, five of which will die before 2023 and twenty-three of which will all die on 23rd September 2023. Now he had five more results all of which will also die on 23rd September 2023. He still hadn't found any samples that would live past that day, except for his own.

Over the next few weeks he analysed another five samples. The data indicated that one was going to die in 2019, but that all the rest would die on *D-day*, for death-day, which was what Alex now called 23rd September 2023.

One time, while Lloyd paid Alex a visit in the lab, he suggested that Alex might want to test more deceased samples to reinforce his theory.

'Twelve is hardly enough, Alex.'

'I know, Lloyd, but the D-day phenomenon has thrown the cat amongst the pigeons. My focus has been deflected and I don't know what is more important, my hypothesis, or trying to figure out why everybody carks it on the same day in 2023.'

'Everybody except *you*, Alex.'

'Yeah, everybody except me.'

'When will you analyse Eva and me?'

'Are you sure that you want to know?'

Lloyd laughed, 'We are absolutely positive. We're not afraid of a little knowledge. You just go ahead and do it and let us worry about the consequences.'

'Alright, I'll do you guys next, but I don't ...'

'Forget it. You just go ahead with the analysis and then come over for a visit and tell us what you have found. We'll be waiting for your call.'

'OK, Lloyd. Give me a couple of weeks to get it done and then I'll come over.'

5

They all got together for a mid-week lunch at Doyle's. As it was Sophia's day off, she joined them as well. It was a beautiful, clear, winter's day and they all relaxed in the sun sipping their beers and perusing the menus.

They all noticed that Alex was behaving a tad more strangely than usual. In fact, he had been *weird* ever since he called them the night before. He appeared

like a person that had seen the Almighty Himself. His whole face glowed and there was a strange, far-away look in his eyes.

'We are well prepared for your news,' said Eva. 'Be completely relaxed telling us.'

'Yes, Alex, let us have it right between the eyes,' said Lloyd feigning gameness. In truth he was a little nervous and he did harbour some doubts about knowing his death date, although he concealed those doubts very well.

'We cannot separate ourselves from new knowledge due to fear,' he thought to himself. *'If everyone did that we'd all still be in the stone age.'*

They all looked at Alex. He just sat there reading his menu. They looked at each other, smiled, and then looked at Alex again.

'So, what is this, Alex, some kind of new torment?' asked Eva.

'Yes, Alex, are you going to tell us?'

'Alright,' replied Alex.

There was more silence.

'Well?'

Sophia placed her arm around Alex's shoulder and kissed his cheek.

'Please tell us, *mon cheri*.'

Alex opened his folder, pulled out the top page and gave it to Lloyd. Lloyd glanced at it, laughed out loud and passed it on to Eva.

She read it and exclaimed,

'It says here that I'm going to live till 2686 ... and that Lloyd is only going to live till 2613. What gives, Alex?'

'That's one unlucky 13,' joked Lloyd. 'How come I get short-changed?'

'86 minus 13 is 73. What am I going to do without my Lloydie for 73 years? That is a whole lifetime.'

'I told you not to do this, didn't I?' said Alex.

Lloyd completely lost control and broke out in a fit of hilarity. The others all looked at each other. Lloyd finally said,

'Let's see, I'm fifty nine now and it's 2009, plus, give me another look ...'

'It's 2613 dear,' said Eva.

'I was born in 1950 and I'm going to die in 2613. I'm going to live to be 663 years old? Imagine the candles.'

'It's still not as old as Alex,' said Eva. 'He's going to live till ... what was it again Alex?'

'2700.'

'Obviously, this is some kind of practical joke, eh Alex? You've pulled the odd prank before.'

'I wish it was, Lloyd.'

'So nobody lives past 2023, except for us? Won't that be a bit lonely?'

'I don't know Lloyd, but I've got to get more data. I would really like to find somebody else that is going to live past 2023 and have a normal lifespan.'

'I think that you might have stumbled us into the *twilight zone*, Alex,' said Eva.

'Yeah, Alex,' agreed Lloyd breaking into another bout of laughter. 'I think I need another bloody beer and is everyone ready to order?'

Everyone smiled and nodded, then Sophia announced,

'I have been thinking about this and I have decided ...'

Lloyd cut her off. 'Don't tell me, please don't tell me ...'

'I have decided that I want to know as well, whatever the truth is.'

'Oh great,' joked Lloyd, 'now Sophia wants to book a ticket to the funny farm.'

'Where my Alex goes, I go,' she answered as she gave him another kiss on the cheek.

6

Over the next eighteen months, Alex searched out every deceased sample he could get his hands on. Each one of them confirmed his theory. The illusive segment of repeats in the junk-DNA perfectly recorded the lifespan of the person from whom the sample was taken. This raised his confidence in the hypothesis, but increased his mystification in his and his friends' aberrant results.

He analysed Sophia's sample and to his, and her, amazement he found out that her junk-DNA revealed that she would die on *22nd December 2700*, the same day Alex was supposed to die.

The four of them spent New Year's Eve 2010 on Mecca, floating in Sydney Harbour just off the Opera house, waiting for the world-famous fireworks display.

Alex had completed his thesis and submitted it to Lloyd, his professor. It had been almost five years since he began his research into junk-DNA. He had never worked so hard on anything before. He felt that now, finally, he had uncovered the true function of the mysterious part of the human DNA strand. However, no one on Earth was going to share in the knowledge. He and Lloyd had discussed it at length during many late evenings and decided that the public was not ready for this information. They felt that knowledge of their death date would change people's behaviour in bizarre and unexpected ways. They could not explain why everyone else was supposed to die in 2023 and the four of them were supposed to live on through that date.

'Nobody could handle it,' surmised Lloyd.

'It could lead to social chaos and only God knows how predetermination would affect organised religions and their philosophies.'

'I think that it would even affect things like stock markets and economies.'

'I accept your thesis, Alex, well done, but I think that you better think up another one for your master's degree.'

'I think so too, but what a ride, don't you agree?'

'Oh yeah!'

'Another glass of champagne anyone?' asked Eva.

Everyone held their glass up. She topped them all up.

'What should we drink to?' she asked.

Sophia stood and suggested,

'Let's drink to life and love.'

Everyone stood and clinked their glasses and repeated in unison,

'To life and love.'

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Chapter Forty-Four

CESAR'S

1

Vanja and Vesna, the twin suns, rose silently into the purple sky above the easterly horizon, filling it with a warm orange glow. Another day had dawned on Rama. As the suns appeared, a cacophony of birdsong filled the air. As Adam awoke, he momentarily thought that he was still back on Earth because the sounds of nature were so familiar. The morning was warm, in fact the whole night had been warm and both he and Ambriel slept naked and completely uncovered. He looked at her sleeping beside him and shook his head with disbelief at her ravishing, youthful beauty. He was, and he looked, substantially older now compared to when they met all those years ago. She was so young to look at that she would have easily passed for his daughter. He thought,

'Everyone looks so young on Rama, even the old people. Just we Earthlings look old. Thank God that at least I'm fit.'

He looked around their bedroom. There were two walls, one full wall behind the bed and one cutaway half-wall on the left side. The walls were made of timber. *'Looks like cedar,'* he thought. The panels were not sawn, or even rough-sawn, but appeared carved into a continuous intricate free-flowing pattern. Their bed was the closest thing to anything one might find on Earth. Covering the stone floor to within about a foot of the walls was the most magnificent Persian carpet he had ever seen. He looked up and admired the smooth, sky-blue ceiling, which looked like a typical plastered ceiling, except that it only came half way out from the wall. The rest of the ceiling, the front half of the left wall, the whole right wall and the front wall, which faced east and opened up onto a stone veranda, was tinted glass, *'liquid glass,'* he assumed. He felt a pair of warm lips kiss his right shoulder.

'Good morning, darling,' she said as she climbed on top of him and gave him a body hug.

'Good morning, Libby, oh sorry, I mean ...'

'That's OK, you can call me Libby. I like it.'

'I'm so used to it. You're my Libby. It's hard to change.'

'Ooooh, what is happening to my big man?'

'Darling, who can help it, you're so gorgeous you could wake the dead. I wouldn't go to any funerals if I were you, you know ... ooh, I forgot ...' She took his breath away.

After working themselves into a lather of passion, which was followed by a brief cool down, she rose from the bed and walked naked through the liquid-glass onto the veranda. He got up as well and joined her. He hugged her from behind and whispered into her ear,

'You are the love of my life, you know.'

'As you are mine, sweetheart.'

They were perched high above the long valley, just to the north of the waterfall. She pointed down the valley into the distance and said,

'Cesar's will be working this morning. It won't be big, but it'll be quality. We ought to get into some of that before the on-shores blow it out.'

'Cesar's?'

'It's our surf break.' She pointed to the easterly horizon. 'See the ocean? You can just make it out.'

He squinted his eyes. 'Oh yeah, I can just make out the coastline.'

'That is the river mouth down there. There are a couple of excellent reef breaks there, although the best break is a few miles south of the river, in a cove. That's Cesar's. It is very sheltered and completely inaccessible by land. I think that it might remind you of Broken Head a bit, the way the wave peels off.'

'Great. I guess it's as good a way for me to begin exploring Rama as any.'

'Cesar's is best in an east or south-east swell. We just love it because it's ours, because we live here. It's kind of part of our staple diet.'

'How come it's called Cesar's?'

'Nobody knows. It has always been Cesar's, for as long as anyone can remember.'

It was about an hour after sun-rise. Adam commented on the unusual appearance of the twin suns and asked,

'Are twin suns common?'

'Twin suns like these are very rare,' she replied. 'Vanja, the bright one, is the son and Vesna is the mother, literally. A long time ago there was only Vesna.'

She gave life to Rama and my people. As she became old and approached her twilight millennia, a great event occurred. She gave birth to a son, a new sun we named Vanja. Initially Vanja was small, like a baby, but very bright. There was an umbilicus that co-joined them, just as there is now, and through it Vesna fed herself to Vanja. The blessing for the Rama was that she managed to pass through this process without destroying us. Vanja grew to its present size and dimmed slightly while Vesna faded and shrank as she gave herself to her son. One day she will be completely absorbed into her son and disappear. The fact that the Rama survived the birth is unique as far as we know. We have never found any people, anywhere, with a history as ancient as ours, although the cosmos is a big place and the teachers are sure there are planets and people out there that have survived the same process. Our saga, Adam, is as ancient as thought itself.' She turned and hugged him. 'I could tell you more, hunkster, but the barrels await and we still have to have breakfast.'

'Breakfast?'

'You will be surprised how many Rama things are the same as you Earthlings.'

They smoked a pipe of Mana. She taught him how to do it. She loaded up his pipe, handed it to him, lit it for him and said,

'Live long, my husband.'

He loaded up hers, handed it to her, lit it and said,

'Live long, my wife.'

They performed this ritual every morning, as did everyone else on Rama. After smoking, they showered together, dressed and wandered down to the kitchen. She made coffee and porridge for them both. She topped the porridge with some dried sultanas and sliced banana. She also juiced some oranges and lemons for them.

Before long, everyone was in the kitchen.

'Who else is hitting Cesar's this morning?' asked Ambriel.

'Not us,' replied Albion. 'The twins and I are taking in the markets on Barta for the next few days. Now is a good time to place your order if there is anything you would like us to pick up for you.'

'No surfing for me today,' said Max. 'Ben, Zeke and I are building generators for Earth today, aren't we Ben?'

'I'll come,' said Ada, 'although I'll have to see you there. I have something to attend to first.'

'Good,' said Ambriel. 'Mommy is coming and we have a threesome. I thought we'd take the saucer, it's such a pleasant day.'

'I'll go in mine,' said Ada.

The family possessed many *saucers* of different sizes. Basically, saucers were open-topped, upside-down, Frisbee-shaped, mind-controlled, levitating discs. They were much smaller than the space ships and were designed for short hops at low altitude and slow speed. They were a step up from flying around in levitation suits as they were large enough to carry small cargo such as surfboards or traded goods. They were rarely flown faster than about 100 miles per hour as the occupants were exposed to the elements and only afforded protection from the wind by clear, Lexan-like windshields. Everyone in the family owned their own single seater. The family also owned a number of two-seaters with the seats in those being arranged one in front of the other. The occupants sat low in the discs in comfortable, semi-supine, anatomically moulded sports seats. There was space on either side of the seats for strapping things down. The hulls were made of the same material as the big ships and also possessed the camouflage function, although there was virtually never a reason for its use.

The fundamental fact about the Rama and their machines was that they controlled them with their minds not their hands and feet. Everything was mind controlled. The other fundamental fact was that everything was powered by gravity.

'Mornin all,' came a cheerful, baritone greeting from the top of the stairs.

'Good morning, Zeke,' came the reply from everybody.

'How's old sleepy head?' asked Ben.

'Bloody marvellous. Boy, I sure could use that coffee ...'

'And toast with Vegemite?' asked Ambriel.

'Don't go to no trouble, Brie.'

'Zeke has to have his axle grease,' joked Ben.

'Listen whipper snapper, I will have you know that this *axle grease* built a whole great nation.' Zeke was laying it on pretty thick, just like the Vegemite on his toast.

Adam was able to have a much better look at him this morning. He noticed that all the crookedness in his body was gone. His spine, arms and legs were straight as a ruler. He was now strong and muscular, with broad shoulders. The long scar, which used to run across his face, was now completely healed and undetectable. He also was not wearing an eye patch over his left eye anymore. Adam figured that the Rama must have transplanted a new eye into his socket. Later, when he asked him about it, Zeke told him that he was given a choice, a natural eye grown from his own stem cells or a bionic eye with enhanced abilities.

'I went for the bionic job. I got 500 times zoom and night vision. The family can also send me telepathic messages via text that appears at the base of me vision. I see letters typed in light, kinda like subtitles in a foreign flick. Ben reckons that it makes me 10 percent telepathic. I'm been taught how to make me own letters and he reckons he'll be able to pick up me messages off the eye one day. So we'll be able to communicate even if we're a long way apart.'

Two things that hadn't changed, Adam noticed, were Zeke's wild, long, blond hair, and his taste in clothing. He still preferred to wear old, worn-out T-shirts and jeans, and no shoes.

While they were having their breakfast, Adam asked Ambriel about her brother and his two wives. She explained to him that on Rama it is not uncommon for *inseparable twins* to be born.

'These are always female,' she explained. 'Male twins do not seem to suffer this affliction. They share a deep telepathic bond, much more intimate than regular telepaths, within which they live their lives almost as one person. When a man falls in love with one inseparable twin, he falls in love with both of them. They spend all their lives together and when one of them dies, the other dies as well, in sympathy. An interesting thing about them is their intense jealousy. Although not being at all jealous of one another, they are exceedingly jealous of any other female that might demonstrate an interest in their husband. In extreme cases, they have even been known to exhibit homicidal tendencies

towards the brazen hussy. Nobody ever messes with inseparable twins if they know what is good for them.'

2

They strapped their surfboards to the saucer and sat in the seats. Adam sat in front and Ambriel behind.

'I'll go slowly, darling, so you can enjoy the beauty of *The Eos Valley*.'

'Thank you, Libby. I saw a bit of it with Ben when we arrived. My initial impression was that it looked like Switzerland. What is the name of the river?'

'It's the same, The Eos, and the sea, in fact all the seas on Rama, which are all interconnected, are named *Oceanus*. The waterfall, as you might have guessed, is named *The Eos Falls*. Ready?'

'As I'll ever be.'

'OK, here we go.'

The saucer silently lifted from its parking spot in the rear of one of the garages and floated out into the spacious back yard. It then rose further and flew over the house and over the edge of the escarpment and giant waterfall.

'I have to tell you the truth, Lib, I *am* a bit excited.'

'I'm not surprised, sweetie. I was extremely excited the first time I came to Earth.'

'Wow, this is my first day on Rama. You know, Libby, if it wasn't for the two suns in the sky, a person could easily forget that they were on a completely different planet.'

'You cannot imagine how exciting it is for us to have the Earth to visit. Although it occurred a long time before my birth, the discovery of Earth was a huge watershed in our history. You will find so many things on Rama that have been brought here from Earth.'

'What, you go there to get stuff?'

'Yes, of course. For us, going to Earth is not unlike you taking a trip to the local mall. Where do you think your morning coffee came from?'

'So, what you are telling me is that the Rama are visiting Earth all the time?'

'Yes, sometimes for the smallest things like a packet of *Vittoria Coffee*. I'm sure that you know what running out of coffee feels like. Well, we are not much different to you in that respect.' They both had a good laugh. 'Although,' she

sighed, 'all that will all change very soon. There will be no more shopping, unfortunately, however there will be a new Earth, a new wilderness, one where there will be no fences and in which the Rama will not need to be a secret. And there will be surfing. Some things will be lost but many things will be gained as well.'

'I still have to come to full terms with all this, Libby. I'm not sure that I've even remotely grasped the implications of the coming event.'

'Plenty of time for that, darling. By the way, did I mention how much I love you today?'

The saucer descended down the front of the two-thousand-foot-high Eos Falls. They floated down to the base of the falls within the deep, rocky V, the place where the two escarpments met. She flew close to the cascading water causing them both to become wet from the spray. She laughed and said,

'Lucky we're dressed for surfing.'

'Yeah, I love this.'

At the base of the falls the air glistened in a fog of opaque spray as it was intensely lit by the warm glow of the morning suns. The roar of the water crashing onto the giant boulders was made twice as deafening as it echoed back and forth off the vertical rock walls of the escarpment.

They flew low and slow down the upper reaches of the Eos. They flew over some rapids.

'Those rapids are great for canoeing,' she said. 'Also, many Rama come to free-climb the falls. Rock climbing is a favourite sport on our planet just as it is on yours. Alpine climbing is as well. Many expeditions climb Mount Ourea, the highest mountain on Rama, every summer. It can be a dangerous practice and some get killed.'

'Mt. Ourea? I think Ben told me that the big mountain behind your house is the biggest mountain on Rama.'

'It is, sweetie, although it's your house now as well.'

They cruised down the centre of the valley maintaining an altitude of about a hundred feet.

'There are many farms along the riverbanks,' commented Adam.

'Yes. They live to farm. They grow everything imaginable.' She pointed to a house off to the left. 'That's Ferdinand's farm. We get all our vegetables from him and his wife bakes delicious pastries.'

'Do you trade with these people?'

'Yes, we trade with all types of goods that we bring back from our journeys to other worlds, however the main things we trade with are our sails. Gravity sails are the most valuable things on Rama. They power everyone's houses and allow the people to get around. We have traded sails with all these farmers for a lifetime of supply of produce. They are very happy with the trade as we do not use much and the free energy of the sails allows them to produce a great abundance of food, which they can then trade with others for other things they may want. Once a farmer has traded for a sail, he knows that he and his family will soon become wealthy.'

'Is your family the only one that manufactures gravity sails?'

'Oh no. There are many families that possess that art, although each family's design is unique and a treasured secret.'

'I see.'

They glided above the serpentine Eos towards the ocean. The valley had widened to what Adam guessed was about three miles across at that point. He expressed his feeling.

'You know what gets me, Lib?'

'Yes.'

'I'm having a bit of trouble wrapping my brain around the fact that I am two million light years away from where I was yesterday.'

'I know.'

'It's inconceivable.'

'Isn't She the prettiest valley on mornings like this, darling.'

'Er, yes ... yes, She *is* beautiful.'

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Chapter Forty-Five

THE DARK SIDE

1

The following day, the surf was all blown out by the early north-easterly wind. Everyone congregated around the breakfast table. On Earth it was the *28th May 2005*. Adam got an invitation from Zeke to spend an old fashioned session with him in his hut.

'We oughta catch up,' he said.

Everyone knew what that meant, except for Adam. He hadn't smoked Marijuana for nearly six years. Liberty laughed,

'If you boys are going to spend your day getting stoned and catching up on old times, I might do something with mommy.'

'I thought I'd go collecting wild honey today, and then I'm baking bread,' said Ada.

'Great. I love collecting wild honey.'

'Why don't you bring your lev-pack, Adam, we might wanna do some flyin.'

'Sure, Zeke. I'll go and get it.'

After breakfast, they walked out the back of the house and through the magnificent gardens along a path out to Zeke's hut. Adam noticed a number of people wearing levitation suits tending to the gardens. Zeke explained to him that they were the gardeners and that they traded a few hours of work every few weeks for their flying suits.

'For life?' Adam asked.

'That's generally how it goes,' replied Zeke. 'They just see it all as doin favours for each other. It's a good deal.'

Zeke's hut was located a few hundred yards to the north of the main family home. It sat nestled in a small clearing about a hundred yards back from the edge of the escarpment. There were two main buildings there, a smaller one, which was his hut, and a larger one, a sizeable, low-slung, tin shed, which was his workshop. Between them and off to one side was a small vegetable garden. Adam noticed the similarity immediately.

'It looks a lot like your place back on Earth, Zeke.'

'Yeah, ain't it a treat? They built it for me exact after I got here. Brie organised everythin.'

'Gosh, Zeke, it's even got the chimney and the old wooden door.'

'It's the same, but it's a lot neater inside an I got better furniture. You wanna see me workshop?'

'I'm just a passenger here, Zeke. You lead the way.'

'Let's go see the workshop.'

'It's just an oversized version of your old shed on Earth, Zeke,' observed Adam, surprised. 'It's even made of the same corrugated iron that your old shed was made of and the double wooden doors and the small window look the same as well. What gives?'

'They brought heaps of stuff over from Earth. They've got huge ships for carryin cargo. You wouldn't believe it, mate.'

They stepped into the workshop.

'Is that your old workbench? And are those your old speakers?'

Zeke laughed, 'Yeah, they wanted me to feel at home when I arrived. They said that a planet change can have profound psychological after-effects an that they wanted to make me transition as smooth as possible. I gotta say it worked cause it does feel a bit like home around here, don't you reckon?'

'Totally.'

'You can hang your pack on the wall next to mine if you like.'

Adam did so and asked,

'So what is the Zekester up to these days?'

'I design stuff for non-telepaths. Everythin on this planet is mind controlled. It's useless for us.'

'Wow.'

'I did the packs an now I'm workin on a disc. I've designed a bunch of manual shaft turners for pumps an generators. A lot of that stuff gets brought over from Earth. Hardly anythin gets manufactured here, other than sails, suits, ships, saucers an the shaft turners ... oh, an bloody surfboards an boats, but that's mainly the coastal people. Most everythin else is imported.'

'Amazing.'

'Come, let's stretch out in the hut an have a puff.'

They emerged from the shed and walked across unmown grass to Zeke's hut. Zeke clanked open the heavy, cast-iron latch and they stepped inside.

'It's the same. Zeke! Everything is the same!'

'You reckon? Me chair is new, but the lounge is the same.'

Adam looked around.

'The walls, the fireplace, and the whole place ... it's ... it's ... like a time warp.'

The walls were rough sawn boards, brought from his hut on Earth. Even all the old hang gliding photos were there and in the centre of the small room was the low, wooden coffee table, the same one Adam, Doyle and Zeke spent so many hours lounging around.

They sat down, Zeke in his chair and Adam in the ratty old lounge. Zeke leaned over and retrieved his bowl and pipe. He pried open a rusty old paint tin and extracted a small pinch of sticky Marijuana out of it and placed it in the bowl. He then retrieved another tin and took a small portion of tobacco leaf from it. He proceeded to cut it up with a pair of scissors.

'It's all homegrown. Coffee?'

'Coffee'd go down a treat, Zeke. I see you've still got your music. Can I pick something?'

'Sure, help yourself.'

Adam flicked through Zeke's extensive record collection. He came to *Van Morrison's Astral Weeks* and stopped. He sighed,

'God this takes me back. I love this album.'

He removed the vinyl disc from its jacket and placed it on Zeke's turntable. He cleaned it with the special record-cleaning cloth and placed the stylus down. The room filled with rich, soul-illuminating rhythms of acoustic guitar.

'That's a great sound, Zeke. Where is it coming from? I don't see any speakers.'

'That's cause there ain't none. It's *holographic sound*. It's made by all the air molecules. They all vibrate. See the small aerial on top of the amp?' he pointed at the amplifier.

'Yeah?'

'That's what's transmittin the signal. It's locked into the molecular frequencies of the air molecules. It was a gift from the family.'

'It sounds insane!' Adam sat back down and put his feet on the coffee table. He began to reminisce. 'God this takes me back.'

'Back to Rose Bay and a girl called Nancy, I bet.'

'How did you remember that?'

'You tell me about her every time we play this record.'

'Do I? What a time that was. She used to play this for me.'

Zeke handed Adam a loaded pipe and lighter and said,

'Welcome to Rama, Adam. This stuff grew under twin suns.'

Adam had a toke and asked,

'Is it indigenous?'

'Naah, I brought me own stuff when I came over an it was full of seeds. Technically it's still good ol *Illawarra Gold*.'

'Ooh, it's good stuff, Zeke, I can feel it already.'

'We better go easy.'

'Oh yeah, I'm all for going it easy. I don't want to end up on the bathroom floor thinking that I'm going to have a heart attack.'

They both laughed as Van Morrison sang,

If I ventured in the slipstream

Between the viaducts of your dreams ...

2

After a couple of pipes each and a couple of sips of their coffees they both marshmallowed into a stoned melancholy as they became immersed in the futuristic heaven-dreaming of *Sweet Thing*. After an interlude of not saying anything, Zeke began to speak.

'I love it up here.'

'Yeah, it's nice.'

'The place is so natural. They live their lives but they don't cut into the wilderness.'

'Yeah, no roads.' Adam thought for a while, then said, 'I thought you were dead.'

'Naah. They time shifted me one day into the future. They timed it a fraction of a second before the gravity sail went through the roof. I popped up in me backyard twenty-four hours later.'

'Libby told me all about the time chip.'

'Good. Saves me from havin to explain it to you. How is Doyle?'

'Oh, that's a whole other story. I'm sorry to tell you, but Doyle's dead.'

'Dead?'

'Yeah. He got a bullet between the eyes from this really crazy guy that escaped from a nut house. Apparently the guy was a serial killer that Doyle caught some twenty years before. It was like a revenge killing.'

'Cripes!'

'I have had the odd strange thought about it though.'

'How strange?'

'Well, you know how we always wondered about Doyle, how no one ever knew anything about any of his connections?'

'Yeah?'

'He knew an awful lot. Maybe more than the Rama were comfortable with.'

'You think that they might have had somethin to do with him gettin bumped off?'

'They certainly had the ability to get into the crazy guy's head. It's possible.'

Zeke's intensely blue eyes pierced deeply into Adam's as he said,

'Hmmm ... we venture into darker thoughts. You know, I've been thinkin about the whole comet thing. Eight billion people are gonna die. I was wonderin if the Rama could deflect that comet if they wanted to.'

'You'd think they could.'

'They're not gonna, though.'

'No.'

They both stared at each other.

'Why should they?' Zeke asked.

'I don't know. Nobody talks about it.'

'No, they don't. Here comes the bloody dark side, mate.'

'It *is* dark, isn't it.'

Zeke began to whisper in hushed tones. He speculated,

'If you look at everythin really objectively, from a distance ...' He sat up and leaned forward, closer to Adam. 'You've found a planet that's a mirror image of your own, an you've got intergalactic travel an time shiftin, an nine-hundred year lifespans. An you love goin to that planet but you've got to keep it secret because there are so many crazy people there, an they're all non-telepathic Neanderthals. Then you discover that this planet's gonna get whacked by a comet. An you figure out the exact day an place where it's gonna get hit. Then you figure that after about a hundred years, post impact, the planet's gonna revert back to wilderness an become habitable again. It'll probably turn into some sort of paradise with no people on it. It ends up that the planet becomes perfect for alien colonisation.'

The conversation stalled while Zeke loaded them both a couple more pipes. Adam blew the smoke out and suggested,

'You are hinting at an alien invasion here, me thinks, Zeke.'

'Them's big words.'

'An alien invasion of Earth ... where all indigenious life is rendered extinct.'

'Nearly all.'

'Where the comet is used as a super weapon, an annihilation bomb, that takes everything out.'

'More big words.'

'It could be planned thousands of years in advance. Everything would revolve around the impact day. *They* choose who and what they want to save.'

'An they time shift em all a hundred years into the future, into the wilderness.'

'Libby told me that they have been time chipping as many species as they can. They're even doing insects. She said that the plants and the oceans will take care of themselves.'

'So with nothing but the Rama an a few Earthlings there, it'll end up like here.'

'To tell you the truth, Zeke, and I haven't seen that much of Rama yet, but from what I've seen so far, it might not be such a bad thing.'

'As long as you're not one of the people that's gonna get extincted.'

'That's for sure.'

They had another pipe and were getting quite stoned by now. A smidge of paranoia began to creep into the conversation.

'Do you think they'll be able to tell what we've been talking about, Zeke?'

'I'm pretty sure. To them we are completely transparent.'

'Maybe we shouldn't think about it.'

'I don't think it matters. They are super-cool people. They don't interfere with anyone. They really make me feel free. Everyone's been like family to me and any dark thoughts I have only come and go and usually don't come back.'

'Well they came back today.'

'It's cause you're here.'

Zeke was partially right. No one ever hinted at knowing what Adam and Zeke had spoken about, or thought negatively about, but as the months and years passed, those thoughts evaporated into nothingness and were finally completely forgotten. They both became immersed in the family and the *grand plan* and its execution.

From the point of view of the Rama, it was Ambriel's responsibility to telepathically manage Adam and Zeke's thoughts and memories. She loved them both very much and was extremely patient and careful with their manipulation. She took plenty of time to make the adjustments in such a way so that neither of them was ever aware of the fact that they had been telepathically *corrected*.

3

Zeke made them another cup of coffee and suggested that they have a fly in their lev-packs.

'I'd like to see what you can do, Adam.'

'Well, I won't be as good as you, Zeke.'

'We could go for a fly around the valley and up the mountains,' suggested Zeke. 'Have you got your suit?'

'Yeah, it's in the bag with the pack.'

'You'll need it cause it gets pretty cold up in the mountains.'

They dressed in their Neoprene-like, matt-black, flying suits. The suits' main function was to keep them warm, or cool, in the temperature extremes often experienced during flight. The material's billions of micro-pores reacted to the outside temperature. The hotter the temperature, the more the material

between the pores contracted, causing them to enlarge and cool the wearer. In sub-freezing temperatures, the micro-pores almost completely closed and with the booties, gloves, hood and goggles in place, the wearer became completely insulated from the cold. Unlike the flying suits that the Rama wore, their suits were passive and not mind-controllable, and designed to be used with a manual levitation pack. Besides shielding the eyes from the wind, the goggles also provided enhanced vision.

The suits acted like a second skin, which is why the Rama called them *second skins* or *skins* for short. The Rama *skins* were mind-controlled flying suits with the gravity sails embedded within the chameleon material.

Adam really noticed Zeke's fine physique through his body-hugging suit. He was tall and straight with broad shoulders. There was not an ounce of fat on his body and his muscles showed with sculpted definition. The cripple was gone. 'What amazing stuff that Fish is,' he thought to himself.

'You're looking pretty fit, Zeke,' he commented.

'Yah, I've come good, an that Mana that I'm smokin, Brie reckons that me life span's stretched out to four hundred years by now. You'll be up to a couple of hundred, I reckon.'

'I've still got to come to terms with all of that, but it certainly takes the pressure off for getting anything done.'

Zeke laughed, 'Yeah.'

They strapped on their lev-packs and tested *the hover* outside in Zeke's backyard.

'You'll want 100 percent hover,' instructed Zeke.

They floated a few feet above the grass, traversing to and fro and turning a few circles. They then both landed.

'I'll give you a bit of an overview of the local geography,' said Zeke. 'An I wanna show you me favourite launch site. It's just over on the edge of the escarpment,' he pointed in the easterly direction.

'Lead the way, sire.' As they flew low and slow across the wavy grass, Adam quipped, 'God, we look like two bloody flying ninjas in these black outfits.'

'Can't see em at night,' was Zeke's reply.

They flew for some hundred yards and landed on a large, flat slab of rock, right next to the cascading falls.

'Stay back from the edge,' warned Zeke, 'this rock hangs right out into free space.'

'Wow, this is so spectacular, Zeke. The valley always takes my breath away.'

Spread before them, and two thousand feet beneath them, was the lush Eos Valley.

'You know, I just realised that I'm really stoned out of my brain, Zeke.'

'Yeah, it's good stuff, ain't it?'

Zeke carefully walked them to the edge of the overhanging rock. They were right next to the wall of outpouring water. The rock was soaking wet and there was spray everywhere. The whole space boomed with the sound of rushing water. They were getting wet and Zeke explained,

'The *skins* are waterproof.'

Then he pointed straight down to the base of the falls,

'That's 2000 feet straight down. First time, I'd pull out at about 500 feet. I usually take it down to about 200 these days.'

Adam had no idea what Zeke was talking about, but he was about to find out. Suddenly Zeke laughed and said, 'See ya out there, mate,' and turned and leapt off the overhanging rock in the direction of the falls without engaging his lev-pack. Adam's jaw hung limp as he watched Zeke freefall down the front of the Eos Falls. His brain suddenly fused like it had just received a powerful electric jolt, and without even thinking, he yelled at the top of his voice and leapt into open space and freefell down the front of the towering vertical cliffs chasing after Zeke.

Adam was very good at judging altitude. He derived it from his old hang gliding days. In his day, there were still no instruments around and one needed to hone one's senses. As he plummeted through the spray he got the occasional glimpse of Zeke freefalling 500 feet below him. He pulled the right trigger early, as soon as he saw Zeke pull up into a hover just above the massive boulders at the base of the falls. He braked to a hover about 400 feet above Zeke. He took a deep breath as he realised that he hadn't taken a breath all the way down. He

saw Zeke, down below, cruising out above the river. He put gentle forward pressure on the right trigger and glided down to him.

'This whole valley was carved out by the Eos,' explained Zeke. 'It gets fed by the glaciers in the mountains. If The Eos wasn't here, this whole place would be desert. Let's fly up to five grand.'

'OK.'

They squeezed the right triggers and shot skyward, climbing-out at nearly 2,000 feet per minute. Three minutes later, they hovered 5000 feet above the centre of the valley. Zeke continued,

'This is the tallest mountain range on the planet an all the weather comes from the south. So this side doesn't get any rain. But we've got the Eos an the valley, an because of the water, the valley is lush an fertile. Also, an this is amazin, you've gotta see this when it's happenin, in the right wind conditions the spray from the falls gets carried all over the valley an comes down like gentle rain. You get a rainbow all day. It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen.' Zeke paused for a moment while Adam absorbed the majestic vista. He then turned and said, 'There's nothin but desert to the north.' Adam turned and faced over the vast, high desert. 'There are these deep gorges out there, an caves, an the *desert people* live there. Because of the mountains an the desert, the Eos valley is virtually inaccessible by land. Let's go to ten.'

Adam understood what Zeke meant. They climbed out at a more leisurely 1000 feet per minute and parked themselves 10,000 feet above the river mouth of the Eos. Zeke waved his arm across the mountain spine and explained,

'The mountain chain sinks into the ocean here, but continues on over the horizon as the *Pearly Islands*. Great sailin country. There's a lot of sailin done by the coastal people. Takin trips to the Pearlies is priceless. Ben's got a mate with a boat. I've been on two trips. The sailin ... maaate ...' For a moment, Zeke was lost for words, then he continued, 'Ben's mate's got a Polynesian-type cat, about a forty footer, with like a double wishbone-rigged setup. There's plenty of shelter on the lee side of the islands for anchorin.'

'It's beautiful, Zeke, and I understand the micro-climate now. Hey, there's Cesar's. I was there yesterday.'

'You want an apple?' Zeke asked.

'Where you gonna get an apple up here, Zeke?'

'I know a tree, follow me.'

They swooped out of the sky to ground level, to an apple tree growing by the stream. They hovered around the canopy as Zeke said,

'Look for a ripe one.'

They grabbed an apple each, landed under the tree and sat down in the shade. They removed their goggles and balaclavas and proceeded to enjoy their meal.

'Boy, you've certainly got the lev-packs worked out, Zeke. Mine feels totally intuitive.'

'Designin those packs was the most excitin time of me life.'

'And they work so well.'

'Thanks. Hey, I'll show you the Miller's house. Everybody gets their flour from there. Then I'll show you the poultry farm from where we get eggs an sometimes a chook or two. There are a few fishermen we get our fish from. I'll show you where they live.'

'I've never enjoyed a day of flying more.'

'This apple ain't bad either.'

They gazed down the valley.

'She looks pretty, don't She?'

'She sure does, Zeke, She sure does.'

.....

Chapter Forty-Six

NOAH

1

Thebe became pregnant to Slater on Christmas Day 2012. Kane was born in Noosa hospital on a bright spring morning on *Monday 23rd September 2013*. Everyone was amazed at how calmly Thebe gave birth without any medication. Kane came into the world with his eyes open and smiling. He was a fully telepathic child, learning communication in the mind plane from his mother since his conception.

Slater had been diligently practising his meditation for a couple of years now. His concentration had become unwavering and required little effort. He could now sit silently and be easily centred in the mind plane. This prepared him well for his full-telepathic communication with his son, Rama style.

Lucy's journey through the Fish meant that her mind had been opened in a completely unique way.

'It has exposed the inner layers of the onion for you,' Thebe explained. 'You will be able to traverse mind space that only Fish initiates may traverse. It is truly amazing. Everything is beyond anything you have ever imagined.'

Lucy had to still herself into lengthy, Fish-like, meditative trances to access places like that. She would come out of them uttering phrases like,

'The whole universe is emanating from one point, from one singularity, me.'

With Kane's arrival, everyone in the house tended more towards telepathic communication, as that was the only real way that he could communicate. He said his first words at four weeks. They were 'mummy' and 'daddy'.

Their lives settled into a blissfully retired, free and easy tempo. Nobody had a job, and they all had plenty of money. They cycled every day and took turns at looking after Kane. They rode out to Noosa Civic, which was the new mall on the edge of town, and bought their large fruit and vegetable juices there. They rode with their backpacks and did all of their shopping and banking that way. Slater needed to re-charge the Kombi's battery every couple of months as it was hardly ever being used. Some of Slater's time was taken up by the garden, which

required periodic attention, and some with Thebe, surfing Granite. Most of the rest of the time was spent playing with Kane.

Lucy's injuries completely healed. She became more youthful as her body accumulated the Mana. Her lifespan, as well as Slater's, had already been extended beyond 200 years and their bodies voltaged with a constant yearning for adventure.

Adrian returned occasionally on another one of his missions to chip some bird species or other. On one of the trips he brought Kane's levitation suit, called a *second skin* by the Rama, and on another trip, he brought a *skin* for Lucy. They were gifts from Max and Ada. Together they gradually learned how to hover in the flying suits by just using their minds. Their flying together and progressing at roughly the same level became a natural bonding time between the grandson and his grandmother. It was Thebe's responsibility to teach them both how to fly the *skins*, and use the camouflage.

Adrian mentioned that a man called Noah, a *time master*, would be paying a visit and, 'seeing as he knew Albion and Ambriel, the Sailsmiths, and they told him about you and your wonderful house ...'

'We'd be glad to have him,' interjected Lucy.

'Wow, a time master!' exclaimed Slater in heightened anticipation.

The household lived by the days and generally remained disconnected from the frenzy of the outside world. They had a TV and radios, but they rarely used them. Most of their entertainment came from the music stored on their iPods. Much of that was sourced from Adam, which in turn was sourced from his old friend Nancy, the girl who was so much fun to be with that it felt like being at a party.

2

Noah arrived six weeks later, on the evening of Sunday *September 21st 2014*. He cruised into Noosa in a compact, single-seater ship, which had a diameter of just thirty feet. It easily fitted inside the L-shaped jetty behind the house and was almost invisible in camouflage mode.

As he stepped out of his machine, they were immediately struck by his self-assured demeanour. He didn't look like the sort of guy who ever took too many orders. He was tall, about 6'2", and broad across the shoulders. His skin was

either dark or deeply tanned and he wore his sun-bleached-brown hair shoulder length. He wore a comfortable, olive-green, surfer-style T-shirt and a pair of lightweight, undyed-cotton trousers. He skipped barefoot from the ship's ramp onto the terrace. His eyes burned an intense, iridescent opal-blue. They shook hands with him and greeted him warmly. Slater noticed that there was still sand between his toes.

'You look like you live on the beach,' he said, joking.

'Shut up, Slatey,' cautioned Lucy, 'you don't want to start off on the wrong foot do you?'

Noah laughed, 'It's true, I live on the beach ... a lot of beaches actually.'

'Welcome Noah,' said Thebe as she came forward and hugged him warmly.

'Thank you. You are most gracious to allow me to invade you like this.'

'Stop it,' said Lucy.

'Yeah, stop it,' repeated Thebe. 'You don't know how excited we are to have a bona-fide time master amongst us. We are going to pick your brain for stories.'

'Come up into the house and make yourself comfortable,' gestured Lucy.

'Thank you, I feel at home already.'

3

After Noah settled into his quarters and they had dinner, they all sat around the big table in the central courtyard. Slater unscrewed a few *Pure Blondes* while Lucy brought out a *mix* and rolled up a big, fat *jayjay*. Thebe loaded everyone a pipe of Mana after which Noah very graciously answered all their questions in as much detail as he could muster.

'So is it true, Noah, that all the time masters are surfers?'

'Yes, that is true, but there is one master who is a particular type of surfer. He is a nomad who likes to surf the desert coastline. He lives and surfs alone. His passion is to surf perfect breaks alone. He knows some of the desert people. They really tend to keep to themselves and it is hard just to find them, much less make friends with them. I think that he might have picked up a few secrets from them.'

Noah looked about twenty-eight years old. His actual age was 367. He learnt the art of time shifting from Iapetus, *the time god*. It was while spending time with Iapetus that he befriended Ben, Ambriel's son.

Iapetus was an enigma and a legend within the constantly drifting, hard-core, surfing sub-culture. This was chiefly due to his feats in time although his surfing was something to behold as well, except that no one ever knew where he was. Noah explained,

‘When the time-chip technology emerged, no one wanted to use it because it was a one-way trip. It ended up that the mysterious nomads that wandered around in the wilderness looking for surf, were the first to properly explore the power of the time-chip.’

‘Is it dangerous?’

‘There *is* a lot in it. You can easily lose yourself in some unwanted future. It takes a lot of concentration to set the chip.’

‘And it’s all done with the mind,’ added Thebe.

‘That is correct,’ said Noah. ‘They kept losing their test dummies, nobody knows how far into the future. But that was in the early days. Iapetus finally tuned into the chip the right way and made the first minute hops into the future.’

‘How minute?’ asked Slater.

‘One day. That was the easiest.’

‘One rotation of Rama?’

‘That is correct. On Earth here, all the time-chips are tuned to two celestial bodies, the Earth and the Sun. We could have used the Moon as well, but it was not necessary.’

‘Do you mean that you made time-chips just for Earth?’

‘That is correct. Earth chips wouldn’t work anywhere else other than on Earth. They are all pre-set to skip 36,525 rotations of the Earth around its axis.’

From under his T- shirt, Noah pulled out a small, gold medallion, which was hanging around his neck on a thin loop of leather. He held it up showing a tiny, inlaid, hexagonally-shaped, bright-blue, crystalline jewel measuring perhaps five millimetres across.

‘This is the master chip. This is the one that sets off all the rest.’

‘Ahh, there is a master chip,’ said Slater. ‘I was wondering how you set them all off at precisely the right time.’

Lucy made everyone a cup of tea and biscuits, and everyone, except for Slater, had some of her mix.

'The day after tomorrow is exactly nine years before the event,' said Noah. 'I'm here to scout out the impact site, right on the 23rd.'

'Wow,' said Slater, 'can we come?'

'Sure, but only one of you can come in my ship. You'll have to sit on a duffel bag behind me.'

'You go with Thebe, Slatey,' said Lucy, 'and I'll stay back and look after Kane.'

'There is no rush to decide,' said Noah, 'we still have all day tomorrow to go over our plans.'

4

Monday the 22nd dawned lazy. There was not a breath of wind and no one seemed to be in a hurry to get out of bed except for Thebe and Kane who were up early. Everyone else managed to drag themselves to the coffee plunger by 9.00am. After breakfast, they all ended up lounging around the pool sunning themselves. Lucy decided that the pool had warmed up just enough for swimming and that she was going to christen it for the season. Before long, they were all in it. Thebe brought out some drinks and fruit and they all relaxed in the sun and listened to Noah describe the exploits of Iapetus.

'... The three of them sat in a circle on the edge of a towering sea cliff that projected out of the desert over the ocean. They all looked at their watches. At exactly midday, Iapetus looked at a silver bracelet around his left wrist and disappeared. His two companions rose to their feet and walked back to their camp. They returned to the same cliff-top the next day. They sat in the same place and looked at their watches. It was 11.55. They sat and waited and at exactly midday, Iapetus reappeared out of thin air, still sitting on his spot on the ground. To Iapetus, the scene changed in a moment, in no time at all.

'The longest jump he's done is sixty days. People came back to the spot sixty days later and watched him emerge out of thin air. As you can imagine, everyone was pretty blown out by his achievement. To him the sixty-day time shift took exactly zero time. It was instant. Because of his achievement they were able to design the second-generation chip, which was capable of much longer shifts. The Earth chips are really simplified versions because they are all set for just one shift through 36,525 axial rotations.

'It was Iapetus who discovered connectivity, which was that things connected to one another can pull each other through time. Only the chip does the shift. Everything that is loosely connected to it gets pulled through with it. So you can have a chip in a bracelet or under your skin. It works both ways. You just have to be telepathic and know how to manipulate it, even when it is in someone else's body. I think Thebe is pretty handy with that sort of thing.'

'Oh ... who ... me? Oh no, I wouldn't pretend ...'

'She did a nice number on me, Noah, in the surf.'

'You must have got your one-hour preset.'

'Yeah, it freaked me out because none of the bloody clocks matched.'

'The one-hour preset is actually fairly advanced technology,' commented Noah.

'It's like a test-run of the chip, like a one-hour skip into the future test-run, isn't it, Noah?'

'That is correct, Slater. There are two presets in the Earth chip, the one-hour and the hundred years. The one-hour is the test-run and can be activated by a telepathic person anytime. The hundred-year preset can only be set off by the master chip that is hanging around my neck. The timing of that must be absolutely precise.'

'How do you control it?' asked Slater extremely interested.

Thebe thought she'd give Noah a break and said,

'An icon appears in our vision every time we are in the vicinity of a time chip. By focussing on it we can activate it. All our devices render telepathically transmitted visual and feeling images of themselves in our mind. Some of them, like our ships, feel like an extension of our bodies, like your flying suit, Slater.'

Noah continued,

'Iapetus was the first person to use time shifting in a functional manner. He was the first to incorporate it into his lifestyle. Now there are a number of us that use it. I'll give you a typical example of how he uses it. He flies to a break somewhere and works out that it will come good in three days, say. He parks his ship, steps out with his board and time shifts three days into the future. Instantly the surf changes to perfection and he goes surfing. Sometimes, he told me, when he can't work out the weather, he just jumps forward one day at a time until he

get's to a good day. It has completely blown the concept of waiting for the surf to get good.'

'I'd love to get into that,' said Slater.

'You *will*, darling, you *will*, and more,' assured Thebe.

5

After lunch, they discussed the destructive power of the comet. Noah had memorized all the statistics.

'It was named Wormwood when it was first discovered some six thousand years ago. It is made up of a conglomeration of ice and rock. It is 30 miles end to end. Some of the rocky chunks embedded in the ice are as much as a couple of miles across. About twenty percent of it is solid core.'

Everyone was transfixed. Noah continued,

'It's going to come in from the west, around the back of the sun. The first anyone on Earth will know anything about it will be when they see it rising up out of the western horizon just after sunset, aiming towards Venus, which will be a little higher in the western sky. The astronomers will go crazy calculating the trajectory and will probably estimate that the comet will do a close pass of Venus and harmlessly fly out into space giving everyone on Earth the best celestial lightshow there has ever been in the whole of human history. However, we have calculated that there will be a near-physical contact with Venus. That comet is going to bury itself very deep into the Venusian atmosphere. It won't actually make solid contact with the planet, but it will burn its way down to about five thousand feet above terra firma. There will be a huge burn. We estimate that the comet will lose a sixth of its diameter. The ice will vaporise and many of the huge boulders will be freed from their entrapment. From the Earth it will look like half of Venus had exploded. Then they will see a wild fireball coming out of it, surrounded by about two-dozen burning satellites trailing fiery tails behind them. And it will all, all of a sudden, be heading directly their way.

'We have calculated that the comet will be slowed from twenty-five miles per second to about twelve and a half miles per second through aero-braking in the soupy Venusian atmosphere. It will also be sucked into a twenty-three degree change of direction and aimed directly into Earth's path.

'From that point on, Earth's fate will be sealed and will be delivered in 166,666 minutes. The distance between the Earth and Venus will be 200 million kilometres. The comet will be travelling at 20 kilometres per second. That works out at 10 million seconds, which equals 166,666 minutes, which equals 2,777.7 hours, which equals 115.74 days ... and it will all be over.'

'Jees, that's not much time,' said Slater.

'It will be less than four months between when it glances Venus and when it hits Earth. Initially, I imagine, everyone will be completely captivated by it. Towards the end, most normal activity will probably come to a near standstill as everyone glues themselves to their television sets. The majority of people will be completely paralysed by the approaching trajectory and will not be able to process what is actually happening, until right at the end.'

'Jees.'

'It will impact square on in the middle of Wyoming, right on top of a small town called Green River. Interestingly, it happens to be exactly 223 kilometres east of Salt Lake City. At 20 kilometres per second it'll come in so fast it'll be through the atmosphere in five seconds. It will bury itself into Green River with the power of 240 quadrillion tons of TNT. The primary projectile will drill itself forty miles into the Earth, blasting out a transient crater 120 miles wide. The final crater will be over 220 miles across.

'The ensuing fireball will reach its maximum radiation about 21.6 seconds after impact. Salt Lake City will be instantly vaporized by radiant heat 17,000 times hotter than the sun. All the oxygen will get consumed in the fire. There will be 1000-foot land tsunamis. Everything will go plastic and there will be earthquakes everywhere that will bring down most of the cities. And whatever the quakes miss, the air blast will finish. The air blast will hit New York City approximately 1.68 hours after impact, with winds reaching 900 miles per hour. Nothing will be left standing. But before New York gets taken out it gets bombarded with ejecta, which will hurtle in about 12.7 minutes after the impact.

'21,500 cubic miles of earth will be vaporized or melted, half of which will be hurled into the atmosphere. All life globally will perish. In the long term, the plants will survive and pockets of the oceans will sustain life.

'The Earth will not be strongly disturbed by the impact. There will not be a noticeable change in the tilt of the Earth's axis, less than five hundredths of a degree, and its orbit will not shift noticeably.

'To New Yorkers, the fireball out to the west will appear 13.7 times larger than the sun. It will blaze with a heat 36.1 times more intense than the sun. Most of them will perish in that.

'Huge tidal waves will rage across all the oceans and deep into the continents as the satellite projectiles slam into all parts of the Earth. Noosa here will be completely levelled by tidal surges. But when everything settles down we think that Noosa will be one of the first places to recover back to its original pristine beauty. I believe Noosa will be your settlement. Am I correct in saying that?'

'We haven't spoken much about that,' said Thebe.

'No,' said Slater. 'It still all seems so far off and it still doesn't feel real.'

As evening approached they decided to go out to dinner. Because they were too lazy to change they chose to go to Elvis's down by the river for some of their legendary hamburgers.

6

They had to be above Green River at 2.23pm on the 23rd September 2014, Wyoming time. That equated to 7.23am of the 24th, Noosa time. They wore their *skins* just in case they wanted to fly outside the ships. They launched at 6.50am, Noosa time, and slipped into the dawn. They crossed the Pacific in ten minutes, flying about 1000 kilometres above the globe. Noah led and Thebe and Slater followed in her ship.

They all communicated telepathically. It was like they were all on an open phone line.

'There's the coast of California,' said Noah as he slowed down. 'The whole West Coast is toast. Nothing will be left standing.'

They cruised at 1000km on an east north-east heading.

'We head for the Great Salt Lake Desert up ahead. It's that big white patch.'

Green River was already showing on Noah's screen as a lime-green cross. They flew over the Sierra Nevada Mountains and across the wasteland of

Nevada. They flew above the white expanse of the Great Salt Lake Desert and the Great Salt Lake, and over Salt Lake City, heading east-north-east to Green River.

They came to a hover 1000 km above Green River.

'There's nothing there but desert,' said Slater.

'Oh, Green River's there all right, we're just too high to see it. See Denver down there on the right? That will vaporise *inside* the fireball.'

'Wow.'

'The crater will go nearly all the way out to Salt Lake City.'

'That's huge. That's like a whole state,' exclaimed Slater.

'In the end there will be a mile deep lava ocean for as far as the eye can see.'

'Inconceivable,' said Thebe.

'Let's take a closer look at Green River,' said Noah.

They descended down to about 60km altitude and noticed how the town straddled a meandering stream. It was nestled in a tiny green oasis in the middle of the vast wasteland.

'Let's take an even closer look,' said Noah.

Thebe followed him down to four kilometres altitude and came to a hover next to him.

'What do you think about landing on top of that butte over the river there?'

'You lead and we'll follow, Noah,' replied Thebe.

The two silver ships descended quickly. Thebe asked,

'Should we go camo, Noah?'

'Naah, I don't mind if anyone sees us out here.'

'OK.'

They parked their craft, hovering one foot above the parched, rocky ground, on top of a thousand-foot butte, about three kilometres to the east of Green River. They stepped out into a dry, ninety-five degree, baking oven and faced west into a gusty breeze.

'God, it's oppressive heat out here. What a vista, though.'

The town lay beneath them, snuggled in a green river valley. It stretched north to south. West of the town was an endless expanse of dry, hilly terrain. To the south, the river snaked spectacularly through a desert gorge. To the east was

mesa country. As they stood there feasting on the view, Noah looked at his watch.

'Ten past two. Thirteen minutes to go.'

'Can you hear that?' said Slater.

'Yeah,' said Noah, 'it sounds like a motor and prop.'

They focussed in the direction of the sound.

'It's a trike,' said Slater, 'a hang glider with an engine. I recognise it because we get plenty of them flying around Noosa. I still can't make it out.'

'Don't worry about him. You know, I'm coming here every September until the event.'

'Every year?' asked Thebe.

'Yeah.'

'There he is, there's the trike,' exclaimed Slater. 'He's just flying over the river now and I think he's coming this way.'

'The town has been booming lately because the oil men have come into it,' said Noah.

'You don't say,' added Thebe.

'Should we make the trike guy go away?' Slater asked.

'Naaah! Let him see us. I detect that he has a time chip on him.' Noah paused, concentrating on the trike pilot, then revealed, 'Ah yes, I recognise him.'

'I detect the chip as well, Noah,' said Thebe. 'And his one-hour test-shift has been carried out as well.'

'Yeah, he's set to go.'

Slater and Thebe both looked at each other and smiled. They both felt a great deal of faith in Noah's judgement. The trike climbed up the west face of the butte, executing a few 360s in the process, until it reached their altitude. It flew a couple more slow circles out in front while the pilot surveyed the scene then flew directly towards them and over their heads. Noah laughed. The trike banked hard and came back from the opposite direction. They could see the excited pilot taking pictures with what looked like his iPhone. They waved as he passed over them. The trike finally settled into flying low circles above them.

'He must have taken a hundred photos,' said Thebe. 'Lucky our faces are covered.'

Noah looked at his watch and said,
'Nine years from right now ... kaboom!'

The trike kept circling and taking photos.

Noah asked Thebe if she minded giving the pilot some instructions. She agreed and he advised her what to say.

'I should give him a show as well,' she said playfully. She made her suit fluoresce in a multitude of bright colours, launched and flew up to the trike. Flying alongside, she posed for more photos and even a video. Following that, she flew right up to the pilot and gave him Noah's instructions. She then flew back down to the boys.

'That will have livened up his life somewhat, I think,' she said.

The trike pilot was stunned, but he managed to keep it together enough to continue to shoot video of the aliens as they re-entered their ships, launched into the sky and disappeared off into the distance in a south-westerly direction.

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Chapter Forty-Seven

JONESY

1

Jonesy was in his mid-thirties. He had slid into a nomadic existence due to a much too prolonged Lysergic acid diethylamide entanglement. He understood that the drug made him extremely 'sensitive' to humanity. As a result he tended to avoid it as much as possible.

He had four daughters and a beautiful wife, Lori, who all got flushed out of his life along with the rest of normal reality. For years he was impossible to understand. The prolonged experience left him with a profoundly altered mind. Although he had ceased any kind of drug taking activity, except for cannabis, he was at that time still basically, 're-connectin with the planet, man.'

As he improved, Lori and the kids began to see him again, although no one was considering co-habitation yet. They had both adjusted to their freedoms and felt that, for the time being, their relationship was just fine the way it was. Besides, they were still married and they still loved each other.

Jonesy spent a lot of time out in the deserts of Utah and Wyoming flying around in his trike. He was the consummate gypsy. He was an electrician by trade and obtained work at every mine he stopped by. The pay was good and he could live for a week on a day's pay if he needed to. He drove around in a small Winnebago and towed his trike and motorbike behind on a trailer. He owned an Air Borne, T-Light, single-seater trike. It ran a 22hp Bailey four-stroke engine, which spun a Helix, all-carbon, twin-bladed pusher-prop and flew a low-drag, lightweight, double-surface wing. The 'rig' had a *Vne* of 46 knots and a range of about 240 kilometres. The trike was designed for motor-off soaring. It was light and efficient and Jonesy could soar thermals in it all day when he wanted to. And that was the big passion in his life, to be coring thermals thousands of feet above the deserts of Wyoming, 'an feelin the freedom'.

2

He was lying in the shade of a low tree in an empty paddock by the river next to his Winnebago and trike. It was stinking hot and he was drifting off to sleep when a bright flash in the sky startled him. He focused on that area of the

sky and spotted two objects descending rapidly from high altitude. He sat up and grabbed his binoculars, which were always near him, and focussed on the two objects.

'UFOs!' he whispered to himself all excited. 'Them's bona-fide UFOs!'

He watched them decelerate their descent and come in for a gentle landing on top of a prominent butte just across the river. His body came to life like it had just been plugged into 240 volts. He scrambled around, picked up his iPhone, jumped in the trike and roared off into the sky. He flew low over the river, flying as fast as the twenty-two ponies could push him. He searched for a thermal, found a good one and cored it up the front of the steep slope to the top of the butte. He flew out of the thermal and straight over the two spaceships, less than 100 feet above them. He was shocked by what he saw and exclaimed,

'There's aliens standin outside the UFOs!'

Frantically, he grabbed his phone and switched it to camera mode right in the middle of a 90-degree, wingtip-stalling, hammer turn. He made the return pass firing stills at the rate of two a second. He noticed that the aliens waved as he flew over them. As he flew out from the butte, he scanned the sky. '*There's nothin else up,*' he thought to himself. There were no other witnesses. He banked left and coiled into a series of tightening 360s, ending up flying circles about 100 feet above the aliens. He fired off shots from all angles. Then the weirdest thing happened. One of the aliens launched and flew up next to him without any apparent form of locomotion. The alien was human shaped, like a very athletic woman, but its whole body looked like a TV screen, '*on friggin acid,*' he thought. He couldn't make out any of the alien's face as it was all covered by screen.

He took many shots of her as they flew circles together. She posed for him and altered the patterns in her suit. He then changed his iPhone to movie mode and shot a video of her flying up to within arm's length of him. He saw her hold up nine fingers. Just as she did that he recorded her yell out,

'Nine years today, be bound to your family on Pike's Peak, east of San-Francisco.'

The alien then flew back down to the ground and rejoined the other two. Jonesy kept the camera rolling and got them re-entering the two saucers and, after a few moments, lifting off and flying away.

He never forgot those words even though he didn't know what they meant. He did note the time of day and date and quickly calculated *23rd September 2023* as being nine years from then.

'I'll be bound to my family on that day,' he thought. *'I wonder what 'bound' means?'*

He flew back to the Winnebago with his camera full of high-definition stills and movies. He plugged his phone into his laptop and replayed the alien's speech. He made himself a cup of strong coffee while he looked up Pikes Peak, California, on Google Earth. He thought that he knew where Pikes Peak might have been located because he had flown near there once, but he wanted to make certain so he looked for it on Google Earth. It was located high in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, east of San Francisco. He spent the rest of the night 'rollin doobies', listening to Willie Nelson and playing everything back, over and over.

3

'You ain't been smokin that Mary-jew-wanna again, Jonesy, ave yer?'

Jonesy didn't have many friends. He did have an acquaintance though, a guy he knew from high school. They had absolutely nothing in common, however as circumstances would have it, a series of chance encounters through the years meant that they managed to keep a semblance of a loose liaison. His acquaintance had a proper name, but Jonesy, and everyone else that knew him, only ever called him by his high school nickname, *Snake*.

Snake was a moderately successful talent agent in Las Vegas. Besides live acts, he also dabbled in the media, handling freelance writers and producers and such. Snake's office was located on the edge of town, at his home, right next to his pool. Jonesy usually parked the Winnebago in the driveway of Snake's comfortable, low-set dwelling.

'I'm tellin you, Snake, all the evidence you need is on this phone.'

'Listen, Jonesy, UFO stories are a dime a dozen. Nobody's interested in that shit anymore.'

'Let me plug my phone into your Mac,' insisted Jonesy.

Snake had the latest, big screen, iMac computer. Jonesy sat next to him on another chair and took him through the photos and videos in chronological

order. The pictures were crystal clear, hi-definition recordings of the space ships and their occupants.

'Christ, Jonesy, these look so clear that they almost look fake.'

'Oh come on, Snake, how could I fake these on the iPhone? An anyhow, if I was gonna pull a scam, you know I'd let you in on it.'

'Holy cow, Jonesy.'

'What did I tell yer.'

'There might be a few bucks in this.'

'This'll blow people's minds wide open,' said Jonesy excitedly.

'I got to figure out how to make the most out of it. Has anyone else seen it?'

'Naah, just you an me.'

'Are there any other copies?'

'Just my laptop.'

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.'

'Were there any other witnesses?'

'None.'

'Bonanza!' Snake whispered.

'I know I got somethin, Snake, an I figured you were the man that knew how to handle it.'

'You make it an I sell it, Jonesy, that's how I operate. But this is raw shit. I'm gonna have to think about it for a while.'

As they watched the video, Snake sat up to attention.

'What was that? ... There! ... Where the alien spoke English. What the hell was that, Jonesy? Stop it there, play it again.'

Jonesy jumped back a minute in the video. They listened to the alien repeat in a female voice,

'Nine years today, be bound to your family on Pike's Peak, east of San-Francisco.'

'What's all that supposed to mean, Jonesy?'

'Beats me, but I know where Pike's Peak is.'

'Can we transfer all this shit to my computer?'

'Sure, all of it, except the Alien talkin. I don't want nobody hearin that.'

'But that's the clincher. That's the big pay-day.'

'Well, it'll have to be a small pay-day, Snake, cause that bit of vision is just for me.'

'Suit yourself, but feel free to change your mind.'

Jonesy copied all the photos and all the footage, except for the fragment that contained the alien's speech, to Snake's computer. They had a beer together and replayed the footage over and over. After a refreshing swim and another beer, Snake told Jonesy to give him a week to 'mull over a few ideas'.

'We could be lookin at a couple of mill each, Jonesy. Why don't you stay here tonight an I'll pick up ten-large for you first thing in the mornin. Think of it like a down payment. It oughta keep you goin for a while.'

Next day, as he rolled out of Snake's driveway, Jonesy said,

'Thanks, Snake. Get in touch when you got somethin.'

Jonesy drove out to the coast and gave most of the money to Lori. She and the kids lived with her parents in Berkley. He told them about the Green River incident and that there could be more money to come.

4

It took Snake almost twelve months to come up with a documentary director that could pull together the right sort of crew. He figured that if they produced a high quality documentary and sold it to the networks they could pocket a 'tidy chunk-o-change'.

Snake phoned Jonesy on *13th September 2015*. He told him that he had a crew going out to Green River to 'do the shoot'. He told him that they wanted to be out there on the 23rd, exactly one year after the original sighting. He told him that the director wanted to include him in the story and that he was prepared to pay him \$10,000 for the job. Jonesy declined the offer and told Snake to find a 'stunt double' to take his place. In the end they hired an actor that could fly a trike and made him up to look like Jonesy. His name was Clint, but everybody called him Cowboy. They also hired an actor Snake knew, named Dirk DeRongo, to be the narrator.

The idea was to make the trip out to Green River the story, and to interweave Jonesey's story, photos and footage throughout it. They thought that shooting it on the twelve-month anniversary would add dramatic effect to it.

Jonesy showed up in Green River on *16th September* and hooked up with the crew. Snake was there wearing his big Stetson and smoking a fat cigar. It was all business as the director, whose name was Ludwig, steered the small crew through their shots. They had to bring in a duplicate T-Light trike for Cowboy to fly because Jonesy wouldn't let anyone as much as touch his machine. He rehearsed Cowboy through some dummy runs for the aerial footage. It turned out that Cowboy was quite an accomplished pilot and they both had a lot of fun flying around together.

Ludwig ordered a chopper for the 23rd. He wanted to get some 'classy' aerial shots of the trike flying circles above the butte. Later, he would edit it together with Jonesy's original footage.

Everything was ready on the big day. They were going to do the chopper shoot just after two o'clock. Ludwig was anxious because he expected a great deal from the day, although he never, in his wildest dreams, expected what he actually got.

Cowboy roared skyward in the trike. He was closely followed by the chopper, which carried the film crew. Jonesy relaxed in a chair under his tree and sucked on a Bud. Snake paced around puffing his cigar and moaned about all the expenses. Jonesy was watching the trike and chopper crossing the river, when he spotted them. He sprang to his feet and shouted,

'They're back, Snake!'

He pointed in the direction of two rapidly descending silver discs. Snake looked in that direction and said,

'Where? I don't see nothin.'

'Oh you'll see em soon enough,' said Jonesy as he jumped into his trike.

'Oh fuuuuuuck, there they are, I see em now.'

Jonesy roared out of the paddock, leaving Snake in a cloud of dust from his prop-wash.

The two silver discs settled on top of the butte just before Cowboy and the chopper arrived.

The chopper was first to rise above the top of the butte, with the camera rolling. They recorded two panels open on the under-surfaces of the ships and extend as ramps towards the ground. They then recorded three aliens emerge

from the ships and step outside. The chopper pilot backed up a little and settled into a hover about three hundred feet out from, and about two hundred feet above, the UFOs.

‘Are you getting all this?’ asked Ludwig excitedly.

‘Every nanosecond,’ replied the cameraman.

Cowboy finally made it up above the top of the butte and proceeded to fly tight circles above the ships. The aliens noticed him but seemed fairly disinterested. They were looking out over Green River and one of them waved his arm across the vast plain.

A couple of minutes later, Jonesy came screaming up the face of the butte, and when he rose just above it he straightened up and flew really slowly no more than 50 feet above the aliens’ heads.

Everyone in the chopper noticed immediately that the three aliens became much more animated when Jonesy arrived. They appeared to focus on him and began waving hello to him. He flew low and slow over their heads and waved back to them. On one pass he clearly saw one of them hold up eight fingers.

‘Are you getting all this?’ asked Ludwig.

‘Yep, the lot,’ came the reply.

The two trike pilots had to keep an eye on each other so as not to have a mid-air collision. After a few minutes, Jonesy noticed the aliens turn to go back into their ships, so he did an ultra-slow flyover, into the wind, no more than twenty feet above them. He gave them a thumbs-up and they gave him a thumbs-up in return. He flew out from the butte and signalled Cowboy to do the same. All three aircraft stayed clear as the two ships rose into the sky and disappeared.

As they returned to the paddock, Ludwig exclaimed,

‘I’ve seen some bullshit in my time, but I’ve never seen bullshit like that.’

Back on the ground, everyone was in a state of total delirium.

‘Did you have something to do with this shit, Snake?’ asked Ludwig.

‘No man, it was as big a surprise to me as to you.’

Jonesy came over and said,

‘I think it was the same bunch of aliens that were here last year. Did you see how they recognised me?’

They crowded into the media truck and reviewed some of the footage.

'Them's good close-ups, Ludwig,' said Snake.

'You can't make out their faces because they are all covered by some sort of full body suits,' said Jonesy.

Snake began whistling the '*we're in the money*' tune.

Ludwig shot some more footage of Cowboy pretending to be Jonesy. He also shot a series of segments of DeRongo narrating the story on site. Because of the surprise re-appearance of the aliens and the crew's subsequent unpreparedness for them, Ludwig said that whatever he forgot to get on site he could make up back in Vegas, at Snake's place.

While Ludwig was doing that, Snake paid the chopper pilot. He offered him an extra 'five hundred bucks' to keep his mouth shut about what he saw.

The pilot was used to keeping secrets of jobs he'd done. He knew that the work would 'dry up pretty quick' if he 'mouthed off' about it. He pocketed the cash, smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow and said,

'It's been good doin business with you, Snake. Anytime you wanna shoot more aliens, look me up.'

They shook hands and he flew home a happy man.

5

As the two, sleek, intergalactic ships sped back across the Pacific towards Noosa Heads, they communicated telepathically with each other. Slater commented on the day.

'Well, that will certainly stir things up over there. They even had a chopper waiting for us. Did you see the big camera hanging out of it?'

'Yes,' said Thebe, 'and they had *two* trikes this year. I think they were filming a documentary.'

'I sensed that,' said Noah.

'So you're not concerned about secrecy, Noah?' asked Slater.

'No, not really. They only have eight years to go. The poor things might as well have some excitement before it's all over. Also, we intend to help them avert a nuclear war between now and the end.'

'Ohh, I see,' said Slater. 'You will try to make humanity's last years on Earth as fun as possible.'

'Err, we won't interfere, but final stage protocol allows for some disclosure. We may be seen, but never caught or contacted. Strict protocols still apply as regards to governments and military. They will *never* see us. They will only hear about us and see recorded material of us. It will frustrate them no end.'

'I've got no doubts about that,' said Slater. 'Do you know how many people are being time-chipped?'

'Yes, exactly 144,000, although many more will do the time shift through connectedness. There will also be over six million creatures time shifted, everything from elephants to bees. It is a mammoth undertaking.'

Thebe contributed, 'You will take Lucy and me through the time shift, Slater. I suspect that Kane will be on Rama with his teacher during that time.'

As they flew over Pago Pago, Slater enquired some more about nuclear war. Noah answered him.

'The main problem for us with nuclear anything is the radiation. A full-scale nuclear exchange would make large parts of the Earth uninhabitable for hundreds of thousands of years and would cause highly destructive genetic mutations. Earth would become a hellhole. We would have to time shift a million years into the future to get to clean, virgin wilderness again. No Rama would be prepared to do that as there would be too many unknowns with such a huge time shift, and they would never see their families again. A nuclear exchange would terminate the time shift program and the Rama would cease to be interested in Earth. We have already interfered with some of their ICBM systems. They are still scratching their heads about that.'

'We are nearly home, boys,' said Thebe. 'Will you stay for a couple of days and have a surf with us, Noah?'

'I was told about your break, so I brought my board just in case.'

'It's settled then, Noah will be our guest and we'll take him surfing.'

6

Snake, Ludwig and DeRongo returned to Las Vegas. Over the following couple of months, Snake negotiated a 'smokin' deal with the History Channel, which included a generous advance of \$100,000. He paid Ludwig \$30,000 as a down payment and transferred half of the rest of the money into Jonesy's bank account. When all the money was sorted, he re-focussed on the running of his

regular business during the days and sat in with Ludwig editing the documentary during the nights.

Jonesy drove out to the West Coast and visited his family. He gave \$25,000 to Lori. She was beside herself with joy, as were her parents, and they allowed him to stay in the house for the first time in many years. He still had to sleep alone in the guest bedroom, although he did receive three good night kisses from Lori and endless hugs from all his girls.

A few days later, he drove the Winnebago south to Modesto where he turned left and took Highway 108 out to Oakdale where he fuelled up and had something to eat. He then headed east towards Sonora and the Sierra Nevada Range. From there he followed the Sonora Pass Highway up into the high country.

Jonesy had decided to scout out Pike's Peak from the ground and he was going to take plenty of time doing it. He sensed that this was somehow the most important thing in his and his family's lives, and even though he had let them all down so many times in the past, he promised himself that he would never ever let them down again.

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Chapter Forty-Eight
GENERAL SLAUGHTER

1

Time - 13.30-hours, Wednesday 23rd September 2015.

Location - Notel Motel, 3050 W. 63rd Ave., Denver Colorado.

Mission - 'Gonna git me some pump-n-dump an no sonabitch, mofo, dipshit, loser, ninety-day wonder better rain on my parade today or I'll feed their balls to my coonhound. Did you get that, Pike?'

'Yes, sir!'

'I didn't hear you, Pike!'

'Yes, sir, sir,' responded Corporal Pike at the top of his voice.

'I don't wanna hear a peep out of my phone unless we're at least under nukular attack! Is that clear, Pike?'

'Perfectly clear, General Slaughter. No calls.'

'Because I really want there to be little Pikes one day, Pike.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Now git your ass off my phone an find yourself somethin to do.'

'Yes, sir.'

Pike hung up the phone and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

2

Time - 14.45-hours, Wednesday 23rd September 2015.

Location - Notel Motel, Denver Colorado.

Slaughter's phone rang. He called out from the shower,

'Do you mind pickin that up, Miss Candy, and tellin em that I'm busy.'

Candy picked up the phone and put it to her ear.

'Hello, this is Miss Floss and Poopsie is busy right now ...'

'Could you please ask the General to come to the phone, please Miss Floss.'

'He won't like it.'

'Please, Miss Floss.'

'They want to talk to you, Poopsie.'

Slaughter's voice growled out of the bathroom,

'Those sons of bitches got no respect for authority.'

He came out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist and grabbed the phone.

'I will have your balls decoratin my Christmas tree, Pike, if there ain't at least world war three goin on out there. Now what is it?'

'Two bogeys, sir. We tracked them across the Pacific doing over 40,000 miles per hour at an altitude of about 600 miles, sir.'

'That only saves one of your balls, Pike.'

'They crossed the coast above Santa Barbara and flew east-north-east over Salt Lake City, sir.'

'You're still lookin at a transfer to the Vienna Boys Choir, Pike.'

'They landed on top of a butte just to the east of a place called Green River, sir.'

'Where the hell is Green River, Pike?'

'Sir, it's in Wyoming, sir.'

'Wyoming? Are they still there?'

'No, sir. They touched down at 14.05-hours, sir. They stayed there till 14.36-hours, then they launched and flew back across the Pacific, the same way they came, sir.'

'Where did they go, Pike?'

'We tracked them as far as New Caledonia, sir, then they disappeared.'

'Are you tellin me that you lost my bogies, Pike?'

'We think that they sped up to faster than what we could track them, sir. We think they were heading to Australia, the same place we think they came from, sir.'

Slaughter thought for a moment then growled down the phone,

'Why don't you git your nuts into a car, Pike, an come an pick me up.'

'Sir, yes, sir. I'll be there in fifteen minutes, sir.'

3

The matt-black Hummer, with black-tinted glass all around and black wheels, roared into the motel parking lot fifteen minutes later. Slaughter burst out of room 66, the secured one, and jumped in the passenger seat. Both men wore civilian clothes comprising of Hawaiian-style shirts, not tucked in, grey suit-pants, black leather shoes, black wraparound sunglasses and narrow

brimmed, grey-coloured straw hats. They raced out of Denver and headed east towards Denver International Airport. They pulled up in the middle of a large, sparsely utilised parking lot, located just south of the main airport. They stepped out of the Hummer, walked over to a low, concrete blockhouse and up to a heavy, grey-painted, steel door. Pike briefly scanned the surroundings. He saw about two hundred cars parked counter-intuitively around the lot. The cars were spread out all over the place, not clustered close to the exits, as one would expect. Most of the cars were old and dirty and looked like they hadn't been moved for many months. Some had flat tires. There were no people to be seen anywhere.

Pike produced a credit card sized, rectangular piece of black plastic and passed it in front of three small numbers that were stencilled on the concrete next to the door. The numbers were 666.

There was a clanking noise as the heavy, two-inch-thick door opened. They stepped inside and the heavy door slammed shut behind them making a resounding metallic boom as it did so. They were in what looked like a concrete sarcophagus, which was dimly lit in red light by four globes located on the ceiling in the four corners. In front of them was another door, which was made of polished stainless steel. There was a keypad in the wall on the left side of the door. The keypad buttons glowed red. Pike keyed in a series of numbers. The buttons changed colour to green. He then keyed in another series of numbers. The stainless door slid sideways making a barely audible shushing sound. They stepped into a lift. The door shut behind them. There was only one button on the wall. Pike pressed it and the lift began to descend into the bowels of the Earth. Not a word had been spoken between the two men since the phone call.

4

They stepped out of the lift one minute later. They were one mile deep, directly under the airport. Slaughter pulled a shiny gold badge from his shirt pocket and clipped it to the front of his shirt. It had three hexagrams of six stars and indicated to everyone in the facility that he was one of the top-ranking *Non-Terrestrial Officers*, NTOs, in the *New World Clandestine Service*, NWCS. His existence, in fact the existence of the whole NWCS, was a total secret from everyone on the planet, including the President of the United States. The

exception was a small, secret group of individuals that belonged to a powerful, international cabal, which was known to the NWCS as *The Head*. 'The Head' stood for the head of the snake and the NWCS was considered to be its fangs. The NWCS was funded by a multi-trillion dollar black budget. It was an entity unto itself and was not allied with any military or government.

The Denver facility employed six hundred and sixty-six people. All were sworn to secrecy and compartmentalised, so no one ever knew more than their immediate sector of responsibility. All employees of the NWCS had passed through a multi-stage recruitment process. All applicants were required to be single and misanthropic. If chosen, they were '*ground through The Mincer*', which was a carefully designed psychological fragmentation of the individual. The process included the administration of powerful psychotropic drugs, which induced complete and permanent amnesia in the aspirant, converting him into a mumbling, weeping mess referred to as '*Mince*'. It was intended that '*Mince*' could not even remember their mother's name, their own name, where they came from or why they were there. The second stage of '*The Process*' was the '*moulding of the Mince*' into precisely what the NWCS wanted. They were given a name, a personality, a life, a job and an extremely addictive drug, called *Joy*. Joy was supplied to the employee as long as they performed up to expectation. If Joy was removed from the diet, the withdrawal symptom was death. All employees could '*rise to Rank*' through loyalty and excellence in their work. Under the influence of Joy, the individual felt totally fulfilled and contented with his or her lot. Once the employee achieved the level of '*Rank*', they were trained to interface with the outside world. One subdivision of '*Ranks*' were the NTO's. The highest '*Ranks*' were the Generals and the highest of those were the '*triple-six-stars*'. Slaughter, being one of the triple-six-stars, received his orders from above, although he did not know from whom or from where.

5

Pike and Slaughter walked briskly through the vast underground labyrinth, which appeared not unlike a large mall, except instead of shops, most of the space was taken up by offices. There was no colour, no greenery and the whole complex was lit by an endless procession of ghostly fluorescent lights. The ceilings and walls were bare concrete and the floors were black and white,

chequered, ceramic tiles. Embedded in the tiles were endless fine strips of copper, which guided a fleet of electric carts to and from the various departments.

Everyone that saw Slaughter stopped on the spot, froze to attention, clicked their heels and gave the Nazi salute. The people who were riding in carts stopped their carts, got out and saluted the General in the same fashion as if Adolf Hitler himself had walked by. Slaughter completely ignored everyone as he strode past them.

They finally walked through a door into a large, hexagonal room. There were about ten personnel in it, all sitting behind large computer screens. Everyone rose and saluted the General. They walked up to one of the screens, which was manned by a man named Kirk, and proceeded to review the data.

'Walk us through the dope, Kirk,' said Pike.

'Yes, sir.'

Kirk's hands danced over the screen. The globe of the Earth appeared, rendered in full colour and definition. A time clock appeared in the upper right hand corner.

'As close as we can make it, they launched at 13.50-hours, Mountain time, somewhere in Australia, sir. We first picked them up on the PG about a thousand miles east of Brisbane.'

Two spots appeared on the screen. Text under the spots read *PGSS*, which stood for *Pacific Geostationary Surveillance Satellite*. The spots flew east-north-east trailing a record of their flight track. Above them, more numbers displayed their heading, altitude and speed.

'Missile alert was activated and deactivated in five seconds, sir. We knew immediately that these bogeys weren't conventional. Their flight trajectory had no relevance to gravity or orbital physics. They flew at a velocity of 40,000mph, 620 miles above the Pacific. They decelerated from that speed to 10,000mph, in less than a nanosecond, as they crossed the West Coast. We picked them up on *ICU2* as they came to a stop at 14.01-hours, still at an altitude of 620 miles, sir.'

The image on the screen changed to a close-up satellite-surveillance recording of two silver discs.

'Bullshit!' growled Slaughter.

'Yes sir, no sir,' replied Kirk nervously, then continued with his summary. 'They descended and landed on top of a butte, about 1.8 miles east of Green River, at exactly 14.05-hours, sir.'

'This is where it gets good, sir,' said Pike.

A helicopter suddenly flew into the scene from the west. It came to a hover and appeared to observe three individuals exit the two discs. Then a hang glider flew up the west face of the butte and began to circle around the two discs.

'I think that is one of those hang gliders with an engine, sir,' commented Pike.

'Look, there's another one!' exclaimed Slaughter. 'It's like a fucking convention down there.'

A second powered hang glider appeared. It began to fly passes above the heads of the three occupants of the discs. Slaughter noticed it immediately.

'Are those sons of bitches wavin to each other, Pike?'

'It would appear so, sir.'

The satellite camera zoomed in for a close-up.

'The freaks got no faces, Pike.'

'No, sir.'

'What's with the waving? Are those people friends with freaks that can fly around at 40,000mph, Pike, and we don't know anything about them?'

'Err, that is inconclusive, sir.'

Slaughter screamed at the top of his voice,

'Inconclusive? Inconclusive? Well get your ass conclusive, Pike. The freaks had a welcoming committee waiting for them and you didn't even know they were coming.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Look,' Slaughter pointed at the screen, 'they're all backing away and the freaks are getting back into the discs.'

They watched the two discs launch and rapidly fly off in a west-south-west direction. The image on the screen reverted to the PGSS. It tracked the discs as far as New Caledonia where they disappeared off the screen.

'They're gone, Pike. Where the fuck have my freaks gone?'

'Sir, we don't know, sir.'

Slaughter growled,

'You don't know, Pike? You are *paid* to know.'

'Sir, we believe they either accelerated to light speed ... or ...'

'Or *what*, Pike?'

'Err ... or they dematerialised into another dimension, sir.'

Slaughter glared at Pike,

'Your *balls* are gonna dematerialise into another dimension, Pike, if you don't find my freaks.'

'Err ... yes sir. ... Sir, we extrapolated their trans-Pacific track, sir. Kirk ...'

Kirk's fingers nervously tap-danced over the screen. A new line appeared. It represented a hypothetical extension of the saucers' flight path from the point of their disappearance. Pike continued,

'The hypothetical track crosses only one town in all of Australia, sir. It's a small town on the east coast called Noosa Heads. Can you zoom in on the town, Kirk, although there is no guarantee that they went there, sir.'

Slaughter thought for a moment then said,

'Yeah, that's true, but it's all we got.' He looked Pike directly into his eyes and sighed, 'Sixty-eight fucking years, Pike. We've been chasing the freaks for sixty-eight years, since fucking Roswell, and what have we got? Sweet fuck all.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I want that technology, Pike. I want it so bad I can taste it. Another chance has presented itself to us and I don't intend to waste it.'

'We'll try again, sir.'

'Who is that new guy? The ace. What's his name?'

'Drek, sir.'

'Drek? What the fuck kind of name is Drek?'

'I don't know, sir. I think it's extrinsic, but ...'

'Should we go with just Drek? What about Beck? Shouldn't we send in both of them?'

'I don't think Drek is that kind of operative, sir. Beck would just get in his way. Drek is the new wave. He and his ilk have been constructed as soloists. The Head believes that we have a better chance at acquiring the technology with a more affable approach. I think they want Drek to try to make friends with the

ETs, sir, without the ETs knowing who he is. Drek has had very advanced mind training, sir, since he was a small child. I believe that he is a natural psychic-intuitive. Apparently he has the ability to stop all thought processes and become an *EHSP*.'

'Refresh my memory, Pike.'

'An *extra highly sensitive person*. We are entering the realms of *telepathic warfare* with agents like Drek, sir.'

'Telepathic warfare? What will they think of next, Pike?'

'We don't know for sure if the ETs are telepathic, sir, but if they are, we feel that we are ready for them.'

'OK, Pike, let's get a brief together for this Drek and then have a meeting with him. I think we'll send him to ... what was the name of that place again?'

'Noosa Heads, sir.'

'Yeah, Noosa Heads, and let's find out who was in the chopper and those hang gliders, and what the hell they were doing there, but let's not give them any clues to the fact that they'll be under surveillance. I want to see what they do next.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And Pike ...'

'Yes, sir?'

'Why don't you organise us a trip to Noosa Heads, you and me, commercial, and well scout the place out before we send Drek in, OK?'

'On it, sir.'

Slaughter smiled,

'You get to keep your cojones for a little longer, Pike.'

'Thank you, sir.'

.....

Chapter Forty-Nine

THE VISIT

1

Life in Noosa was free and easy. For most people the year had four seasons, but for Thebe and Slater it only had two, the 'on-season' and the 'off-season'. The on-season meant endless surfing days in their favourite bay. The clean, east swells began in February, peaked in April-May and lasted, in some years, well into July. They preferably went surfing by boat and occasionally strung together as many as ten or twelve days in a row in the peak of the season. Lucy happily looked after Kane during those times. She liked to play games with him. Their favourite amusement was playing hide and seek in their levitation suits inside and around the house. Besides hiding in the most unlikely places like canopies of trees and making themselves invisible with their chameleon effect, they also practised their telepathic invisibility against each other.

Kane was only two years old, however he already possessed an impressive spectrum of knowledge because he studied the Rama way, by *telepathic trance transference*. Knowledge was literally downloaded into his memory from others. When Thebe found someone who was an expert in his or her field, she waited for an opportune moment, and then pounced. Her favourite place for a *knowledge transference* was a café.

All telepaths could, if they wished, see the sum total of an individual's knowledge, which was made up of their memories, fantasies, fears and amusements. Thebe could see images of whatever the person was into, floating in space around the person's head. For example, a cloud of mathematical formulae would typically surround a mathematician. The memories that were most strongly prominent in the person's psyche were also most prominent in their visible thought cloud.

Noosa, being such a popular tourist destination, was the perfect place to 'trawl for intelligence', as it was constantly being visited by an endless stream of academics and connoisseurs of the arts.

Thebe and Kane would sit at an adjacent table in one of the fine cafes in Hastings Street. She would telepathically place the targeted 'knowledge donor'

into a brief trance. Kane would slide into a corresponding receptive trance in the fashion his mother had taught him. Thebe would then download the carefully selected knowledge from the unsuspecting prey. The whole process was over in seconds without the donor having any idea of what had just happened to him.

2

It was *early Autumn 2016* and everyone was sitting around the kitchen bench having their breakfast when Thebe announced somewhat excitedly,

'I have some big news. My friend Ambriel contacted me from Rama and asked if she could visit us in May. Her husband, Adam, their son, Ben, and their friend, Zeke, were hoping to come as well. Isn't that exciting? May is the most perfect time of year, don't you think?'

Everyone agreed. Thebe was excited about again seeing her best friend from childhood and Slater was excited about seeing his good old friend from the water.

'We'll finally be able to thank Adam for the house and all the money,' said Lucy.

'Brie is kind of like your Auntie, Kane,' said Thebe. 'She loves you very much and she told me how much she is looking forward to meeting you.' Thebe turned to Lucy and said, a little cheekily, 'Zeke is about your age, Lucy, and he is a Fish initiate like you ... *and he's single.*'

Lucy laughed, 'Don't you go gettin any ideas, Thebe.'

'Who me? Ideas? Perish the thought.'

Lucy was surprised, however, at the tingle of excitement she felt deep inside in anticipation of meeting this man called Zeke. It had been fifteen years since her beloved Timmy died in the car accident. Fifteen years without romance. Something within her said that maybe it was OK to let her heart free up a little and open itself up to new possibilities. Besides, she was now healed and was getting younger as the Mana performed its magic. Even though she was sixty-eight years old, she felt more like a teenager and looked like a lady in her early thirties. Her grey hair was disappearing and her wrinkles were smoothing out and Thebe was telling her that her lifespan was already approaching three hundred years. Everyone was noticing what an attractive lady she was becoming. She was tall and slim, with long, light-brown hair and the prettiest face

imaginable. She liked to dress like a hippy, wearing tie-dyed sarongs and Puka shell necklaces, and she could easily have been mistaken for someone straight out of the Woodstock movie. If anyone commented on her 70s look she just smiled and declared, 'It's me, man.'

3

The hundred-foot diameter, family-sized ship silently descended into Noosa Waters under the cover of darkness in the early hours of *Sunday, May 01 2016*. After its occupants alighted, the ship was remotely flown a couple of miles out into Laguna Bay and parked on the sea-floor there, some two hundred feet underwater.

It was all happy smiling faces as everyone introduced themselves to each other. Adam and Ambriel stayed in the spare upstairs bedroom, Ben and Zeke stayed in the spare room in the granny flat section of the house, which was Lucy's area, but she didn't mind, 'as long as nobody walks in on me while I'm having a shower,' and Kane moved into a small tent they pitched on the back veranda.

They all went to Elvis's for lunch. The day was as perfect an autumn day as nature could possibly conjure up. There was not a cloud in the sky and a light south-wester blew crisp and clear making breathing deeply a delicious pleasure. They dragged a couple of tables together and sat around them and began a conversation that would not let up for a whole month.

'You know, the longer I live here, the less inclined I feel like ever leaving.'

'I know exactly what you mean, Thebe, I have felt like that for years,' replied Lucy.

'I've never lived anywhere else,' said Slater.

'She sure is a pretty river,' commented Zeke, keeping one eye on Lucy who smiled at him. He surprised himself when he added, 'like some of the ladies around here.'

Lucy blushed while everyone exchanged glances and fought to keep the smirks off their faces.

'God I love these chips,' exclaimed Adam. 'They're so hot and crunchy.'

'Who forgot the napkins?' said Ambriel as she rose to get some napkins from the counter.

'Eat them, don't wear them, sweetie,' said Lucy to Kane as she picked up a French fry from his lap.

4

The *Hand of God* conducted its aquatic opus in Elysian perfection for the whole month of May. Ambriel, Adam, Thebe, Slater and Ben surfed almost every day. They decided to drive and walk because Slater's boat wasn't large enough to take them all. Adam commented,

'I kind of like walking out to Granite again. It takes me back to my early days here, to before I bought my boat.'

'Do you remember the first time we came here together, darling?' asked Ambriel.

'I do indeed. Those were the days I was in love with my Libby. I wonder whatever happened to her?'

They both had a chuckle as Ambriel replied,

'She turned into an alien.'

Zeke stayed with Lucy and Kane during the surfing sessions. Zeke and Lucy weren't interested in surfing and Kane was still too young.

Although Zeke was two years older than Lucy, having been born in Cronulla in 1946, he looked nothing like a man of his advanced years ought to look, due to his daily ingestion of Mana. He looked like he was at the peak of his energies, aged in his mid to late twenties. He was tall, about 6'4", and strong with broad shoulders and long blond hair that waved around on breezy days. He wore a closely cropped beard and looked altogether too handsome and manly to Lucy, especially when he spoke with his deep baritone voice. Unbeknownst to her, his time on Rama had refined him substantially, although his choice of clothing still left something to be desired. Ultimately, the aspect of Zeke's character that Lucy was attracted to the most was his free spirit. She felt like they belonged to the same kindred. And that may not have been too far from the truth because the most significant thing they both had in common were their fathers. They were both hybrid offspring from a union of an Earth mother and an alien father. Zeke turned out to be a part-telepathic schizophrenic who bravely learnt how to handle his bizarre inner reality, while Lucy was born a full-telepath who, due to a

complete lack of training, had, until recently with Thebe's guidance, never explored even the most rudimentary potential of her telepathic powers.

'It's almost like we're brother and sister,' Zeke suggested.

'Perish the thought,' she replied.

One of the favourite things they liked to do together, besides smoke marijuana, was fly, he with his lev-pack and she in her *skin*. They flew at night so no one could see them. One of their favourite destinations was Double Island Point, which was located exactly 33 miles to the north of Noosa. It was on one of those flights that he revealed to her that he had never had a girlfriend in all his life. When she heard that, her heart went out to him and she hugged him and tenderly kissed him on the mouth, and revealed her growing affection for him. A new romance was born that night, a blazing fire that was destined to burn across millions of light years, for almost a millennium.

5

About a week later, *Saturday 7th May*, Ambriel and Thebe relaxed at Aromas in Hastings Street and caught up on conversation. They spoke to each other telepathically.

'We've become somewhat fans of Woody Allen movies,' said Ambriel. 'Have you seen many of them?'

Thebe laughed, 'Are you kidding, we can't get enough of them. We think he's an absolute genius. Have you seen *Midnight in Paris*?'

'Oh yes,' Ambriel sighed, 'those opening scenes of Paris, thirty seconds and I was putty, pass the Kleenex ... and the tune, I looked it up, *'Si Tu Vois Ma Mere'*, by Sidney Bechet, perfect.'

'I fell in love with Hemingway all over again,' said Thebe.

'Me too. To me he expressed the very essence of manliness, something that many women on this planet seem to have fallen out of love of.'

'It defies understanding.'

'Yes, I know. The emasculation of men seems to have become a female sport here.'

'I think that Woody subtly touched on it in the movie when he explored the tension between Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald, and Hemingway. She hated Hemingway because he thought that she was bad for Scott; he thought that she

emasculated him and distracted him from his work. Scott was torn between his love for her and the friend he admired.'

'Whenever I think of Hemingway, the word Himalaya comes to mind. Isn't that strange?'

'I loved the cinematography,' said Thebe. 'I think it's Woody's best looking movie. It truly expresses a passionate love for all the colours and textures of that city, born out of a rich history and culture. It really gives us a clearer picture of the inside of Woody's mind.'

'I thought it looked absolutely fractal.'

'Without a doubt, and on many levels. The market scene with all the Persian rugs in the background comes to mind, and how about the time travel, you can't get more fractal than that.'

'No, and did you notice that Gil left his book with Gertrude Stein at one stage, back in the twenties, while he returned to the present, absolutely underlining the surrealist's view that all time is happening at the same time.'

'I don't think that Woody Allen has much of an opinion of Picasso. He virtually portrayed him as an oafish mute.'

'Yeah.'

They both laughed.

'Who knows, maybe Picasso was the greatest hoodwinker of all time?'

'Maybe?'

'Look at the painting Allen chose to feature in his movie, *La Baigneuse*, a complete absence of all truth, and what is left?'

'Whatever one wants, I assume. That's why the critics love it, why they love Picasso himself; it allows them and their verbose critiques to become the art. The parasite fools the organism it is feeding off into thinking that it is part of that organism itself. It's the hoodwinking of a hoodwinker and I suspect that Gertrude Stein might have been a classic prototype of that genre.'

'I must agree because I find that painting verging on the absurd, if I must be honest.'

As they sat there relaxing and people watching, they observed possibly the most attractive man they had ever seen walk past. He looked entirely out of place, even for a tourist. And to top it all off, they also sensed him in the mind

plane. He suddenly turned his head and looked at them through his dark wraparounds with a beguiling stare. He then looked away again and kept walking up Hastings Street. The girls glanced at each other with an expression of astonishment on their faces. Ambriel thought to Thebe,

‘Oh my God, did you feel that? Let’s tag him.’

Tagging was a telepathic technique of marking an individual with a temporary mind thread. When effected by an expert, the person being tagged remained completely oblivious to the tag if he was non-telepathic. If the person being tagged was telepathic, he knew that something had just happened to him, but he wasn’t sure what it was and he was completely helpless to do anything about it. Once a person had been tagged by a telepath, their location and proximity was much more predominantly perceived.

Thebe replied, ‘Got him. Who *was* that? After a few moments she asked, ‘Another coffee?’

‘Why not? I am enjoying myself, are you?’

‘Very much.’

A little later,

‘Imagine if we could go back in time. The places we could go and the people we could meet.’

‘I know, but alas, it can not be, at least not yet.’

‘Or ever, I suspect, because if there was reverse time travel we would have had visitors from the future right through the whole of our history. I’m afraid time travel can only happen into the future and that is how it will always be.’

‘It seems so. ... You know, I also loved Manhattan Murder Mystery?’

‘Oh yes, what a lark.’

‘The suspense had me biting my nails while Woody’s farce made me laugh at the same time. Who else could do that?’

‘Nobody.’

‘Remember the ‘I commands’? *I am your husband and I command you to sleep.*’

Both of the girls laughed heartily.

‘Weedy little Woody trying to be the bossy husband. So funny.’

‘Yeah.’

6

On a warm evening, about a week later, the conversation turned to time travel. They were all together sitting around the big table under the gazebo in the central courtyard. The iPod was set to random play and the garden lights were dimmed to soft, and the wine flowed and the smoke of Zeke's Rama-grown Illawarra Gold lingered in the calm air. Slater described his time shift experience once again.

'You know, it completely blew my mind.'

'Thebe and I discussed this not more than a week ago,' said Ambriel. 'We talked about the possibility of reverse time shifts and how it doesn't appear that the technique will ever be discovered.'

Everyone became very interested in the topic, and alert. Thebe continued, 'As far as anyone knows, there has never been a visit from a time traveller from the future, ever. If people discovered time travel into the past sometime in the future, then our whole history would be punctuated with visits from future time travellers. There clearly is no reverse time travel and never will be.'

'It is one of the most studied topics on Rama,' said Ambriel.

'Let's play a game,' Adam suggested. 'Let's pretend that there *is* reverse time travel, just for fun.'

Everyone looked at Adam and smiled. There was a momentary pause in the conversation as everyone thought about the implications.

'I'd want proof,' said Zeke.

'Ezekiel is right,' said Lucy. 'The first thing the time traveller from the future would have to do is definitively prove who he was.'

'He would have to accurately predict some soon to happen event,' said Ben.

'I've just had a thought,' said Zeke. 'The Bible is full of predictin the future, but I don't think any of it has happened yet.'

'I think those predictions come from outside our time-space, Zeke, from the mind plane. That is a whole different kettle of fish.'

'Thebe is right, Zeke,' said Ambriel, 'even telepaths don't understand where that type of prophesy comes from. But I think for the purpose of our game we ought to limit ourselves to actual *physical* time travel, don't you think?'

Thebe looked at Kane who was sitting in his high chair and said,

'I think it's time for bed, little tyke.'

'I'll put him away,' said Lucy, 'you relax.'

'Who wants to start?' asked Adam.

'Why don't you start, darling,' suggested Ambriel.

'OK. If I could go back in time I would like to come back to Noosa in the late fifties, before Bob McTavish discovered the place, and surf the points completely uncrowded. I think that would be the ultimate.'

'Interesting,' said Thebe, 'except don't you think that other surfers would have the same idea?'

'What, you mean even surfers from the future?'

'Yeah, the infinite future. Once you have two-way time travel, it's open season. And the word would get around pretty quickly about which days were the good ones and the breaks would end up even more packed than they are now with drop-ins from the future.'

'That would destroy everything,' said Adam.

'Who wants to play next?'

Zeke said, 'I'll go next.'

'Go the Zekester,' said Adam.

'I would go back to the crucifixion of Christ. I'd wanna see what really happened.'

'I think that you'd have to get in the back of a huge line there, Zeke,' said Adam.

'Yeah, I imagine that that would be one of the most popular destinations into the past,' added Ambriel.

Ben began to laugh, 'I think if there was reverse time travel, Jesus would have to be crucified in a huge stadium that could seat hundreds of thousands of people, there would be that many time travellers that would want to witness that event.'

'I think the stadium would have to accommodate millions,' added Ambriel.

'It would be bigger than the Olympics,' said Slater. 'Maccas would probably want to sponsor the show.'

Lucy returned from putting Kane to bed. She sat down and asked,

'So how is travelling back in time going?'

'Not too good,' replied Zeke. 'It looks like all of history would get completely overcrowded. We worked out that Jesus would have to be crucified in a huge stadium.'

Lucy laughed, 'What have you people been talking about? ... and smoking?'

'It's amazing,' said Liberty, 'no one has even attempted to change anything and there is still chaos. Imagine if somebody tried to alter history ...'

'Yeah,' said Adam, 'like bump off Hitler when he was a little boy or something ...'

'Yeah, the chaos that could ensue is unimaginable.'

'Everybody would try to make emselves rich by goin back to when ... ah ... say ... gold was cheap an buy up heaps of it an bring it back into the future an make a motza. Lots of people would use reverse time travel for that.'

'Nobody'd want to work,' said Lucy.

'I think that the verdict is pretty much in,' said Thebe, 'time travel into the past is, and will always be, an impossibility. In one way it is a good thing, but in another way it is a shame.'

'How do you mean?' asked Slater.

'Well, we have the time chip, our most advanced technology. It allows us to skip time into the future, but virtually no one uses it because they can't ever return. Iapetus, our most revered time traveller only does small hops. Whoever time shifts, leaves their loved ones behind and can never return to them. Also, a time shift into the future means a shift into the unknown. No one has ever come back from there to tell us what it was like. If one time shifts into a bad future, their only option from there is to time shift further into another future, which could be just as bad, or even worse. Very few people use the time shift.'

'The 100-year shift that we are doing is the biggest one that has ever been attempted,' added Ambriel. 'Iapetus came up with the original idea. We think that it is the most perfect use of the technology. By the way, we're not going.'

'What do you mean?' asked Slater.

'Adam, Zeke, Ben and I are not doing the time shift. We will spend the 100 years on Rama. You, Thebe and Lucy will shift into the future. I think Kane will be ten at that time so he might have to be with his teacher. We will all be there

when you arrive, though. At least that is the plan, however nothing is set in stone.'

Lucy and Zeke looked at each other. Although everyone pretty much guessed that there was something afoot, Lucy and Zeke had not yet officially announced their newfound amorous entanglement. Lucy spoke up first.

'I don't know if I want to be apart from Ezekiel for a hundred years.'

Zeke hugged her and said,

'We need to talk about this.'

.....

Chapter Fifty

SPOOKS

1

Pike and Slaughter strolled along the boardwalk of Main Beach Noosa. They were dressed casually in floral shirts, Bermuda shorts, black shoes, long white socks, grey, narrow-brimmed, straw hats and wraparound sunglasses. Their noses were covered with white zinc cream. Pike licked on a Gelato while Slaughter puffed on a huge Diplomatico No.2. It was *Thursday 5th May 2016*.

'What gets into all these bitches flauntin their tits all over the fuckin beach, Pike?'

'I can't imagine, sir.'

This was their third trip to Noosa since they tracked the two saucers across the Pacific nearly eight months before. They were visiting Drek this time. They were there for two reasons. One, they were there for a de-brief from Drek, and two, they were really starting to like the place and any excuse was a good reason to go there again.

They stayed at the Sheraton Noosa Resort, the big pink building in the heart of Noosa. Drek was hunkered down at the Noosa Outrigger Beach Resort on Gympie Terrace, right on the river.

They all got together the next morning, *Friday 6th May*. Drek drove his rental the few miles to the Sheraton and met the General and his aide by the pool. They ordered drinks, kicked back on some poolside lounges and began conversing in hushed tones.

'Did you bring your report, Drek?' Pike asked.

'I did, sir.'

Drek handed Pike a folder.

Pike opened it and had a look. Slaughter requested,

'Can you give us a rundown?'

'Yes, sir. I arrived here on *5th December 2015*. I began reconnaissance as soon as I settled in. Have you been briefed on how I operate, sir?'

Pike answered, 'The General has been briefed, but can you please describe your modus operandi in your own terms.'

'Yes, sir. It's quite simple really. I was born a natural psychic-intuitive. The Service recruited me because of my abilities. They then trained me in advanced psychic surveillance using the *Proactive Entheogen Enhancement Program*, PEEP, sir.'

'Would you like to give that to us in English,' suggested Slaughter.

'Yes, sir. I take LSD to elevate my sensitivity.'

'Oh yeah, I've heard of that program. Go on.'

'Sir, to keep the effect up to the required potency, I can only use it one day out of three. The effect lasts about twelve hours, sir.'

'OK, I got it.'

'To date, sir, I have not come across any individuals active in the mind space.'

'I see.'

'Sir, I believe that I would have to walk right past one of them to detect them. They would have to be active in the mind space as well. I believe that they would register on my mind, sir. As that happened, I would then need to get a look at them in order to register their face, which I would then need to commit to memory. Ideally I would get a photograph of them using the camera concealed in my sunglasses.'

'Where do you look for them?'

'I mainly sense for them in the busy tourist strips like Hastings Street, Main Beach or Gympie Terrace along Noosa River. That's where most of the people are and I figure that that is where I have the best chance of bumping into one of them.'

'And you feel that you would know if you passed one?'

'Oh yeah ... sir.'

'It would be a pity if they stayed away from the tourist traps, Drek.'

'I could walk right into one, sir, but if they weren't actively engaged in the mind space, I wouldn't recognise them.'

'I won't even pretend to understand what that's like, Drek. Look, we're here for another few days. What's say we catch up one more time before we go back to the States.'

'Yes, sir. Tomorrow is my next active day, sir.'

'OK, why don't we get together here on Sunday, same place, same time. Will you be *comprende* enough by Sunday, Drek?'

'Yes, sir.'

'If anything happens, anytime, call Pike. That's anytime, Drek, 24/7.'

'Yes, sir.'

After Drek left, Slaughter quietly commented,

'It's like looking for a needle in a haystack, Pike. The freaks might not even be here.'

'Nothing ventured, nothing gained, sir.'

'That's true, Pike, and how nice is this place to visit, eh?'

'It is certainly an agreeable assignment, sir.'

2

Drek was hand picked and carefully trained for *Charismatic Telepathic Warfare*, CTW. The *Service* needed a man who was attractive to both men and women alike. He needed to be extremely handsome, as well as charming, easy-going, communicative, likable and good-humoured. Drek was tall, dark, slim and fit. He looked like a cross between Cary Grant and George Clooney and was always dressed immaculately, even on casual occasions. As a consequence, he could attract women, and men, like a magnet if he willed. That was his external profile. Internally, however, he was a dark, cold, calculating black hole of a pre-programmed machine, devoid of any empathy and focussed only on the objective of the mission. On his active days he sat in cafés or strolled the streets spaced out of his brain on acid sensing for anyone that might 'register on his radar'.

He wore special-issue, wraparound sunglasses that incorporated a microscopic lens in the bridge between the eyes. The lens was part of a very sophisticated digital camera, which was embedded in the frame and controlled by way of a small remote device usually hidden in a pocket. When the button was pressed, the camera fired off twenty-four high-definition shots per second.

It was *Saturday 7th May 2016*, the day after his meeting with the General and Pike. It was another scheduled 'active day'. He dripped two drops of Lysergic acid diethylamide into his morning coffee using an eyedropper. He drank the coffee, exited his holiday unit and caught a taxi out to Hastings Street for his day of enhanced reconnaissance.

3

That afternoon found Pike and the General sprawled on two lounge chairs next to the resort pool. They were both on their second beer as Pike's phone rang. Pike recognised the incoming number as Drek's. He flipped the phone open.

'Drek.'

'Yes, it's me, sir. I'd like to report a positive contact.'

Pike sat up, instantly excited.

'Where?'

'Aromas in Hastings Street, sir.'

'Did you get a look at them?'

'Yes, sir, and I got twenty-four shots. We've got them, sir.'

'Are you still under the, er, influence?'

'Yes, sir.'

'When will you be ready for a de-brief?'

'Six hours, sir.'

'OK, come to our room at 21.00 hours tonight.'

'Yes, sir.'

That night they all sat on leather lounges around the coffee table with their laptops open and connected to each other via Bluetooth. Drek had already downloaded the twenty-four photos from his sunglasses to his computer. They were in turn transferred onto Slaughter and Pike's laptops. They opened a beer each and examined the shots closely.

'Them's fine lookin bitches,' commented Slaughter.

'They are beautiful,' Drek agreed, 'like models or actresses. I didn't realise how attractive they were until I looked at the shots. I only got a brief glance at them when I spotted them because they were onto me immediately. I had to turn and keep walking in order to not completely lose my cover.'

'They made you?' Pike asked.

'Yes, sir. Instantly.'

'Do you think that it was your physical appearance?'

'No, sir. They detected me in the mind space. As well, there was some kind of telepathic interaction, but I couldn't define it.'

Slaughter sat up.

'How long did you look at them?'

'About two seconds, sir. I fired off the shots in a reflex reaction.'

'Let me get this straight, Drek, the bitches recognised you faster than you recognised them?'

'As fast, sir. As far as I can make out, they were communicating with each other in the mind space when I walked past. To them there would have been no one else present until I arrived. They became aware of me instantaneously.'

'And something telepathic happened?'

'Yes, sir. I felt a kind of telepathic link for a moment. I have no idea what it might have been though.'

'We have the stills taken from the Green River surveillance video, sir,' said Pike. 'I'll just bring them up.'

Pike was attempting to correlate the close up shots of the female alien from the Green River incident with Drek's shots. He brought up a close-up of Thebe.

'You can't make out her face because it's completely covered by some kind of electronic, chameleon balaclava and, when you take a careful look, a pair of closely fitting, chameleon goggles, but you can make out through the suit that she's a woman.'

'Yeah, she's got a nice pair of tits,' commented Slaughter. Drek smiled.

'Er, yes, sir,' said Pike. He continued, 'It appears that the two women Drek photographed in Aromas have the same type of physique as the alien in the Green River surveillance photos.'

Pike activated a face-matching program and manipulated the photographs, superimposing the Noosa shots over the Green River shots. After about five minutes he declared,

'Sir, I believe we have a match. Although both women in the Noosa shots have similar facial features, both perfectly symmetrical and perfectly proportioned, the software is able to clearly differentiate between them. The software is also capable of analysing the facial features of the alien in the Green River shots. It is capable of taking key measurements through the balaclava and simulating an approximation of the face beneath it. When the two shots are superimposed over one another, the software comes up with a 98 percent match with one of the women at the café. I think we have found our aliens, sir.'

'Good work, Drek. Nice analysis, Pike. I can't believe that we've found them. I have to be honest, I thought we were lookin for a fart in a hurricane. Which one is it, Pike?'

Pike brought forward the photo of the two women sitting at the café on Slaughter's laptop and said,

'It's the one on the left, sir. Their sunglasses make it slightly more difficult to differentiate between them, but our software is designed to overcome such drawbacks.'

'They look completely human, Pike,' observed Slaughter.

'Yes, sir.'

'They operate in a whole different place, sir,' said Drek.

'Expand, Drek.'

'Sir, yes, sir. Imagine that we Earth humans are like people without radio communication and the alien humans have radio communication.'

'Yeah?'

'It goes further than that, sir. Imagine that we Earth humans are all totally deaf, dumb and blind and the alien humans can see and communicate perfectly.'

'So what you are saying, Drek, is that you got people that can see, visiting a planet full of blind people?'

'Precisely, sir, except that it's not a 100 percent to zero ratio.'

'Elaborate.'

'Well, and the statistical details are a complete mystery, but I believe that there is a small percentage of Earth humans that may also be partially telepathic, like me, sir. These are probably a result of natural evolution. The other possible source of telepathic Earth humans would be hybrids, sir.'

'You are now venturing into highly sought-after information, Drek,' said Slaughter.

'Yes, sir, although I'm only speculating. I believe that these types are extremely secretive and almost impossible to locate.'

'Tell me something I don't know, Drek.'

'Sir, yes, sir.'

They analysed the photos and tossed around hypothetical ways of approaching the aliens. Slaughter repeatedly enunciated the primary goal.

'We want the freaks' technology, period, and we want to know what the fuck they are doing here. Everything else is secondary.' He leaned back in the sofa, slipped off his shoes, lit a cigar and placed his feet on the coffee table. He then suggested, 'Let's take a break, eh; we've done some good work tonight. How about another beer, Pike, and let's see what's on TV.'

4

Pike grabbed some beers from the fridge and placed them on the coffee table. He then picked up the remote and switched on the large, flat-screen TV.

'Let's see the guide,' suggested Slaughter.

Pike brought up the program guide on the screen and scrolled it down. Slaughter suddenly pointed at the screen.

'What the fuck is that, Pike?'

'Er, it's the History Channel, sir. Er, 10.30pm it says that they're showing a program called, *Incident at Green River*, sir.' Pike clicked on the program and read out the blurb. 'It says, *Witness the closest close encounter of the fourth kind ever captured on film. The world will never be the same again after it sees this documentary, which is being premiered globally tonight.*'

'What time is it?' enquired Slaughter.

'It's 22.20 hours, sir. The program will start in ten minutes.'

'What are the fucking odds? Can we record this, Pike?'

'Yes, sir. I have *Eye TV* on my laptop. I'll set it up.'

The program was scheduled to run for one hour. It began with an introduction, which was filmed in Las Vegas. The host, an unknown actor named Dirk DeRongo, entered the scene dressed like a rhinestone cowboy. He began,

'What you are about to see, ladies and gentlemen, will change your lives forever. Eighteen months ago, a wandering loner named Tommy Jones witnessed and filmed the most Earth shattering event that has ever transpired, possibly in the whole history of our planet.'

'What the fuck is he talking about eighteen months ago, Pike?' queried Slaughter.

'Beats me, sir.'

'The date was 23rd September 2014 and the location was Green River, Wyoming. We will take a ride through the desert out to Green River with a film

crew in tow and we will meet Tommy Jones and re-live with him his bizarre experience. Above all, we will all see the exceptional quality photographic and video evidence which Tommy Jones shot during his amazing encounter with the unknown.'

The program paused for an advertisement. Slaughter asked,

'Did we know about 2014, Pike?'

'Not as far as I know, sir.'

Slaughter had a drink of his beer and looked at Drek.

'You don't say much, do you, Drek?'

'No, sir. I have been trained to be a receptive, sir.'

After a few moments, the program resumed.

'It is our intention to be at Green River, Wyoming, above ground zero, exactly twelve months, to the second, after Tommy Jones's incredible encounter with what we believe were extraterrestrial beings from another planet. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you heard right, this is a UFO story, a UFO story like no other UFO story this planet has ever seen before. I, Dirk DeRongo, promise you this; after tonight you will forget about Roswell ... after tonight you will forget about Area 51 ... after tonight you will only remember one place ... Green River ... because that is the place, and this is the show, that in the following fifty minutes will change your lives ... forever!'

Slaughter growled,

'Fuckin Hollywood! Who writes shit like this? Is this really goin global, Pike?'

'I'll check on it, sir.'

Pike picked up his phone and dialled a number. He spoke to someone for a few minutes then hung up.

'This thing is being shown globally, to everybody that has a television, sir. It is estimated that it will be able to be accessed by over ninety percent of the world's population. Apparently it has been produced with subtitles for all languages, sir.'

'This is too much bullshit, Pike. Why weren't we in the loop? Somebody's nuts are gonna swing for this.'

Pike took a nervous swig of his beer bottle. The three men watched in total amazement as the documentary team skilfully navigated through their story. They interviewed Tommy Jones, who was really Clint Rodgers, aka Cowboy, the stand-in actor. He told his story of how he witnessed the two UFOs descend and land on top of a butte on the far side of the river, just outside of town. He explained how he grabbed his iPhone and took off in his trike chasing after the silver discs. Just at that point there was a seamless break in the program. Snake stitched up a deal with Apple computers and got paid one million dollars for the strategic placement of a thirty-second segment in which Tommy Jones waxed lyrical about the incredible features of his iPhone.

The program showed maps and aerial shots of the area. On the maps they drew lines representing the flight paths of the UFOs. They then began showing Jonesy's photos in the order they were taken. As the photos transitioned one into another, Dirk DeRongo gave a dramatic running analysis of events as they unfolded. Even up to this stage, the documentary had already surpassed, in content, all previous documentaries of the same genre. Never had so much clear, irrefutable evidence been presented with such skill and dramatic effect.

'Fuck this is good!' exclaimed Slaughter.

The program paused for an ad with DeRongo promising the audience,

'Hold onto your hats muchachos and muchachas, cause you ain't seen nothin yet. When we come back, the aliens come out to play.'

The excitement in the room was palpable. There was no doubt that this documentary was going to become the definitive watershed in the long history of UFO/ET reportage. Pike suggested,

'Sir, I suspect that the producers of this show intentionally kept it a complete secret, especially from all governments. I don't think that there was any pre-publicity on it whatsoever.'

'This is gonna catch everybody with their balls hanging out, Pike. Nobody's gonna be prepared for this. And now, cause the whole fuckin world has seen it, there's nothin that can be done about it. We've been flimflammed up the ass, Pike, good an proper.'

The program continued. DeRongo stood in front of Jonesy's trike as he delivered his lines. The butte on which the UFOs landed twelve months before was strategically framed over his left shoulder.

'What you have seen so far, ladies and gentlemen, were photographs taken by Tommy Jones during his actual encounter with the two space ships and their occupants. What you are about to see next, though, is something completely out of this world. Now remember that we shot this documentary on 23rd September 2015, twelve months to the day after Tommy Jones's encounter. All the photographic evidence shown so far was taken on 23rd September 2014. The photographs and video you are about to see was shot on that same day. Hold onto your grandma, Biff, cause this'll blow her socks off.'

It began with stills. One of the aliens, dressed in some kind of full body suit that fluoresced like a TV set, launched into the sky and flew up to Tommy Jones who was flying circles above the landed spaceships. The whole amazing event was being presented from the point of view of Tommy Jones' camera. One after another, crisp, clear close-ups of the levitating alien blew the boundaries of known reality into oblivion. Then the video started. It showed the alien, who appeared to be an athletic woman, posing for the camera and altering the patterns in her suit like a chameleon as she flew circles alongside Tommy Jones' trike. Slaughter threw out a comment.

'I said it before and I'll say it again, that is one pretty pair of titties.'

'Sir, we have no idea what kind of technology allows her to fly like that, seemingly completely unaided by any form of locomotion.'

'Well, Pike, if you and your broke-dicks did some work instead of jerkin off in the latrine all day we might know somethin by now.'

'Yes, sir.'

DeRongo mentioned the chameleon effect and they showed some stock footage of a chameleon and an octopus changing body colours and patterns and melting into a variety of backgrounds.

'The chameleon effect may be alien, ladies and gentlemen, but it happens on Earth as well. The apparently unaided levitation, however, doesn't happen here. That technology is only theirs,' he looked directly at the camera and dramatically declared, *'so far.'*

The program broke for another ad break. Slaughter asked,

'Is everything we've seen so far from 2014?'

'I believe so, sir.'

'So they haven't even got to the part where we came in.'

'Not yet, sir, but it can't be far off.'

Pike was right. When the documentary re-commenced, DeRongo was sitting on a chair by the side of Snake's pool. He began his dramatic explanation.

'Ladies and gentlemen, when we planned to do this expose on the alien presence on Earth, it was our intention to do a road trip out to Green River, film the area and feature Tommy Jones's dramatic 23rd September 2014 footage. We wanted to do it on the twelve-month anniversary of that epic day, which was 23rd September 2015. I am sitting here in the house of one of the producers, back in Vegas. It's Sunday 27th September 2015. What you are about to see, folks, will completely blow your minds. We will play our footage through, unedited and without ad breaks. I will make no further comments and will bid you a Jew and only say one final thing. It is the intent of the producers to return to Green River in twelve months time and record a two-year anniversary program of Incident at Green River. Bye folks.'

'Here it comes,' said Pike.

The footage that followed was raw, unedited and highly dramatic. It was all shot out of a helicopter. It showed Cowboy, who was playing Tommy Jones, launching out of a paddock in his trike and flying out across a river. The helicopter took to the air behind him and filmed him flying up the side of a tall butte. As they crested the top of the butte, two landed, silver-disc UFOs came into view. Three alien occupants of the two UFOs could plainly be seen standing outside. Highly excited verbal exchanges between what sounded like the director, the cameraman and the pilot could be heard beneath the roar of the helicopter engine. The trike flew low over the ships and aliens. The aliens did not seem to pay any attention to the trike. Then another trike appeared. It flew low and slow over the three aliens. There was no explanation offered as to who was flying the second trike. The aliens clearly recognised the second pilot and waved to him. The camera zoomed in for some crisp, ultra close-ups. One of the aliens

appeared to hold up eight fingers. As he flew low over them he gave them a thumbs-up. They gave him a thumbs-up in return then waved goodbye and walked back to their ships. The director could be heard telling the pilot to back away slightly because the ships looked like they were going to take off. The camera skilfully followed as the ships rose into the air and sped off in a south-westerly direction at incredible speed. The camera kept rolling into an empty, blue sky as the director asked the cameraman, 'did you get all that?' and the cameraman replied, 'yep, the lot.' It was Ludwig's idea to have the end credits backed by a montage of stills from the show and accompanied by the Carpenter's version of the old Klaatu song, *Calling Occupants Of Interplanetary Craft*.

'Have you got all of that, Pike?' Slaughter asked.

Pike checked his laptop, 'Yes, sir, the lot.'

'OK, here's what we do. Number one, Drek, we want the technology. I don't give a shit how we get it as long as we get it. Got it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'We've never been this close to them before. We don't want to have them slip through our fingers now. Be very careful. We don't want to startle them. Got it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'We want to find out where they live and where they hide their ships. Priority one, Drek, we want one of their ships. Pike ...'

'Yes, sir?'

'When we get back to base I want you to organise a meeting with *The Shadows*. I'll want them to head up a surveillance and infiltration operation of Noosa Heads. We want eyes and ears all over this district without anyone, especially the freaks, noticing.'

'Yes, sir.'

The Shadows were the most elite covert corps in the Service.

'I'm gonna git them smartass bitches with their perky little titties, an I'm gonna rip off their toys. Git me another beer, Pike, an let's play that fucking show over again.'

'Yes, sir.'

Unbeknownst to the three men, two dark figures levitated just outside their open veranda door. They had been there for nearly an hour and a half and they heard everything that was said inside the room. They noticed that their *location beacon*, whose name they now knew was Drek, was not active in the mind plane. They assumed that he used a drug to sensitise himself.

‘They’re spooks from America,’ thought one to the other.

‘Yeah, we’ll have to be careful,’ came the reply.

As the three men settled down to watch the documentary over again, the two dark figures silently flew away and dissolved into the blackness of the night.

5

The documentary, *Incident at Green River*, rampaged around the world like a cultural tidal wave. Due to unprecedented demand it was re-played on most channels, this time in prime-time, within two weeks of the first showing. The show received world record ratings earning the networks obscene amounts of advertising revenue. Snake, being a self-confessed, ‘cunning sunabitch hustler since my cradle days,’ made sure that he and his small band of ‘compadres’ got their ‘fair slice of the pie’. The first thing Jonesy knew about it was when ‘one million bucks’ appeared in his bank account. Although he wasn’t obligated to do so, Snake paid \$100,000 bonuses to Ludwig, Cowboy and DeRongo, and secured them for the follow-up documentary. He told Jonesy that this was just a part payment and that there would be ‘plenty more to come’. Snake split the money with Jonesy 50/50, just like he said he would. Interestingly, all of Snake’s agreements with his ‘crew’ were based on trust and a handshake. Snake wasn’t so ingenuous when dealing with the ‘bloodsuckers from the networks’ though. The deal he negotiated with them included a generous percentage of gross takings, without time limitations. He made sure that the money would keep rolling in for many years to come.

Jonesy gave all the money, except \$50,000, to Lori. Although he still didn’t feel ready to settle down into any kind of ‘domestic situation’, he tried to visit his family at least once every month. Lori bought a nice house, with a pool, close to her parents’ house. She also bought a new car and enrolled the kids into a private school. As well, she was beginning to soften up on Jonesy to a fair degree. The

most recent time he came to visit, he was allowed to, for the first time in a long time, sleep in the same bed with her.

6

In the following few months, Snake had a series of meetings with some key people from the networks. They decided that they would essentially replay a re-edited version of the previous year's documentary. Snake convinced them into signing a three-year, three program contract. The idea was that they would take a trip out to Green River every year and do 'an anniversary shoot' on the 23rd of September. They would edit that into the previous year's show and release the updated version worldwide. Although they jokingly tossed around the idea, none of them seriously believed that they would ever see another UFO again.

.....

Chapter Fifty-One

IAPETUS

1

'Maybe you're just fucking with us, pal.'

'Why would I do that? You have my ship and I have no idea where I am.'

He looked around. They were in a dimly lit, grey cube with no visible doors or windows. They sat on grey metal chairs on opposite sides of a grey metal desk. On the desk was a small spotlight, which shone directly into his face.

'You brought me here with a hood over my head and I am completely disorientated.'

'OK, so you say your name's Pete and that you're from a planet called Rama, from the Andromeda Galaxy.'

'That's right.'

'And you reckon that you came here to surf?'

'Yeah. Why is that so hard for you to believe?'

'And you don't have any other names?'

'No. Pete is as close as you can get to my formal name, which is Iapetus. Just call me Pete. Look, I don't want any trouble.'

His breathing was slow and relaxed and there was a look of total calm in his hypnotic, iridescent-blue eyes. He was tall, about 6'4", tanned and extremely fit. He wore an old Dewey Webber T-shirt, a ratty pair of faded-blue Okanui Baggies and a pair of fairly worn Huarache sandals. His sun-bleached-blond hair was long and untidy, and he sported a closely cropped beard. He was extremely handsome and spoke with a manly voice. His overall demeanour was that of a man who was in total control, which made his inquisitors palpably nervous. Pike and Slaughter wore black suits and ties, black leather shoes, white shirts, wraparound sunglasses and black, narrow-brimmed hats. Pike continued the questioning.

'If you came here to surf, why did we capture you on top of a butte in the middle of the desert? And don't tell us you were lost.'

'I wasn't lost. I wanted to be there. I wanted to see the place with my own eyes.'

'Why?'

'Because it is historic.'

'Historic?' replied Slaughter angrily. 'What is so fucking historic about a dump like Green River?'

'Well, there have been many visitations to that place over the last eight years. I know you are aware of that.'

'How do you know that, smartass?' retorted Slaughter.

'We get your TV. I've seen the documentaries, just like everyone else on this planet.'

'Bullshit, pal. How could you get our TV?'

'Different people bring it over when they come back from here. It's stored in sort of like digital form and brought over with other stuff.'

'Other stuff? Like what?'

'Well, we are particularly fond of your coffee. We have all your music and all your literature. Our archives of your artistic and intellectual endeavours are more comprehensive than yours. We also have all your movies, every single last one. Have you seen *The Blues Brothers*? They had similar taste in clothes to you guys.'

Slaughter rose to his feet and approached Iapetus angrily, ready to hit him. Pike stopped him by gently covering his fist with his hand. He calmly said,

'Sir, we *do* grow some good coffee on this planet.'

Slaughter pulled back and dropped his arm to his side. He then ripped his sunglasses off his face and glared at the alien who remained totally tranquil.

'Fuck you, Pete, or whatever your name is. Do not fuck with us, son, or we will fuck with you. We are trying to be nice here, so just don't fuck with us, OK?'

'I promise you this,' replied Iapetus, 'no lie shall ever pass my lips. In truth I am free and in truth I shall be.'

Slaughter and Pike looked at each other. Although they were extensively trained in every type of interrogation technique, they both felt out of their depth with this character. They turned their backs to him and Slaughter whispered a name to Pike.

'Brent Dawes?'

Pike nodded his head.

Three days earlier, on 23rd September 2022, there was mayhem in Green River. The normally placid town of some 12,500-odd locals was completely swamped by over 300,000 visitors. There were hippies, trekkies, conspiracy freaks, abductees, contactees, psychics, psychos, ascenders, descenders, new agers, Jesus freaks, hare Krishnas, prophets, seers, junkies, dope-heads, speed freaks, dealers, pushers, thieves, scammers, movie stars, rock stars, millionaires, billionaires, the army, the navy, the air force, the CIA, the FBI, the NSA, and hidden in the desert to the east of Green River, amongst the mesas, was the NWCS.

They came by chopper, plane, train, in their cars and RVs, some hitched and some walked like they were on a religious pilgrimage to Mecca. Every street and road was clogged with parked cars and camper vans. The Lincoln Highway was blocked for fifteen miles in both directions, as was Uinta Drive, which headed out of town in a south-westerly direction and was the only road that linked the town to the local airstrip. The town's folk humorously named the tiny strip of dirt *The Greater Green River Intergalactic Spaceport*. No one ever imagined how prophetic that would become.

The Sherriff did his best to keep the road to the Intergalactic Spaceport open as that was the only way that additional food supplies could be flown into town from Salt Lake City. That was also where a small military contingent set up their base.

The town was crawling with media, a whole army of it, from all over the world. The big US networks got there a week early in their huge trucks and set themselves up in and around Stratton Myers Park, which was located on the south-eastern edge of town at the end of Bridger Drive.

Stratton Myers Park was a 17-acre community park and a popular recreational area for the locals. It had a large open space, baseball fields, soccer fields, an amphitheatre for summer events, picnic areas and grills, designated parking areas, restrooms, garbage receptacles and access to the river. The most significant thing about Stratton Myers Park was that it was located directly opposite and just over the river from the butte on which the UFOs landed every year.

2022 was going to mark Snake's eighth revision of *Incident at Green River*. Seven times before, the aliens returned like clockwork just after 2.00pm on the 23rd of September. Seven times before, Snake and his faithful crew were there waiting for them. Seven times before, they 'got the shots' and updated the documentary. The subsequent global sales of the show raked in more money than any of them could ever have imagined. One of Snake's favourite comedy routines was lighting one of his huge cigars with a hundred dollar bill.

As a consequence of his obscene newfound wealth, Snake formed his own production company, which he called *Hisss Productions*. He bought a small, desert ranch just outside of Las Vegas. On it he built his dream house and studio, and a huge hangar for his new helicopter. These days he and his crew flew to all their assignments in his customised *Bell 525 Relentless*, which was set up as a state-of-the-art flying studio. The exterior of the sleek chopper was painted up to look like snakeskin.

Trixie, Snake's voluptuous private secretary for the last five years, had organised a permanent, annual rental of a house in Colorado Circuit, which was located just across the Stratton Meyer Boat Ramp Road and which backed onto empty land on the western side of the river. Snake got the local Mayor to OK the landing of the chopper behind the house by buying a new fire truck for the Green River Fire Department and making a generous annual donation to the Sweetwater County Museum.

They flew in and settled into the house three days early, on *Tuesday 20th September 2022*. They all got together at Snake's ranch and flew to Green River from there. There was Ludwig, Cowboy, DeRongo, Melvin the cameraman, Ace the pilot, Trixie and Snake. Jonesy rolled into Green River a week before Snake arrived and parked his RV in the driveway of the house. These days he didn't mind sharing his trike with Cowboy, seeing as they had become pretty good friends over the years, and anyway, Jonesy could afford to buy a new trike every day of the week if he wanted to. He parked the trike in the back of the house where there was enough space to launch from.

In the evenings they liked to hang around the barbecue in the back of the house. Snake either wore his *Snake's Steaks* or *Fangs For The Memories* barbecue

aprons and rotated between having a suck of his beer bottle, a drag of his Cuban or flipping a burger. Trixie made the salads and buttered the buns while Ludwig was in charge of the beers. Jonesy brought a big bag of 'maryjahooney' for himself and anyone else that felt so inclined. Cowboy had the best collection of music so they spent most of the time listening to that through his Bose iPod player.

On Wednesday night, Jonesy sat down next to Snake and reminded him,

'You remember that message the alien lady gave me, Snake?'

'You mean the one you wouldn't let me use in the show?'

'Yeah, that's the one. Well, I don't know if you remember, but I won't be comin here next year cause I'll have to be someplace else.'

Snake looked into Jonesy's eyes.

'I understand, Jonesy. Don't think nothin of it. You got to follow your instincts. It won't make no difference to our deal, friend. It's always been 50/50 an it's always gonna be 50/50. Anyhow, Cowboy will be there to cover for you, just like always.'

'Thanks, Snake.'

'She told you to be someplace on that day, didn't she?'

'Yeah, me and the fam. Pike's Peak, out the back of San Fran.'

'Up in the Sierra Nevadas?'

'That's right. I've scouted it all out and I've got it all planned out. Lori and the kids are all in on it. I'll be here the year after, though, Snake.'

Snake looked up into the starry night sky and toked on his stogie.

'And we'll be glad to have you back, son.'

4

At the earliest sign of dawn, on *Friday 23rd September*, 300,000 people began to converge towards Stratton Myers Park. The local police and community groups attempted to prepare the area for the crowd by trucking in hundreds of portable toilets and thousands of gallons of drinking water. Many of the local merchants set up food and drink stalls around the perimeter of the Park. The three local *Churches Of Jesus Christ Of Latter Day Saints* also provided a band, named *Rapture*, to play in the amphitheatre.

There were prophets of doom and prophets of salvation everywhere. Some were saying that the ETs were devils while others were saying they were angels come to save us. There was a guy selling T-shirts that said *Take Me* and *Welcome To Earth* and another guy who was selling ones that said *Invaders Go Home*. Snake summarised it well.

'It's like a friggin wacko convention. Every nut-job in the country is here.'

The mass of humanity had all been made aware of the alien visitations by Snake's documentaries. They all knew the whole story and they all knew Dirk DeRongo and Clint Rodgers, who were both national celebrities by now. They had heard of Tommy Jones, but their memory of him had faded away years before. He and Snake had always intentionally stayed out of the limelight. Neither of them ever gave an interview.

Every year it became more difficult to film the documentary because of the increasing crowd. The previous year they even had to compete for airspace with the media helicopters. Snake stayed positive about the project, but he was beginning to sense that the good days were coming to an end, fast. He was hoping that this year they would be able to get close enough to get some decent shots, but he knew that it was far from 'a done deal'. There were just too many media, police and military helicopters around town to be sure of anything. He even got a peculiar premonition that this year could be their last visit there.

5

Everyone in the house was up early. Ludwig began organising the day while DeRongo practised his lines. After having their morning coffee, Ludwig and Melvin went walkabout with a camera and shot plenty of footage of the gathering masses. Ludwig was seeing a whole new dimension opening up in his documentary. He was now not just documenting an alien visitation, he was also documenting the human reaction to that visitation, and that reaction, Ludwig observed, was profoundly disturbing. However it was, though, he was determined to capture it on video.

By mid-morning, Ludwig directed DeRongo through some narration shots, Cowboy and Jonesy fuelled up the trike and Ace did a walk-around pre-flight of the Bell 525. Snake noticed how a small contingent of military had set up on the other side of the river. He observed,

'I don't think those sons of bitches are there for their own amusement, Jonesy.'

'It don't appear that way, Snake.'

'I wonder if they got intentions of gettin in our way?'

'Can't see why they should. You got it all sewn up with the Mayor, ain't ya?'

'Sure, but I don't know if he's got any pull with the military.'

'I reckon we just do our thing an see what happens.'

'I reckon so too, Jonesy, but I gotta be honest with ya, I woke up with a decidedly negative feelin this morning.'

'That ain't like you, Snake.'

'This could be our last year here, Jonesy. Too many people getting into the act.'

'Yeah, it's a damn shame.'

'Yeah,' sighed Snake as he removed his Stetson and wiped his brow with the back of his sleeve. 'We were startin to feel like real family.'

Jonesy's eyebrows suddenly shot skyward.

'Snake ...'

'Yeah?'

'You remember what the alien said to me all those years ago?'

'Not word for word.'

'It was about bein at Pike's Peak on 23rd September 2023, that's next year Snake, and bein bound to *my family*. Well you are my family as well, Snake, so maybe you should all be there next year as well. The alien told me, Snake.'

'Shit, Jonesy, let me think about that for a while. Let's get this job out of the way first and talk about it when we get back to the ranch.'

'Sure, Snake, sure.'

6

By 2.00pm everyone was poised and ready. Ace had the Bell 525 fired up and ready to go. Melvin stood outside the helicopter with the camera on his shoulder. Snake and Ludwig scanned the sky with their binoculars looking for the expected UFOs. Cowboy sat in the trike ready to launch. DeRongo shuffled around nervously, standing next to Melvin and adjusting his headgear, while Jonesy sat in his chair under a beach umbrella and sucked on a Bud.

They didn't have to wait very long. Suddenly someone in the huge crowd screamed out at the top of his voice, 'There's one of em!' He pointed into the sky in a northerly direction. Everyone looked that way. In one second, 300,000 fingers rose above the sea of heads and pointed in the direction of a small, polished-silver, almond-shaped disc silently descending from the north and heading directly towards them. Some people were struck mute, some laughed and many cried, while others, mainly the women, began screaming.

Ludwig and his crew were all wired up with communication headgear. He calmly directed his crew,

'Start shooting, Melvin, and you start talking, Dirk.'

Melvin began capturing dramatic footage as DeRongo kicked off a running, high-octane commentary of the spectacular event.

The UFO flew slowly and glided in over the gridlocked freeway. It kept descending as it crossed Flaming Gorge Way, in downtown Green River, then the railway line and finally the river. There were oohs and ahhs and gasps as the UFO silently passed no more than 100 feet above the heads of the crowd gathered in Stratton Meyer Park.

Ludwig calmly directed Ace and Cowboy,

'Hold it, hold it, boys, let's not jump the gun. Keep shooting, Mel, let's see what they do first.'

Everyone was wound up like a spring.

The beautiful spaceship glided right over their heads then turned east and flew low over the river again, low over the army contingent on the other side, then up the west side of the butte upon which the UFOs landed every year.

'OK, into the chopper, boys,' said Ludwig. 'Take off, Cowboy, and give us a good show, eh.'

Ludwig, DeRongo and Melvin jumped into the chopper. Melvin kept recording through the open side-door and DeRongo kept documenting as the sleek and powerful Bell 525 launched in a cloud of rotor dust. Cowboy switched on his helmet-cam and fired up the trike motor. As soon as the chopper was clear, he roared out of the clearing and pitched up into a steep climb-out.

By now, the crowd in the Park was going completely nuts. The saucer rose to the top of the butte and settled into a hover about a foot above the ground,

right on the edge where everyone below could see it. A panel opened underneath and a man stepped out. He looked like a normal person dressed like a surfer.

The media were caught slightly off guard, but they quickly organised themselves and took to the air in their own helicopters.

Ace was first on the scene. He rose above the top of the butte and settled into a hover about 300 feet out and level with the landed UFO. Cowboy flew into the scene next, right in front of the alien standing on the edge of the butte, visible to everyone down below. Melvin's camera rolled while DeRongo delivered a riveting commentary.

'This is incredible, ladies and gentlemen, this is the first time in eight years that we actually get a good look at the alien ... and he's human! He looks like, dare I say it folks, a beach bum.'

As the media helicopters appeared on the scene, Ace cleverly manoeuvred the Bell 525 in such a way as to keep them away from the prime shooting position, right in front of the butte. They didn't call him Ace for nothing.

Cowboy began doing lazy 360s just above the alien's head. He waved to the alien and the alien waved back. Melvin ground out the hi-def footage while DeRongo barely managed to get a breath in between the words, when suddenly, faster than suddenly, an all-black, completely unmarked helicopter dropped out of the sky like a stone and parked itself between the Bell 525 and the alien spaceship. Ace screamed out excitedly,

'Whoah! Where did that thing come from?'

'What the hell, Ace?' exclaimed Ludwig.

Suddenly they noticed the side doors of the black menace open and two men dressed in all black, including balaclavas, point machine guns at Ace and his crew. One of the men gestured with his finger that he wanted them to fly away.

'Shit, Ludwig, they got guns pointed at us!' exclaimed Ace at the top of his voice. 'I think they want us to clear out.'

'Fuck that,' responded Ludwig. 'Hold station, Ace, keep recording, Mel, and you keep talking, Dirk!'

DeRongo's mouth was going off like a gattling gun.

When it was clear that the Bell 525 wasn't moving, two bullets pinged off the Lexan windscreen right in front of Ace's face.

'Jesus H, Ludwig, they're shootin real bullets at us. I'm gettin outa here.'

'OK, Ace, back up a quarter mile.'

As they backed away from the butte, two more matt black helicopters flew into the scene and proceeded to chase away the media helicopters. Cowboy, who saw the whole drama unfold above him, banked west, flew over the edge of the butte, pulled up into an extreme stall then pitched forward into a near vertical dive down the front of the west face of the butte. He dove out of the sky under full throttle and didn't pull out until he nearly hit the deck at the base of the hill. He raced across the river and landed back in the clearing behind the house. He jumped out of the trike, stumbled over to Jonesy and yelled,

'Jonesy, I need ya to roll me one of them doobies right now, buddy, before I crap my pants.'

Jonesy put his beer down and retrieved a small, red, antique, Buckhorn Tobacco tin from a shoulder bag that hung off the back of his chair. As he rolled the joint, he commented,

'Man, that was some of the best trike flyin I've ever seen, Cowboy.'

Snake hurried over and asked,

'What the hell's goin on up there, Cowboy?'

'Some kind of black ops gettin in the act, Snake. They're forcin everyone out of the sky.'

'I hope Ludwig's gettin it all,' replied Snake.

The three black helicopters established a perimeter keeping everyone else out. DeRongo described the dramatic events as they unfolded.

'These guys mean business, folks, they shot at us using real bullets.'

The 300,000 witnesses in the Park stood as one in a stunned silence.

When the airspace around the UFO was cleared, two more black helicopters came flying low out of the east, from between two mesas. There was a smaller one and a much larger one. The smaller one came to a hover about 50 feet above the alien and three men dressed in all black slid down ropes and surrounded him. The alien didn't appear to try to escape. A cable with a harness attached to the end of it was lowered and the three black men secured it to the alien's body. Within sixty seconds, the alien was winched up into the helicopter and flown away.

Many people in the crowd screamed, many cried and some yelled out, 'They've got the alien. They're taking him away. Noooooo ...'

As soon as the smaller helicopter flew away with the alien, the larger one moved in and came to a hover about 100 feet above the space ship. It lowered what looked like a suitcase-sized package to about ten feet above the silver disc. When the package was in position it exploded and changed into a large, circular net, the sides of which ended up hanging down past the edge of the disc. The three black men still on the ground secured the bottom of the net around the space ship and stood back. The big helicopter lifted into the sky carrying its intergalactic cargo beneath it. The last time anyone saw the UFO was when it disappeared behind a mesa as it was being flown away to the east hanging under the huge, black helicopter.

One of the three remaining black helicopters flew down, landed on top of the butte and picked up the three black men. It then re-launched into the sky and was immediately joined by the other two. They all flew away, at rapid speed, in the same direction as the first two helicopters, and disappeared.

7

'What do you think the most attractive thing about life is, Dawes?'

'Do you mean human life, or life in general, alien?'

'I mean human life.'

'That's easy. A good whore.'

'Why is it that you don't surprise me, Dawes?'

'Life's too short for bullshit, that's why.'

'What about love?'

'Love is a myth.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, big time. So *you* think it's love?'

'Not exactly. Actually, I think the best thing about life is death.'

'Wow, I didn't expect you to say *that*. Why?'

'Because it is the thing that makes life so exciting.'

'How so?'

'You like your job, don't you, Dawes?'

'Yeah.'

'Could it be the occasional brush with death that is the drug?'

'It's possible.'

'Like the sweetest meat is closest to the bone, the sweetest life is closest to death?'

'I get your point.'

'Not completely, but you will soon enough.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Why don't you ask me some more questions? I think your superiors, who are spying on us, are becoming impatient.'

'OK, so you say you came from Andromeda. We find that very hard to believe seeing as it is two million light years away.'

'I sailed here on gravity at the speed of light squared.'

'Er, OK, whatever that means.'

'It means no engine and no fuel, Dawes.'

'Yeah, OK, right.'

'I know that you have been chasing our technology for decades, and that you've been harassing some friends of mine back in Australia for years, but let me assure you that even if I wanted to give you our technology, which I don't, it would be like giving a computer to a monkey.'

A wave of anger flushed through Dawes. He raged at the alien, who was tightly bound to a chair with his hands cuffed behind his back, stepped up to him, made a fist and swung at his face. Before his fist could make contact with the alien's cheekbone, he collapsed unconscious on the floor in front of him.

A door burst open into the featureless room. Pike and Slaughter bounded in followed by two armed guards. Slaughter angrily asked,

'What the fuck happened to Dawes?'

'We were having a nice chat and in the middle of it he decided to have a nap.'

Slaughter glared at the alien then ordered the guards to,

'Pick him up!'

Dawes was beginning to wake up as the two burly guards picked him up off the floor and sat him on a chair. Pike asked him,

'Are you all right, Dawes?'

'Bl mlabl glubl muglablu ...'

'What did he say?' asked Slaughter.

'Do you want to repeat that, Dawes,' said Pike.

'Glabl bundlab gbadglabl.'

One of the guards noticed,

'Look sir, he has urinated in his trousers.'

This was followed by Slaughter exclaiming,

'What is that fucking bad smell? Has he shat himself as well?'

Pike checked.

'Er, yes sir, big time. He's a mess down there.'

'Oh Christ,' exclaimed Slaughter, 'get him out of here and take him to the ER ... and check his pill box while you're at it.'

The guards dragged Dawes out of the room. He kept blabbering like a baby. Unbeknownst to all but Iapetus, his brain had been completely short-circuited by telepathic means. Essentially, all his memory was erased in an instant and he became like a newborn babe. To live independently again, he would have to re-learn everything from scratch. Iapetus was tempted to say, 'he'll be wanting his mommy,' but he held his tongue and just sat there like he didn't have the faintest idea about anything that was going on. For a moment, there was just Slaughter and the alien in the room.

'You smartass freak, I don't know what you've done to Dawes, but be sure of one thing, your ass is mine now, and you *will* talk ... and then you *will* die. How soon that happens totally depends on you and on what you tell me.'

'Death is certain for us all.'

'That may well be, but rest assured that we specialise in the most creative methods. I urge you to be as co-operative as possible because you do not want to get me angry. Dawes was the good cop, freak. We also have a man, called Ivanovich, who's the bad cop and he has a whole suitcase full of, er, *instruments*, designed to help you sing like a canary.'

Pike returned into the room.

'Sir, I checked Dawes' pill box and his medication is up to date.'

'Hmm, so it wasn't that. I keep thinking that the freak here had something to do with it.'

Iapetus looked at the two men,

'I am bound and handcuffed, how could I do anything?'

'Shut the fuck up, freak!'

'I thought you wanted me to sing like a canary.'

'You smartass piece of shit, we have your ship and you are stranded here. You *will* tell us how your ship flies, one way or another.'

'I never said I wouldn't.' There was a pause. After a few moments, Iapetus looked directly into Pike and Slaughter's eyes and said, 'You have been harassing my friends in Australia for many years. That is part of the reason why I'm here. Do you mind telling me; how are all your spy goons going anyway?'

Pike placed his arm in front of Slaughter to temper his anger and replied,

'I suspect that you are fully aware that they are all dead. They have all been involved in fatal accidents of various kinds. Three of them wrapped their cars around telegraph poles, two of them fell from their hotel balconies, one drowned in a pool, one got hit by a bus, one got mugged by a bunch of thugs, one got bitten by a poisonous spider and one of them, our special agent, Drek, choked to death on a French fry.'

'What an unfortunate set of circumstances,' replied Iapetus.

'Let me kill him, Pike,' Slaughter insisted.

'Sir, he has indicated that he is willing to co-operate and explain his technology.'

'Sure I am, why not?' said Iapetus. 'But you have to take me to my ship for that, although let me assure you, like I tried to explain to Dawes, it won't do you any good.'

'You let us be the judge of that, freak,' snarled Slaughter.

Slaughter and Pike stepped outside the room for a few minutes.

'So what do you think, Pike?'

'Well, sir, it's hard to know what he is capable of. We have his ship in a hangar at *the power station*. Apparently it's just floating there and no one can find a way into it. It has no seams or joins and is seemingly impervious to drills and torches. Bullets just hit it and fall to the floor. If we raise it or lower it, it just stays at whatever altitude we set it at. I think that we are going to need the alien's help to get into it.'

The power station was a barbed-wire-enclosed area in the middle of a ploughed field, located about five miles south of Denver International Airport. It mainly consisted of a series of transformers, poles and wires, which tapped power out of the national grid and channelled it one mile underground into the NWCS subterranean base. Standing un-conspicuously within the enclosure was a medium-sized, featureless outbuilding, which looked not unlike a typical barn of the area. There was an underground tunnel linking the building with the base. Hidden inside the building was the alien spaceship.

'I was hoping we would never have to take him back to the surface,' said Slaughter.

'Sir, the reason the ship is being kept above ground is because we were unable to move it below ground level. When we tried to lower it into our underground facility, it, er, locked itself into position and wouldn't budge any further. We could move it sideways and upwards, but we couldn't move it downwards past ground level.'

Slaughter shook his head and said,

'That is such fucking impressive technology. We better be careful with the freak, Pike, because I trust the bastard less than my ex-mother-in-law. I want top security when we transport him to his ship.'

'Yes, sir.'

8

The shiny, silver saucer levitated silently about two feet above the polished cement floor. It was quite compact, measuring only about thirty feet across. Three strong hold-down straps ran across the top of it and were bolted to the floor in six places. It was lit by a dozen spotlights, which were supported on tripods set up around the perimeter of the interior of the building. Along the back wall, opposite the large, wooden, double sliding doors, was a long workbench with shelves above and below it. There were a variety of tools and instruments scattered on them. There were three gas bottles, which were connected to torches by long rubber hoses, standing near the saucer. There was also a wheeled cart there, containing a variety of drills and drill bits. Above the workbench and running almost the whole length of the back wall were two rows of fluorescent lights. In the rear left-hand corner of the building was a box-like

structure with a metal door in it that opened into a lift well. The walls were painted matt white, as was the ceiling, and there were no windows. The only air coming into the building was that which was supplied by a centralised air conditioning system through the lift well.

There were six technicians, dressed in white overalls, standing around the ship. They were either, scratching their heads, holding their hands on their hips or just staring at the impenetrable alien hull. Suddenly they all turned as they heard the lift doors open. They observed five men exit the lift. They recognised two of them, General Slaughter and Corporal Pike, who walked behind a handcuffed, longhaired, surfer dude and two armed guards. All the technicians froze to attention, clicked their heels and gave Slaughter the Nazi salute. They noticed a smirk appear on the surfer dude's face.

'Well here we are, freak,' said Slaughter.

'She's a beautiful ship, wouldn't you agree, er, what do I call you?'

'Slaughter will do.'

'Have your grease monkeys taken measurements of the hull yet, Slaughter?'

Slaughter turned to Pike, who in turn walked over to the head technician and spoke to him for a minute. He came back and said,

'No, sir. All they have tried to do so far is penetrate the hull.'

'That is like the local butcher attempting to perform brain surgery,' commented Iapetus. 'You boys ought to be able to demonstrate that you have the intelligence to receive our technology.'

Slaughter glared at the alien, his anger again coming to a boil.

'You fucking smartass prick, you are really asking for it.'

He waved a finger causing the two, armed guards to un-holster their side arms and bring them up to Iapetus' head. Slaughter smirked and said,

'Go ahead, prick, say something smart *now* ... and *make my day*.'

'I saw that movie, Slaughter. Clint Eastwood, Sudden Impact, 1983, writer was Charles B. Pierce. You are a plagiarist.'

'Fucking hell!' growled Slaughter.

He pulled his own gun out of its holster, placed it against the alien's temple and cocked the trigger. Seeing this, the two guards cocked the triggers of their own guns as well.

'Get ready to meet your ancestors, freak.'

Pike couldn't believe what was happening. He attempted to temper the General.

'Sir, he might be more valuable to us alive.'

'Shut your face, Pike. I want to see this prick's brains all over the fucking floor.'

Iapetus looked directly into Slaughter's eyes. The look made Slaughter want to look away, but he couldn't. Suddenly, to everyone's disbelief, the two guards took their guns from Iapetus' head and pointed them at each other's foreheads. Then Slaughter took his gun away from Iapetus' temple and stuck it in his own mouth.

'Go ahead, Slaughter, give the order,' said Iapetus calmly.

No one had ever seen so much fear in Slaughter's eyes before. The wimpy technicians all stood back and cringed. Pike was the only one in the room who maintained any semblance of rationality. He pleaded with everyone,

'Why don't we all just get along, eh?'

Slaughter stood there shaking in terror as he held his finger on the cocked trigger of his HK 45, which was stuck deeply into his wide-open mouth. Iapetus turned to Pike and looked at him. Pike walked over to one of the guards and unclipped a set of handcuff keys from his belt. He walked over to Iapetus and unlocked his handcuffs from behind his back and dropped them to the floor.

'Thank you, Pike, you are a gentleman.'

Pike's whole body shuddered as he urinated in his trousers. Iapetus looked around the large room and said,

'Have you nasty bunch of cretins ever heard about what happened to all the rabbits in Australia?'

Pike was the only one who could speak. He answered,

'No.'

'What about you, Slaughter?'

Slaughter shook his head sideways with his eyes bulging and his gun still stuck in his mouth.

'Have you heard of myxomatosis?'

They both shook their heads sideways. The two guards, who still had the guns pointed at each other's heads, urinated in their trousers as well and began to cry.

'Well, let me illuminate you. Myxomatosis is a disease that affects rabbits and is caused by the Myxoma virus. At first, the disease appears as visible lumps, called myxomata, and as puffiness around the head and genitals. It then usually progresses to conjunctivitis and blindness. This is associated with general listlessness, loss of appetite and fever. Secondary bacterial infections occur in most cases, which cause pneumonia and purulent inflammation of the lungs. This is followed by a rapid and merciful death.'

'Why are you telling us this?' whimpered Pike.

'Hear me out. A rabbit with myxomatosis is extremely infectious. As a consequence of a controlled release of the Myxoma virus into the rabbit plagued outback of Australia, back in 1950, 90 percent of the rabbits died.'

One of the technicians tried to move towards the workbench. He immediately fell to the floor, asleep.

'Now, where was I, Pike?'

'You were telling us about the dead rabbits.'

'Oh yes, that's right, thank you. Well, us freaks, Slaughter ...' Iapetus looked at Slaughter who still had his gun in his mouth and a look of total terror on his face, 'we have some pretty good virologists and they've managed to take that Myxoma virus and perform some proper magic with it. I understand that you all take a pill every day. I believe you call the drug *Joy*. I understand that if you stop taking the drug, you die. It wasn't very smart of you sending your agents into Noosa, each carrying his month's supply of *Joy* with him. We got our hands on it and quickly worked out what it was for. *Joy* is how you are all controlled. Am I getting warm, Pike?'

'I can't speak about classified information.'

'Good for you, Pike. To cut a long story short, we've re-engineered the Myxoma virus to act only on humans that take *Joy*. People who come in contact with the virus, but do not take *Joy*, become carriers who will never develop any kind of symptoms. They continue to spread the virus however. We also made the virus, which we have named *Pestilence*, one hundred times more virulent. I am a

carrier, in fact I am the first carrier, but I am immune. Every time I breathe out, I breathe out thousands of viruses. These have spread through your air-conditioning system and throughout your subterranean base and infected you all. You are now infecting each other. If you stop taking Joy, you will die. If you keep taking Joy, you will die as well. The time between infection and death is seventy two hours.'

'Can't you reconsider?' asked Pike.

'Did you know, Pike, that the people you work for are rotten to the core?'

'No.'

'And guess what ...'

'What?' whimpered Pike.

'They've gotten themselves hooked on Joy as well, how about that?'

Pike couldn't think of anything else to say. Iapetus continued,

'You will all be too sick to function within twelve hours and you will all be dead in three days.' He turned to Slaughter who still had the gun stuck in his mouth. 'Now Slaughter, you should know that all our technology is completely useless to you because you are not telepathic. All our machines are mind controlled. They are way out of your league.'

Iapetus looked at his ship. Suddenly a panel opened beneath it and became a ramp. He invited Pike to look inside. Pike was completely terrified.

'Relax, Pike, I just want you to see that there are no controls in there, see? And there is not much stuff because we don't spend much time in our ships, because they fly so fast. When I fly, the ship is like an extension of my body and I control it like you control your limbs, without thinking. Get it?'

Pike nodded his head.

'That's my surfboard over there. Surfing is what I do most of the time.'

Iapetus walked towards Slaughter and Pike followed him.

'There are thirty-three underground bases, like the one here in Denver, scattered around the globe. They are all either directly or indirectly connected. They will all be infected and everyone that ever took Joy on this planet will die. Now, come and undo these hold-down straps for me, Pike.'

Pike cried as he walked around the ship and unshackled the straps from the bolts that were embedded in the concrete.

'Please slide the straps off my ship, Pike.'

Pike did as he was asked.

'Please take the gun out of Slaughter's mouth, Pike.'

Pike visibly shook as he walked over to Slaughter and took the HK 45 out of his mouth and then out of his hand.

'Now go over to the lift there and empty the gun into the control panel.'

Pike walked over to the open lift and buried ten rounds into the control panel, causing sparks to fly, the control panel to short out and the lift to become inoperable.

'Now drop the gun and come and open these doors.'

Pike walked over to the side of the large, wooden, sliding doors. There was a small control panel there, located half way up the wall, with two buttons on it, a red one and a green one. Pike pressed the green one. The doors slid open. Bright sunlight filled the interior of the building. Without saying another word, Iapetus walked up the ramp into his ship, the panel closed, the ship floated out through the open doors and disappeared.

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Chapter Fifty-Two

MYXO

1

Friday 30th September 2022 was a typically busy day at the Denver International Airport. Jeppesen Terminal buzzed with a hive of activity. The numerals on all the clocks had just flipped to 10.13am as loud screams pierced the background din. A circle of space formed around a man who had just crawled out of one of the unisex restrooms and was struggling there on his hands and knees, clearly having a great difficulty in breathing. A number of women in the crowd continued to scream in horror as they witnessed the man, who was covered in suppurating sores, completely blinded by conjunctivitis and coughing up phlegm and blood with every breath, die a slow, painful death.

2

The blue Pantera rumbled through the Sydney Harbour Tunnel and up the Pacific Highway through North Sydney on its way to Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. It was *Wednesday 21st December 2022*. Alex and Sophia were on a day outing visiting Lloyd and Eva, who were in the middle of a ten day cruise to the Hawkesbury. Their sloop, Mecca, was anchored just outside the moorings in the secluded waters of Bobbin Head.

Alex drove slowly as he negotiated the tortuous twists and turns of Bobbin Head Road. As it was the middle of the week, they easily found a good parking spot. Sophia called Eva on her mobile and informed her of their arrival. Ten minutes later, the tiny dinghy putted up to the jetty. Lloyd and Eva came ashore and greeted their guests. After hugging and shaking hands, Eva said,

‘I have to go to the shop for a minute. I need some fresh bread, milk and ...’

‘Do you mind getting a paper while you’re at it, darling?’ Lloyd requested.

‘Certainly, sweetheart.’ Eva replied.

‘I’ll come with you,’ said Sophia.

The girls wandered off to the store while Lloyd and Alex stayed on the jetty.

‘How has the sailing been, Lloyd?’

‘It’s been perfect, Alex. We sailed up the coast in a nice southerly and we’ve been hanging around the Hawkesbury enjoying the afternoon north-easters for

days now. We tend to sail for a few hours and then tie up at the Newport Arms and sit the rest of the day out there drinking beer.'

'Cogitating about what the rest of the world is up to, I presume.'

'Er, not exactly.'

A few minutes later, the girls returned. They appeared somewhat animated as they approached. Noticing this, Lloyd asked,

'What's the drama?'

'Look at the paper,' said Eva handing the paper to Lloyd.

He read the headlines, which were written in bold print, and exclaimed surprised,

'Pope Petrus Romanus is *dead!* Holy cow! And look what it says underneath ... it says that they don't know where the next Pope will come from because all the cardinals are dead as well.' Lloyd turned the page. 'It says that the whole Vatican City is in total lockdown because of a suspected viral epidemic. It appears that everyone in the place is dead. God. Oh, look down here; some elements of the Carabinieri have expressed suspicion that it may have been the work of Mossad, the secret Israeli intelligence agency. Israel has unequivocally denied the charges. And look down here ... it says that the King of England and his brother have both been rushed to hospital. A Buckingham palace media release stated that they were both suffering from a bad case of the flu and simply went into hospital for observation.'

'Sweetheart, we better get this ham I bought into the fridge before it spoils in the heat.'

'Sure, come on all, let's pile into the dinghy and head off,' suggested Lloyd.

They all sat in the tiny dinghy and motored through the moorings towards Mecca.

3

Christmas Day 2022 dawned morbidly sombre. It may have been the annual anniversary of the birth of Christ, but that was totally overshadowed by the news headlines echoing out of every television screen in the world. *The King of England is dead. Long live the King.* Death had also come to his brother, his cousins, aunts, uncles and all their children. Initial investigations indicated that they were all victims of the same mystery virus that decimated the Vatican. The

greatest dilemma facing the British people on Christmas Day 2022 was who was going to become their next monarch because everyone even remotely in line to the throne was dead.

British Parliament attempted an emergency sitting the very next day. Those parliamentarians who were still alive were flown back to London from their taxpayer-funded jaunts. Martial law was imposed and the military was assigned with keeping apart opposing factions, such as the fascists and communists, who were trying to take advantage of the sudden chaos. Everyone blamed 'the Jews', saying that Mossad must have been responsible. There were calls for an invasion of Israel. Israel responded angrily, saying that they had nothing to do with any of the deaths and that they had all of Europe's capital cities targeted with nuclear missiles. Their top general was quoted as saying,

'Our position is not that we *will* push the button if we are attacked, but that we *won't*.'

When asked to explain what he meant by that, he replied,

'It's simple, in order to prevent our missiles from launching, a button must be pushed every five minutes. If for some reason, like an attack on Israel for example, the button is *not* pushed, all the missiles will launch automatically and wipe out every city between the North Atlantic and North Pacific Oceans. So get off our backs if you know what is good for you.'

That quietened everyone down somewhat.

By new years day, *death* was the most reported word on the planet. The second most reported word was *panic* and the third, *fame*. It was beginning to emerge that the mystery virus was targeting famous people. Hollywood moguls, movie stars, rock stars, presidents, prime ministers, captains of industry, heads of global corporations, bankers, media personalities, religious leaders and world celebrities in general were mysteriously dying off like flies.

The planet had become gripped by fear. No one knew anything about the virus. As a consequence, people began to avoid places of large gatherings. Many concerts were cancelled either because the acts were dead or because no one wanted to go to them. Movie theatres closed their doors and people stayed away from malls and off public transport. Everyone huddled around their TVs and waited for the news.

A report came out of Israel enumerating the high number of Jews that had died in the mystery epidemic. The report claimed that that was proof that Israel had nothing to do with it. The report then indirectly suggested that it might have been the Russians that engineered the virus. The Russians strongly denied the accusation and threatened Israel with total annihilation. One high profile Russian political commentator even went so far as to say on national television that Hitler might have been right. The following morning he was found hanging by his neck from the middle of Andreyevsky Bridge. A video appeared on YouTube the next day in which a masked man declared that too much Russian blood had been spilt getting rid of that son of a bitch Hitler for the people to forgive such a treasonous remark.

4

All through January 2023, the world remained in the grip of fear, chaos, and in some places, marshal law. Gradually the deaths slowed until they finally ceased. Hollywood and the movie industry were decimated. Nearly everyone was dead. Most in the music industry were dead as well. The President of the United States, his Vice-President, half the House and most of the Senate were gone as were most of the military leaders of the world.

Operation One World, which was the name of the imminent invasion of Iran by the combined forces of the USA and Israel, came to a crumbling halt as all its leaders perished. The million-strong army, which was concentrated on Iran's eastern and western borders, collapsed into total disarray as fuel and food supplies dried up. They became sitting ducks in the desert as calls for evacuation were ignored. Throughout February of that year, 99 percent of Operation One World either died of thirst, starvation or were picked off one by one by the Revolutionary Guard. Israel launched an arsenal of nuclear missiles at Tehran, but the missiles mysteriously performed a U-turn twenty miles above Amman and fell back to earth in the middle of downtown Tel Aviv without exploding. The ayatollahs declared the event a miracle of Allah, while Israel suffered global humiliation.

On *December 28th 2022*, a virologist from Vienna named Goldbaum published a paper detailing his research into the mysterious epidemic. He managed to isolate the virus responsible and recognised it as a mutation of the

Myxoma virus. He named it Myxoma-H2022. He noted that it was human specific, but couldn't work out why it was only lethal to some humans, chiefly famous ones or leaders in their fields. He noted that nearly all humans on Earth were carriers of the virus, were infectious, but were totally unaffected by it. He assumed that most of the Earth's human population had a natural immunity to it. In summation he wrote that the virus was most likely a natural chance mutation of the Myxoma virus, which killed rabbits, although the conspiracy theorist in him could not discount the possibility that Myxoma-H2022 had been engineered by a very clever team of virologists. He never worked out why the people who were killed by the virus were specifically susceptible to it, and every person living on Earth that might have been able to illuminate him with the answer was now dead.

5

Lloyd, Eva, Alex and Sophia spent the night of *New Year's Eve 2022* on Mecca, tied up alongside Lloyd's jetty. Under normal circumstances, they would have been floating just off the Opera House watching the big fireworks display. That year, though, the fireworks were cancelled at the last minute as a mark of respect for the deaths of so many prominent people.

The night was warm and calm. There was a noticeable absence of frivolity around Rose Bay. They should have heard the sounds of music, laughter and gaiety, from many parties, wafting through the night air, but they didn't. On that night, the celebration of life was replaced by the fear of death, and rejoicing was replaced by mourning.

The strangeness of the world was not about to derail the cheerfulness of our happy foursome, however. They were all intelligent, unafraid and used to mystery. They laughed at life and its constant threat of death. They expressed their total contempt for it by always insisting on being happy, no matter what. Above everything, though, was the fact that they all shared a secret that no one else knew and none of them actually understood, a secret about a date in September beyond which it seemed no one would live, no one, that was, except themselves.

They turned off all the house lights and lit dozens of colourful Chinese lanterns that they had strung up all around the back yard and over the boat.

Lloyd played *Sade* through his iPod player while Alex popped open the first bottle of Moët for the night. The girls made a platter of cut sandwiches and they all stretched out on the boat, relaxed and chatted about whatever came to mind. In the absence of the fireworks at midnight, they planned to each release a Chinese lantern into the night sky and watch it drift over all the moored boats towards Shark Island.

‘So, whose theory shall we start with?’ Lloyd asked. ‘What killed all the famous people?’

‘Well, we know it was a virus,’ said Alex.

‘Apparently we are all carriers,’ added Eva.

‘That is what they said,’ continued Lloyd, ‘although we are all supposed to be immune, but nonetheless highly infectious.’

‘I know,’ said Alex in a perplexed voice, ‘it’s bizarre. The whole thing stinks of a carefully engineered conspiracy, like very specific people were targeted.’

Lloyd smiled, ‘Good old Alex and his conspiracies. Next he’ll be telling us it was the aliens that did it.’

Everyone laughed. Alex laughed as well and said,

‘Go ahead, go on, mock at my expense. I didn’t mention aliens, did I? I’m pretty sure that there are plenty of labs on Earth that could have come up with the Myxoma-H2022 virus. What I *am* having trouble wrapping my brain around is what could all the people who died have had in common that made them susceptible to that virus?’

‘That is the sixty-four million dollar question, Alex. We must ponder on the possible commonalities of all the victims.’

‘What if they all belonged to a secret club,’ suggested Sophia.

Everyone looked at each other, then at Sophia. Lloyd shook his head and smiled,

‘Sophia, you do this too often.’ He turned to Alex. ‘She is a genius, Alex.’

‘You don’t have to tell me, Lloyd.’

‘What did I say? Did I say something?’ said Sophia feigning surprise.

‘Who wants more champagne?’ asked Eva.

Everyone held out their glasses.

'A club, a global club, that included as its members, royalty, clergy, film and music elite, bankers, industrialists, politicians, etc, etc, etc, need I go on? The virus killed all the famous people of Earth. But fame on its own couldn't be the differentiating agent, no, it had to be something else.'

'You know what always amazes me about all the famous people,' said Sophia. Everyone looked at her inquisitively. 'It is how well they all cope with their fame. I mean, they are always surrounded by thousands of fans, many of who could be complete weirdos, probably capable of anything. If it was me, I would be totally paranoid. I couldn't handle it.'

'These women, Alex,' said Lloyd, 'are beginning to worry me. They are becoming too smart. If we are not careful they could take over the world.'

'What do you mean, *could*,' responded Eva in jest. 'We have always ruled, we just let you poor males think that you have control in order to prop up your fragile egos.'

'Ouch, that hurt,' said Lloyd grabbing his heart.

'You asked for that one, Lloyd,' said Alex. He continued, 'I think what Sophia is alluding to is some kind of medication, am I right, darling?'

'Yes, I was thinking that. I have always thought that. Those celebrities are just too cool to not be on some kind of medication.'

'By the way,' said Alex, 'not just celebrities died, but also people who wielded a lot of power and influence behind the scenes.'

'People are always talking about the Masons,' said Eva.

'Yeah, and what about that Scientology, what's all that about?' added Alex.

'There is no doubt that there are clandestine organisations,' surmised Lloyd. 'What we are contemplating here is a secret umbrella organisation which had as its members all the movers and shakers on the planet, including The Pope and Kings and Queens. If one didn't belong, one didn't get on.'

'You know, that Tom Cruise always reminded me of The Joker from the Batman movies,' said Sophia. 'He was in with one of those secret clubs, wasn't he?'

'Yeah, he was a big time Scientologist,' replied Alex.

'So let's assume that there *was* a secret club that was above all other secret clubs. And let's assume that it had a way of controlling its members, keeping

everyone in line so to speak. One of the best methods for achieving that type of control over a person is to get them addicted to a drug that only you supply.'

'Yes, Lloyd, and let's assume that this drug is so good that it makes you feel phenomenal. Er, it makes you feel powerful, confident, intelligent, clear ... er, totally in control in any situation ... er,' Eva searched for a word, then found it, 'it makes you feel *invincible*.'

'That's right, Eva, and as long as you keep taking it, you feel that way, but as soon as you stop, it all goes to hell in a handbasket.'

'You guys should write a book,' said Alex.

'I think we need more champagne,' observed Sophia holding up the empty bottle.

'I'll get another bottle,' replied Eva as she zipped into the house. Lloyd continued,

'So what we are talking about is the best drug in the world. In fact it is so good that it is kept a secret from the general population and only used by the elite few who belong to the global secret society. The society gives them privilege and the drug gives them superior abilities and feelings, while at the same time keeping them in line. If they rebel, the drug is taken away, which results in some horrific kind of withdrawal, maybe even death.'

'Wow, Lloyd, you *should* be a writer. That *is* good. OK, now we need to introduce an enemy. This secret society has an enemy that finds out about the drug ...' Alex paused and thought about it for a moment, then continued, 'and this enemy engineers a version of the Myxoma virus that is specific only to humans and is activated by the drug in the host's system. It's perfect.'

'And it takes out the whole secret network,' added Lloyd. 'Wham-bam, thank you maam!'

'OK, that's all good, Lloyd, but now the big question arises; who is the enemy?'

Eva laughed, 'Maybe it's your aliens, Alex?'

Everyone laughed while Alex protested,

'It may not be such a crazy idea, you know. We have all been following the exploits of that Drongo guy over the years. We have all seen every episode of

Incident at Green River since they began. We have all been intrigued out of our minds ... those aliens were real, and they have been visiting every year ...'

'Unless it's all Hollywood *bullkacky*,' suggested Eva.

'It looked pretty real to me,' said Lloyd. 'How about this year's show in which the alien got abducted by those black helicopters. That was pretty amazing.'

Alex sat up all excited.

'That's it, that's the motive!' he declared. 'Do you see? He infects the group that kidnapped him and it spreads through their system.'

'Interesting hypothesis, Alex, shame we will never know.'

'I agree with Lloyd, Alex, but don't you think a group like that would certainly have had Earth based enemies as well?'

'Probably,' Alex replied.

'Let us all agree that we will never know the truth,' suggested Sophia, 'and thank our lucky stars that we weren't part of this elite group.'

'I'll drink to that,' said Eva.

'Wait a minute,' said Alex, 'what about the dates? The aliens came every September 23rd, am I right?'

'Yes, I think that's right,' said Lloyd.

'Didn't we see something in the news about a guy that dropped dead at Denver Airport around about the end of September? I remember it because the news came out the same night as the last instalment of *Incident at Green River*. Remember how they said that they rushed the documentary through production because they wanted it to go to air as fast as possible? It was later confirmed that the guy died from a mystery virus. We now know that he was the first because they found more and more dead people every day after that. They found the first viral death about a week after they abducted the alien. There is a synchronicity there.'

'Actually, Alex makes sense. The guy that isolated the virus, Goldbaum I think was his name, reckoned that we are all highly infectious carriers. Why couldn't the alien have been a carrier who was also highly infectious and completely immune to the effects of the virus?'

'Bingo, Lloyd!' exclaimed Alex. 'I have always thought it strange the way the alien just stood there and allowed himself to be abducted. He didn't even attempt to escape or resist.'

'Yes, Alex is right,' said Eva, 'I noticed that. I thought it seemed strange the way he just let them take him.'

'Yes, it's as if he wanted them to take him ...' Alex suddenly stopped talking. Everyone just looked at each other. Suddenly it all made sense.

6

At the stroke of midnight there was no cheering to be heard, no fireworks and no one sang *Auld Lang Syne*. Lloyd, Eva, Alex and Sophia were struck by the silence.

'People are really afraid,' said Sophia gazing out into the tranquil night.

'Happy New Year, one and all,' said Lloyd.

'Happy New Year,' everyone repeated. They all hugged each other and held up their glasses.

'To friendship,' said Lloyd.

'To friendship,' everyone responded.

'Let's launch the Chinese lanterns,' suggested Eva.

They took a lantern each, lit the small fire beneath it and released it into the night sky. They watched the glowing lights slowly drift across Rose Bay.

'They look like UFOs, don't they?'

'Yes, they do.'

As they watched their lanterns hanging in the sky, Alex resurrected an old conversation.

'Every year they come on the same date.'

'And every year we talk about it,' said Eva.

'I finished my research into the junk-DNA in 2010. The one thing that stood out was the date, 23rd September. Four years later, the aliens started arriving, exactly on that date. Every year we discuss the possibility of a link ...'

'And every year we come up with nothing,' interjected Lloyd.

'And now it's 2023, the last year,' said Sophia grimly.

'I'm going to get more champagne,' said Eva.

They sat in silence while Eva retrieved another bottle of Moët from the refrigerator. When she returned she gave the bottle to Lloyd and he began opening it. As he did this he spoke,

‘You know, I’ve given what I’m about to say quite a lot of thought. The four of us share an amazing secret and perhaps an amazing destiny. We cannot possibly understand how certain things could happen, but Alex’s research was thorough and his results were crystal clear. The knowledge derived from his work was so consequential that we decided to bury it and not reveal it to anyone.’

He popped the bottle and gave it to Eva who topped up everybody’s glass. He then continued. Everyone listened in silence.

‘None of Alex’s cases lived past the 23rd of September this year, except the four of us. I won’t even pretend to understand how this could be true. One thing is for sure; much has changed in the twelve or so years since Alex shelved his thesis. For one, we have had nearly a decade of alien visitations. That is something we could never have foreseen back in 2010. And now we have this global mega-death of all the important people in the world. Also, we know that everyone on the planet is a carrier of the offending virus. Things have changed and some sort of extinction level event does not seem as inconceivable as it did twelve years ago.’

No one else spoke. They were subdued to silence by the grave tone of Lloyd’s voice.

‘It might be a plague or it might be a nuclear war, hell, it might even be an alien invasion, who knows, but I have decided that we should use the knowledge we have and take some precautionary action. Look, I will be 73 on my next birthday, so I’m not all that fussed, but I still feel good ...’

Eva butted in, ‘Darling, you are still a spring chicken.’

‘And Alex is my rooster,’ added Sophia.

‘Cock-a-doodle-doo!’ said Alex.

That broke everyone up in laughter.

‘Well, that’s all very good,’ continued Lloyd, ‘but I have an idea that I would like to run past everyone.’

‘We are all ears, Lloyd. Fire away.’

'Well, we don't know what is going to happen on the 23rd of September, we can only guess. One thing is for sure, when something bad happens it usually happens in cities. My idea is that we provision the boat up for about a month and take her out to sea about ten or twenty miles and sit-it-out out there for a few days. Whatever is going to happen will probably happen on land. Even if there is some kind of tidal wave, we will still be safest out there.

'I have given thought to Leon and Russel and their families out on the farm and I believe that they are located in a good place for some kind of disaster. I intend to instruct them to provision up for an extended period.

'I think that you, Alex, and you, Sophia, should come with us on the boat. My gravest concern is that the world will break down into nuclear war. The Australian outback or the open ocean will be the best places to survive such a catastrophe.'

They sat in the boat discussing Lloyd's plan for hours. They finally all retired to bed as the first light of 2023 set fire to the eastern horizon.

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Chapter Fifty-Three

THE DARK ONES

1

Timmy Travers put away the Blanik. He had spent the whole day at the airfield, taking novices up for their one-hour gliding lessons or tourists on joy flights. It had been a 'stinker' of a day with the mercury touching on 40 degrees. It might have been hot, but that wasn't the thing that put the total damper on his day. Oh no. That honour went to young Johnnie 'rotund', whose mother insisted that he take a ride in a glider after lunch. Johnnie complained and protested, but his parents insisted, promising him a giant pepperoni pizza for dinner if he went.

He was a tight fit, but Travers miraculously managed to shoehorn the tub of perspiring blubber into the passenger seat of the sleek Blanik. Travers wasn't what you would call psychic, but the feeling of foreboding that consumed him as they were about to launch almost made him nauseous, albeit not as nauseous as actual flying made Johnny who spilled his guts all over the inside of the cockpit as soon as they left terra firma. A minestrone soup, a double portion of linguini marinara, two slices of apple pie with cream, a triple scoop of rainbow fudge ice cream and a large packet of M&Ms was projectile vomited all over the interior of the windshield making it almost impossible for Travers to see where they were going. It was pure luck and blind instinct that helped him find the runway to land on. It took him two hours in the stinking heat to clean up the mess.

After work, Travers enjoyed a few beers with some of his mates over at the Narromine Golf Club. After the drinks, he wandered home and sat down in front of his computer. He logged onto the SOHO site and began his second favourite pastime; that of searching for as yet undiscovered comets. His dream was to find one and have it named after him.

2

The first time any news appeared regarding the discovery of the new comet was on *phys.org* in *mid-December 2022*. It was a small item naming the discoverer, a Mr. Tim Travers from Narromine N.S.W. Australia. The article mentioned that Mr. Travers was a professional gliding instructor and an amateur comet hunter. It stated that the newly named Travers' Comet was about 350

million kilometres from the sun and gave rough co-ordinates. It said that astronomers were currently busy calculating the comet's size and flight path. The article concluded by stating that the comet posed no danger to Earth and that it may put on a spectacular show for everyone in the second half of the following year. All mainstream media missed the article, as did most of the population of Earth.

3

Lucy ran out of the granny flat into the kitchen and excitedly said,
'Come see what's on TV. I think it's happening.'

Thebe and Slater followed Lucy back to her part of the house and stood transfixed as the television news reported on a new celestial discovery.

'It is called Travers' Comet after its discoverer, an Australian from Narromine named Tim Travers. The comet cannot be seen from Earth, as of yet, as it is approaching the sun from the far side. It will come into view late in February and will be visible just after sunset, just above and slightly to the north of the sun. We have our resident space expert, Dr. Carl, on the line. Now doctor, what can you tell us about this new comet everyone is talking about?'

'Well Glenn, it looks like the gods are going to smile on us with a celestial display of epic proportions.'

'Pray tell, doctor, what exactly is a comet?'

'Imagine a giant snowball full of rocks and dust, Glenn, and you pretty much have your run of the mill comet. They like to call them dirty snowballs. When the comet gets close enough to the sun, the ice begins to vaporize forming a coma, which is like a thin, fuzzy, temporary atmosphere that usually trails off as a long tail.'

'Does this comet pose any danger to Earth?'

'It doesn't appear so, Glenn. The experts at NASA have put out a statement saying that the comet will miss us by miles. They did mention, however, that it will pass very close to Venus. They said that there was a one percent chance that it might collide with it, in which case we would be treated to the most spectacular celestial fireworks extravaganza ever witnessed from Earth.'

'Ooooooh, let's all pray for that.'

'Amen to that, Glenn.'

'Is there anything else we should know about the comet, Dr. Carl?'

'Well, it's still early days, Glenn, but initial reports measure Travers' Comet to be one of the biggest ones ever observed. It is said to be somewhere between twenty and fifty miles end to end. If the reports are correct, a planetary collision with this comet would certainly cause an E.L.E.'

'An E.L.E, Dr. Carl?'

'An E.L.E is an extinction level event, Glenn, and nobody wants one of them.'

'Lucky that Venus is uninhabited.'

'That's for sure, although a collision with Venus is extremely unlikely and the comet is expected to pass by it and fly harmlessly off into deep space.'

'That's a relief. Well, thank you, Dr. Carl, for another expert report of goings on in outer space.'

'You are most welcome, Glenn.'

Lucy looked at Slater and Thebe and said,

'You know, I've got to be honest with you guys, that report just sent chills up my spine. I'm still feeling shaky.'

4

Kane was nine years and four months old. Rama kids traditionally received a teacher on their day of birth. The teacher was called a *guru* and his student was called a *chela*. The teacher taught his student the disciplines of higher concentration, breath and the telepathic arts, which included the mind control of chosen creatures as well as Rama technology, such as their space ships. It was not necessary for the teacher to be physically present when instructing his student. They could be on opposite sides of the universe; it did not matter because they came together in the mind plane where the lessons and their associated exercises were always given telepathically. This changed, however, when the student became ten years old. At ten, the student left his mother and spent one year in the presence of his teacher.

When Kane was born he was deemed blessed because Iapetus agreed to become his teacher. This was doubly so because Kane was not a pure-Rama-born but a hybrid-Earth-born. Kane's birthplace was significant as well because it was considered *sacred*. Throughout history sacred places bore holy men and mystics who became revered by their people.

News arrived with one of Noah's sojourns that Iapetus wished to visit Noosa to meet Kane and his family in person. Noah also mentioned that Zeke was going to hitch a ride with Iapetus. The news caused much excitement around the household, especially with Lucy.

5

Iapetus and Zeke arrived in Noosa Waters late at night, under the cover of darkness, on *Thursday 2nd February 2023*. Thebe and Lucy both cried as Iapetus stepped out of his ship, which was comfortably snuggled within the L shape of the jetty. Both of the girls instinctively bowed before the great man.

'You honour me, Thebe,' he said slightly embarrassed.

'You honour *us*, Iapetus, with your visit ...' Thebe couldn't continue because she began to cry again.

'And this I presume is Lucy.' He looked at Lucy. 'Zeke has not stopped talking about you, Lucy. I feel like we are old friends already.'

'It's a privilege to finally meet you, Iapetus,' said Lucy looking the tall, broad shouldered man straight in the eyes. 'I thank you for bringing my Ezekiel to me ... er ... where is he?'

Iapetus looked over his shoulder, back into the ship, and called out,

'Come on, Zeke, stop hiding. You can come out now.'

Zeke emerged from within the matt black craft.

'I'm comin. I just didn't wanna steal your thunder, Iapetus.'

Before he even finished his sentence, Lucy ran forward and threw herself into his arms. They kissed.

'I missed you so,' she said through her sobs.

They hugged while Thebe came up to Iapetus and hugged him, still crying. Slater and Kane stood back trying as hard as they could to hold back their emotions. Thebe took Iapetus' hand and walked him towards the house.

'I would like you to meet my husband, Slater, and my son, Kane.'

They all hugged like old friends.

'It is always a great day when a guru meets his chela in the flesh. How are you Kane?'

'I am well, teacher, and you?'

'Also well, thank you.'

'I hope your journey was uneventful.'

'It was.'

'I look forward to our time together.'

'As do I, chela, as do I.'

'Let Iapetus come into the house and settle into his quarters, Kane, I'm sure there will be plenty of time for questions later.'

They walked up the stairs into the house. After Iapetus and Zeke settled in they all sat on the veranda overlooking the water. Thebe and Lucy organised refreshments and snacks after which they all sat and chatted.

'I hope you brought your surfboard, Iapetus,' said Slater, 'there's a bit of a swell running at the moment.'

'I did, Slater, I never go anywhere without it.'

'Granite should be pumping tomorrow.'

'I have heard much about this break and look forward to surfing it.'

After some time, the conversation turned to the comet and the 23rd of September. Everyone wanted to know more about what was going to happen.

'It's been in the news,' said Lucy, 'but nobody has guessed that it will hit anything.'

'I am afraid it will,' said Iapetus.

Then Zeke asked a more serious question. He couldn't help himself as the thought had been surfacing in his conscious thought from time to time ever since he had a conversation about it with Adam.

'Does it have to happen, Iapetus?'

Iapetus smiled a melancholy smile and warmly looked at Zeke.

'Ahh, a very important question and I know that you have been wrestling with it for some time, Zeke. It deserves a thorough answer and that is precisely what I shall give you, but before I do, could I have another cup of your delicious tea, please Lucy, it's quite addictive.'

Lucy smiled and made Iapetus another cup of tea. He took a sip and began his story.

'We Rama are all full telepaths. However we are not the only fully telepathic species in the cosmos. In fact, most species are telepathic. Non-

telepathic Earth humans actually belong to a tiny minority of very young non-telepathic species.

‘All telepaths communicate in the mind plane. It is like an *Internet of the mind*. Non-telepathic humans don’t even know that this *Internet* exists and they are incapable of imagining the manner of communication that is possible within it. For us it is second nature, although it takes some training to become proficient at it. I am sorry, Zeke, but we do not consider you or Adam any lesser persons because you are not telepathic, to the contrary, you are both greatly admired and much loved amongst my people.

‘Now, you may or may not know this, but one of the many skills of a telepath is *merging with a creature*. This must be learnt, as the technique is different and unique for each creature. Most telepaths specialise in just one animal. Mostly they learn the technique of their teacher and learn to merge with the animal that their teacher could merge with.’

Kane butted in, ‘What is your animal, teacher?’

‘Don’t interrupt,’ said Thebe.

Iapetus smiled, ‘It’s fine, Thebe. My animal is the wolf. As a consequence, I can merge with any species of wild or domestic dog. My favourite wolves are those of the high forests of Rama. They are wilder than most and spend the early part of their lives alone, until they meet a mate. I also am very fond of the desert coyote. Does that answer your question, chela?’

‘Yes, thank you, teacher.’

‘Now, where was I? Oh yeah, that’s right. OK. Now this merging with lower species is a very serious business because it involves the complete takeover of their body without them being aware of it. Besides animals, all non-telepathic humans can be merged with as well. Because this is possible and because it is considered immoral, a code of conduct was established amongst all telepaths everywhere. The code states that a telepath must never merge with a non-telepathic human. The chief exception to the rule is self-defence. So, animals are OK, but humans are not.’

Slater asked, ‘If I control the behaviour of someone to my advantage; is that merging?’

'No,' replied Iapetus. 'Merging is a complete becoming of the other creature. Firstly I locate the wolf. Then I usually sit on the ground and slide into a deep trance. I then locate and merge with the wolf's brain in the mind plane. From my perspective, my body morphs into the body of a wolf and I become the wolf. I see through the wolf's eyes and feel through his body, but I think with my own brain. The wolf on the other hand has no inkling of the fact that there is someone else controlling his body. I know that our mutual friend, Ambriel, is a master merger of eagles, as is her brother, Albion and her son, Ben, my most recent chela.'

'That's somethin else I didn't know about her,' said Zeke.

'I'm gonna get my stuff,' said Lucy.

'Oh, that's a good idea,' Zeke agreed, 'I think I'm ready for a puff.'

Lucy zipped off to her room, Iapetus had a sip of his tea, while Thebe thought she might play some Van Morrison. When everyone was settled again, Iapetus continued his explanation.

'Most telepaths are what we refer to as *clears*. That means they are unburdened by dark thoughts and emotions such as anger, jealousy, hate, etc. The chief reason we are like that is because we can see right through each other. Nothing is hidden and nothing is secret. Now, there is a small, shrouded group that many, many years ago rebelled against the code of conduct. We refer to them as *the dark ones*. They particularly enjoy merging with non-telepathic humans. The other thing that really stimulates them is military strategy and warfare. The bigger the war, the happier they are. At least that is what we assume because we virtually never come in contact with them.

'You see, when we look at a living being, we see straight through them like looking through water. We can see what is inside. What the dark ones have learned, however, is a special telepathic technique, which makes them opaque to us. When we look at a dark one, all we see is a black cloud, or fog, surrounding them. We cannot see the person inside. Because of this, they have become like stormy oceans, consumed by hate and violence. They have become cold-blooded murderers of millions of people through their puppet-mastery of weak individuals. Once they have merged with their chosen person, they quickly rise to power and proceed to orchestrate an environment for war. Adolf Hitler, for example, was a man who was completely possessed by one of the dark ones.

Churchill was another. When the war is over, the dark ones move on to new pastures. In the meantime, many lives are lost and much is destroyed.

'The Earth has been infested by these telepathic vermin for thousands of years. Some of them live here amongst you while others live somewhere else, but they all embody a non-telepathic human and act out their evil deeds through them. They are the scourge of the Earth and are responsible for all its suffering. They are also nearly impossible to root out.

'They are planning a great nuclear war involving all the nations of the Earth. They control all the militaries, the governments and the media. This planet is completely enslaved by them. The comet shall put an end to all of it. When everything is destroyed, the dark ones will leave and look for another planet to torment.

'There will be a hundred year healing period after which all the time shifters will arrive along with the Rama immigrants. We will begin anew on a new Earth, free of the dark ones and aided by Rama technology.

'So to answer your question, Zeke; does it have to happen? Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. Either way, nature has decided for us and she will do what she always does, she will cleanse. All we will try to do is be in harmony with her.'

'Thanks for that explanation, Iapetus,' said Zeke.

'Who wants a jayjay?' asked Lucy.

'I think I'll bring out the Mana,' said Thebe.

'We'll have to take off for Granite straight after breakfast,' said Slater.

'I can't wait,' said Iapetus.

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Chapter Fifty-Four
INDEPENDENCE DAY

1

Jonesy sat quietly on the highest boulder on top of Pike's Peak, California. Next to him were his backpack and his canteen. In his hands was a pair of powerful binoculars. It was *Thursday 1st June 2023* and the sun had just set. There was not a cloud in the sky. Ever so gradually, Venus emerged out of the purple twilight.

He steadied his binoculars with his elbows on his knees and focussed in on the spectacular event, which was keeping everyone on the planet totally mesmerised. Venus appeared three times its normal size. It looked like the right side of it had exploded. The view became clearer as the western sky darkened. There was only about an hour and a half of viewing time between when Venus became visible after sunset and when it set below the horizon.

He put the binoculars down for a moment and looked down the southern slope of the rocky hill. He could just make out his motorbike parked down there on the trail. He had been scouting out the trail over the last few months. He wanted to make sure that it was clear enough of obstacles for when he intended to drive his Winnebago up the mountain with his family. He had already moved some large rocks that would have impeded his progress.

He looked through his binoculars once again. If he really steadied them he could just make out a secondary point of light coming out of Venus. He knew, because he heard it on TV, that Travers' comet would probably glance the planet and ricochet off it leaving an explosive trail of light. He had seen close-up photos of the comet on the Net. The whole world knew that it was one of the largest comets ever discovered, measuring some thirty miles end to end. They tracked it as it approached the sun and thought that it would just miss Venus right up to two weeks before, when NASA put out a press release stating that Travers' comet would in fact actually come into physical contact with the planet. The scientists stated that although such a glancing blow had not been witnessed before, computer models predicted that most of the comet would break up into little pieces, some of which may go into orbit around Venus while others could

possibly ricochet back into outer space in a direction away from Earth. No one predicted what actually happened. The computers were not even programmed for an aero-braking scenario. It seemed at the time that not one scientist at NASA, or any other organisation for that matter, foresaw the terrible truth that was to unfold.

Jonesy observed the Venusian light show right up to the time it finally set below the horizon. He then pulled a torch out of his backpack and climbed back down the hill to his bike and rode off the mountain to his Winnebago where he cracked open a beer, rolled a big fat joint and kicked back to the soothing melodies of Willie Nelson.

2

Everyone was invited to Snake's ranch for the 4th of July holiday. Snake had built a small, motel-style row of eight self-contained holiday units behind his house. He said that he built them for his family. What he really meant was that he built them for his crew, seeing that he had no real family to speak of.

'Build it and they will come,' he joked, quoting from the movie *Field Of Dreams*.

And they came, all of them, happy and wealthy beyond their wildest dreams, thanks to Snake and his astute business practises. And to him they *were* his family. It actually surprised him how much he had grown to love them all. They felt like the children he never had and he harboured a deep concern for their happiness and security.

Jonesy rolled up in his new, all wheel drive Winnebago accompanied by his beautiful wife, Lori, and their four stunning daughters. Ludwig came with his young Russian wife Ivana. Cowboy styled in with his *Porsche Panamera* accompanied by Lauren Cole, the world famous movie star from the last completed Hollywood blockbuster, called *Fury*, which was a film based around the old TV series about a black horse. Dirk DeRongo arrived in his metallic blue *Lamborghini Aventador* accompanied by Miss Sweden of 2022, named Inga. Melvin rode in alone on his huge *Harley Davidson Desert Ghost* while Ace flew in with his own, state of the art, prototype multi-copter accompanied by a young Italian goddess named Johanna. The one other person that was there, of course, was Trixie, Snake's buxom private secretary.

They spent the whole day around the pool. Snake manned the barbeque, Trixie made the salads while the others took turns at choosing the music and organising drinks and smokes.

'Have you heard the latest they're sayin about the comet?' asked Jonesy.

'Yeah some idiot reckons that it's coming this way,' said Ludwig.

'They've been saying all along that it got deflected out into outer space away from Earth,' said DeRongo.

'Now this one guy from NASA is sayin that it's comin this way. Apparently NASA is denyin his version of the story an I believe that they have fired him for sayin it.'

'I haven't trusted a word NASA has said since the moon landing bullshit,' blurted Melvin.

'Don't you think they went to the moon, Melv?' asked Snake.

'Absolutely not.'

'What makes you think that?'

'There's heaps of reasons, but the main one is horizontal motion in one-sixth Earth's gravity. Every frame of video in existence of the Apollo moon missions is proof they were never there.'

'Would you like to elaborate,' asked Ludwig.

'Sure, but there's some simple physics involved.'

'No matter, tell us your theory.'

'OK, in one sixth gravity your body only has 16.66 percent weight but still retains 100 percent of its mass. Now, gravity, which is weight, is the engine that powers horizontal motion. On Earth, 100 percent weight moves around 100 percent mass. When we begin to walk we subconsciously allow ourselves to fall in the direction we intend to walk. At just the right moment, we bring our foot out to stop ourselves from falling over. We keep falling and bring out the other foot. That is what walking is. It is using gravity and converting it into horizontal motion. When we want to change direction we allow ourselves to fall in that direction and balance the lean against the centrifugal force ...'

'Oh Melvin, my poor little brain,' complained Lauren.

'It's a bit tricky, I know, but I'll try to make it simple. All this falling and catching ourselves, and leaning and balancing centrifugal force, is done

subconsciously and automatically by our neuromuscular system. We have practised it since we were babies. The people who understand this best are motorbike riders because they rely on more extreme lean angles to manoeuvre. I am not saying that man could not adapt to walking on the moon, he probably could, but the physics and lean angles of his horizontal motion would be quite extreme compared to walking on Earth. In lunar gravity, lean angles would be as much as 60 degrees. The angles for acceleration, deceleration and change of direction would be three to four times greater than the maximum obtained in the one-G environment of Earth.'

'So what you are suggesting is that the astronauts aren't leaning enough when they're changing direction.'

'That's right, Cowboy, but it goes much further than that. The laws of physics dictate that the whole nature of human horizontal motion on the moon would look quite bizarre when compared to motion here on Earth. For example, leg movement would be blatantly, obviously different. Hip flexion angles would be larger in moon gravity compared to Earth gravity because the legs would have to be carried farther forward in the lunar gait. This is attributed to the fact that with the large body inclinations the legs would have to be carried farther forward to maintain balance. This in turn would result in reduced knee flexion and give the astronaut an appearance of walking stiff-legged.

'There are two basic components to commencing forward motion. One is the fall in the direction of the intended motion and two is the placement of the foot forward to prevent falling too far. Had they actually walked on the moon, the first noticeable thing would have been the much slower and more extended fall into a more extreme angle, say 45 degrees. The second noticeable thing would have been the exaggerated length of the first stride. They would have only had 16.66 percent weight to accelerate, decelerate or change the direction of 100 percent mass. Imagine that you have a 120cc motorbike on earth. It gives you so much acceleration. Now imagine that you change the engine of that motorbike to 20cc and keep all the weight the same and try to accelerate with that. You will accelerate much, much slower, at least six times slower. If you make the brakes six times weaker you will decelerate six times slower as well. These are the laws of physics, which are immutable. The change in performance of the weaker bike

would be plainly obvious. The velocity of acceleration and deceleration on the moon should have been much slower, should have involved extreme body-lean angles and should have been plainly obvious and bizarre looking. What the astronauts' horizontal motion in all the moon videos clearly shows is bungee-supported motion giving the appearance of less weight in a lower gravity field, albeit without the essential lean angles to account for the unreduced mass. There was no way that they could fake that. There is not one frame of footage from the moon that is congruous with the laws of physics.'

Everyone just looked at Melvin unsure how to respond. Ace thought he saw a flaw in Melvin's logic and asked him,

'Hang on Melvin; the astronauts wore heavy backpacks on the moon. That would have brought their weight closer to Earth weight. The extra weight would have created more Earth-like movement.'

'That is a common misconception, Ace, and smart of you for pointing it out, but every pound of weight the astronauts carried on their backs, on the moon, increased their mass by six pounds. That only made it *more* difficult to move around.

'What amazes me is how nobody has seen this. I mean, this is high school physics not rocket science. Another thing, if an astronaut began to walk down a slope on the moon, it would not take much of a slope angle before it became physically impossible for him to stop. He just wouldn't be able to lean back far enough and get enough traction to brake to a stop. Conversely, if he got stuck at the bottom of a crater with steep enough sides, the laws of physics would dictate that he could not lean forward enough and get enough traction to move his mass out of that crater. He would be stuck there and run out of oxygen. NASA never even considered any of these potential problems because they never intended to go to the moon from the git-go.

'Who designs a four-legged moon lander? An idiot, or somebody who knows that it will never go to the moon. Give me a break. How many camera quadropods are there? None, because they would rock on uneven ground. Anybody with a high school education given the task of designing a moon lander would have begun with a tripod and worked from there. Total common sense. You only get one shot at landing on the guaranteed rough ground of the moon

and it has to be right the first time. You cut your chances of a successful landing by about a million percent with a four-legged lander. But that doesn't matter if you never intended to go in the first place.

'And the moon buggy, have you seen the photos of that? The wheels are made of mesh so they let the dirt get in. The dirt built up inside the wheels, which made them heavier and heavier. The buggy ran on batteries and the calculations for the run-time had to have been pretty accurate or the astronauts could have gotten stranded away from the ship. As far as I could tell there was no compensation for the wheels filling up with dirt in any NASA calculations.'

'Boy Melvin, you really got into this, didn't you.'

Melvin took a breath and replied,

'Yeah, I hate being hoodwinked.'

'Are you suggesting that our government actually *lied* to us, Melvin?' Snake asked sarcastically. Everyone laughed.

Trixie stepped out of the kitchen and announced,

'President Griffin is about to come on TV and give his weekly address.'

Moans and whines were heard all around the pool. 'I'll put him on the speakers, he might mention the comet.'

The ice-cool voice of President Robert Griffin III spoke to the people of America.

'Hello and Happy Fourth of July, everybody. This holiday is a time to get together with family and friends, kick back, and enjoy a little time off. And I hope that's exactly what all of you do. But I also want to take a moment today to reflect on what I believe is the meaning of this distinctly American holiday.

'Today, we are called to remember not only the day our country was born, we are also called to remember the indomitable spirit of the first American citizens who made that day possible.

'We are called to remember how unlikely it was that our American experiment would succeed at all; that a small band of patriots would declare independence from a powerful empire; and that they would form, in the new world, what the old world had never known ... a government of, by, and for the people.

'That unyielding spirit is what defines us as Americans. It is what led generations of pioneers to blaze a westward trail.

'It is what led my grandparents' generation to persevere in the face of a depression and triumph in the face of tyranny.'

'It is what led generations of American workers to build an industrial economy unrivalled around the world.'

'It is what has always led us, as a people, not to wilt or cower at a difficult moment, but to face down any trial and rise to any challenge, understanding that each of us has a hand in writing America's destiny.'

'It is what kept us united through the tragedy of the Myxoma-H2022 virus and the subsequent failure of Operation One World. But we were not knocked out, we were just knocked down, and we rose back to our feet.'

'However, my fellow Americans, it now appears that our spirit shall be called upon once more. It appears that we will be forced to face a challenge on a scale unseen in the entire history of this proud nation.'

'Today is the 34th day since the world witnessed the collision between Venus and Travers' comet. As many of us with binoculars can plainly see, the comet did not bury itself into Venus, but broke up and continued on its journey through the heavens. There have been many conflicting predictions as to the final post-Venus-encounter trajectory of the comet. To tell you the truth, I don't know why we employ these people and I have taken steps to have all their asses fired, as of today. But I digress. Not one of these, and I use the term very loosely, NASA scientists, got it right. Not one ...'

There was a brief pause in the speech and the President could be heard conferring with someone out of earshot. He then spoke into the microphone again.

'I stand corrected, there was one lone voice within NASA that tried to warn us of the potential true outcome, but he was summarily dismissed. I believe his name was Tavish McTavish, I kid you not, and I will instruct NASA to reinstate him into the organisation and have him head up the Travers' Comet Task Force. I have also asked my staff to fly him up to Washington from Houston and bring him to the White House tonight so that I can meet him in person.'

'Tonight, my fellow Americans, it is my sad duty to report that Travers' comet is headed our way.'

There were gasps all around the pool. The sound of Ivana's glass shattering on the sandstone paving dramatically punctuated the shock of the moment. Trixie was there almost instantly with a dustpan and broom. The president continued,

'It appears that the unthinkable has happened. It appears that none of our existing computational models were capable of predicting an aero-braking encounter between Travers' comet and Venus. If you ask me, this is a classic case of garbage in, garbage out. Tavish McTavish was the only person who got it right, and the idiots at NASA fired him for it. I can't tell you how angry that makes me.'

'Now, we can all see the comet, or its remnants, in the western sky just after sunset. Even though it does not appear a threat to us, I have been reliably informed that the immutable laws of orbital physics are going to ensure a very close encounter with our planet. How close? The jury is still out; we're working on the calculations. How long? We're working on that as well. One thing is for sure, though, as soon as I know, you, my fellow Americans, will know as well.'

'So this is the challenge that our generation has been called on to meet. We are not a people who fear the future. We are a people who make it. And on this Independence Day we need to summon that great American spirit once again.'

'A challenge has been set before us. We will meet that challenge and defeat it. That is how this generation of Americans will make its mark on history. That is how we will make the most of this extraordinary moment. And that is how we will write the next chapter in the great American story. Thank you and happy Fourth of July.'

'I gotta buy myself a decent telescope,' exclaimed Snake.

'I preferred him when he was quarterback for the Redskins,' said Cowboy.

'They're having a panel of experts going to talk about Griffin's speech after the ads. Who would like me to wheel out the TV?' asked Trixie.

Everyone agreed.

'I'll do it for you,' said Melvin. He rose to his feet and wheeled out the big TV from the living room. Trixie turned it on.

There was an ad for Kentucky Fried Chicken. Then there was an ad vilifying gay vilification. That was followed by an ad listing the penalties for tax evasion. That was followed by an ad explaining the benefits of the National Public Surveillance Network. That was followed by an ad depicting a speeding driver

being caught by the police, brutally dragged out of his car, thrown to the ground face down and handcuffed. The final message was; *'Break the road rules – Go to prison!'* That was followed by an ad for the Satellite Surveillance System. It opened with a shot of continental USA from space. It zoomed in to a state, then a city, then a suburb, then a house, then a backyard. It showed a man tending a garden. Text appeared on the screen showing the date, time and address of the house. The name of the occupant appeared. The camera zoomed in on the garden and clearly focussed in on a Marijuana plant. New text on the screen read; *Plant, Cannabis sativa - Federal breach - penalty, 15 years in Inc. Inc., (Incarceration Incorporated)*. The camera zoomed back slightly, revealing a para-military police unit breaking into the person's home, beating him to the ground, handcuffing him, dragging him to a van in the street and driving him away. The final message of the ad was; *'We see everything you do. Break Federal Law – Go to prison.'*

Finally, after all the ads, the panel show, called *Through The Microscope*, began. The new presenter was Alex James, a popular Internet personality. He replaced the long running celebrity presenter, Bill Reilly, who sadly succumbed to the Myxoma-H2022 virus. Alex James began,

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and a happy Fourth of July. I don't know about you, but my head is still spinning. Did I just hear what I thought I heard? Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know what RG3 is smoking, but I want some.'

Alex turned to an assistant just off camera and laughed,

'Was that for real? Mikey is nodding his head, so it must have happened, I wasn't hallucinating ... er ... what's happening? ... Can somebody tell me what the fudge is happening ... yeah ... OK ... er ... ladies and gentlemen, it seems that we will not be having our advertised guests on tonight's show. We'll have to put China, the military option, on the back burner. It would seem that RG3 has been hitting the presidential crack pipe again. Our screens are running hot with comments ... excuse me ... yeah ... yeah ... ladies and gentlemen, my producer tells me that we are linking up to Mischa Koko, who these days resides in the Golden Sunsets Nursing Facility in Santa Monica ... I thought he was dead, ha, ha, ha, ha ... how long's this gonna take? ... OK ... we'll make some money, folks, and then we'll be back with the immortal Dr. Koko.'

The program broke for more advertisements.

'Did RG3 say the comet was coming this way?' asked Ludwig.

'That's what it sounded like to me,' replied Jonesy.

'Well at least the government is onto it,' said DeRongo.

'Is it going to hit us?' asked Lauren.

'That's not what they said. It'll probably come flying past us,' replied Cowboy.

'Ooh look, the show is starting again,' announced Trixie.

'Welcome back, folks. I've just been informed that someone tweeted us that RG3's speech was a rip-off of Obama's 2009 Fourth of July speech. We aren't certain of the verity of that tweet, but we'll check it out ... I believe that Dr. Koko is ready for us ... Dr. Koko ... hello? ... Have we got him? ... Hello Mischa ...'

'Hello Alex ... sssssssss ... it's so nice to speak to you again ... sssssssss'

'Er, sorry to see you flat on your back, Mischa Koko, er, what is that you are breathing?'

'Sssssssss ... oh, just your plain-old, run-of-the-mill Oxygen, Alex ... sssssssss ...'

'What is going on with this comet, Mischa?'

'Sssssssss ... Alex, we don't have to invoke parallel universes ... sssssssss ... we don't even have to invoke the multiverse ... sssssssss ... in order to explain most celestial phenomena ... sssssssss ... however it does raise the other question ... sssssssss ... is it ever possible, on any measure ... sssssssss ... to perhaps flip between different universes ... sssssssssss ... and the answer there is actually rather ... sssssssssss ... unclear. ... sssssssss ... We physicists believe ... sssssssss ... for example ... sssssssss ... that there is really a multiverse ... sssssssssss ... that exists even inside our living room ... sssssssssss ... we are waves, Alex, vibrating waves ... sssssssssss ...'

'Er, let me cut you off there, Mischa, er, I was wondering if we could cut to the chase and talk about the comet?'

'Sssssssss ... sure Alex ... sssssssss ... we are celebrating the fact ... sssssssss ... that we have found a new particle ... sssssssss ... that has never been seen before ... sssssssss ... in mother nature ... sssssssss ... by slamming two beams of protons ... sssssssss ... at trillions of electron volts ... sssssssss ... and this particle was ... sssssssss ... we think ... sssssssss ... a particle ... sssssssss ... like this was the fuse ... sssssssss ... that set off the explosion ... sssssssss ... that created the universe ... sssssssss ...'

'Let me stop you right there, Mischa, we have to go to an ad break. Just hold onto that thought, er ... right now, folks, I wouldn't mind a hit on RG3s crack pipe.'

'Do you wanna see what's on another channel, Trix?' asked Snake.

Trixie changed channels. There was a close-up image of Venus and the comet on the screen. A group of people were having an in-depth discussion.

'... this is straight out of Wikipedia. Aero-braking is a spaceflight manoeuvre that reduces the high point of an elliptical orbit by flying the vehicle through the atmosphere at the low point of the orbit. The resulting drag slows the spacecraft. I think that what they are getting at here is that you have two choices in how you can slow your spacecraft down when you get it to the target planet. One is by using retro-rockets; the other is by using the atmosphere of the planet itself. It's a huge fuel saving technique.'

'So what they are telling us is that Travers' comet aero-braked in the Venus atmosphere and slowed down?'

'Actually, more importantly, it slowed down and changed its trajectory in the opposite direction to what was expected. Instead of being deflected off Venus like a billiard ball, it got slowed and attracted towards Venus and set on a trajectory, which, it seems, is going to intersect with the Earth's orbit sometime in the near future.'

'So it never actually made physical contact with the planet?'

'NASA doesn't believe there was any physical contact. The comet burned deep through the Venusian atmosphere. They now believe that some of it vaporised, and pieces of it came off the main core, but essentially it came through the Venus encounter unscathed. It is actually now more potentially lethal because it has a couple of dozen pieces of debris accompanying it.'

'So even if the main core misses us, chances are that we might get hit by some of the debris.'

'That is correct.'

'How big are the debris?'

'NASA is still analysing the data. They still aren't absolutely sure how much of the core remained intact either. We should know in a few days.'

'What about the date? When is this thing supposed to arrive?'

'A few days and we will know everything, I'm sure. NASA has marshalled all its resources at solving this problem.'

They watched show after show about the comet until they were all exhausted from it. Snake suggested,

'Switch the bastard off, Trix, I've had enough. It's obvious that they don't know any more than they're tellin.'

Trixie turned off the TV and wheeled it out of sight.

Everyone around the pool was visibly unsettled by the whole experience.

'Is this thing supposed to hit us?' queried Ace.

'They didn't say,' said Ludwig.

'This is scary shit,' exclaimed Cowboy.

'Let's not any of us jump to any conclusions and freak ourselves out,' advised Snake. 'It's a big space out there an Earth is a small target.'

Jonesy changed the topic. He suddenly remembered something that happened years before.

'You know, about twelve years ago, somethin really strange happened to me. I ain't told nobody about it. I pretty much forgot about it, but for some reason it's come to mind now.'

Everyone turned towards Jonesy and listened intently.

'I was flyin my trike about fifty miles south of Salt Lake City. I remember that my fuel tank was about half full when I took off. My tank takes 2.6 gallons of juice to fill up, but there was only about one and a half gallons in the tank on that flight. I use about 0.6 gallons per hour, on average, when I'm flyin. That means that I had about two hours flyin time. Seein as I wasn't goin anywhere, I was just gonna fly around the area, I didn't bother fillin up.

'I checked my wristwatch. I remember it was 11.00am when I took off. I flew around checkin my watch from time to time to make sure I had enough juice left to get back to the Winnebago. I landed at exactly 1.00pm. As far as I was concerned, I flew for two hours. The amount of fuel left in the tank also indicated that I flew for two hours. But here comes the rub. When I stepped into the Winnebago, the clock on the wall said 2.05. I turned on the radio and the announcer said it was 2.06. I checked the time on my computer and it also said 2.06. My wristwatch, however, said 1.06. Everything except my watch was

suggestin that I flew for three hours, but that was impossible because I didn't have enough fuel for a three-hour flight. Sometime durin my flight, the whole world jumped forward one hour without me noticin. To this day I still can't explain it. I've had some strange experiences, like the space ships at Green River, but nothin was anywhere near as strange as the hour I lost durin that flight south of Salt Lake.'

'Wow, that is one bizarre story, Jonesy,' said DeRongo.

'What do you reckon, Snake?' asked Jonesy.

Snake lit another cigar and quipped,

'When in doubt, let your horse do the thinkin.'

Everyone cracked up.

'Plenty of people have lost-time experiences, Jonesy,' said Ludwig. 'They're all over the Net. Lots of them think they've been abducted by aliens.'

Ace had been surfing the Internet on his laptop. He suddenly exclaimed,

'Hey, look what just came up on Drudge.'

Everyone looked at Ace. He read the headline.

'Australian astronomer predicts date of comet encounter with Earth.'

All became silent. Ace read on.

'An Australian dentist and part-time amateur astronomer named Graham Rowe, from Parkes, western New South Wales, today claimed that he had calculated the date of arrival of Travers' comet, down to an accuracy of three days. He said that he factored into his calculations the original velocity of the comet and then halved it due to the aero-braking in the Venusean atmosphere. He claimed that he calculated the speed reduction by the deflection angle of the comet's trajectory as it passed by Venus, which was 23 degrees. Dr. Rowe claimed that the comet's original velocity was about 40 kilometres per second. After the Venus encounter, he claims that it slowed to about 20 kilometres per second. He said, *going by my calculations, the comet should intersect Earth's orbit sometime between the 22nd and 24th of September later this year.* When asked whether he thought any part of the comet or its debris would impact Earth, his only reply was, *I'd be stocking up on toilet paper if I were you, mate.* Dr. Rowe hung up the phone after that. We were unable to re-contact Dr. Rowe again as he seemed to have disconnected his phone. We have attempted to speak to someone

at NASA in order to corroborate Dr. Rowe's calculations, but all we got was a message that all the lines were busy and that we were placed in a queue. We will post more news as it comes to hand.

'That's it. That's all there is,' Ace finished up.

'Did you say 22nd to the 24th September?' questioned DeRongo.

'Yeah,' Ace replied.

'Do you think it might be the 23rd?'

'Jesus Christ,' exclaimed Cowboy, 'we've been goin out to Green River for the best part of a decade on that date. Do you reckon the aliens might have somethin to do with the comet?'

'We've been goin out since '15,' said Snake. 'We've done eight shows. Every year the aliens showed up just after twenty past two in the afternoon on the 23rd of September. Every year they showed up in the same place. And now some Aussie reckons the comet is gonna come visitin on that same day. That's a big coincidence.'

Jonesy suddenly spoke over everyone.

'Nine years today, be bound to your family on Pike's Peak, east of San Francisco. That's it, they were warnin me. I saw em first in 2014. It's nine years this year and the comet is comin ... and they were warnin me.'

'Would you like to explain that a bit better to the rest of us, Jonesy,' said Ludwig.

Snake explained,

'Jonesy came to see me in 2014 with all his photos and videos. He told me about what the alien said to him and he even showed me the clip, but he didn't want me to use it. Have you still got the clip, Jonesy?'

'Yeah, I still got it. It's on my computer. Y'all want to see it?'

'Yeah, sure, we want to see it,' everyone replied.

Jonesy was about to get up to go and retrieve his laptop, but Lori stopped him and said she would go. She returned with Jonesy's computer and placed it on an outside table. Everyone gathered around as Jonesy brought up the file titled, *alien message-2014*.

'I was recordin on my iPhone when the alien lady spoke to me.'

They all watched and listened to the video recording of Thebe instructing Jonesy what to do.

'I've been thinkin about what she said for all these years an I've decided to be up there, on top of Pike's Peak, with Lori an the girls, all bound to each other with rope.'

For a moment everyone was silent, all attempting to deal with a number of rapid-fire shocks. Finally it was Trixie that broke the silence.

'You know, Jonesy, I was thinkin about your missin time story that you told us.'

Everyone turned to Trixie. Snake smiled. She continued,

'You said that you thought that the whole universe jumped forward an hour. Maybe it was the other way around. Maybe *you* jumped forward an hour.'

Everyone smiled. Ludwig, who happened to be a huge fan of science fiction novels, suddenly sat up excited.

'You got time shifted, Jonesy, into the future. That's the only explanation. And think about it; what else got time shifted with you?'

Jonesy's brain was partially stalled, so Ludwig continued.

'Your clothes, your watch and your trike. And why did these things go with you?'

Jonesy stared at Ludwig with his mouth agape. Ludwig delivered his conclusion.

'Everything that went with you went with you because it was *bound* to you. This is time travel, Jonesy, but not fictional time travel like you read about in books, this is the real stuff, the stuff the aliens that we've been filming for the last eight years do. You see?'

Everyone broke into a cacophony of conversation. Snake ceased the din when he spoke over everyone.

'So what you are suggestin, Ludwig, is that the alien lady told Jonesy to be bound to his family because they were plannin some kind of time shift on him?'

'Yeah, Snake, a time shift into the future. What's the difference between one hour and a thousand years when you're doing an instant time shift? Absolutely nothing. Who knows how sophisticated their technology is.'

'It makes a lot more sense now,' said DeRongo, 'what with the comet and everything. If that thing hits us, we *will* be toast. A time shift into a future where everything has settled down again would be one really good way to save somebody.'

'I wasn't bound to my trike,' said Jonesy breaking into the conversation. 'It ain't got no seatbelt.'

Ludwig answered,

'Yeah, but you were hanging onto the control bar. Obviously just holding onto something is enough to pull it through time with you. Clearly you are the time shifter. Anyone or anything that wants to do the shift with you needs to be bound to you. It's brilliant, these aliens are brilliant.'

'Maybe they're not as brilliant as you think, Ludwig,' said Cowboy. 'You've conjured up a pretty good story, but you could be barkin up the wrong tree.'

'You are absolutely right, Cowboy, but I know where I want to be on the 23rd of September.'

Jonesy looked at Lori, who nodded her head, then at everyone else and said,

'You are all my family and you are all welcome, but we'll need some more rope to go around.'

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Chapter Fifty-Five

HYPOTHESIS

1

'She was the last of the great old ladies, Alex,' said Lloyd.

'I'm very glad I knew Jikita, Alex, she was always a good friend to me,' added Eva.

'I loved her like my own mother,' said Sophia through her tears. 'I'll never forget the day she introduced us to each other.'

'Thanks guys, your words are very kind.'

'How old was she?'

'She was 91. The hospital told me that they couldn't remember the last time they had someone who died of plain old age.'

'Oh, that's nice.'

'We'll miss having lunches with her, that's what we'll miss.'

'Yeah.'

'Let's go and have lunch at Watson's Bay Pub and remember her.'

'Good idea.'

2

There were few better places in Sydney, in the middle of a crisp August day, than Watson's Bay. There was not a cloud in the sky and one could feel the snow scented chill of the gusty southwester all the way to the base of one's lungs if one dared to breathe in deeply enough. Yet Watson's Bay provided some shelter from the elements and the sun seemed to magically focus its energy there, as if shining on a holy shrine where sun worshippers gathered to pay homage to their god.

They sat in the beer garden, right down the front, overlooking the tiny beach. There were not many people there that day and most of the tables were empty. Sophia unbuttoned her shirt and exposed her lacy, white bra.

'Darling, what will people think?' Alex whispered expressing concern in his voice.

'I don't care,' she replied defiantly, 'I just love the sun in winter. Anyway, no one can see anything.'

Alex and Lloyd smiled at each other. Upon seeing Sophia expose her underwear, Eva decided to do the same thing.

'Oh my God,' exclaimed Alex, 'we'll probably get arrested. I'm not bailing us out.'

'I'm thinking of removing my trousers,' said Lloyd.

'Oh great,' Alex laughed, 'why don't we all run around the pub in the nutty ... I'm going to get some beers. Everyone having a beer?'

Everyone nodded as they kicked back around the table and put their feet up on opposite chairs. Eva turned on her iPad. She Googled Travers' comet and proceeded to check the latest news items.

'You know what's funny,' she said, 'the story seems to be changing. A couple of weeks ago they were telling us that it was coming this way, now they are not so sure.'

'I thought one of the most significant things was that Australian dentist's discovery,' said Lloyd. 'What was his name? Oh God, I can't remember anything anymore. Pretty soon you'll have to come looking for me when I go out to check the mail. What was his name?'

'I'll Google him,' said Eva. She Googled *Australian dentist Travers' comet*. 'Bingo! It was a Dr. Graham Rowe from Parkes. He calculated that the comet would cross Earth's orbit between the 22nd and 24th September. Ha ha, then he told everyone to stock up on toilet paper.'

'That's the guy,' said Lloyd. '22nd to 24th eh? I'll bet anything that it's the 23rd and that it hits the Earth. Alex's junk DNA research reaffirms that.'

Alex returned with a tray of beers and crisps.

'Is someone talking about me?' he asked.

'Ooh yeah, we were all talking about you, Alex,' said Sophia. 'And what juicy stories they were.'

'I don't care. What do I care? I want you all to be happy, even if it is at my expense.'

'We were discussing the comet, Alex,' said Lloyd, 'and how the news reports are changing.'

'Really? Changing?'

'Yes, they are beginning to downplay the danger, no doubt attempting to avert mass panic.'

'Lloyd thinks that it's going to hit us,' said Sophia.

'I used to think that it was going to be a nuclear holocaust, but now it has become pretty obvious that the comet is the most likely cause of a mass die-off on the 23rd of September. It looks like your bizarre junk DNA results might very well come true, Alex.'

'Yeah, maybe, but we still don't have a clue how we get to live for hundreds of years after. That is still a highly improbable mystery.'

'Well,' philosophised Lloyd, 'we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. As far as I am concerned, I'm sticking to our plan of provisioning up Mecca for the four of us for a month. I intend to add a few more items to the list, taking into account a comet strike, like gas masks. There will probably be quite a bit of airborne particulate matter in the atmosphere that none of us would want to breathe. To tell you the truth, the main thing that gives me confidence in our successful survival is your research, Alex. Without that we would be completely screwed. We would have no inkling that anything was about to happen.'

'Yes,' added Eva, 'we would be in the same pot of poo as the rest of the population, completely ignorant and completely dependant on the news coming out of the media.'

3

The winter sun was sitting low in the western sky. Sydney's iconic skyline was becoming silhouetted in the orange backdrop. After a couple of beers each, Eva suggested,

'We might as well stay here for dinner, and anyway, it's a great place to watch the sunset.'

'We'll get to see the comet,' added Alex.

'What's on the menu?' asked Lloyd.

Sophia sprang to her feet and raced into the bar to pick up some menus.

'We should do some hypothesising,' suggested Alex.

'Hypothesising?' asked Lloyd. 'What kind of hypothesising did you have in mind, Alex?'

'Let's see if we can construe what all the main players would do in the event of an imminent, extinction-level, comet impact.'

'You mean like what would people in the know do?'

'Yeah, like the government and other self-interest groups. I imagine that they have underground bunkers all over the place for such scenarios.'

'OK,' said Lloyd, 'good idea. We can construct a hypothetical chain of events that might happen between now and the 23rd of September.'

'That sounds exciting,' said Eva as she perused the menu. 'I'm going to have the John Dory, chips and salad, I think.'

'I'll go with that.'

'Me too.'

'Me three.'

'So that's four John Dorys. ... Or is it Johns Dory? ... Hmm ... and four more beers, I presume. I'll go order them.'

'I'll come with you,' said Sophia.

After the girls scuttled off, Alex began hypothesising.

'If I was in the government, and I had inside information about a deadly comet, I would try to save myself, and my family, at any cost. I would see all other humans as a threat to my plan and would thus, if I could, keep the information about the comet a secret from them. I see this as a primary natural reaction of anyone in that situation.'

'I hate to say it, but I agree with you, Alex. One doesn't want to get killed in the rush to the bunkers before the comet even gets here.'

'Don't forget the supermarkets and petrol stations.'

'Yes, of course, er, what about altruism and humanitarianism?'

'Yes, there will be many of those, but they probably won't survive in an extinction level event. Morality and self-sacrifice is not conducive to survival. I think people will revert back to animalism where for one to survive another must die. So, going back to our government insider, he will naturally attempt to hold back the information while at the same time preparing himself and his family for survival.'

'Actually, I agree with you, Alex. One of the primary strategies for these peoples' survival will be to minimise competition from all other human beings, by any means possible.'

'Yes, I think that is exactly what the government will try to do through the media. I don't think there is an ounce of morality in any of them. They will try to withhold information, that is my postulate.'

'Actually, Alex, they will probably do more than try to withhold information. They will probably fabricate false information and attempt to control the behaviour of the masses with it. They will probably attempt to engender a false sense of security in all the people by telling them blatant lies.'

'Yeah, while at the same time preparing themselves and their families for the imminent disaster. They'll be telling people to relax and not worry ... er, they'll be telling them to go to the beach and to the movies ... while secretly stashing tons of supplies in deep underground bunkers for themselves.'

'They will probably make hoarding illegal ...' Lloyd looked over his shoulder and noticed, 'oh, here come the girls with the food.'

'Good. I'm so starving I could eat a horse ... with cancer.'

'Wow, that *is* starving.'

The girls returned with two trays of food and beverage.

'Hello boys,' said Eva, 'have you missed us?'

'Indescribably,' answered Lloyd.

'They told us that these fish were caught this morning,' said Sophia.

'Wow, just look at that sunset,' marvelled Eva as the girls sat down.

'The comet will come into view when it gets dark enough,' explained Lloyd.

'We'll get a dress circle view from here,' said Sophia.

'Oh God this fish is good,' exclaimed Alex.

'Have you boys been hypothesising while we were away?'

'Yes we have, Eva.'

'And what conclusions have you reached?'

'Well, we have got it down to an active disinformation campaign by the government through the media,' explained Alex.

'Yes, basically everything that will come through the media from now on will most likely be a blatant fabrication designed to steer the behaviour of the masses in a chosen direction.'

'You mean into a false sense of security?'

'That is correct, Eva my darling. Hoodwinking on a global scale, with fatal consequences.'

'Maybe it's for the best,' suggested Sophia. 'At least the people will get to spend the final days of their lives free of absolute terror.'

'Interesting thought,' observed Lloyd.

'Would anything the government said or did make any difference to the final outcome?'

Lloyd and Alex looked at each other. Lloyd replied,

'Actually, if we are talking about an extinction level event, no, none of it would make any difference at all. Everyone and everything would die. Maybe some might survive in their deep underground bunkers, but they could only take a small number of people there.'

'So it is probably better that they lie to everyone and keep them calm.'

'I guess so, Eva, I guess so.'

They enjoyed their meals as they watched the sun set behind the city skyline. By the time they were finished, it was dark enough to see the comet.

'It's getting bigger,' observed Eva.

'Let's see, it's the 10th of August today; how many days are there in August?'

'Thirty-one I think, Lloyd,' replied Eva.

'So that's twenty-one plus twenty-three, equals forty-four days to go. The comet is only forty-four days away.'

'I don't know about you, but I just felt a chill of fear run down my spine.'

'Me too, Alex,' said Sophia.

'I have faith in Alex's research,' responded Eva. 'I believe that we will make it somehow ... I just feel it ... and I believe in Lloyd's seamanship, and in Mecca, our trusty sloop.'

'I'm with Eva,' said Lloyd. 'I have to start making up lists of things we'll need.'

'We must help Leon and Russel get themselves ready as well,' said Eva.

'Yes. We'll need food, fire and shelter,' said Lloyd.

'And good outdoorsy type clothes,' added Eva.

'We'll want hunting and fishing gear,' said Alex.

'Ugh, I have never killed anything.'

'That's OK, Sophia; I've skinned rabbits on the farm. We will each need a good hunting knife. Your knife is your best friend in the bush.'

'Now I'm getting nervous,' said Eva.

Lloyd spoke confidently, like a leader.

'Instead of getting nervous, we must all get busy getting ready. We begin tomorrow. Every inch of space on the boat must be utilised. We can also put many things in the dinghy. Every item we take must be functional. We have nothing to worry about because if you remember, Alex's research has us not only surviving, but living for centuries.'

They all became silent for a moment as they gazed westward and focussed on the increasingly menacing looking comet. They all felt the fear attempting to overwhelm them and they all felt themselves fight that fear by focusing on the solitary item of hope they knew, which was Alex's research into the non-coding DNA and the surprising results that came out of it.

Eva broke the silence with,

'We mustn't forget to stock up on plenty of toilet paper.'

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Chapter Fifty-Six

TAVISH

1

The nightly news began in the same fashion as on every other night for the previous month. The comet was headline news and all other news was secondary because of it.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is the news of Wednesday August 23rd 2023. Travers' comet again dominates the news with the latest release from NASA reassuring us that the comet will safely pass between the Earth and Moon on the 23rd of September. The report goes on to say that a number of small pieces of comet debris may in fact pass through our atmosphere, but NASA assures us that they will burn up harmlessly before they hit the ground.'

'Tavish McTavish, head of NASA's Travers' comet Task Force, stated today that he was looking forward to the spectacle and that he and his family were planning a backyard, comet-welcoming barbecue on the big night.'

'People all over the world are planning to celebrate the comet's passing. We now cross to London for the latest on their planned celebrations.'

'A jolly good evening America. Reggie here. On the 23rd of September, Londoners will do what Londoners do best, paaaaar-teeeee! Yeah baby! ... and Roger ... it's Roger isn't it?'

'Er, yes, that's correct, Reggie.'

'Well, Rodgee-dee, I have some Earth-shattering news for you tonight ... no, no, Elton John has not been defrosted out of his cryo, it's bigger than that ... are you ready America ... The Stones ... oh MY God, did I just say The Stones? ... Yes I did, girlfriend ... The Stones are going to smash the whole planet with a show they say will absolutely slay everybody. How about that, America?'

'Do you mean The Rolling Stones, Reggie? I would have thought that they would have been on life support by now, ha, ha.'

'They might look like the walking dead, Rodgee-dee, but apparently they still kick ass, as you Americans like to say.'

'It's a wonder they survived the epidemic. If they live any longer, people are going to start thinking that they're immortal.'

'Yeah baby. That's because they come from good old British stock, Rodg.'

'Aren't they into blood transfusions or something?'

'Rodgee, Rodgee, where did you hear that? I don't know where these sorts of cruel rumours come from. I have it on good authority that Mick and the boys get off on their veggies every day, and you can take that to the bank.'

'They probably suck them through a straw.'

'Ha, ha, ha, Rodgee baby, the par-teeeee, Rodgee, aren't we supposed to talk about the par-tee? What is happening on your side of the pond?'

'Listen, Reggie, us Noo Yorkers can out-par-teeee you bunch of fish-n-chip chompin redcoats any day of the week. The 23rd of September'll be like Noo Years Eve 1999 here in the Big Apple.'

Trixie yelled from inside the house,

'They're sayin it's gonna miss us, Snake. They're sayin that there's gonna be a big party.'

Snake took the phone away from his ear and yelled from the side of the pool,

'Change the friggin channel, Trixie. Those sons of bitches are bullshittin everybody.'

'OK, Snake. You want I should get you another beer?'

'That'd be nice, cupcakes.' Snake put the phone back to his ear. *'Now Jack, I don't want you to let me down on this one. I need the whole load here by the weekend.'*

'You got it, Snake. The truck is nearly loaded. We're just waitin for the guns and the ammo and well be off. We should be there by Saturday night. And you wanna buy the truck as well, is that right?'

'That's right, Jack, the truck and everythin that's in the truck, for cash, payable on delivery.'

Snake hung up the phone. He lit a cigar and took a swig of his beer. His phone rang. He recognised that the call was from Jonesy and picked up.

'Hiya Jonesy.'

'Hiya, Snake. Have you been watchin the news?'

'Agh, Trixie's been surfen the channels, but all I smell is bullshit by the bucket-load.'

'They all reckon that it's gonna miss us an put on a great show.'

'Yeah, crap!'

'Have you seen the guy on YouTube that reckons it's gonna hit? He calls himself *cometwatcher*. He put up this video showin all these calculations he'd done an he's come to the conclusion that it's gonna hit right somewhere in the middle of the North American continent, man. Have you seen the video, Snake?'

'Can't say as I have, Jonesy. I knew nothin about it.'

'They took his video down as soon as it started goin viral. He put it up again an told everybody to record it on their phones off their computer screens. He then told everybody to upload their copy back on YouTube. He reckoned that that was the only way to beat the bastards. That's what I've done; I've recorded it on my phone, Snake, an just after I did it they took the video down again. I can send it to you if you want.'

'That'd be good, Jonesy. I'd like to see it. So what else does this guy reckon?'

'Well, he reckons that he's calculated the size of the comet. He reckons that based on the speed reduction and the change of angle after the Venus encounter, the comet should be about twenty-five miles end to end.'

'Holy cow!'

'An he reckons that there are at least a couple of dozen chunks of rock flyin through space alongside it that are between half an two miles across.'

'Jesus Christ!'

'He reckons that the main comet will hit on the 23rd somewhere right in the middle of the North American continent an that all the rest of the chunks will pepper the whole rest of the planet. That was his word that he used, Snake, pepper.'

'Jesus, Jonesy, send me the video an I'll check it out.'

'They keep takin it off YouTube, but now so many people are postin it back up that they can't keep up with em.'

'Serves em right, the sonabitches. Hey, I've got the supplies comin this weekend.'

'What have you got?'

'You name it. Food, water, tents, guns, ammo, clothes, first aid; did you know that Trixie used to be a nurse?'

'No, I didn't know that, Snake.'

'Oh yeah. She made up a list of stuff, everythin from bandages and tourniquets to penicillin and sutures. She's somethin else.'

'How are ya gettin all the supplies up there?'

'I've bought a truck. We'll have to go an scout out the area, Jonesy. I figured we could make base camp somewhere near Pike's Peak, maybe in a park or campin area. I thought we could fly a lot of the supplies up the mountain in the chopper.'

'We better go out there and case the scene soon, Snake. Time's runnin out.'

'I thought next week, after all the supplies get here. Lets both check out the area on Google Earth an I'll touch base with you in a few days.'

'That might be too slow, Snake.'

'You wanna go faster?'

'I think so, Snake.'

'OK, how about, say the truck arrives on Saturday like Jack says it will, so say I book a flight to San-Fran on Sunday mornin an you pick me up at the airport?'

'That's a better idea, Snake.'

'I tell you what, Jonesy, why don't you hire us a nice red Corvette for the trip into the mountains an pick me up in that.'

'You got it, Snake. You want it should be convertible?'

'Yeah, an get the one with the big-mother motor.'

'Sounds good, Snake. Call me an let me know your flight number. We'll blast straight up the mountains from the airport.'

'I'll call you Saturday night.'

'Adios compadre.'

'Adios amigo.'

2

The candy-apple-red Corvette roared up the Sonora Pass Highway. Snake drove while Jonesy navigated using both the GPS in the dash and Google Earth on his tablet.

About twenty-five miles out of Sonora, and just before lunch, they rolled into a tiny town called Cold Springs. They pulled up at the only building on the side of the road, which just happened to be the Cold Springs Realty office.

'What kind of house are you fellers lookin fur?'

'We'd like it big, next to a clearin and some water nearby, an as close to Pike's Peak as possible.'

'Well, you'd be wantin somethin around Pinecrest Lake, up the road apiece. Just happen to have a place on the books that might suit yer. Let me git my file.'

Jonesy and Snake looked at each other while the realty man rummaged through his filing cabinet.

'It's here somewheres. I know the place. It's real pretty. It's on Pinecrest Avenue an it's right across the street from a cleared out space. You got kids?'

'Er, yeah,' replied Jonesy, 'but they're pretty grown up, er, high school.'

'Not too many high schools round heresabouts ... here it is.' He opened the file and took out some photos of the house. 'I can take you up there if you like, it ain't far.'

'We like,' said Snake enthusiastically.

As they followed the agent's pickup in the Corvette, Jonesy looked up Pinecrest, California, on the net.

'I know this place, Snake. It can't be more than five miles from Pike's Peak as the crow flies. It's like a holiday place with campin, an a resort with a marina on the lake. It's a real pretty place.'

They pulled up in front of the house, which was a well maintained, medium-sized, stone and timber construction with a gabled roof. They stepped out of their cars.

'There's your open space over there,' said the agent pointing across the street from the house.

'No problems landing the chopper there, Jonesy,' observed Snake.

'It has a big driveway, as you can see, a big two-car garage, five spacious bedrooms, a big woodpile fur the fireplace ...'

'We'll take it,' said Snake.

'But you ain't seen the inside of it yet, sir.'

'So let's have a look.'

As they inspected the interior of the commodious mountain abode, Snake found out the asking price and offered \$50,000 bonus to the agent if he could get the conveyancing completed within a week. After the agent caught his breath, he assured Snake that he could get the job done on time because his brother was a lawyer. He told them that they could pick up the keys in seven days, 'or anytime after'.

3

As soon as Snake returned home to Las Vegas from his house-hunting trip he began calling everyone and informing them of the purchase. He told them that the Pinecrest house would be their base from which they would launch operations. He told them all,

'Get good hikin boots an tough mountain clothes an backpacks. I've got guns, crossbows, ammo, arrows, knives, binoculars an you name it.'

Snake was approaching this like a military operation. He suspected that the comet might take everything out, including them, but he clung onto a blind faith that Jonesy would somehow pull them through, although he couldn't imagine how. He knew one thing for sure though. The last decade of his life had unfolded in a fashion he could never have imagined or foreseen even in his wildest dreams. Who could have imagined aliens from other planets that flew around in silent silver disks and psychedelic body suits?

The aliens were responsible for his obscene wealth, they were responsible for his new *family*, his talented crew, and they were responsible for them being the benefactors of the secret knowledge about a date and a place to be, *bound to one's family*. Although he wasn't a religious man in the traditional sense of the word, Snake had his own secret relationship with *the Big Guy upstairs*. He had his own reasons, which he never spoke about. He spoke to the Big Guy and he believed that the Big Guy listened; that was how it went. He always thought that he wasn't going to hide under some rock from the Big Guy, 'no, no way'. For better or worse, he would face Him, and be open to Him, and accept his fate as delivered by Him. But Snake had absolutely no time for any kind of organised religion and he had zero tolerance for its 'twisted' purveyors.

'Bullshit artists, the lot of em.'

People all across America and all around the world ate their dinner in front of the '*many coloured beast*' that dominated their living rooms. Togetherness was now something altogether different from what it was a few generations before. Togetherness was now being locked into the beast in the vicinity of people who were similarly locked in. Days, even weeks, went by without anyone in the house ever looking at anyone else directly in the eye. Whole conversations were held between participants who were firmly tranced into the rectangle of flickering light. It was like having a black hole in the house. Albert Einstein warned us about how anyone that got too close to a black hole would be drawn into it until they got so close that they could never escape. Little did he know that black holes came in many guises and that one of those guises was the domestic television set. It sucked everything in. It operated chiefly on the mental level, attracting and annihilating the mind of its victims. It sucked the personality out of a person like someone sucks the meat out of a lobster claw. This phenomenon might have been predictable mathematically, and Einstein might have even worked out the formula if he had lived long enough, but there was something that was not so easily predictable, and it was quite amazing. The black hole created a vacuum and then re-filled that vacuum with something else. It replaced the vibrant, unique consciousness it had sucked out of the human individual with its own consciousness, which could at best be described as *groupthink* and at worst, *propaganda*. And the most amazing thing about this whole transmutation was that the victim remained completely oblivious to what was happening to him. The black hole gave the anaesthetic and then performed the lobotomy. It took away *real* reality and replaced it with its own, *even realer* reality. Reality wasn't what was happening outside, it was what was happening on TV, and everyone believed it. They believed in the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam War, the moon landing, 9/11, Saddam's weapons of mass destruction and carbon tax. And now they believed in the Travers' comet flypast. They believed everything they were told because they were lobotomised and were thus incapable of discerning the truth. From the point of view of an alien race, they were ready to die.

'Snake ...'

'Yeah cupcakes?'

'That NASA guy who's in charge of the comet task force is gonna be on TV.'

'You mean the guy with the funny name? What's his name? Donald McDonald?'

'No Snake, it's Tavish McTavish. They're sayin that he's gonna give us the latest information on the comet.'

'You know, Trix, you oughtn'ta watch that thing so much cause it'll rot your brain.'

'I would'a thought my brain was the last thing you worried about, Snake.'

'I worry about all of you, Trixie. I just don't want you to get too sucked in by all the bullshit, that's all.'

'Don't you worry about that an come in here an give your Trixie a big kiss, eh?'

Snake could never resist an invitation like that. He rose from the lounge in his study and stepped into the living room. The television took their attention.

Live from downtown, smoggy Burbank, welcome to Newspeak.

Dateline, Friday September first 2023. Travers' comet continues to hurtle towards Earth accompanied by an armada of deadly debris, which became freed from their icy entrapment during the comet melt as it passed through Venus' thick atmosphere, ... bla ... bla ... bla, I'm reading here. Today we have Mr. Tavish McTavish, from NASA, who is with us to explain the latest findings on the goings on of Travers' comet. Good evening Tavish. Give Tavish a big hand, people.

The rented audience, going by the name of *Clapmeisters*, gave Tavish precisely ten seconds of wild applause with added hoots and whistles. Tavish looked decidedly troubled as he sat in the guest's chair. His forehead was furrowed and his eyes darted from side to side. He appeared to be unable to make direct eye contact with anyone. He seemed to be hazy on his surroundings. A small bead of sweat rolled down his left temple.

'Good evening, Tavish. Is that an Irish name?'

'Uhm, yeah, Dave.'

'Is it OK to call you Tavish?'

Tavish stared at the audience as though they were cardboard cutouts. There was a distinct glaze in his eyes. The presenter looked sideways at the audience with a *'what the fuck?'* look on his face. He turned back towards Tavish and asked him,

'So Tavish, three weeks to go. The whole world is chillin the champagne in anticipation. Tell us a bit about how you discovered the comet.'

Tavish's eyes turned slowly towards the presenter with a dumbfounded look on his face. It was the kind of expression a person gets just after they realise that they are in the presence of a total idiot. He scanned the interior of the studio with a slow, purposeful turn of the head. The camera zoomed in on his face as he mumbled,

'You are all actors.'

The presenter looked at the ceiling and called out to his producer,

'Greg, what is happening here? Should we go to a break?'

Just before they made a decision to cut to an advertisement, Tavish regained his composure.

'Actually, Dave, the comet was discovered by an Aussie gliding instructor named Timmy Travers, hence the name Travers' comet.'

'What did I say?'

'I was the guy that guessed that the comet would execute an aero-braking manoeuvre through the Venusean atmosphere.'

The audience laughed.

'You crack me up, Tavish. So can you describe to the people of the world just how good the big show is gonna get? Will it be better than the New Years Eve fireworks?'

'Sure, Dave, I can give you a description.'

The audience broke into wild applause. Dave shuffled in his chair excitedly and licked his lips. Tavish leaned back in casual repose and placed his right ankle on top of his left knee. A sudden calm overcame him. He appeared like a man who finally got it. He began,

'Travers' comet came hurtling into our solar system doing something like 40 kilometres per second, which is about 144,000 kilometres per hour, Dave. It was huge, about thirty miles across. I guess the universe is a game of random events, a

game of billiards played on an infinite billiard table. Every now and then something hits something else. I suppose that you could work out some sort of statistical probability, but the fact is that there was nothing random about the comet's encounter with Venus. Since its formation, the comet's flight path was ruled by the immutable laws of physics. If you knew where it was and you knew its mass, speed and trajectory, and you were smart enough, you could have worked out the Venus encounter thousands of years in advance. And you probably could have worked out what happened after the Venus encounter. You just needed the data and the intelligence to do it.'

Tavish looked around at all the blank, gaping faces, then continued.

'Once I knew the speed and mass of the comet, I crunched the numbers and came up with the aero-braking scenario. I have no idea why nobody else got it ... no idea at all ... it seemed pretty straightforward to me.'

'Everyone knows what happened after that, how NASA sacked me, and how President Griffin got my job back for me.'

The Clapmeisters burst into a round of wild applause, hooting and whistling.

'Thank you. The comet burned deep through the Venusean atmosphere, but did not actually make physical contact with the ground. It experienced a huge amount of friction, which caused the fireball we all witnessed from Earth. The friction also caused a profound reduction in the comet's mass due to the vaporization of an outer layer of ice. This vaporisation of ice released a number of large rocks, which were previously trapped within it. Am I making any sense, Dave?'

'Er, kind of, Tavish. Are we coming to the show part anytime soon? Everybody's itching to hear about the show.'

'Oh yeah, I'm getting to that.'

'Oh good. Give Tavish a big hand for that, folks.'

More applause.

'Er, thanks. Now, where was I? Oh yeah. The comet burned away about a sixth of its mass passing through the Venusean atmosphere. It is now, as close as I can figure it, about twenty-five miles across. The other thing that happened, and you needed really excellent data to figure this out in advance, the other thing that

happened ... actually there were two things ... there was the twenty-three degree change in trajectory ... plus there was a slowing down of the comet due to the braking effect of the atmosphere. It halved its speed to about 72,000 kilometres per hour. Er, most of the freed debris got slowed down a bit more than the core of the comet ... er ... smaller chunks more than bigger chunks ... er ... as a consequence they got deflected at slightly different angles meaning that they are spread out in a broad pattern, not unlike a shotgun blast. Because some got slowed down more than others, some will ... er ...' Tavish paused and looked at all the apathetic faces staring blankly at him. After a brief moment of contemplation he continued, *'some will, er, pass this way, we estimate as much as twelve hours after the main part of the comet does. That will give the Earth time to turn and ...'*

'I know what you are going to say, Tavish, you are going to say that everybody on Earth will get to see the show ... eh what? ... Am I right?'

Tavish's jaw dropped open and his eyes took on an even more vacant stare. He mumbled,

'You must be psychic, Dave.'

The audience went nuts with applause. Dave rose to his feet and began stomping around his chair, chanting, *'par-tee, par-tee, par-tee'*. Then the whole audience rose to their feet and began chanting *'par-tee'* as well. Tavish just sat there looking like Jack Nicholson after his lobotomy. After all of the ruckus subsided, he continued,

'Er, so the comet is about 25 miles end to end. That's like two Manhattans, Dave. It's travelling at about, ah, give or take, 72,000 kilometres per hour, which is, er, about 45,000 miles per hour, which is about 12.5 miles per second.'

Beads of perspiration were beginning to appear on Tavish's forehead.

'Er, we've been observing the comet and doing a lot of number crunching and we've pretty much nailed the final trajectory. We've got the ETA down to, er, like five minutes. Er, just as a hypothetical ...' Tavish looked at Dave, *'er, that's like pretend, Dave ... just as a pretend, if the comet hypothetically hit anything, it carries the power of about 240 quadrillion tons of TNT, er, I think the Hiroshima bomb was something like around 15 thousand tons. Er ... that equates to about 16 trillion Hiroshimas ... er ... that's one huge firecracker, Dave ... Er, this thing is*

going so fast it'd be through the atmosphere in about five seconds. That's just enough time to take one breath.'

Everyone in the studio sat spellbound.

'Er, as I said already, we've pretty much nailed the ETA. It's going to be sometime between 2.20 and 2.25 in the afternoon, Mountain Time, on the 23rd of September.'

Dave cut in,

'Ohh, that's daytime, Tavish. You can't have fireworks in the daytime. Can't you do anything about that?'

'Life is full of disappointments, Dave. Get used to it. Now, the speed, mass and power of this thing adds up to some biblical numbers, Dave. Like this puppy would bury itself forty miles into the Earth's crust if it hit. It would take you hours to drive your Hummer to the bottom of the hole. As I said, we've done plenty of number crunching and we've nailed it, Dave.'

Tavish sat there looking as pale as a ghost and as cool as a cucumber. With sweat dribbling down his forehead, he calmly declared,

'The comet is going to slam into the Earth right in the middle of Wyoming, with the power of 240 quadrillion ...'

Suddenly a man ran into the shot. He appeared to have come from the audience. Only his back and the back of his head could be seen. He pulled a pistol from his right jacket pocket, placed it point blank between the eyes of Tavish's forehead and pulled the trigger. As the bullet buried itself deep inside Tavish's brain, his last realisation was that it was a fractal precursor of the coming event. Dave dove under his desk. The audience screamed. The gunman raced off, stage left. Tavish slumped forward in his chair, dead. The program cut. The station logo appeared for fifteen seconds. Finally an ad for Chunky Cheese Protein Patties, with guaranteed 5% real meat content, came on. After the ad, a favourite old episode of F-Troop began.

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Chapter Fifty-Seven
THE ANNIHILATION BOMB

1

The execution of Tavish McTavish went completely unreported by all the mainstream media. It was as if it never happened. There was no mention of it in any television, radio or Internet news. It was as if they believed that if something didn't exist in their media, it didn't exist, therefore it didn't exist. They had come to this belief over a century of news manipulation, firstly through the print media, and finally through the electronic media. In the end they reached a point where they believed their own lie. If they decided that something wasn't news, it just wasn't news, so it didn't exist. It wasn't part of reality. So if it happened and people actually saw it happen, if the media ignored it, it didn't happen. And if the media modified it, that was what really happened. Two classic examples of such flimflams were the Kennedy assassination and the moon landings. And the lobotomised masses of planet Earth swallowed them, hook, line, sinker, rod and boat. From the point of view of an alien race, they were ready to die.

As it turned out, thousands of people recorded Tavish's murder. The video clips of the event flooded the Internet. As much as the people behind the scenes of sites like YouTube attempted to delete the clips, citing breaches of copyright as reasons for their actions, they just couldn't hold back the flood.

Following the clips of the murder came a wave of videos of Tavish's speech and his announcement of the impending collision between the comet and Earth. These were downloaded by millions of people. YouTube's *cometwatcher*, who had been right all along, was finally vindicated by Tavish's courageous revelation. While this social media tidal wave of truth was sweeping around the planet just beneath the surface, domestic television sets all over the country remained completely calm and innocuous. All the live programming just disappeared off the screen. It was replaced by repeats of favourite old shows like *Seinfeld*.

In the end, two truths began to dawn upon the sleeping population of the Earth. One was the truth about Travers' comet and the other was the truth about the deceitful mainstream media.

Different people reacted in different ways. One of the most common reactions was that the person just didn't show up for work. It began as a trickle, just here and there, but the trickle soon turned into a torrent as the full implications of the impending disaster became clearer. Strand by strand, the fabric of civilised society began to unravel.

2

Trixie came home from shopping, all flustered.

'Our local gas station is closed, Snake. The owner never showed up. He musta put the sign in the window last night that said; *Closed due to comet. Gone to Mexico*. I had to get gas at the station you don't like.'

'It looks like it's startin, Trix.'

'Yeah, Snake, an the supermarket was fresh outa bread an milk an heaps of other stuff. The checkout chick told me that the delivery truck never showed up this mornin.'

'I wouldn't be surprised if the driver is takin his family down to Mexico as well, Trix.'

'The world is startin to go crazy, Snake. What'll we do?'

'We'll stick to our plan, that's what we'll do, cupcakes. Cowboy'll be here any minute. He'll help us load the last of our stuff and we're outa here. Organise your most precious things, but remember, in the end we might only get to keep what we can carry on our backs.'

'I'm startin to feel scared, Snake.'

'Feelin scared is OK, Trix. Just remember this one thing, I'll never leave your side, not for a minute, cause I loves ya like me own mother.'

'Thanks, Snake, I loves ya too.'

They kissed and hugged.

Not long after, Cowboy and Lauren rolled up in the Panamera. The plan was that they would follow Snake and Trixie in the truck, all the way to the new house at Pinecrest Lake where they would meet up with the rest of the crew. Ace would fly the chopper out to Pinecrest a few days later.

'Say good-bye to the house, Trix. I got me doubts that we'll ever see it again. It's been nice, eh?'

'Real nice, Snake,' whimpered Trixie between her sobs.

'We can't look back,' said Snake. 'We gotta fixate our minds on the future cause pretty soon there won't be no past to look back to.'

Snake was the only one who wasn't feeling mild shock at that moment. He felt that he couldn't allow himself that luxury because his crew depended on him for their very survival and he needed to keep a clear head and a firm focus on the path ahead.

3

They rolled out of Vegas before sunrise on *Tuesday 5th September 2023*. Snake drove the truck, Trixie rode shotgun while Cowboy and Lauren followed in the Panamera. They took Route 15 through the Mojave Desert and stopped in Barstow for breakfast and a top up of fuel. From there they took the Barstow-Bakersfield Highway to Bakersfield. They communicated with each other through their cells, which were connected, hands free, to their vehicular sound systems.

'What is it with all the military convoys, Snake?' Cowboy asked.

'Yeah, an they're all headin east. I've never seen so many army trucks headin in the same direction before.'

They stopped for lunch on the outskirts of Fresno. They sat down next to a man, his wife and their two young kids. They struck up a conversation as they ate their lunch.

'Where you headed?' asked the man.

'San Fran,' replied Snake.

'I wouldn't be goin up there,' the man whispered.

'Is that right? Why not?'

'Did you see that NASA guy get shot on TV the other night?'

'Yeah, as a matter of fact I did.' Snake looked around at his companions then back at the man. 'We all saw it.'

'Did you get what he was sayin before he got shot?'

'You wanna run it past me again?'

'Wyomin, man, the comet is comin down in Wyomin with the power of 16 trillion nuclear bombs. The government is lyin to everybody, man. It's every man for himself, man.'

'Where you headed?' Snake asked.

'As far south as possible, man. First we're goin to Mexico, but we're gonna try to make it all the way down to Panama if we can. We gotta get as far away from Wyomin as possible.'

Snake noticed the worried look on the man's wife's and kids' faces. He could see that they weren't sure if they were worried about the comet or the sanity of their husband and father. Snake looked around the restaurant and focused on the eyes of individuals sitting around the tables. He recognised two kinds of eyes, regular and crazy. Regular was what he saw any average day at any diner. Crazy eyes were survivalist's eyes. They were acutely aware of their surroundings and blazing with light. The man, his family, Snake and his compadres all had crazy eyes, as did a couple of other groups in the restaurant. He sensed a phoney calm about the place, the kind of calm one could cut with a knife. The crazy-eyed people in the establishment looked like they knew something. They were keeping a low profile, though, and weren't about to stampede the herd. Nobody was trying to attract any attention. The only thing that gave them away were their crazy eyes.

They arrived at Jonesy's house in Berkley late in the afternoon. Jonesy had his Winnebago all packed and loaded. They planned to leave for Pinecrest Lake first thing in the morning.

That night they all sat around the lounge room and watched Jonesy's videos of the aliens, over and over again. They were particularly interested in the part where the lady alien gave Jonesy his instructions.

'Nine years today, be bound to your family on Pike's Peak, east of San Francisco.'

'Do you think she meant right on top of Pike's Peak, Jonesy, or roundabouts Pike's Peak?'

'How am I supposed to know, Snake? I always figured right on top.'

'Cause if it's right on top, I ain't sure if we can get all our supplies up there. We'll only be able to take our backpacks up to the summit. That will limit our survivability. That's *if* we survive, an it all depends on Ludwig bein right about the time shift thing. We should wait for everybody to show up before we make any final decisions, although the final call is always yours, Jonesy.'

‘Thanks, Snake. I had been wonderin meself if it was necessary to climb right up to the summit. There ain’t much room up there. How long before everybody shows up?’

‘We should all be at the Pinecrest house by tomorrow night. That’ll give us plenty of time to get organised.’

4

It was Wednesday night, *6th September 2023*. Everyone had arrived at the Pinecrest house. There was Tommy Jones, his wife, Lori, and their four teenage daughters, Carla, Clara, Catherine and Connie. There was Snake and Trixie, Dirk and Inga, Clint and Lauren, Ludwig and Ivana, Ace and Johanna, and finally, Melvin.

After settling into the house and having dinner, they all sat in a circle around the central common room. Even though Jonesy was the key to their survival, as far as they understood things, everyone was quite happy to let Snake be the leader of the group. His strength of character and obvious affection for the group gave everyone enough confidence to fend off the huge fear heaping up just outside their consciousness. Snake began to speak.

‘We have seventeen days to make the right decisions. We can do almost anythin we like cause we’re rollin in money. So it’s all a matter of thinkin it out right, makin a plan, an followin up on that plan. The first thing we oughta discuss is whether we need to climb up to Pike’s Peak, or whether we can stay here. I’ve watched the video of the alien with Jonesy at least a hundred times. She definitely says to be at Pike’s Peak, no doubts. But to do that leaves us with certain disadvantages, like we can only take our backpacks up there, not much more. I’ve been doin plenty of thinkin about it an I’ve decided that we are Jonesy’s guests here, an that as a consequence we don’t get to have any say about where we’re gonna be. So I think it should be Jonesy’s call.’

Everyone looked at Jonesy. He looked down for a moment and played with his shoelace, then he looked up at everyone and calmly announced,

‘She told me to be on Pike’s Peak an that’s where I think I oughta be.’

‘OK,’ said Snake, ‘that’s the decision, an that’s what we’ll go with. I gotta say that I tend to agree with Jonesy. No point in riskin that the time shift mightn’t

work cause we were in the wrong place. What do you reckon about that, Ludwig?’

Ludwig was startled to attention.

‘Er what, who me? Er ... I er, tend to agree that it’s Jonesy’s call, but I doubt that it matters where we are. The time shift will probably happen anyway. As far as I understand it, if you shift in time you don’t necessarily shift in space. That means that you pop up sometime in the future in the same place you left the past. I suspect that there might be somebody at Pike’s Peak to meet us when we pop up in the future. That is probably the main reason to be there.’

Everyone broke out into a cacophony of conversation. The idea that there might be someone there to greet them excited them very much. Snake spoke up above the group.

‘That may very well happen, but we gotta plan for it *not* happenin. How far into the future do you reckon we might be goin, Ludwig?’

‘That’s hard to say, Snake. I guess it all depends on how much damage the comet does to the planet. It could be a hundred years or it could be a thousand years, it’s anyone’s guess. The way I see it is that it doesn’t matter when we pop up because the Earth will be the same whether it’s a hundred or a thousand years.’

‘The same, Ludwig?’ asked DeRongo.

‘Yeah, pristine wilderness. Like paradise without any supermarkets. Like America was before even the Indians got here. Nothing but nature. This, if our time shift theory is right, is our destiny, and it’s just over two weeks away.’

‘How will we live without Walmart?’ asked Trixie sounding very concerned. Snake replied,

‘One breath at a time, cupcakes, one breath at a time.’ He continued. ‘We’ve got a truckload of supplies outside. We’ve got freeze-dried meals, water bottles, lighters, matches, butane stoves, hiking packs, tents, sleeping mats, first aid kits, vitamins, antibiotics, binoculars, compasses, you name it. I don’t even know everythin we’ve got. We should be able to survive with what we can carry on our backs for about two weeks. We’ve also got guns, traps an fishin gear for huntin an fishin; an we’ve got enough ammo to defend the Alamo. The way I figure it, we’ll need to hike down the mountain to the coast followin a stream. That’ll give

us water an maybe fish. When we get to the ocean we'll find a place to settle, somewheres with some shelter an plenty of natural food like shellfish an crabs. We'll either start farmin, I got plenty of seeds, or we might decide to keep movin, like hunters and gatherers. There are no guarantees in this venture, an in the end we're all gonna die anyhow, but we're givin ourselves a shot at somethin here an I say let's make the most of it an treat it like an adventure.'

'That's all very good, Snake, but shouldn't we wait on Pike's Peak for a few days for somebody to show up first?'

'Jonesy brings up a good point, Snake, otherwise what's the point in even goin up there? Maybe we should wait there until somebody shows up.'

'What I reckon,' said Ace, 'is that we better start trainin. Most of us are pretty out of condition. I think we should go hiking every day between now and the 23rd.'

'I'll hike to Pike's Peak tomorrow,' said Cowboy. 'Who's with me?'

Everyone agreed. Lori asked,

'By the way, did everyone remember the toilet paper?'

5

They spoke late into the night. Ludwig was the first to entertain a darker facet of the whole comet phenomenon.

'You know, I've read plenty of sci-fi in my time. I think you could safely say that it is my favourite genre. There are many novels that deal with alien invasions. The old saying that truth is stranger than fiction might apply to the situation we, and our planet, find ourselves in at present. I have been asking myself lately whether the aliens could deflect the comet? I think they could do it with one arm tied behind their backs. So why don't they do it, eh? Does anyone want to hazard a guess?'

'Are you suggesting some kind of alien conspiracy, Ludwig?' DeRongo asked.

'Well, yes and no. Maybe the comet is a natural phenomenon. Maybe they had nothing to do with it. Maybe they just found out about it. Maybe they're like us, just more advanced, and our planet is perfect for them. Maybe our planet is just like theirs, except it's full of crazy people that are extremely prone to violence. Maybe the only thing standing in the way of their colonisation of Earth

is us, and maybe the comet conveniently takes care of that problem for them. Why should they stop it? It makes no sense.'

'So they use the comet like a mega weapon,' suggested DeRongo, 'like an *annihilation bomb*.'

'That's right, Dirk, like an annihilation bomb. And when everything settles back down to pristine wilderness, they move in unchallenged. It's perfect.'

'They seem like nice people to me,' said Jonesy. 'They seem similar to us.'

'They certainly seem perfectly adapted to our planet,' replied Ludwig. 'I've never seen them wearing space suits. They wore those body-hugging outfits but I suspect that they were some kind of levitation suits. They breathe our air no problem. I don't know where they come from, but the place can't be much different to Earth because they seem quite at home here.'

'They can't be all that bad cause they tipped me off about the date.'

'They did more than that, Jonesy; they set you up to survive. They *chose* you.'

'It sounds like we better get used to the idea of interactin with these dudes from space. It sounds like they might be movin into the neighbourhood.'

'That may very well be, Cowboy, but with them comes some pretty fancy technology,' said Ace, 'like interplanetary spaceships, antigravity and time travel.'

'Plenty more than that, I suspect,' said Ludwig. 'Free energy ... I wouldn't be surprised if they've got free energy, and we can't even imagine what we could do with that.'

They talked late into the night until they were too exhausted to talk any more. As everyone retired for the night, Snake, Ace and Jonesy stepped outside and gazed into the star-studded void.

'We'll need to make a list of things we'll wanna take up to the Peak in the chopper. We can take extra supplies that we can leave up there when we leave. We can take a couple of the big tents an extra butane an food. Everythin can go up in the chopper.'

'While they're hikin up there tomorrow, we oughta scout the place out from the air,' suggested Ace. 'We've gotta find out if there's any place we can land the

chopper up there. If not, we'll have to transport everythin up there in a sling, which ain't no problem.'

They gazed west into the infinite blackness. They could just make out the comet above the horizon. They became tired of talking as imaginings of the final day raced through their minds. Jonesy passed a joint to Ace and Snake took a few last puffs on his cigar before they finally settled in for the night.

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Chapter Fifty-Eight

THE BIG SELL

1

Even though Tavish McTavish's public execution was completely ignored by the mainstream media, it nonetheless proceeded to go viral on the Internet. As much as government agents attempted to censor the spread of Tavish's information about the comet through existing internet sites, they could do very little to control it within the social media. As well, people simply emailed the video file to one another. The news spread around the planet like wildfire.

The first thing that became noticeable was that people just stopped showing up for work. It began slowly with maybe one person not showing here and there. The word got around quickly and before long more people stayed away. They became extremely distracted by the rumours going around about what was rapidly becoming known as *the end of the world*. They sat in long gas lines until someone came up to them and informed them that there was no one working at the gas station. They went panic shopping and found half empty shelves and no one working the checkouts. People got robbed and called the police, but no one came. The trains and busses stopped running. Everything was beginning to unravel and it was all because of the fact that the government was incapable of controlling the cyber traffic on the Internet. It was turning into a state of virtual anarchy.

2

Back in Australia, things took a little more time to go bad. Maybe it was because Australia was so far away from everywhere, or maybe it was because of the Aussie *she'll be right, mate* attitude, or maybe it might have been the diatribe of lies propagated by the incumbent regime, whatever it was, the Australians mostly believed that everything was happening clear on the other side of the planet and the most they would know about it would be what they would see on TV.

Things were a little different in the Noosa house, however. It was *Monday 11th September 2023*. They were sitting around the kitchen bench having their breakfast when Thebe announced,

'Ambriel and Adam are coming to visit and they're bringing Zeke with them. This will be their last visit before the time shift.'

'That will make someone very happy,' smirked Slater.

'Shut it, whipper snapper,' said Lucy with a joyful grin on her face.

'This will be our last opportunity to fine-tune our plans with them,' said Thebe. 'Even though we won't see them for about one of our weeks, they won't see us for a hundred years. They will be here to greet us when we pop up in the future.'

Two days later, the matt black space ship settled into the L shape of the jetty under the cover of night. Lucy threw herself into Zeke's open arms and they disappeared into her bedroom. The other four laughed openly as they walked up the steps into the house and sat down on the veranda. Kane came home from visiting a friend and sat down with them. Ambriel began the conversation,

'Thank you so much for having us. It is always such a pleasure to stay in your beautiful house.'

'Ours is the greater pleasure, Brie,' replied Thebe.

'Been getting any good waves, Slater?' Adam asked.

'Plenty, Adam. The last season was extraordinarily good.'

'We saw Iapetus before we came here,' announced Ambriel. 'He suggested that he could either pick up Kane himself or if you thought it was OK, we could take him back to Rama with us. Iapetus thought that this was an unusually advantageous circumstance for Kane's studies because he could spend a hundred years with him and be away from you for only one week.'

Thebe showed instant apprehension at the suggestion that she was about to be parted with her only child. It was a natural reaction. She knew, however, she had always known, that her son would be taken away when he became ten years old. The time shift made this a unique situation for both of them. She would not see her son for about one week although he would not see his mother for a hundred years. She hugged him and whimpered,

'You'll be 110 years old when I see you next.'

'I'll miss you too, mum, but when I return it will be as a time master.'

'I suspect much more than that, my son. A century of disciplined study and travel throughout the cosmos should broaden your horizons substantially. You leave me a boy, but you will return to me a man.'

Slater hung his head in sadness in anticipation of his son's departure. Then he remembered that they would only be apart for one week. That cheered him up again.

Not long after, Lucy and Zeke emerged from her room, appearing slightly self-conscious, and re-joined the group. Lucy brewed tea for everyone and brought out her mix, while Thebe packed the Mana pipe and Slater chose some music with Adam.

'We plan to be there when you emerge from your time shift,' said Ambriel. 'We'll all be there. Zeke will be with us, as well as Kane. Iapetus *may* be there, I am not certain, but Adrian plans to be there, I know that for sure. And Noah will fly straight back over from Green River. We will bring shelter and supplies. We expect that we will set up camp by the river, somewhere near the river-mouth. We expect that there won't be too much change in the geography because we think that Noosa will only be affected by one or two surging tidal waves. All the signs of civilisation will be washed away by the massive waves. We expect nothing to remain but pristine wilderness.'

'I've been inventin like crazy,' said Zeke. 'I've been workin with Max's gravity sails an comin up with all sorts of stuff for non-telepaths. There's the flyin backpacks, the flyin discs, generators, pumps an green houses. We might have lost the technology from Earth, but there's a million other planets we can visit to trade technology with. You oughta see the way me tents are held up by gravity sails. I've been on Rama for 31 years and I'm startin to get a handle on how the Rama operate. They're traders. They've got the ability to travel anywhere in virtually no time at all. If they want somethin they just go someplace an get it. They've all got one speciality that they trade with. Max and Ada, they make gravity sails an things that go with gravity sails that are useful. Gravity sails are amongst the most valuable things in the universe an they are infinitely tradable. That's how they get their stuff an that's how they got so rich.'

'Oh, we're not so rich, Zeke,' said Ambriel modestly.

'You're loaded, darling,' exclaimed Adam, 'but that's what I really love about you. There's nothing quite like a woman with money, I say. It's a bona fide turn-on.'

Everyone chuckled.

Lucy had a look at Drudge on her tablet. She announced,

'Oh look; the President of the United States is going to give an address to the world tomorrow night. The white house has sent out a media release requesting that every citizen on Earth tune in to his speech. I wonder what he's going to say?'

3

The following night, everyone on the planet gathered around their television sets to listen to President Griffin's speech. The President appeared on the screen, flanked by his top ranking general and admiral. He was making his speech from within a featureless room, which could have been located anywhere. Robert Griffin III began to speak in his ice-cool, confidence inspiring voice, although it didn't stay like that for long.

'My friends, we meet here today at a time where we find ourselves at a crossroads in the world's history.

'It's a time where you can go to your local gas station or supermarket and find that no one showed up for work. No one is picking up the garbage or driving the buses or trains. No one is loading up the teller machines or selling tickets at the movies. Everywhere we go we see panic with people not knowing what to do.

'My friends, it is for this reason that I have come to speak to you today.

'Everyone has heard of Travers' comet. If you haven't, you've been sleeping under a rock somewhere. Now I know that your government has been sending out mixed messages regarding this comet, but that was for a reason, for a good reason. Your government tried to keep you calm. We protected you from the facts in order to prevent exactly what is now happening all over our country and apparently all over the world. People are panicking because they're listening to crazy people on the Internet. Our whole system of civil life is unravelling right before our eyes. East L.A. is ablaze. Manhattan has bodies piled up on top of the uncollected garbage. Sears Tower and half of downtown Chicago is burning out of control because the whole Chicago fire department has taken a holiday. People are stranded all over

the highways of the United States because they've run out of gas. This madness has to stop because it is getting us nowhere.'

President Griffin was beginning to look profoundly disturbed. He stopped talking for a moment in order to calm himself down and take a sip of water. After taking a deep breath and looking at both of his military chiefs, he continued.

'I have come here today to beseech everyone to go back to work. Nothing productive can come out for anyone or their families by panicking and unplugging from society. The every-man-for-himself approach just will not work ... and it is anti-American. ... We either stand united or we fall divided.'

'If you drive a truck, bus or train, collect the garbage, deliver mail, work in a bank or work for any of our fine police departments, go back to work because your country needs you. Our nation is unravelling at the seams ... er ... er ...'

RG3 stumbled in his speechmaking. He looked at his military companions with a *what do I say next* look on his face. The general leaned over and opened a folder that was lying on top of the lectern in front of the President. RG3 slowly turned his head and glanced at the general with an *are you sure you want me to read this?* look on his face. The general nodded. RG3 looked down at the script titled *'The Hail Mary'* and began to read.

'My fellow Americans and citizens of the world. Your government has not been entirely frank with you ... about many things. For example, your government has concealed a secret more profound ... er, more important to life on this planet than any other phenomenon in history. It is true, ladies and gentlemen, that the Earth has been visited by extraterrestrial races and that this has been going on for many decades.'

A bead of sweat rolled down the President's right temple and his eyes expressed great inner conflict. He turned to his general who motioned with his eyes for him to keep reading.

'Er, although there have been uncountable accounts in the popular media of sightings, encounters and even abductions, your government has stringently denied any existence, in reality, of this phenomenon. Your government has done this for your own protection, not to mention national security.'

'Just like the day comes when a child must be told that there is no Santa Claus, the day has come when the citizens of the world must be told that aliens are real.'

Ambriel burst out laughing.

RG3 paused and attempted to clear his throat. His eyes nervously twitched around the room as he took another sip of water. He continued,

'Er, we have all watched the documentaries called 'Incident at Green River' every year for the past eight years or so. We have all been amazed by what we have seen. Er, now thanks to your government, you were never completely sure about whether the documentary was just a plain old, superbly contrived hoax or whether it was true. Your government chose to ignore the event and thus consign it into fiction.'

'Now I know that what I have just told you must come as a shock. I was shocked when my parents told me the truth about Santa Claus, but I eventually realised, ladies and gentlemen, that it was a necessary part of my growing up. And now it's your turn to grow up.'

RG3 turned to the general with a, *who wrote this shit* look on his face. The general motioned with his eyes to keep reading. Lucy jokingly quipped,

'Isn't there any Santa Claus?'

The President continued,

'Er, your government has not been totally honest with you as regards to Travers' comet either. A number of astronomers have calculated the true trajectory of the comet and unfortunately some of them have paid a high price for that knowledge. The truth, my fellow citizens of the world, is that Travers' comet is on collision course with our planet. The good folks at NASA have calculated the impact point on the globe and the exact time that impact is supposed to happen.'

RG3 looked up from his script and improvised,

'I imagine that you are all riveted to your screens right about now. Me, I can definitely feel a bowel movement coming on.'

The general prodded him on the shoulder to keep reading. RG3 looked at the script and mumbled,

'I wonder what's next? OK ... continuing ... er, if the comet were to collide with the Earth, it would do so at 2.23pm, Mountain Time, on the 23rd of September this year. Ground zero for impact would be ...'

RG3 paused, shook his head from side to side, looked at the general, then directly into the camera.

'Ground zero would be Green River, Wyoming. Now you might have noticed that I said would instead of will. I did this for a reason. The reason I said would instead of will is because the comet WILL NOT, I repeat, WILL NOT make contact with the Earth.

'Those of you who have been paying attention would have noticed that ground zero and the time of impact coincide with the annual alien visit as depicted in the documentary 'Incident at Green River'. We can now tell you that the timing and location of these visits was no coincidence. It was all planned. They have known about the comet for many years. They, that is to say the visitors, go by the name of Arcturians, and your government has been in close liaison with them for many years.

'Citizens of Earth, of the Orion Arm of the Milky Way Galaxy ...' RG3 glanced nervously at the general then directly into the camera '... the Arcturians are our friends ... and they have offered to help us by deflecting Travers' comet off its lethal trajectory. Your government has forged a peace treaty with the noble and benevolent Arcturians. In return for saving our planet from the catastrophically destructive effects of the comet, we have co-signed a treaty with the Arcturians, which allows them total visitation rights and if they decide to stay, residency visas and ultimately citizenship of Earth.'

'Who are the Arcturians?' asked Lucy.

'I haven't got a clue,' replied Ambriel.

'Is this all bullshit?' asked Zeke.

'It would appear so,' replied Thebe.

'I have assigned NASA the responsibility of televising the whole comet event, including the deflection. Ladies and gentlemen, never in the history of the Earth has such a telecast been attempted. There will be over one thousand cameras trained onto the approaching comet. We will have cameras in space, in the air and on the ground. The most eminent experts in their fields will provide commentary. As well, there will be celebrities from all fields of artistic endeavour to entertain you. The final 24 hours of the comet's flypast will be transmitted live on every channel on Earth. This will be the only show on the planet, folks. It is our wish that every citizen of Earth will get to see the comet's approach and its ultimate deflection by

the Arcturians. Every citizen will be able to see the whole show at home. That is why the telecast will be made available free-to-air worldwide.'

RG3 took another sip of water. He looked at his generals who gave him a confident thumbs-up. His confidence was returning, as was his ice-cool, inspiring voice.

'My fellow Americans and citizens of Earth. I assure you that there is nothing to fear, except fear itself. Life as we know it will continue to flourish long after Travers' comet has passed us and disappeared off into the infinite void.

'I beseech you; I plead with you, please go back to your jobs and do your duty for your fellow Americans. United we win, divided we lose.

'Finally, I am declaring a public holiday for the 22nd and 23rd of September so that everyone can enjoy the big show. Stock up on the beer, popcorn, chicken wings and pretzels and settle back to enjoy the greatest show of all time.

'Thank you, God bless you and God bless the United States of America.'

They must have forgotten to switch off the mike in the live broadcast because just as the telecast ended, the President could faintly be heard asking someone,

'Do you think they bought it?'

.....

Chapter Fifty-Nine

THE CHOSEN

1

Snake and Jonesy walked around the back of the Pinecrest house. The house was on a slope with the back yard sloping upwards fairly steeply.

'We got good access into the yard around the side of the house here, Jonesy.'

'Yeah, Snake, I reckon we could get a shippin container in here OK, no problem.'

'Yeah, an we could dig it into the hill an bury it in there.'

'We could bury it deep, all the way underground.'

'We gotta git ourselves a container an a backhoe.'

It was Thursday, *14th September 2023*. Cowboy had led two hikes, with fully loaded packs, up to the summit of Pike's Peak and back. After those first two hikes, they all decided that it was smarter to drive to as close to the Peak as they could and walk from there. They took the Sonora Pass Highway, turned off onto Forest Route 5N12 and parked their vehicles on the side of the dirt road adjacent to a foot trail that snaked up the southern slope of Pike's Peak.

Snake had a truckload of supplies sitting out in the street that he didn't know what to do with. He knew that they weren't going to be able to take them up the mountain and he suspected that they wouldn't be there when, and if, they ever came back down. After discussing it with Jonesy, they got the idea to transfer all the supplies into a shipping container, which they could then bury around the back of the house. They figured that that would give them the greatest chance of finding the supplies intact when, and if, they returned.

They found their shipping container in Sonora, about 30 miles down the road. They also found a backhoe operator, called *crazy Clyde*, on the edge of town. Clyde used to be a gold prospector back in the good old days. These days he found his solace at the bottom of a whiskey bottle. He lived in a ramshackle old cabin and kept fairly much to himself. The boys found him sitting in his rocking chair on the porch, whiskey glass in one hand and a smoke in the other.

Willie Nelson was crooning from within the weathered, paint-peeling boards of the disintegrating hovel.

‘What brings you boys all the ways up here?’

‘We needs your backhoe an we needs it fast.’

‘I ain’t too sure if I got any room in my schedule for you boys.’

Snake was known for his fast thinking and sharp negotiating skills.

‘I was thinkin that maybe twenty cases of Jack might help change your mind.’

They brought the empty container up to Pinecrest on the back of a flatbed. They marked out the dimensions of the container on the ground as a guide for Clyde’s digging. When the space was excavated out of the side of the hill, a crane that also came up from Sonora lifted the empty container off the flatbed and placed it into its new resting place. Clyde backfilled the sides and piled the rest of the dirt on top of the container leaving the front exposed so that the doors could freely be opened and closed.

Snake told Clyde where he organised for him to pick up his twenty cases of *Jack Daniel, Old No. 7*, plus he gave him five thousand dollars in cash as a bonus ‘for doin such a fine job’.

The following day, everyone helped to transfer all the survival supplies from the truck to the shipping container. Nothing with a use-by-date was included. The container was closed and locked with a padlock, the key to which Snake hung around his neck.

They all rode up to the base of Pike’s Peak in the truck on the morning of the 23rd. Everyone dressed in tough, all weather, camouflage-design, mountain clothing. They all wore quality hiking boots, polarising sunglasses or ski goggles, and carried all their personal survival gear, hiking tents and supplies on their backs, either in their back packs or strapped to them. They each carried a compass, a hunting knife, a pistol with a silencer and ammunition, fishing line with plenty of hooks and lures and a fine fishing net. Cowboy and Snake, who it was decided were the best shots in the group, carried long range, sighted, sniper rifles for hunting game. Everyone shared in carrying extra ammunition for the sniper rifles. Ace carried a crossbow and a substantial quiver of arrows. Ludwig and Melvin carried a pair of powerful binoculars each. Trixie carried the first aid

kit. They all carried solar-powered walkie-talkies. They calculated that they carried enough food, water and butane gas, in the form of small cartridges for their camping stoves and lanterns, to survive for two weeks. After that period they would be required to live off the land. Jonesy was in charge of the rope that would bind them all together as they waited on top of Pike's Peak for the hoped for time shift.

2

The comet and its armada of projectiles hurtled towards Earth like a cosmic shotgun blast.

The President, who was safely ensconced with his family in a survival bunker one mile under the Mojave Desert, argued with his chiefs of staff.

'The people should be warned.'

'You gotta get this straight, sir, the people can never be told the truth about an impending catastrophic event. It has been government policy since 1947 that any and all events, especially ones like meteor or comet strikes, be treated with *absolute terminological inexactitude*. If you have a problem with that, sir, it is government policy to terminate your tenure on this planet. Your choice, sir. I would strongly suggest that you get with the program.'

'But I am the President of the United States!'

The General unholstered his sidearm and put it up to RG3's forehead.

'Only until I pull this trigger, sir.'

3

Mecca sat low in the water. Every cubic inch of space within her was full of provisions. As well, her fuel and drinking water tanks were completely topped up. There were many favourite things they all wanted to take but couldn't in order to leave as much space for food and survival gear. Eva looked back at the house and began to cry.

'I just realised how much I love this place. Do you think the house will be alright, Lloydie?'

'Well, a big surging tsunami would certainly make a huge mess of the place.'

Sophia hugged Eva to console her as Alex untied the bow rope from the jetty. Lloyd fired up the diesel and motored away.

It was early morning of the *21st of September 2023*. The crisp spring morning was cloudless and a gentle west wind blew Mecca through Sydney Heads into the vast South Pacific Ocean. Lloyd instructed his crew,

'I need everyone to put on their safety harnesses and clip them to the guardrail. I want you all to be clipped to the boat 24/7, whether you are above or below decks. This skipper is not losing a crew overboard on this trip.'

Everyone obeyed.

Although the group had no idea that Alex was one of the *chosen ones*, they suspected through Alex's junk DNA research that something hugely catastrophic was going to happen on the 23rd. Unbeknownst to any of them, Lloyd's fastidious seamanship ensured that they all conformed to the rule of connectedness, which was what was required for them all to be pulled through time with Alex, along with their boat and dinghy.

They sailed about twenty miles out to sea, out beyond the most easterly extremities of the continental shelf, where the water was over 2000 metres deep. Once out there, they continued to sail in a large circle to wait for the 23rd of September to pass on by. Lloyd postulated,

'We'll be as safe here as anywhere in the event of a mega tsunami. How about a cup of tea, darling?'

'Cup of tea everyone?' Eva asked.

Alex and Sophia raised their hands.

'We are fortunate that the sea is so calm,' said Lloyd.

'We are pretty out of range of any kind of media out here, aren't we Lloyd?'

'We should pick up some shortwave tonight, Alex.'

4

Noah arrived late in the evening of the 21st of September. He found Thebe, Lucy and Slater busy preparing for their time shift into the future.

'We can only take our favourite small things because there is not that much space in my ship,' said Thebe.

The levitation suits and surfboards were a priority.

It had been decided that they would do their time shift from within Thebe's space ship, which would hover a few hundred feet above Noosa. Slater would be strapped to the interior of the ship by the wrist, as would the two women. Thus,

through connectedness, they, as well as the ship, would be pulled through time by the time-chip implanted in Slater's left leg, just above the knee.

Noah left for Green River at 6.00am on the 24th September 2023, Australian East Coast Standard Time. They knew what he meant when he said,

'See you in a few hours a hundred years from now.'

He flew across the Pacific and parked his ship above the same butte that he parked above in prior years at exactly 2.13pm on the 23rd of September 2023, Mountain Time, USA. He levitated the ship just above the ground, in the centre of ground zero, directly under the plummeting comet. Just before he stepped outside the ship he pulled the *master time chip* out from under his *skin*.

5

Half an hour after Noah flew off to Green River, Thebe, Lucy and Slater entered Thebe's ship and lifted into the sky.

.....

Chapter Sixty

CLYDE

1

Clyde lay in his bed listening to a podcast of *Jerome Clark* eloquently philosophising about multiple dimensions. The interviewer was *Errol Bruce-Knapp* in episode 448 of the popular Canadian programme, *Strange Days Indeed*. Something about the conversation struck a chord with him.

'Is that a suggestion about interdimensionality?'

'No, see that doesn't mean anything. You can throw words like that around but they don't explain anything. They're just words. What's interdimensionality? It's a speculative concept. All we can say is that it is possible to have vivid experiences of things that do not seem to be conventionally explainable as hallucinations or mental illness, but also that do not exist in event reality. These things are some kind of anomaly of experience, anomaly of consciousness, anomaly of imagination, and they're real, but they're real solely as experiences that exist only in testimony and memory, but that you could never prove happened in this world. These things take on the colouration of cultural expectations of otherworldly encounters. So in other words, they're fundamentally subjective. There may be some kind of phenomena out there that triggers these things, but they're experienced in cultural images and language that the brain can comprehend.'

'You know, there isn't even a proper vocabulary for it. That is one of the problems. The closest we can get to it is visionary experience, but visionary experience is simply descriptive, it's not explanatory. So we think that something is either true or it isn't true, but what if there are things that happen to us that are neither, just try to get your brain around that. We don't have a vocabulary for that. How could something be and not be at the same time?'

Clyde rose to his feet and sat in front of his computer. He paused the program and replayed the last few minutes. He listened intently and when the question was asked again, he answered it in a whisper,

'Jack, that's how.'

2

He let the radio show keep playing as he stepped out onto the porch and stretched his arms. His bloodhound, named Lincoln, raised his head lazily to see what his master was up to.

His hut was located on a ridge above and due east of Sonora. His porch faced due west and gave him a view clear across Sonora and New Melones Lake in the distance.

Clyde had just come up for air from a weeklong bender. He'd been celebrating the procurement of twenty cases of his favourite whiskey. He sat in his rocking chair and blankly stared at the sunset. New Melones Lake glowed like liquid gold out in the distance. Something in the splendid vista triggered a memory of a dream in his mind. He thought that maybe he might have dreamt it the previous night, or maybe the night before. Hell, he couldn't remember the last seven or eight nights, or days. Everything was all melted together into one homogeneous haze. But his dream stood out crystal clear like a vision, like the memory of a place he'd actually been to.

He remembered sitting on his porch in his rocking chair and it was sunset, just like then, and he remembered how the ocean, all orange and gold, lapped right up to the porch steps. He remembered it like he'd seen it with his own eyes.

He got up out of the rocking chair and went inside to turn off his computer. He'd lost interest in the radio show. Lincoln followed him into the hut and muzzled his shin.

'You hungry, boy?'

He took a frozen pizza out of the fridge and placed it into the microwave. He then opened another bottle of Jack and filled his glass.

3

The brand new, 60-inch, high-definition, flat-screen TV sat on top of two cases of Jack placed side by side on the spot where *the old piece of shit TV* used to be. Clyde bought it to celebrate his recent windfall.

He took the hot pizza out of the microwave and gave half of it to Lincoln. He sat down in his ratty old lounge chair and took a bite out of a wedge. He grabbed the remote and switched on the TV. A panel of presenters appeared, sitting behind a large, semi-circular desk, backed by a giant television screen. On the

screen was a live image of the comet being shot through a telescope from the International Space Station. One of the presenters explained,

'It may look small, ladies and gentlemen, but let me assure you that this puppy is at least 25 miles across. It is still eighteen hours out from the flypast, so it's about, let's bring up the on screen calculator, OK ... eighteen times 45 thousand is 810 thousand miles out from Earth. That's over three times farther out than the moon. If it did not have a coma around it, it would be almost impossible to see. And buried in that coma, so NASA tells us, are a couple of dozen chunks of rock, any of which would wreak extreme havoc on our planet if they were allowed to impact.'

Clyde topped up his glass, grabbed another slice of pizza and changed channels. He found the same program. An attractive female co-presenter asked a question of the handsome anchor.

'When will we see the Arcturians, Mike?'

'Good question, Sandy. The word is that the Arcturians are a little bit shy. It may be because of the slight difference in their appearance to us. Not all space species are as good looking as we are, you know.'

Everyone sitting around the desk laughed.

'Life can be a bitch, ha, ha, ha.'

'Yeah, Mike. So will we see them deflect the comet?'

'Another extremely good question, Sandy. Well, apparently not. Apparently they will be using a deflector beam from a distance, so we won't exactly see anything. They only have to deflect the comet by a fraction of a degree to make it miss our planet. Er, they may have even done it already. Either way, they know the best time to do it, so NASA has decided to leave it up to them.'

'Will they also deflect the surrounding debris?'

'That's affirmative, Sandy. The treaty we have signed with them stipulates the deflection of the comet, as well as all the debris.'

'I'm keen to get a load of their women, Mike.'

'Get in line, Randy. We've all been secretly fantasizing about a little whoopee of the third kind.'

Clyde changed channels and found the same program again.

Mike placed his hand over his right ear and announced,

'I am being told that we are about to cross to Green River, Wyoming. Hello, Allan, how is the weather in Wyoming?'

Allan had to scream at the top of his voice in order to be heard over the tribal thump, thump, thumps of drums and guttural screams of a band playing in the background.

'Well I can report that it's night and that it isn't raining. Green River this year is like an insane asylum, Mikey. There must be a million people here and I'm pretty sure that everyone is on something that's probably highly illegal, ha, ha, ha. My advice to anyone thinking about coming here is; forget it because you won't get within thirty miles of the place.'

'What is that noise, Allan?'

'Oh, that is the band, 'Beaver Fever', going right off behind me, Mikey. They're just belting out their big hit, the ever-popular, 'Armageddon Some Tonight'. We're set up on the edge of Stratton Myers Park, just like we were last year. Tomorrow's the big day. Every 23rd of September for the last eight years the aliens have shown up on top of the butte just across the river. We'll turn the camera around so that you can see it, Mikey. See, it's all lit up in spotlights this year. The crowd is going completely nuts around me ... oh, oh ... OK ... er, I might have to get back to you later, Mikey ... you don't look eighteen sugarplum ...'

4

Clyde changed channels and got the same program. He clicked the clicker over and over and finally realised that there was only one program on television that night. He poured himself another glass of Jack, lit a smoke and turned the sound down on his TV. He picked up his iPod that was lying on a small table next to his ratty old lounge chair and scrolled through the tracks until he found the one that reminded him of his Jenny. He took a couple of big swigs of whiskey and pressed play. The sound blasted out of a perfectly preserved, antique set of Altec Stonehenge 3 speakers that Clyde had inherited from his father. The song, *There's No Other*, by *The Crystals*, filled the interior of the hut with a wall of sound. The song had an effect on him like a time machine, especially when he was hammered. It took him back to the best time of his life, back to Turlock High, his Jenny and his '57 Chevy. He remembered the first time she played the song for him and how she dedicated it to him and declared her lifelong love for him.

Jenny was the most beautiful girl in school. Every boy in the valley wanted Jenny, but she only had eyes for her Clyde.

Tears began to stream down his cheeks as he emptied the glass and re-filled it again. He was beginning to once again slide into his favourite place. He sometimes called it 'the place between dreamin and dyin'. When the song came to an end, it automatically reverted to the beginning because he preset the iPod to *replay track*. And *The Crystals* sang, *There's no other like my baby, oh no, no, no*. And one time, he couldn't remember when, Clyde thought that Phil Spector might have killed his wife, or maybe he didn't, and maybe she deserved it, or maybe not, but sure as hell there couldn't be any denyin the fact that he produced the greatest anthem to American culture ever recorded, bar none.

The swirling haze of liquor and music took him back to a place that was young and healthy, and full of life and love. And it was full of Jenny, the last pair of lips he ever kissed, and the last pair of arms he ever felt around him. That was over fifty years ago. He remembered the accident, and how he lived to suffer the pain of her death for the rest of his life. That's where he stopped the movie and went back to the beginning, back to Turlock High and the day he met the love of his life.

5

Clyde awoke from his drunken coma mid-morning on the *23rd of September 2023*. *The Crystals* were still singing and the television was still playing with the sound turned off. He switched off the music, poured himself another glass of Jack and turned up the volume on the TV. The presenter's voice echoed in and out of his drunken daze,

'Ladies and gentlemen, this is the most widely viewed telecast in the history of the planet. Everybody, I mean everybody is watching because it is the only program on Earth. Every network, every station, is tuned into us. So, hello world, it's three hours to go and all is fine with the planet.'

They crossed to Green River where there were over a million people packed into the town. Everyone came to see the aliens.

'Travers' comet is now less than one hour away, ladies and gentlemen. It is less than half way between the Moon and here. Here is a shot of it from the Space Station ... and here is a shot from the Keck 1 telescope in Hawaii ... and here's a

shot from Keck 2 ... hmm, that is one nasty SOB there, wouldn't you agree, Sallyanne?'

'I certainly would, Mike, but right now I am going to surf the crowd and get some first hand impressions of the big day out at Green River.'

Clyde looked at all the crazy people on his TV. He wasn't actually sure what all the hysteria was about, and he was in no frame of mind to work it out. He just knew that what he was watching was not what he dreamt about as a kid. This was not the dream. This was not America. This was a disease, a nightmare. He gazed at the insanity on TV and heard himself whisper,

'This country is fucked.'

Suddenly something snapped him out of his chimera. It was the appearance of a spaceship descending from the sky above. Within seconds, dozens of cameras focussed in on the streamlined silver disc and an ocean of fingers pointed into the sky. The disc descended from the north and headed directly towards the crowd. There were screams and squeals heard all around. The UFO flew slowly and glided in over the gridlocked freeway. It kept descending as it crossed Flaming Gorge Way, in downtown Green River, then the railway line and finally the river. There were oohs and ahhs and gasps as the UFO silently passed no more than 100 feet above the heads of the crowd gathered in Stratton Myers Park.

All the commentators were stunned into silence.

The beautiful ship glided right over their heads then turned east and flew low over the river again, low over an army contingent on the other side, then up the west side of the butte upon which the UFOs landed every year.

The saucer rose to the top of the butte and settled into a hover about a foot above the ground right on the edge where everyone could see it. A panel opened underneath and what looked like a man stepped out. A hundred cameras zoomed in on him. He appeared to be wearing a body-hugging costume that completely covered every part of his body. The costume fluoresced in many colours.

Mysteriously, as if they instinctively suspected something, the crowd hushed into a ghostly silence.

The commentator whispered,

'Five minutes to go.'

Suddenly, the alien levitated into the air right in front of his ship. He slowly rose above it and softly landed on top of it. The commentator whispered like he was watching Tiger Woods putting out at the US Open,

'The alien seems to have something attached to his ankle, like a rope.'

'It looks like one of those surfer leg ropes, Mike, except it's a bit longer.'

'I wonder what it's for?'

'Maybe it's got something to do with the deflection?'

Clyde poured himself another glass of Jack.

'Sixty seconds to go, and counting. Fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven ...'

Clyde patted the top of Lincoln's head and lit a smoke.

'Forty-five, forty-four ...'

'Look at that, the alien is now pointing straight up into the sky with his right hand, straight up at the comet.'

A picture-in-picture screen, shot from the Space Station, showed the comet about to enter the atmosphere right above central USA. The commentator whimpered,

'It's now or never for this deflection thing ...'

The countdown continued,

'Twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven ...'

Clyde emptied his glass and took a deep drag of his smoke. As he breathed out he whispered,

'I love you Jenny.'

'Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven ...'

As the countdown reached ten seconds to go, the alien and his ship disappeared. The commentator swore,

'Fuck, where did he go?'

'Eight, seven, six, five, four, three ...'

As the countdown reached zero, the picture on Clyde's TV turned black with a 'no signal' message. Five seconds later, the outside of his hut faded to brilliant white.

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