

The Christian Adventures of Doc Savage by Mark and Karen Eidlemiller

E10

DOC SAVAGE

Bronze Shaped as Clay



BLADE PRODUCTIONS

The Bronze Saga #10: BRONZE SHAPED AS CLAY
by Mark Evan Eidemiller

Job 10:9-10 - Remember that you molded me like clay. Will you now turn me to dust again? Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese. (NIV)

Isaiah 64:8 - But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand. (KJV)

Ephesians 3:20-21 - Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen. (KJV)

PROLOGUE

John Fleming woke up in the darkest corner of Paradise.

As the cobwebs started to clear from his head, his senses began to bring in valuable information about his environment. He was horizontal ... lying naked on a mattress that smelled of years of copulation mixed with an assortment of cheap scents, both male and female. His mouth felt as if he'd been rinsing with sawdust. There was the music of steel drums in the distance; *okay, so I'm probably still in the Bahamas*. The room was dark, and the absence of noise beyond the room suggested that it was nighttime. His arms moved outward from his sides, and the tips of his fingers lightly brushed against the smooth, bare arm of a young woman.

Just then, his instincts kicked in, his senses turned dark, and his smile vanished. The woman's cool arm hadn't responded to his touch, and there was a grim familiarity to the feel. He moved down to the wrist and felt for a pulse; the absence of one elicited a sharp profanity. The harsh reality of death brought his mind out of its lethargy, and he rolled off of the bed, his senses reaching out as he remembered what had happened prior to his waking in this room. *Oldest trick in the book, and I fell for it. He didn't kill me when he had the chance, because he wanted to frame me for murder*. It was a good bet the police would arrive at any moment.

Seconds passed, and nobody entered. He knew better than to let his guard down, but he needed to know who the girl was. No light came in from around the door, and the floors confirmed his conclusion that he was in a bungalow. He could waste time crawling about on the floor, or dare to find a source of illumination. He moved around the bed to a side table, and felt a lamp. He switched on the light, and quickly became accustomed to the brightness.

The room didn't have windows, which suggested he was not in a bungalow but a room in one of the smaller motels on the island's far side that catered to locals and the occasional frugal tourist. He quickly looked at the girl, and let out a sigh of relief. She was black – not unusual for the

region – and very pretty. But she wasn't who he had expected (or dreaded) to see. A cursory examination of the body told him that she had been strangled; her final expression had been one of wide-eyed terror. He groaned; it wasn't the first time he'd seen a dead girl in his bed, but he didn't have to like it.

Now he was fully convinced that he was being set up. He needed to get dressed and get out as quickly as possible. His clothes were on the floor at the foot of the bed. As he slipped on his trousers, he noticed his reflection in the cracked mirror of the dresser across the room.

He froze as if captured in amber, and his breath caught in his throat.

"No," he said aloud, shocked. "No!"

So distracted was he with the image in the mirror, that he didn't sense the approach of the police until they actually battered in the door and flooded into the room with guns drawn.

CHAPTER ONE

Sometimes, you never know what God has in mind until you get there.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

This first line from Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* is among the most memorable opening statements in all literature, next to *Moby Dick's* "Call me Ishmael."

It fits.

'The best of times.'

That's an easy one. For almost ten years following his release from hibernation, Clark Savage Jr. walked the face of the Earth unable to publicly acknowledge who he was because the rest of the world thought he was a criminal. But because of a full pardon granted by President George Walker Bush, nobody can touch Clark with that anymore. He doesn't have to hide himself anymore. He's free.

Then there's his family, Bonnie and the triplets. A fine family.

When we're not staying at our residences in Arronaxe, near the CSI campus, we're aboard the *Orion*, a huge flying platform that can reach any place in the world and provide help and ministrations to just about anyone.

It would appear like a fantasy come true. But then there's the other side of the coin: *'The worst of times'*.

To begin with, we lost one of our own. 'Johnny' Littlejohn had died, tragically and yet heroically giving his life while rescuing two people from a burning house.

At the same time, thousands of miles to the west, Clark was seriously injured, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. For a man who'd spent his life active, 'sound in life and limb' as it were, this hit him hard.

Finally, there's my own personal loss. Due to the special properties of my Uncle Perry's extremely special ring, I'd been able to become invisible. But on that last mission, that gift ran out. Considering I prayed for it to happen, and God answered my prayer, there's no cause for blame.

Not to say I don't miss it. Being able to become invisible has been quite useful over the years. It gave me the capability to infiltrate Caroline Island undetected after Daniel Franklin's army-for-hire took it over, and to get lifesaving botulism antitoxin to Pat Savage and Jill Woodward. It kept me alive in that alternate timeline, as I made my way across a United States that thought of me as a terrorist, to get back to Clark. It allowed me to smuggle surveillance devices into Clark's trial hearing so we could know what the other side's strategy was and thus prepare our defense.

And it was a distinct advantage in Miner's Bowl, including keeping me hidden as I kept watch over Clark as he was shackled to a pre-animated golem in the self-proclaimed fiefdom of my old pastor.

Okay ... who am I trying to fool? I *really* miss it. But I can't mourn over it. It's given me an opportunity to clear up a little room inside my skull, removing both the *Bio Timer* that I no longer needed, and the subcutaneous transceiver that had started giving me headaches.

Life goes on.

It was a lazy Wednesday afternoon in Arronaxe.

The girl in the black mask commanded, "***FIRE!***" and there was an explosion.

"In the light of day Darcy Walker is a cop, but in the dark of night she becomes 'Black Scorpion', doing with a mask what she can't do with a badge – "

"– proving that the Batman's not the only one who can be fashionable in black," I finished the thought, then snickered at my own joke. When Dot and I got hooked on this series a few years ago, we'd try out-drawing the other with a smart-alecky response.

I was sitting in the living room of my residence, catching up on some favorite television from years past. At the moment, I was engaging in some guilty pleasures watching the old Roger Corman superhero series. Sebastian – the house's AI – had all 22 episodes queued up in digital format, perfect for a private marathon.

I was watching scantily-clad Michelle Lintel (as Black Scorpion) facing down a equally scantily-clad blonde supervillain named Aftershock, exchanging blows, kicks, and snappy repartee, when Sebastian paused the playback and announced, "*Douglas Martin approaching.*"

I wasn't expecting any visitors, let alone our old friend and chief solicitor. "TV off," I said as I stood. "Let him in."

The front door opened and Martin entered. "Perry?" he called.

"Doug! So what brings you to my humble abode?"

"Business," he replied. "I was instructed by Mr. Littlejohn that, should your uncle's ring cease to function, I was to give you *this*." He handed me a leather pouch.

I took the pouch and turned it over in my hands; a metal seal of sorts connected the twin wire bands crossing it horizontally and vertically.

"Interesting," I commented.

"There is," Martin added, "one stipulation to accepting this pouch."

"What?"

"For reasons purely of his own, Mr. Littlejohn didn't want you to divulge its contents to Mr. Savage."

"Really?" I wondered. "Okay, sure, I'll keep it secret. Do you want to stick around while I open it?"

"I'd like to, but I'm meeting Pat back in the city."

"A New York rendezvous?" I said with a smirk.

"A late lunch/early dinner," he replied.

"Tell her 'hi' from me."

"That I shall. *Au revoir!*"

As the door closed behind him, I looked at the pouch as if I might be able to see through the leather to the unknown contents inside. The last time I'd received a mysterious package from a lawyer was when I received Uncle Perry's ring – and that turned my life upside-down. *Okay*, I thought. *Might as well see what's so important*. I found a pair of wire cutters and cut the bands, then carried it over to the kitchen table to examine the contents. There were several envelopes, but the one with my name written on it in Johnny's handwriting begged to be opened first. I slit it open with a kitchen knife and unfolded the handwritten note.

Perry.

If you're reading this, then your uncle's ring has ceased to function normally. This should help resolve that problem. One request, however: please do not share the contents of this with anyone else save Dot and Elena. My reasons will become clear when you arrive at your destination.

I couldn't tell him that Dot was away with the *Orion*, where it was getting some needed systems upgrades. And Elena – Elena Inez Garcia de Ybarra, Johnny's protégé – was still MIA. Shortly after the reading of Johnny's will, Elena chose to decline Johnny's old teaching position, explaining that the grief at her mentor and close friend's death was just too great for her. Leaving CSI behind, she disappeared off the grid. Out of respect, we've refrained from using the *Orion's* extensive tracking equipment to locate her, but have just left her in God's very capable hands.

I continued reading.

These papers will direct you to a location in South Dakota and tell you what to do once you arrive. I have no doubt that you will use this information wisely.

God bless you, Perry.

Johnny

I tried contacting my wife Dot aboard *Orion* to discuss this with her, but she seemed to be away from the station on some sort of personal errand; *probably shopping*, I shrugged. I felt like I needed to go to this location as soon as possible, but I didn't want to go alone. So I prayed, and God inspired me to call on an old friend.

Portland, Oregon

The cell phone rang. The man who answered it was in his fifties, overweight, and bald. "Mark speaking."

"Mark, it's Perry."

The man smiled at his friend's voice. "Hey, brother! What's up?"

"You got anything going this weekend?"

"Not really. Karen's going to Oral Hull, so I'll be batchin' it. Why?"

"I've got something going, but I don't want to do it alone."

"You're not talking about something dangerous, are you?"

"Probably not."

"*Probably?*" he repeated ominously. "You sending Gumball to get me?"

"No. I'll come and get you myself. How's Friday morning?"

"I'll arrange to take the day off. How early?"

"How about 9:00?"

"I can do that."

"Good. I'll give you a call when I'm in the neighborhood."

"Do I need to pack anything?"

"Whatever you'll need for the weekend. I'll provide the rest."

"Okay. See you then." His voice turned serious. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah. I'll explain it more when I see you."

"Okay. See you Friday."

Early Friday morning, I arrived at the apartment complex where Mark and Karen Eidemiller lived.

Several years ago, due to personal health issues, Mark had to turn his ministry house over to someone else, and now was back to apartment living. When I arrived, Mark was standing off to the side of the parking lot, by the mailbox array. He took one look at my silver Porsche 904 and his jaw dropped.

"When did you get *that*?" he gaped.

"A couple of years ago," I shrugged. "Actually, it's pre-owned. Are you ready?"

"Yeah," he responded. "Just let me get my suitcase and lock 'er up."

"Karen left already?"

"Tri-Met LIFT picked her up about an hour ago. She wanted me to tell you 'hi'."

Fifteen minutes later, we were on the road. Driving east out of the city, we finally turned onto a dead-end road within a deserted patch of trees. I stopped the car.

"Perry, are you sure you're not lost?" Mark queried. "We're out of road."

That was my cue. Grinning, I flipped a couple of controls and said, "Roads? Where we're going, we don't need ... *roads*."

Then I took the Porsche straight up.

Mark let out a little gasp as the landscape fell away from us, and gripped the handle above the passenger door.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said innocently. "Did I not mention this car can fly?"

"No," Mark shot back. "Did I not tell you I have an existing heart condition, and that sudden surprises can be *fatal*?"

I knew he was joking, but I apologized anyway. With the secret of the car now revealed, we went up to a cruising altitude and headed east.

"Aren't you afraid you're going to be seen?" Mark inquired, relaxing and enjoying the view.

"Naw. It's got tech that makes us practically invisible."

"Then why didn't we do that when we took off?"

"What – and miss out on using a classic *Back to the Future* line? No way!"

"Okay. So what's this mission we're going on?"

"Myrna, take the wheel, please."

Once the car's AI accepted control of the Porsche, I reached back and grabbed the leather pouch, explaining how it made its way into my possession, and shared each envelope with Mark.

One envelope included a piece of paper with coordinates written on it. "Did you check this out?" Mark asked.

"Yes, I did," I said with a chuckle. "It's Mount Rushmore."

He gave me a double-take. "*The national monument?* Are you sure?"

"There's no mistake – I checked the coordinates three times. According to Johnny, there's a back entrance out of range of the tourist areas that leads to something *inside* the monument."

"A back door into Mount Rushmore," Mark reflected. "Should I expect to see Nicolas Cage? This sounds like one of his movies. So what is it that that we're supposed to find inside?"

"So I suspect it has something to do with *this*." I held up my right fist and looked at my ring.

"Another ring?"

"Possibly; I don't know. Now, what about this?" I held up another piece of paper with a series of numbers – three digits, a dash, four digits, a dash, and two digits. "A combination? A serial number? A code?"

"Did you run it through your computer?"

I nodded. "Too many possibilities. So we'll find out when we get there."

While we flew on, Mark explained about the folding metal support cane he carried. "Diabetic neuropathy in both feet," he explained, ticking his infirmities off on his fingers. "Arthritis in my right ankle from where I broke it back in '68. And the sciatica I went through a couple of years ago has left my left knee weakened. I don't need the cane all the time, but it's good to have around." Then he gave me a big smile. "I just keep reminding myself about the *zero-defect* body I'll have in Heaven!"

Latitude 43° 52' 44.21" North
Longitude 103° 27' 35.37" West

Originally known to the Lakota Sioux as *Six Grandfathers*, Mount Rushmore was undertaken to increase tourism. Historian Doane Robinson came up with the initial concept in 1923. Gutzon Borglum began the actual carving in 1927. The initial concept called for each of the four presidents to be depicted from head to waist, but lack of funding kept that from happening. Now under the control of the National Park Service, two million people annually come to South Dakota to see the sixty-foot high visages of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln.

With the Porsche invisible to the casual observer, Myrna guided us in as close to the coordinates Johnny gave us. We landed within a hundred feet of a rock face.

"The coast is clear," informed Myrna.

We climbed out and spent the first few minutes stretching out the last few hours of flight. Then I took a look at the rock face, comparing it to Johnny's instructions.

"Are you sure this is the entrance?" asked Mark.

I took a deep breath. "*Walk by faith, not by sight.*" Then I placed my hand on a large rock, trying to match my fingertips to the diagram. Then I pressed. As I suspected, nothing happened ... after all, I was trying to push on rock. But ... something felt different. Was my mind playing tricks on me, or had the rock yielded to my touch?

We stood there patiently, waiting for a sign. Then, all of a sudden, the rock face ahead of us split open like Ali Baba's cave.

"Well, what do you know?" Mark muttered with amazement.

We walked over to the opening, shining our flashlights ahead of us. It was definitely some sort of man-made tunnel.

"Okay, this must be the place," I concluded. "Let's grab the equipment."

A few minutes later, toting a couple of backpacks, we entered the tunnel. Our night vision goggles freed up our hands. The tunnel ended at a metal door that could've come from a

submarine. I took hold of the handwheel in the center of the door and turned; it was stubborn at first, but eventually yielded. I pulled on the door, and it creaked open.

"Needs WD-40," Mark quipped.

We stepped over the threshold and into the next room.

"It's a warehouse," Mark commented in a low voice. "Perry, we've seen this movie."

He was right. It was a warehouse, with huge metal shelves stacked with lots and lots of wooden crates stenciled with the words U.S. ARMY. Without a doubt, it looked a *lot* like the warehouse at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

"Let's look for a light switch," I distractedly muttered, pointing to some old bell-shaped light fixtures hanging from the ceiling.

Finding the lights, we looked at the crates with amazement.

"Perry?" Mark spoke in a hushed tone. "Since Johnny was the model for Indiana Jones, what are the odds that ... 'it' ... could be here?"

"I ... don't know," I answered sincerely.

Could it be possible, I pondered as I looked at all the crates surrounding us, that the mystery of mysteries – the Ark of the Covenant described in detail in the books of Moses – could be among these anonymous crates?

I was certain of one thing: if the Ark was indeed here, God wanted it here.

There had been other instances where outsiders tried holding onto the Ark without permission. In the first book of Samuel, the Philistines had stolen the Ark and had placed it in the temple of their chief deity Dagon, their way of thumbing their noses at what the Israelites had called their 'Most High God'. And, besides, who in their right mind would defy 'mighty' Dagon just to get to this ... *box*?

They found out that you *don't* mess with Jehovah.

The next morning, the Philistines found the Ark where they had left it in the temple. But the heavy stone statue of Dagon was laying prostrate *before* the Ark. The Philistines were shocked, but not shocked enough to give up. They returned Dagon to its pedestal, and posted guards.

The next morning, the statue was *again* prostrate before the Ark, *and* the statue's hands and head had been removed and put on the threshold ... all without anyone seeing it.

At the same time, just to make it clear who's God *was* God, the Philistines were hit with a plague of hemorrhoids.

They gave back the Ark.

"Let's start looking for those serial numbers," I ordered. "You check the crates in that direction, and I'll check these. See if you can spot a pattern."

"Okay," acknowledged Mark.

We wandered down the aisles, calling out numbers as we went. Sure enough, there *was* a distinct numerical sequence to the crates – *God bless the clerks* – and we followed them to the general area of the number Johnny had provided.

"Up there," Mark commented, pointing to a tall stack of crates. "But how are we going to get up there?"

"Flight suit," I informed him.

Ever since the first flight suit had been created for Kal to approximate his flight powers while his were returning, they've been constantly developing, improving. It used to take a small pit crew to put one on; now they were comparable to the *Iron Man* suits from the comics, able to expand from a slim unit hugging the back. When I activated the suit, it expanded around my body like a living thing, wrapping itself neatly around my street clothes. I didn't need the helmet, so it remained retracted, hidden at the base of my neck. I was grateful that the critical components were now protected from damage; back in Miner's Bowl, all it took was a fall to put my power unit out of commission. Many of the pieces, such as the antigravity microcircuits and maneuvering units, had now been integrated into the material of the suit itself. Although the rig could be operated hands-free, a flat, flexible, auxiliary touchpad was integrated into the right forearm.

"I swear, if that thing plays a fanfare," declared Mark, "I'm going to smack you."

I laughed.

"On second thought," he amended, "you might actually *benefit* from adding some music."

I gave him a double-take. "Huh?"

"You ever listen to some of Bill Cosby's early albums?"

"Some."

"Remember the one about the Go-Karts?"

I glanced up at the crates and began to rise. "Nope."

"It was one of his 'when I was a kid' stories, when he and his buddies used to put together go-karts – more like unpowered Soap Box Derby racers – to race down this big hill. One of the things he emphasized was the fact that all the guys had their own music that they'd hum when racing. One used the theme from the Green Hornet, another the theme from the Lone Ranger, and so on."

I was level with the top crates. "And your point is ...?"

"Music motivates. It elicits changes in mood and attitude. It causes the adrenaline to flow, to be able to push yourself just a little bit more than you could without it."

"Can't argue with you there." I laughed. "When we were leaving the Valley of the Vanished after defeating Franklin, Gumball tied his sound system into the sound systems of the other aircraft. As we were flying out of the valley in formation, Gumball played the *Raiders' March*. He told me, 'Might as well head out in style!' And he was right. To those on the ground, it was something astonishing."

"My point exactly. 'Always have your music'." He paused. "Changing subjects, is there any way your techies could tailor one of those things to my Double-X Large frame? Just think how much easier it would be if I could reduce my weight to half."

"We'll see," I called back. "What kind of music do *you* have?"

"Depends on the circumstance," Mark grinned up at me. "My mp3 player's got a lot of Christian music, plus favorite pieces from movies and television."

I hovered and examined the serial numbers of the crates. I smiled as I found the one matching the number Johnny had provided. I called down, "Got it!"

"Are you going to need help bringing it down?" Mark called.

"It's not very big," I informed. "The suit will compensate for some of the weight."

"I'll grab something to set it on!" Mark announced. I tested the crate's weight while Mark found a rolling metal cart. "This'll do it!"

"Okay. Here I come!"

Taking hold of the sides, I lifted the crate; the antigrav field compensated for the weight, and I drifted down easily to the ground. As I set it down on the cart, my curiosity was going into overdrive.

Mark had found a crowbar, and we pried the top off the crate. The screeching sound of the nails being wrenched from the ancient wood was like fingernails on a blackboard; we gritted our teeth at the noise, and gave a collective sigh as the lid finally gave way. Mark held the flashlight as we peered in.

"It's a box in a box," Mark observed dryly. "A stone box, probably hematite by the color and shine ... just like your ring. Can you see any markings or carvings?"

"No. You?"

"Not from here."

"I'm going to pick it up."

I reached into the crate. Half expecting some sort of reaction, it was almost a let-down when nothing happened. I picked it up and looked it over.

"Is it heavy?"

"You'd think it would be. But it's not. It's surprisingly light."

"Hollow?"

"Most likely, but it appears to be completely smooth; I don't even see anything like a seam. There's just this ..." I turned the top to face him; there was an oval indentation a little over a half inch long and about half that in width.

Mark pointed the flashlight at the indentation; he removed his glasses to examine it closer. Then his eyes got big and he looked at me. "Perry – look at your ring!"

I turned the box around to see it from his angle. As I did, I saw what he was talking about. The indentation had the same dimensions as the stone in my ring. I felt the depression, and noticed that it was not smooth, but had facets to it. I concluded, "It's like the stone could've come from the box."

"It doesn't quite fit the Green Lantern style – I mean, a *box* instead of a *lantern* – but, could it serve the same purpose?"

"Johnny knew this box existed," I stated. "Could he have known what it would do?"

"Maybe," Mark shrugged. "Or maybe he was just taking an educated guess. Go ahead and plug it in."

I removed my ring from my finger and looked at it. I had become quite attached to it, and didn't really want to do anything that could damage it. But ... I had to know. Holding it by the band, I carefully lined up the ring with the indentation and set it in.

"A perfect fit," I smiled, moving my hands away from the box. "It's –"

My words were cut off in mid-sentence as the box's color suddenly changed to a glowing white. I tried pulling out my ring, but it wouldn't budge.

"You better not," Mark cautioned, placing a hand on my arm. "Whatever's going on, I don't think it would be wise to interrupt it."

We both took a step back from the box as the glow increased. The sides appeared to have turned translucent, and the light was changing color, slowly moving through the visible spectrum ... red ... orange ... yellow ... green ...

"Fascinating," Mark said. "An imperceptible transition of incandescent luminosity."

I gave him a double-take.

We continued to watch for several minutes as the mysterious box performed its magic act. Blue. Indigo. Violet. Then it was black again.

"Okay," muttered Mark, falling back on humor to dissipate the tension of the moment. "That was fun."

We stood watching a few minutes more, waiting to see if there was a second act to this show. When nothing happened, I reached for my ring, hooking my finger in the band, and tested it with a gentle pull. There was no resistance, and it came out easily. I looked at the ring; it didn't look like it had changed, didn't feel heavier or lighter. So I slipped it on my finger, in faith believing that it wouldn't harm me. I didn't feel any different. No surge of otherworldly power came down as I made a fist. I was half-tempted to raise my hand towards the ceiling and shout some comic-book hero oath to call down lightning from heaven.

I resisted.

"Anything?" Mark asked, intrigued.

I shook my head.

"Why don't you see if it works now?"

Without hesitation, I put my hands together and pressed the top of the stone.

I vanished.

"It recharged the ring!" Mark whooped.

"Yes," agreed my disembodied voice. "But how long will I remain invisible? I don't have the *Bio Timer* anymore."

"Maybe you don't need it," Mark slyly commented, and I knew what he was getting at.

"Okay, let's find out. On three ... two ... one ..." I concentrated.

"***You're back!***" Mark exclaimed.

"Yeah," I grinned, thrilled. "How 'bout that? And Johnny either knew, or suspected, that this box would do just that to the ring. I'd love to know where this originated from."

"Research later," redirected Mark. "Testing now."

"Right you are, old chum!"

Over the next hour, I took the ring through its paces. The invisibility operated on the basis of an aura or field that I was able to control through willpower. I could extend the aura to encompass others – as I demonstrated on Mark – or withdraw it to make only my torso invisible. I extended it around part of a nearby crate, allowing us to see inside. And the most amazing thing was that I no longer needed to touch the ring to make it work – as long as it was still on my finger. Just out

of curiosity, I tried to see if I could make any or all of the walls of the hematite box invisible – so we could see inside, if indeed there *was* an inside – but it wouldn't respond.

"Hey, it was worth a try," I shrugged.

I noticed that Mark was moving slower, limping more, and depending on the cart for support.

"You're not doing so well, are you?" I asked.

"It's the neuropathy," he answered with a grunt, then awkwardly lowered himself into a seated position on the concrete floor. "That's why I had to give up the tract ministry at Saturday Market; I'm fine walking – for the most part – but standing in one place for any length of time is murder on my legs."

"You gonna need help getting out of here?"

He waved me off. "Naw. Just give me a few minutes off my legs, and I'll be fine."

I joined him on the floor.

"You know," I mused aloud. "Johnny either *knew* – or at least *suspected* – that I'd need that box one day. And I think I know why he wouldn't want Clark to know."

"Christmas morning," Mark suggested. "Too much temptation to open *all* the presents."

"Just like the original Fortress," I agreed. "Did I ever tell you what happened to it?"

Mark shook his head.

"It was while Clark was in hibernation. Some sort of government team found it in the Arctic. But while they were exploring, something happened. The Fortress sank below the ice like the *Titanic*, and took everybody down with it." I released a sigh. "Monk told me Clark had a real love/hate relationship with his Fortress. He told me about this one villain – John Sunlight – who broke into it and made off with some of the weapons Clark had hidden inside. He got most of them back, but not before Sunlight used them for all sorts of mayhem." I paused. "Monk also explained that there was a self-destruct device connected to the Fortress, controlled from two levers hidden just under the ice a few yards from the dome. Clark had the opportunity to sink the Fortress ... but didn't. And he regretted that for the longest time."

"Makes you wonder what kind of marvels and terrors are in *this* fortress."

"Johnny told me to use this information wisely. I suspect he may have been talking about more than just the ring."

"Speaking of which, how are you going to explain your ring is working again?"

"I've been thinking about that. I could always say that it just spontaneously began to work again. It's not quite the truth, but it would be better than telling him about this warehouse."

Mark looked around, curious at all the stacks of crates. "Do you want to check the rest of this place? I mean, see if **'it'** might be here?"

I shook my head. "The Ark? No. Besides, now that we've got the combination to the door, we can always come back another time."

"So what's next?"

"Well, we've got the rest of the weekend, and you, my friend, have never witnessed the awe and splendor of the CSI campus. Since you helped me, I figured the least I could do was show you a good time on *my* turf."

"Remember, I've got to get back by Sunday. Karen'll be coming back from Oral Hull, and I've got to be back to work on Monday."

"Hey, it's Friday," I spread my hands. "We'll get two days of fun and sun, and I'll fly you back myself." I turned around, then added over my shoulder, "Be nice to me and I'll take you two out to dinner at *Cattleman's*."

"Okay, I give," Mark acquiesced. "Besides, the last time I saw Clark was the wedding."

I smiled. Just in case someone else came after us, we cleaned up and I replaced the crate the box came in on the stack. We retraced our steps and returned to the Porsche.

"I just realized something," I announced as we went airborne. "I need to take care of something. I need to return to Miner's Bowl."

"Why in God's name would you want to return to *that* place?" Mark gaped incredulously.

I stared ahead soberly. "Business."

**Miner's Bowl, Montana:
Several hours later**

I stood inside the bedroom once inhabited by Pastor Steven Winter.

"*Archie*."

The man in the bed stirred. I repeated his name. He finally opened his eyes.

He saw nothing, of course.

"*Archie*."

"Who's there?" he asked softly.

I reappeared. The bioluminescent fabric of my flight suit gave me an appropriately eerie glow in the dark room.

"Liston?" Archie Hazelwood exclaimed as he recognized me.

"Good evening, Archie," I said cordially. "Would you like to go outside to talk?"

He looked over at the woman sleeping peacefully beside him – young Paula Winter – then at me. He slowly eased himself out of bed, and I couldn't help notice that both of them had been sleeping *au naturel*. It gave me a sick feeling, especially when Archie didn't offer any apology as he reached for a robe. With him boldly walking ahead of me, we went outside. From what I knew, I really wasn't surprised that he had taken over Pastor Steve's house.

As soon as we got outside the door, he spun on me and reached out to grab me – but I wasn't there anymore. I grabbed his hand and bent it back, forcing him to his knees. He grimaced and muttered something obscene.

"You just don't learn, do you, Archie. If you'll behave, I won't do like I did the last time we tussled. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," he grunted. "Now let go!"

I released him. Then I took a step back and reappeared.

"How the hell did you do that?"

I shrugged off his question and his language. "I'm not here for that, Archie. I'm here to warn you."

"Warn me from what?"

I took a deep breath, exhaling it through my mouth. "I know all about what you have done. You allowed Pastor Steve to die and lied to all these people about it. And while your ... accomplices ... were taking his remains to the compost pits, you told these people he'd become a god. And don't get me started about how you've conspired with his widows to make them your own concubines." I paused as I saw the look of incredulity on the other man's face. "You have sinned, Archie. And if you don't repent and make it good for everyone you will die in your sins."

"What gives you the right to judge me, Liston?" he shot back.

"Galatians 6:1: *'Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.'* And since there are so few people who aren't scared of you and who know the truth, it was up to me." I paused, and my voice softened. "Please, Archie ... do the right thing."

I looked at Archie Hazelwood. Neither of us spoke. His expression said nothing, and I would've given anything to read his mind. All I could do is pray.

"Liston, you're absolutely right," Archie said calmly after several seconds. "Miner's Bowl is now *my* land ... *my* kingdom. These people are *my* people, and they have chosen to live and die by *my* will alone."

"What about God?" I pleaded.

"*God? What God?*" he sneered back. "Man creates 'God' to keep the people under control. God becomes a convenient Boogeyman. *'You people better behave! If you don't, you'll be thrown in to a pit of fire for all eternity. But if you obey me – your leader – you can look forward to an eternity of paradise beyond your wildest dreams!'*"

He gave me a grin that soured my stomach. He was like Anakin Skywalker in *Star Wars*; Archie Hazelwood had turned himself over completely to the Dark Side. But this 'dark side' was darker than any possible movie depiction.

I didn't know what else to say. But then God gave me a passage from Mark chapter 6, when Jesus was cautioning his disciples before sending them out. "*And he said unto them, In what place soever ye enter into an house, there abide till ye depart from that place, and whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear you, when ye depart thence, shake off the dust under your feet for a testimony against them. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city.*"

I knocked the dust off my feet. "Good bye, Archie." And I vanished.

"*Good riddance,*" he spat back in my direction, not in the least fazed by the fact that I had just become invisible before his eyes.

My flight suit took me silently out of Miner's Bowl. Once I was over the rim and descending, I became visible. Nobody was out there to see me, and I really didn't care if they did. I was grieving in my spirit because Archie had such arrogant contempt for God. Mark was sitting in the Porsche, praying, when I landed. I retracted the flight suit into its backpack unit and secured it in the trunk.

No words were exchanged as I got into the car and we took to the sky.

Several minutes later, I sighed, "He's completely lost. And he's going to drag 'em all down with him."

"Forgive me, Perry," Mark said respectfully. "But, from what I remember of Archie Hazelwood when you left Winter's group, *plus* what happened afterward, there's nothing about that smeghead that surprises me. In fact, if he would've suddenly repented in sackcloth and ashes, **then** I would've been suspicious." He sighed. "You did your best, Perry. Now it's up to God to change his heart."

"Is there *anyone* back there who can be saved?"

"Of course there is," Mark replied calmly. "Each man has to make their own decision. God made a way to get *you* out, as we're both well aware of. And it won't matter if they're sealed in that

valley for all time. If they *want* to be free, God *will* make them free." Then he quoted from Psalm 71: "*Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up.*"

"You're right." I smiled. "Thanks."

On the way back to CSI, my ring's origins came back into the conversation.

"It was shortly after I'd discovered that the ring could make me invisible," I recounted. "We were visiting Monk, looking for answers from a chemist's perspective. Monk had taken some pictures of the ring and had emailed them to Johnny. Johnny told us about a stone that was found in the Achates river, somewhere in ancient Sicily. The stone resembled hematite, and was reputed to possess 'great mystic powers'. Whoever had it would be protected, and could become invisible. Johnny said that the stone was very popular to make into amulets and talismans."

"And a piece of that stone ended up in your ring?"

"That's what I believed."

"Did you ever research it deeper, confirm what Johnny had told you?"

"Well, as you know, after that, things got a little busy, what with the attack on Caroline Island. And it just got lost in the confusion."

"So what's stopping you from checking things out now?"

He had a point. Our flight back to CSI would take awhile. And I had an AI with access to a vast wealth of information.

"*Myrna?* Open a new file under my name. Research the word Achates." I spelled it.

"Specifically, look for a connection to precious stones possessing great power."

"Working," the AI replied.

Several minutes passed without a response. Finally: "Reporting: Achates. Item 1 of 3: in the *Aeneid*, Achates was a close friend of Aeneas; his name became a by-word for an intimate companion. Achates accompanied Aeneas throughout his adventures, reaching Carthage with him in disguise when the pair were scouting the area, and leading him to the Sibyl of Cumae. Virgil represents Achates as remarkable for his fidelity, and a perennial type of that virtue. However, despite being Aeneas's most important Trojan, Achates is notable for his *lack* of character." Myrna paused. "Item 2 of 3: *Dirillo*, the Sicilian river known in antiquity, is sometimes known as Achates." Another pause. "Item 3 of 3: the gemstone *agate* was referred to as Achates by Theophrastus and Pliny the Elder." Another pause, then, "Report ends."

"What?" I looked at the dash as if I was looking at Myrna's face. "Myrna, are you telling me there was no such thing as the Achates stone ... found in the Achates river ... that was widely known to hold great mystic power such as invisibility?"

"That is correct," Myrna calmly replied.

I couldn't believe it. "Where did Johnny get his information from?"

"Could he have been *mistaken*?" Mark ventured.

"Impossible," I replied resolutely. "He was one of the foremost archaeologists in the world – if not the best of the best. He was so sure of what he'd said ... I can't believe he could be wrong."

"Then maybe it's something else. Maybe the information you're looking for is beyond the memory banks of your little girlfriend here."

I chuckled at his joke. "Myrna? Could Mark's assumption be possible?"

"I am not your little girlfriend," the AI replied.

"No," I rephrased once I stopped laughing. "I mean, could Johnny's knowledge have been beyond the scope of your memory banks?"

"I would be remiss in assuming my memory is omniscient," Myrna replied.

"I'd take that as a 'yes'," interpreted Mark.

"But, with Johnny dead, and no way of researching this Achates stone, we're pretty much back to Square One."

"Not necessarily. Did God ever show you things without involving a computer?"

"Well ... sure," I admitted.

"Then let's just sit back and see what God has in mind."

CHAPTER TWO

"*Amazing*," Mark commented with hushed awe.

Arronaxe, the community associated with the Clark Savage Institute, was unlike any community existing in the world today. Not only did it contain some of the most sophisticated and experimental things in the fields of alternate energy, recycling, cybernetics, and dozens of other scientific areas, but it was a veritable smorgasbord of architectural designs.

As we approached my neighborhood, there was the odd fascination of descending on a Martian colony or such. In the *Fuller* residential neighborhood – named after engineer, author, designer, inventor, and futurist Buckminster Fuller – the predominant architectural style was a geodesic dome. The domes were of various colors and sizes. My dome was white, one of many. But the dome next to it was one of a kind, and would always be as such. It was blue, and belonged to Clark and Bonnie.

With practiced ease, I maneuvered behind our dome and carefully set the Porsche down into the parking spot next to our *ElectroCar*. I could've had Myrna do it, but I enjoyed the experience.

"Nice landing," Mark complimented as the doors unlocked.

We climbed out and stretched.

"I meant to ask," spoke up Mark as he went around to get his bag. "What's the power source for this car?"

"Fuel cells," I answered. "You know those charging grids they use for cell phones and such? Well, there are larger versions of those buried below the parking spaces. As long as we're parked, the grids will charge the fuel cells."

We walked around to the front and Sebastian opened the door for us. I gave Mark the 25-cent tour and pointed him to the guest bedroom. While Mark used the bathroom I took the hematite box to my room and transferred it to a backpack I'd be taking aboard *Orion*.

Since neither of us had eaten for most of the day, I fixed us a couple of sandwiches.

"So where's Doc?" inquired Mark.

I checked the time. "Interviews."

"Interviews?" Mark echoed.

I smiled. "I suppose I should explain."

"Would be nice."

"It all started with the accident. When the word got out that the great 'Doc' Savage was a paraplegic, it sparked a veritable firestorm of imaginations around the world – with most of it centered right here at CSI. Of course, CSI had an distinct advantage, since it was an established and organized think-tank with the capability of making ideas reality. So the Human Movement Augmentation department – HMA for short – was established. Since we weren't the only ones involved in that research, we freely shared information with organizations like the *Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation*. Karleen Bush was responsible for most of that, what with all her connections.

"Research around here falls into three main areas. Level One works on improvements for wheelchairs: making them more comfortable, lighter, more durable, easier to maneuver. For

powered chairs, designing new and more efficient batteries and propulsion systems. Level Two focuses on getting people around *without* the use of a chair, with things like prosthetics and exoskeletons. Do you remember Christine Snow? Well, during the time of Doc's trial, she was supplied with a prototype set of artificial legs with a supporting exoskeleton to supplant her own missing legs." I paused. "Now, Level Three is the most ambitious of all. Those are the dedicated people who aim to resolve the *source* of the problem – repairing the damage that caused the paralysis in the first place."

"Ambitious is right," Mark agreed with me.

"Every day," I continued, "hundreds of people submit applications online through CSI's HMA website. They get screened to eliminate the obvious crankers and prankers; depending on the threat level, some of them are referred to law enforcement or mental health professionals. Others are matched and referred to organizations involved in similar research.

"The rest of them have the opportunity to come here to be interviewed by the Review Panel ..."

The Human Movement Augmentation Building was an extremely large Quonset hut.

When it was first under construction, the Art Department begged to decorate it to resemble a giant running shoe, but the idea was voted down as 'too frivolous' for such a serious subject. Undaunted, some imaginative students ventured ahead, striking by night before the grand opening. In the morning, the Quonset hut looked like a giant had used it for a tent; a pair of huge legs and feet stuck out from one end. It looked amazing, especially from the air, and nobody had the heart to tear it down. However, as time often does, it took its toll on the decorations and caused it to fall apart within a couple of weeks. Pictures of the spectacle were eventually put on permanent display in the lobby.

Earlier that morning, several men and women had been escorted onto the CSI campus and taken to the Auditions Room of the HMA building, where their first response was surprise and amazement.

The Auditions Room had the basic look of a theater-in-the-round, with a raised stage area in the center, surrounded by rows of seats on stepped ledges. Above the stage was an impressive dome that contained the holographic projection equipment used during some presentations, worked from a control center in the form of a lectern. Positioned on a ledge at the edge of the raised stage were four stations for the members of the Panel; from there, they could see anything that happened on the stage.

According to a prearranged schedule, each candidate would come to the stage. Everything tried to make them feel at home; to alleviate any residual nervousness, technicians would've made sure their presentations were ready and loaded. After each presentation, the Panel would give its recommendations. It was a rarity if a candidate left disappointed or unsatisfied.

Doc Savage was unsatisfied.

He didn't want to be in the Audition Room, sitting at the fourth position (it was automatically reserved for him whenever he was in the neighborhood), having all those candidates around him, their eyes drilling into him as, one-by-one, they came forward and presented their ideas.

But what was worse, he didn't know *where* he wanted to be.

Whenever he was at CSI, it was his responsibility – some might call it his *duty* – to participate in the Panel auditioning this generation of *wunderkind*. One of his fellow panelists told him that when he was here, things upgraded to 'magical', "like George Lucas sitting in on a group of college film students".

After all, "Doc" Savage was a VIP, a celebrity, a star, a luminary.

Bull.

The others at this table were far more qualified than he.

First there was Amy. He'd known her for only eleven years, and that started with the death of her adopted father, Long Tom. But so much had happened in those eleven years. She'd met and fallen in love with Monk's son Clark – nicknamed 'Gumball' – and they were now the parents of a beautiful little boy, Thomas Harper Mayfair. Amy had picked up her father's interest of electronics, and had expanded upon it over the years – as illustrated by the secret laboratory in the sub-basement of their home in Lincoln City, Oregon. Considering Tom's years in a wheelchair, it would be naïve to think that he and Amy would never consider research into improved human mobility.

Then there was Miranda – Dr. Miranda Schneider. She had been the first one to diagnose his paralysis, and had been his chief medical supporter. In those first weeks, she brought all of Seattle Medical Center's Neurology department to bear on his condition. Now, on loan from SMC, she possessed extraordinary experience to find the potentials – and the flaws – in many of the ideas brought before the Panel.

Finally there was the Englishman, John Stonebrake. Prior to his injuries, Clark knew nothing about him. But that changed. In the 1990's Stonebrake had been a close friend and colleague of Dr. Miles Hawkins – an electronics genius and the founder of *Hawkins Technologies*. Hawkins had been shot in the back during a police action, paralyzing him from the waist down. A self-made millionaire, determined not to give up on the dream of walking again, he secretly used his amazing talents and personal fortune to create a powered exoskeleton which allowed him to walk, run, jump – and more. Joined in his crusade by Stonebrake and Taylor Savage, he became a masked crimefighter known as MANTIS. After Hawkins' death in 1995, Stonebrake self-exiled himself to the Orient. But, after Savage wrote the popular exposé *MANTIS Unmasked*, Stonebrake returned to the States. Shortly after, he began sharing bits and pieces of Hawkins' technology with select groups. During the formation of the HMA and the adopting of the Panel, Clark was introduced to Stonebrake, and he found out that Chris Snow's exoskeleton had been a direct result of Hawkins' technology through Stonebrake.

So remarkable, he reflected on the others.

"Thank you, Mr. Brady," Miranda Schneider addressed the young man on the stage. "Your work is impressive. I'd like to refer you to Dr. Ben Harrison at the *American Congress of Rehabilitation Medicine*; I think he'd appreciate seeing your research. I'll put you in touch with him."

"Thank you!" the man beamed. He gave them all a slight bow and left the stage.

"***Eight-oh-five***," someone announced. "***Tamara Bernice Elders***."

A dark-haired girl in her late teens stepped up onto the stage, a backpack slung over one shoulder. She thanked the Panel as she unzipped the bag. Then she removed something quite strange and placed it on the floor at the base of the lectern.

It was a small white teddy bear.

It was all quite fascinating. It wasn't unusual for applicants to show up wearing special clothing or 'lucky charms' to give them encouragement. However, to anyone's recollection, nobody had ever produced a stuffed animal. Clark found it especially interesting. It could be, as the others, a form of personal encouragement, or a special prop for the presentation, or ... as a message?

Clark's lips formed a thin smile. It *was* a message, directed specifically at *him*.

"*Tammy?*"

The girl responded to her name by looking at Clark and giving him a mischievous smirk.

Without hesitation, the big man rose from his position and began to walk towards her. He was testing out a set of *eLEGS 5.0*, produced in cooperation with Berkeley Robotics and Human Engineering Laboratory and UC Berkeley in California. It was composed of a pair of braces that fit around the legs and under the feet, then around the waist and halfway up the torso. The power source and microprocessor system had been greatly reduced in size since their first prototypes. Clark's movements were smoother than the early trials, as the microprocessor learned from its host. If one didn't know the history of the bronze man's infirmities, it would be easy to assume that his legs just needed the composite braces to assist him and not provide mobility for his lower limbs.

The dark-haired girl waited only a moment before leaving the lectern behind and joining Clark in the middle of the stage. Her arms opened wide and they met in a big, gentle embrace.

"Charity was a good choice," he whispered to her, referring to the teddy bear.

"I thought so, too," she returned.

Clark opened the embrace and turned to his audience. "Tammy is a friend. We met during the 2001 Pine Corners Quake." He turned back to Tammy and grinned. "With that out of the way, let's see what you got."

With a last squeeze, the two returned to their places, and Tammy began. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for allowing me to present my idea to you."

An image appeared on the rear screen. It was an old film, showing a man using a lifting machine to transfer large barrels from the floor to some shelves. "The concept of using exoskeletons as practical lifting machines – also known as *mecha* – is not a new one. Machines like these have been in limited use since the 1960's. As you can see, this early machine is effective, but very, very slow. Over the decades there has been some progress, but not enough to keep up with the need." More images, various clips of disaster scenes; people were clearing debris slowly and laboriously. "What is needed is something more practical and capable of meeting the needs of a crisis scene." With the clips of manually clearing debris continuing in the background on the screen, a rotating holographic display appeared in the middle of the stage. "This is the ***Walking Bulldozer***. It is specifically designed to be used in situations where a lot of heavy debris needs to be cleared from normally-unreachable areas where you can't get a truck or even a Caterpillar in close enough. The operator wears the mecha, and is airlifted to a disaster site. As soon as it touches down it can get to work clearing debris with more maneuverability than anything on wheels. Get a team of them into an area, accompanied by a med crew, and they can be saving lives within minutes."

Watching her presentation, Clark berated himself for his oversights. He had been aware that she was a student at CSI, and that she and her father also lived in Arronaxe, and yet he had neglected to visit them even once. He promised himself to change all that, especially in light of this invention of hers. His mind went back to the first time he met that frightened little girl, cowering in the basement of her earthquake-damaged house in Pine Corners. He and Bonnie had tried rescuing her, but the three of them became trapped when the house collapsed above them. She relaxed as soon as she realized they weren't giants, but were friends. And then when Bonnie was facing her *own* crisis, Tammy's childlike trust inspired Bonnie into placing her own faith in Jesus Christ.

"Ms. Elders," addressed John Stonebrake. "Do you have a prototype?"

"Yes, sir!" On cue, the rear screen lit up with video of the *Walking Bulldozer*. Clark recognized the location: it was on campus, in some foothills often used for rock climbing. With Tammy at the controls, she maneuvered easily across the uneven ground, clearing loose rocks and moving large boulders aside. "These tests were done over several days; I am in the process of securing a fuel cell powerful enough for any prolonged tests."

"I think I might be able to help you with that," offered Clark, making a note to put her in touch with one of the department heads on campus.

As Mark and I climbed out of the ElectroCar in the parking area of the HMA building, we saw Clark standing outside with some others. He spotted us, nudged a young dark-haired girl who was standing next to him, and waved us over.

"Auditions done for the day?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Clark, extending a hand to Mark. "Mark, good to see you again! Perry told me you were coming to visit."

"Yeah, he kinda begged me to come," Mark quipped. "I like the outfit, by the way."

"This week's test model," Clark responded. "Perry, Mark, this is Tammy Elders. Perry, you should remember Tammy."

I looked at her and shook my head. "I'm sorry, I don't."

"It's probably because, the last time you saw me, I was eight, and we were in Pine Corners."

My eyes went wide. I *did* recognize her. "The house!"

She smiled.

Clark introduced her to Mark.

"You were making a presentation?" Mark asked Tammy.

"Yes," she beamed. "I'm a student here at CSI – hydraulic engineering and robotics. I've designed a mecha to be used in rapid-response situations clearing debris in usually-unreachable areas. It's not directly related to Doc's situation, but they tell me it's got a lot of promise."

"I'm going to put her in touch with Mitch," Clark added.

"Not bad, Tammy," I commended her. "Hey, why not join us for dinner?"

"That'd be great, but Dad's expecting me at home." It was obvious that her father was more important to her than anything. "But I'll take a rain check on it, if it's okay with you."

"You're always invited," Clark smiled.

Tammy gave us all hugs, then headed on her way.

"Hydraulic engineering *and* robotics?" commented Mark. "She's barely out of her teens!"

"Nice girl," I added. "Boy, she's grown!"

"Yes, she has," agreed Clark. "So, did you decide on any place in particular for dinner?"

"I was thinking *Luigi's*."

"Sounds good," commented Clark. "Let me collect my stuff and we can be off."

"Can I give you a hand?" asked Mark.

"Sure, why not?" Clark smiled back.

"I'll bring the car around," I called after them.

Clark and Mark entered the empty Auditions Room. Mark froze in place and took it all in, mouth agape. A few moments later he regained his composure and followed Clark to his seat along the edge.

"Hey, Doc?"

"Yes?"

"Perry told me you were testing exoskeletons, and told me I shouldn't be surprised. But I have to admit, that *does* look a bit strange."

Clark smiled as he picked up a box and placed it on the table. "Just imagine how it's been from *this* end, especially when people refer to me as *RoboDoc*."

Mark chuckled. "So how often do you get a new one to try out?"

"Too often, it seems," he sighed. "I just get one 'broken in', and they switch me over to a new one." He suddenly sat behind his table; he looked weary. "The first few days are the worst. I walk around like Frankenstein's monster." He illustrated by stretching his arms out stiffly before him and rocking back and forth a little. "Don't get me wrong – it's a blessing to be able to get around without the wheelchair, and I praise God for all those people who've given so much to provide these for me. But there are times I wish I could just take a vacation from it all."

"And I suppose you're always counted on to take notes on how they work?"

"Oh, yes." He paused, then looked straight at Mark. "They call me a test pilot, but sometimes I feel more like a guinea pig."

"Really?"

He stood and absently began to put things in the box. "You know, a lot of these inventors are good ... *really* good. But I remember when it was *me* coming up with all the wild new inventions, devising things that had never been imagined. Did you know that I invented the first telephone answering machine back in the 1930's?"

"I seem to remember that," replied Mark. "So you think that you have nothing to contribute to the cause but be a guinea pig?"

"Yes," Clark answered thoughtfully.

They continued gathering things. Then Mark suddenly asked, "Did you know I write?"

"Yes. I read your novel. It's good."

"Coming from you, that's high praise. Anyhow, one of my friends, Richard, is a security guard at

the Federal building where I work. He's also a brother in Christ. Well, sometimes I get in so early that I catch Richard towards the end of his shift, and we'll just sit and talk about all kinds of things. He's helped me with some of the technical details in my writing. He refers to himself as my 'violence editor' – and that's how I put him down in the dedications." He smiled. "Now, if you were to ask him, he'd be the first to admit that he couldn't put two sentences together to save his life. But he's got an incredible mind for strategy. I'll give him situations my characters would be involved in, and he'll come up with solutions in no time flat. And it doesn't matter if he can't write. He does what he can, and he does it *well*." He paused. "So ... have you ever thought ... that God has a better direction for you and you just haven't found it yet?"

Clark continued to absently put things in the box. "You know, what you said has reminded me of something Perry told me a long time ago. We were in Lincoln City. My old team was together once more. However, Ham and Tom were dead, Pat hated my guts, and the world still considered me a criminal. To make a long story short, I was stuck. I didn't know what to do ... and that's not like me." He paused. "While everyone else was partying, I wandered out onto the beach. I sat down in the sand and just looked out at the waves. Next thing I know, Perry's standing there next to me. And he reminded me of what I'd wanted to accomplish when I started the Crime College: to rehabilitate the crooks without killing them. To get rid of their evil ways and give them new lives as productive citizens." He looked at Mark. "Sound familiar?"

"Of course," Mark smiled. "Jesus Christ. He takes the sinners – us – and cleans us up through His own blood. Then he gives us new and better lives. Like He told the woman caught in adultery, '*Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.*'"

"Exactly," Clark nodded. "Perry reminded me of the obvious, that my intentions were good but my methods dangerously flawed. But by using what we had on hand – the word of God – I could still make a difference. And that's when we became traveling evangelists."

"It was a good move," Mark commented. "So maybe, what if Satan's trying to use these bright kids against you – make you think you're a failure when you're far from it? What if, instead, your role isn't as *inventor*, but as *facilitator*?"

"Facilitator?" he repeated.

"For example," Mark continued, "What's that kid's name, the one who came up with the stasis chamber?"

"Bill Sloan," Clark answered. "He had the idea, and had done all the research, but I saw the potential in him."

"Imagine what would've happened if you hadn't stepped in when you did."

"I have," he admitted.

"The stasis chambers have affected a lot of people around the world, including me. Karen might have died when her shunt malfunctioned last year. But they put her into a stasis chamber until they could order the proper replacement. The stasis chamber helped save her life."

"Thank God," breathed Clark.

Mark came over and put a hand on the bronze man's muscled arm. Their eyes met. "Don't sweat over what you *can't* do, but be open to what you *can*."

Clark looked at Mark, and his face suddenly mirrored his epiphany.

"That's ... *brilliant*," he whispered. "Thanks."

Mark shrugged it off. "For years I bought into what others said about me, that I was always going to be a loser. Most of that negative talk came from my own lips. I can't say that I've stopped listening to them altogether ... but I try. In the meantime, God's given me supporting verses like Galatians 6:9."

Clark recalled the reference. "*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we shall reap a harvest if we do not give up.*" He nodded. "Good verse."

"It's on the wall above my desk, where I do my writing. Whenever I get frustrated and start to listen to the lies, I look up and there it is, reminding me He's not done with me yet."

I was starting to get impatient as I waited for them to return from the Audition Room. Finally the two of them appeared.

"*What took you guys so long?*" I called to them. "*Is everything okay?*"

"Fine," they both replied with an implied shrug.

Something about their response made me wonder, but I let it slide. "I went ahead and made the reservations for *Luigi's*. Ready?"

"Yes," said Clark.

"Lead on," added Mark.

We went out to the parking lot and loaded Clark's stuff into the rear storage compartment of the *ElectroCar*. The drive to *Luigi's* was about fifteen minutes – *ElectroCars* aren't known for their lightning speed – and we found a parking spot right away.

As soon as we walked through the main doors, the *Maître d'hôtel*, Antonio, greeted us with a beaming smile and open arms. "*Monsieur Sauvage, Monsieur Liston* – so good to see you!"

"Thank you, Antonio," Clark greeted. "This is our friend, Mark Eidemiller."

"*Monsieur Eidemiller*," he greeted with only a little difficulty pronouncing Mark's last name. "Would you care for your usual booth, or would you like something more private?"

"Booth is fine," acknowledged Clark.

"This way."

We were all surprised when Luigi Tamari – owner of the little restaurant we visited in New York during Clark's trial – asked to open up a second restaurant in Arronaxe. Considering the man and his expertise, it wasn't a hard decision. As the three of us headed for our usual booth near the back of the restaurant, we were the center of attention. But this wasn't your usual celebrity-worshipping crowd of diners. Most of the people here knew Doc, and greeted them as a neighbor and a friend. The others ... well, they were nice enough just to stare on in silent amazement.

Almost as soon as Antonio left us with the menus, a tall girl with a tray of water glasses came by; her name tag read *Judy*. She set the glasses before us.

"Your usual iced tea, guys?" she inquired.

"I think *hot* tea tonight," spoke up Clark. "Earl Grey, with lemon."

"Sure thing, Doc," she acknowledged.

"Hot tea sounds good to me, too," added Mark. "Do you have mint?"

"Peppermint, spearmint, or mint medley?"

He smiled. "Spearmint."

Judy wrote the order down, then looked at me. "Perry?"

"Same."

A few seconds after Judy left with our orders, a waiter came in with warm bread and a side of honey butter. He placed it in the middle of the table, where the smell teased our noses.

"Are you ready to order, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Not just yet," informed Clark. "Our friend's new in town."

"I'll give you a few minutes." And he quietly withdrew.

We looked over the menus and offered our suggestions. In the end, Mark ordered *Vermicelli á la Derek Flint*. "It sounded interesting," he commented.

Judy had delivered our drinks, and left to summon the waiter. He came in seconds after she left, took our order, and moved out.

Clark took a sip of his tea and added a sugar cube. "So what do you think of CSI, Mark?"

"It's an amazing place," he commented.

"And I haven't even given him the full tour yet," I explained. "We came straight from my place to the HMA Building."

"Well," Clark said, "I think we've got tomorrow planned for us."

"No auditions?" I asked.

"Just a few in the morning," Clark informed us. "Give you two a chance to sleep in."

"The exoskeletons are a fantastic idea," Mark commented during dinner. "But what about the flight suits? I mean, couldn't you modify one of them to let you move around?"

"We considered it, of course," answered Clark. "But we kept running into a problem keeping me hovering just above the floor."

"Do you remember Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen*?"

Mark nodded.

"Well, as tall as Clark is, and with his legs not moving, he looked like Dr. Manhattan bobbing there in mid-air."

"Gotcha," Mark nodded understanding. "It's hard to be meek and mild when you're floating like some sort of bronze demigod."

"Precisely," agreed Clark with a smile. "So we focused on the exoskeletons."

"So what's your favorite one so far?"

"Actually, I think it's this one. The guys at Berkeley have tested two models on me so far, and I've enjoyed them both. But there are features from some of the others that I would like to see incorporated in a single exoskeleton."

"So what's the problem?"

I offered to explain. "Say that you can create an automobile that'll change the world, using technology that exists in cars already out there. Sounds easy, but just try to get Ford, Toyota, Volkswagen, Ferrari, Dodge, *and* Rolls-Royce to let you have it."

"Can't you make a deal with them? Give 'em all a piece of the pie?"

Clark sighed. "Not so easy."

Dinner was excellent, and the conversation shifted from topic to topic as we shared some of our less-classified adventures.

On the way back to the residences we brought up some of the lighter moments that occurred during Clark's trial, and were relating when we'd played hooky and, disguised, had flown back to

Portland to rendezvous with our spouses.

"The girls were in our RV, in the airport parking lot," I explained. "Dot met us at the terminal while Bonnie stayed with the triplets."

"I was suddenly hit by a mischievous idea," Clark picked up the story. "Still in disguise, I went over to the RV and tried to make Bonnie think I was there for a –" His eyes narrowed. "– carnal assignation."

"You *propositioned* your wife?" Mark exclaimed.

"Yes," Clark nodded. "But she got suspicious, so she had Myrna scan me."

"So what did she do when she realized you were trying to put one over on her?"

"She ambushed me with a can of pressurized whipped cream."

As I pulled into the parking space, I added, "He ended up looking like a flocked Christmas tree!"

As we laughed, Mark told Clark, "Serves you right!"

Clark had invited us to his dome. Inside, I got us soft drinks while Clark took care of business. Mark took a seat on the large couch before the giant-sized hi-def plasma screen.

"I tell you, Perry," commented Mark. "You've come a long ways from pounding the pulpit down at the Mission. Have you ever thought about putting these adventures on paper?"

I handed him a bottle of Diet Mountain Dew, and said, "Too busy. Besides, you've just heard the stories that we can tell in public."

"There's more?"

"Oh, yes!" I smiled and took a sip from my bottle. "Stuff that would curl your hair."

"Like what?"

"Remember the terrorist that had kidnapped Amy?"

"Yeah. Kananga, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Did you ever wonder why there was never anything in the news about him?"

"I figured it got overshadowed by 9/11."

I shook my head. "No. It was deliberately covered up, and for good reason. He'd built up a stockpile of weapons over the years, and had packed them into small buoyant packages the size of footballs. They were equipped with remote control detonators, then were released into the ocean currents – the ones leading straight to the U. S. of A."

"Did he know where they'd end up?"

"That's the thing – he didn't care where they'd end up as long as it was within the United States. And those remote detonators? Well, they would be controlled from a satellite he'd gotten his hands on. His plan was to set off one package per day – at random through the satellite – until they were all exhausted."

"Couldn't you guys just blow up the satellite?"

"He had it set up so that, if anyone tried tampering with things, a signal would be sent that would detonate everything all at once."

"Oh, wow!"

Clark added, "According to Renny – who got into Kananga's base – Kananga believed that what happened on 9/11 was too limited."

"The biggest mountain will crumble if it's hit enough times," Mark mused aloud.

"And Kananga figured that his plan would cause utter chaos in the United States."

"Well, thank God you guys stopped him in time!"

"The only reason why we're telling you now, Mark, is that you were in on things at the start, and we know you'll keep things quiet."

"For sure," Mark promised, his voice sober. "You said there were other stories?"

"Not nearly so menacing," I reassured my friend. "We're more prepared now."

Clark touched me on the shoulder. "Show him *Orion*."

I nodded. "You're aware that *Orion* is our base of operations. But you don't know *what* it is."

"What do you mean?"

"*Sebastian*," I commanded. "Put *Orion* on screen."

The large flat-screen monitor against one wall suddenly came to life, and the image of our Flying Fortress appeared.

Mark took a look at it, his jaw dropped, then turned to face us. "You've got a *flying platform*?"

I nodded. "Yep."

"How big are we talking about?"

I replied with a reference he would understand. "Think SHIELD helicARRIER."

His jaw went slack. "So ... why isn't it picked up by satellites and such?"

"Special cloaking technology," Clark provided.

"Like the car," he associated as he rose and approached the screen. "You know, this looks ... *familiar*." He angled his head to one side, then the other, then he calmly announced, "I've seen this before."

Now it was our turn to be surprised. "How?" I exclaimed.

"Did you have it at Miner's Bowl?"

"Yes," Clark answered.

"I saw this in a dream," Mark declared slowly. "It was after you had sent out the emergency prayer request against Wail. And I saw this. I thought I was imagining it, but now I know I wasn't. I also remember seeing this woman, somebody named Jenny."

My breath caught in my throat.

"Jenny's my daughter," explained Clark with a smile. "But she's only five."

Mark and I made brief eye contact, and he saw the expression on my face. "I guess I interpreted that part wrong," he excused himself. "Sorry." He angled his head to the screen. "So where is it now?"

"Arizona, getting some upgrades," I explained.

Mark continued to marvel at *Orion*. "How does something that huge stay *airborne*?"

Clark spoke up, "It has to do with the source of the technology that was used to build *Orion*. A few years ago, we were visited by someone from a parallel dimension. Before he returned home, he helped us build *Orion*."

"A parallel dimension?" Mark repeated.

"A *familiar* someone from a parallel dimension," I amended.

"*Sebastian*?" Clark addressed. "Folder *Kal One*."

The image of the floating *Orion* changed to several group pictures of us standing alongside a dark-haired woman and a tall man wearing a colorful costume. A red cape casually billowed behind him. Adorning the chest of the familiar red-and-blue costume was a diamond-shaped shield with a large **S** in its borders.

I knew Mark's fascination for Superman, and braced myself for anything including hysteria and loss of consciousness. Instead, he slowly and silently examined the pictures, his eyes wide. Then, with his voice barely a squeak, he asked, "He ... *exists*?"

Clark answered. "As I said, they were drawn from *their* dimension into *ours*."

"*They*?" He turned back to the images and pointed at the dark-haired woman. "Lois Lane?"

"Lois Kent," I corrected. "They got married."

Mark returned to the couch and seemed to deflate. He stared straight ahead. "Now I understand why you needed privacy. I can't believe it. It's ... I don't have words for it."

I was very thankful that Clark didn't reveal the *other* things that took place while Kal and Lois were in our dimension. Lois had been killed, shot to death by modern-day buccaneers. Then God compelled me to pray for her healing, and she came back to life like Jairus' daughter. It was enough to convince Kal that what we had been sharing with him was the truth, and to demand that I lead him through becoming a Christian.

It was all so amazing. Had it not been for the pictures that we held back from showing Mark – Lois Kent's bloodied corpse, and Clark and I lifting the Man of Steel out of the waters of the Mediterranean in the wake of his baptism – I myself would find it hard to believe.

"The *Orion* will be back in a couple of days?"

"Yes."

"I'd love to have seen it," Mark shrugged. "But I've got to be back at work on Monday."

"Might I make a suggestion? How about Sunday, after church, you two fly down to Arizona and meet up with *Orion*?" He looked at Mark. "You can have a few hours to check it out, then Perry can fly you home. What do you think?"

Mark grinned. "You have to ask?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "That's a great idea."

"Why don't we take a break here?" asked Clark. "Anyone for microwave popcorn?"

He started getting up, but I stopped him. "I'll take care of it. I know where everything is."

"Thanks," Clark responded.

I went into the kitchen, got a couple of bags out of the pantry, and put one in the microwave.

"Hey, Clark," I called out. "What do you think about sharing our *other* adventure with Mark?"

He thought about it a moment. Then he called back, "Yes."

"Are you sure I *want* to know about this?" Mark asked.

I disregarded Mark's doubt. "Clark, go ahead and start it off."

"First, you *must* keep what you hear to yourself. You cannot share it with anyone, including your wife. Is that understood?" The tone of his voice was dead-sober.

"Sure," Mark promised.

"It was during the honeymoon cruise. A man appeared on the upper deck. He identified himself as Doug Phillips and claimed to be part of a secret Government project called the *Time Tunnel*. He explained that he and his partner Tony Newman had been lost in time, bouncing around from one time period to another."

"I don't remember that happening," Mark admitted.

"And you won't, because everything got straightened out in the end. For reasons you'll eventually understand, only Perry and I remember the actual facts." He saw Mark's confusion. "It sounds like we've both lost our minds, but I assure you, it'll all make sense."

I came out with the popcorn in a bowl; I handed it to him. He looked at both of us, then nodded. "Okay. So this mysterious Doug Phillips appears on the ship and tells you about being bounced around in time like *Quantum Leap*."

"Correct," Clark continued. "We were able to locate their secret base – which had been closed years earlier due to budget cuts – and got the Time Tunnel going again. One of the features of the Time Tunnel was being able to view past or future events. We were able to lock in on Tony, and saw him appear out of the time stream and arrive at a specific time and a specific place."

"Unfortunately," I interjected, "the place was Maine, and the time was when Clark was looking for Wail."

"*Before* you were captured and put into hibernation?" Mark gaped.

Clark nodded. "However, because Tony Newman appeared when and where he did, the 'other me' was startled, and became more on his guard. When Sloan's men tried to ambush him, he turned the tables on them."

"Which created an alternate timeline," Mark deduced. "*Back to the Future Part 2*. Did things change where you were?"

"No," I answered. "The complex was somehow protected. But everything around us was changed – the rest of the world was changed! The United States had become two separate nations. The northern states had become this anti-Christian realm, and the southern states had become an African-American province."

"Did you two still exist in the divergent timeline?"

I laughed. "I was a terrorist sanctioned by the southern states."

"And I was President of the United States – the *northern* states."

"You *what?*" Mark exclaimed.

I continued. "Clark and I became separated. All we wanted to do was get back together, get back to the Time Tunnel complex, and pray to God that the people we left behind had figured out how to straighten things out."

"How did you survive?"

"For me," I admitted, "God sent an angel." I knew Mark believed in angels, especially after hearing the accounts of when Sunni was in the hospital in 2001.

Clark continued. "I didn't have the capability of contacting Perry – you can't really sneak around when you're the President of the United States. But Perry finally caught up to me. And we headed back towards the Time Tunnel."

I took the story from there. "But then, something happened. We don't know what it was that triggered it, but there was some sort of nuclear exchange. By the time we got to the Time Tunnel complex, somebody had turned it into a radioactive crater. Our only hope was gone."

"Obviously you survived," Mark commented. "But, how?"

"We were almost dead due to radiation poisoning," explained Clark. "We passed out, and came to in a strange place. We were in the *future*, in a restored Time Tunnel complex. The scientists there saved our lives, and sent us back to our timeline before any of this other stuff ever happened. If it wasn't for the fact that we both remember it happening, it would seem to *us* like a dream."

"But because you both remember all the details, it confirms the fantastic truth of it."

"And the fact that, when we went to where the Time Tunnel had been, it actually was there. That's where *Orion* is at right now."

Mark let out a sigh, his eyes glazed. Then he excused himself to go to the restroom.

I turned to Clark. "We did the right thing in telling him, didn't we?"

He nodded. "We did."

"Why don't we call it a day?"

"Agreed. After all, we've given him quite a lot to take in."

When Mark came out, we announced that we were calling it a night. Thanking Clark, we left his place and headed next door to my residence.

"*Sebastian*," ordered Clark after the others had left. "Activate security net."

"Activated," came the swift response.

Clark silently headed to the bedroom. He disconnected himself from the exoskeleton and plugged it in for the night. Given the zero crime rate of Arronaxe, the security net was hardly necessary. But given his helplessness without his exoskeleton, Clark had to acknowledge that it was a wise precaution. He climbed under the bedcovers and squirmed about to get into a comfortable position.

"Lights, please," he instructed. The room went dark.

"Good night, sir."

"Good night, Sebastian."

Back in my residence, I activated our security net, and we prepared for bed. As I passed by the spare room Mark was using, I glanced in. Mark was placing a small stuffed object on the bedside table.

"Teddy bear?" I asked.

Mark held him up. He was round, with stump-like arms and legs, and an expressive face. "On the outside, maybe. Inside, he's my Sancho Panza. His name's Butterball."

"He *looks* like a 'Butterball'," I agreed. "And he also looks rather 'well-loved'."

Mark stroked the bear's matted fur. "He comes with me to work and keeps me company. When I don't have anybody else to talk to, I've got him. Okay, so call me weird." He grinned. "I got him at Parlor Bears back in the 90's."

"Hey, you introduced us to Parlor Bears, remember?" I reminded him. "I just wish we could've kept 'em from going under."

"Yeah," Mark agreed, sadly. "Me, too. But we got a lot of bears out of there before they did." He pushed away the momentary lament at losing a favorite business. "So, you still got Berry?"

"Of course." I grinned and retrieved Berry Blue from the other room. Six inches tall in a seated position, he was a *Russ* bear from the 'Teddy' series. With midnight blue fur and a Parlor Bears tee-shirt sized to fit his small body, he was a twin to Dot's purple-furred Grape Juice. As I put him on the bedside table next to Butterball, I said, "By the way. Thanks for not pushing the *Jenny* reference."

"No kidding. You looked terrified."

"Was I? Sorry." I stepped back and sat on the edge of the other twin bed in the room. "Well, since God has allowed you to know about her, I figure He won't mind me sharing the other half of the swizzle stick." I paused and took a deep breath. "Remember when we told you about the

scientists from the future who saved our lives? Their names were Jason and Jennifer."

Mark's eyes went wide. "Jenny?"

"They were Clark's grown children. It was purely by accident, I overheard them talking, referring to Clark as Father. When I talked to Jenny about it, she made me promise to keep it a secret even from Clark. Makes sense, when you think about it. If he knew the future of his own children ..."

"Especially after personally witnessing what one little *oops* can do to the world."

"Exactly. Realize, Clark grew up in a controlled environment fashioned by his own father. If he had the chance to direct his own children in a particular direction, he might be tempted to do it."

"Then you made the wise choice," Mark agreed. "Did she help you at Miner's Bowl?"

"When I was trapped underground, praying for help, she sent back some sort of message device that let me know Clark was in serious trouble, and helped me in getting a message to the *Orion*. Then it self-destructed leaving no trace of its existence."

Mark looked thoughtful. "Does that mean you've got a guardian angel from the future?"

"It's certainly looks like it, doesn't it."

"How does it feel, knowing someone from the future is watching you ... or watching out for you?"

"Very strange. Especially when I see little Jenny here, and, in the back of my mind, I can picture the older Jenny watching both of us through the Time Tunnel. I mean, I have no problem with God watching me all the time – after all, He's God – but another human ... I suppose that should be very disturbing." I shook my head. "Don't get me wrong. She's helped us out twice now, and I am forever in her debt. I don't know. Maybe Jenny's doing God's will as well." I smiled. "But knowing what I do, knowing that I'm Jenny's favorite uncle in two different time eras ... there's something ... very ... special about that."

"What year did you arrive in?"

"What does that matter?"

"Something you said. What year was it?"

"Two thousand eighty ... something. I can't remember the exact year at the moment."

"Good enough. How old did you say Jason and Jenny looked?"

I thought about it. "I'd say they looked somewhere in their mid-twenties, maybe early thirties."

"Have you done the math on this? They would've had to have been in their eighties by then. But they weren't. Could they have been Clark's *grand*children or *great*-grandchildren?"

I shook my head. "No. She confirmed that she was Clark's daughter."

"Then I think it's safe to say that – somewhere between then and now – they somehow find the Fountain of Youth."

"You know, up until this moment, that never occurred to me." I blinked. "Wow."

CHAPTER THREE

Five Weeks Earlier

"Thank you for flying Air Bahamas, Mr. Fleming."

John Fleming looked at the young blonde stewardess smiling up at him. Had he been thirty years younger, he would have invited her for a late dinner – and an early breakfast – in his suite. But now at seventy, all he could do was offer her a charming smile.

He was fashionably dressed for the weather in a tropical shirt and white slacks. Thanks to his special credentials, his Belgian-made hand-crafted ebony cane – and the sword hidden within – was able to get through airport security without scrutiny. The walking stick was a necessity ever since the arthritis in his limbs from years of fighting and rough treatment made getting around harder than in his youth.

Followed by a porter with his luggage, he summoned a taxi outside the airport. As he rode to his hotel, his mind once more went back to the reason for his trip into his past.

Fleming had been working for the British Secret Service for several decades. In the past, he'd been referred to as a 'misogynist dinosaur', 'a relic of the Cold War', and 'a blunt instrument' – mostly by his superiors and colleagues. He smiled to himself; *a man's got to do what a man's got to do*. And then his adventures – heavily edited and somewhat fictionalized – found their way to the general public in book and film, courtesy of his raconteur.

Now, however, he was getting a little long in the tooth for active field work. And for the past two years – ever since medical reasons finally forced him from active status – he was reassigned to supervising LTK field agents, which was boring and personally a waste of time. But it would do until he officially retired. Royalties from his raconteur's investments had allowed him to purchase one of the smaller islands nearby. It offered privacy and an unparalleled view. He didn't remember what the island's original name had been, but he renamed it Tracy Island in honor of his late wife. And it gave him access to another of his favorite pastimes: sailing. There was a house already on the island; it needed fixing up, but it would be a joy to do that.

But that was before he got the news that he'd been seconded to succeed his boss as the head of the Service – which meant a nomination as Minister of Intelligence. That latest development came as a distinct shock to him, especially in light of the low opinions his supervisor had for him. They'd given him thirty days to make a decision, but he couldn't do it while teaching a

bunch of runny-nosed kids how to be secret agents. So they granted him conditional leave to return to his much-beloved Bahamas to think things over.

"Hav' you heard of our new club, sah?" the driver suddenly asked.

"I'm sorry," Fleming blinked. "What was that?"

The driver pointed to an archway. Beyond that was a tree-lined road, and a columned building. "I don't remember seeing that the last time I was here," Fleming commented.

"That's *Excesses*, sah," he answered. "It's been in business fo' abou' six months nah. It's owned by Xander Sanders."

"I'll have to check it out."

They continued for several more minutes, then the driver announced, "The *Royale*, sah."

Fleming smiled as they pulled up to the front doors. The hotel hadn't changed in decades; it still looked as fabulous as he remembered. Handing the driver enough for the fare plus a healthy tip, he stepped from the car. Two uniformed young men attentively came out of the *Royale* with a cart and began unloading his bags. Fleming let them do their jobs and walked into the hotel, through the opulent lobby, and up to the front desk.

"*Monsieur Fleming*," smiled the manager courteously.

"Charles," Fleming responded.

"Your suite, eet is ready," he informed him.

"Thank you, Charles."

The manager handed an electronic key card to a black female bellhop with the nametag *Lily*. Fleming smiled and followed the girl to the elevator, where the luggage handlers were holding the car. On the third floor, Lily led the way to his suite. Her guidance wasn't necessary; Fleming could've found the room blindfolded. But he allowed the attractive young woman to lead the way just so he could treat his eyes to her impressive form. Lily deftly swiped the card through the scanner and gestured the luggage handlers in to finish their work, then she and Fleming smiled at one another appreciatively until they were done. The luggage handlers accepted their gratuities and left the two alone.

Lily handed Fleming the key card with a charming smile and a soft, "Enjoy your stay, sir."

He generously tipped her and gave her an equally-charming smile. As she walked away, he went into his room and closed the door behind him. He strolled through the exquisite room and took a deep breath. The French doors leading to the balcony had been opened to let the room air out, and the smell of exotic flowers mixed with the ocean breeze wafted in and brought back pleasant memories. Then he glanced over at the table, and his countenance fell. On the table was a chilled bottle of Bollinger and two glasses.

And he had no one to share it with.

With all the women he had known in his life, only two had captured his heart.

One was the secretary of his superior, Jessica Pence-Debit. They had never been lovers, but he had flirted with her for years until she finally gave up waiting for him to get serious. In the end she left the Service and found somebody who *was* serious. The last time he checked, they had four children and were living in Cardiff.

The other woman, the one who had meant everything to him, was his beloved wife Tracy. Their life together ended within hours after their wedding, when she was brutally gunned down. Even though he had killed the bastard who had taken her from him, Fleming made a promise to himself that no woman would ever get that close to his heart again.

He poured some of the Bolly into one of the glasses and drank a toast to Tracy and Deb.

Then he finished the bottle.

CHAPTER FOUR

The present

The Verona Arizona Show was one of Disney Studios' most popular – and *profitable* – licensed franchises. It starred 18-year-old Demeter Bronco, daughter of country-western legend Billy Jim Bronco. The series storyline revolved around a teenage girl who led a double life – as an ordinary student, and as a pop singing superstar. They were in their sixth and final season, with plans for a grand finale after the first of the new year.

Death, however, had other plans.

It was Saturday afternoon. The cast and crew had finished their lunch break. The studio audience, comprised mostly of young people between the ages of 7 and 19, had gathered, and were sitting in rapt anticipation of their idol's appearance.

At 1:03, Demeter Bronco, wearing her blonde Verona Arizona wig, came out of her trailer. She smiled and waved cordially to her screaming audience, then talked with one of her co-stars as the rest of the crew prepared for filming. The flashes from cell phones taking their pictures made her feel good, knowing her fans cared about her.

At 1:06, as she looked over script pages, refreshing herself for the scene ahead, she casually drank from a bottle of spring water.

At 1:08, the lights were adjusted in preparation for the scene. Demeter handed her water, along with the script pages, to a nearby assistant. Then she moved off-camera, as the audience hushed.

At 1:09, the director shouted "action" and filming began. Demeter stepped into the scene to the modest applause from the audience. Everything seemed to be fine as she spoke her lines without fail.

At 1:13, she began to falter. She stopped in mid-line and looked as if she was feeling dizzy. The director stopped the filming and those near her asked if she was okay. She told them she felt a little light-headed, but she was determined to finish the scene. She apologized to the director and asked to take the scene from the top. As she moved to take her mark, she gave the audience a reassuring wave. At that point, two young girls in the audience began recording streaming video on their *Inmenso* phones for their friends back at home.

At 1:17, Demeter started the scene again, but seconds later she passed out, much to everyone's surprise. Almost instantly, everyone who had a way of communicating with the outside world was doing so – capturing the action, or texting the news to the major social networks. Within seconds, studio medics were summoned, while cast and crew drew closer to get a first-hand look at the unconscious star.

At 1:19, a stagehand announced to the audience that Demeter Bronco had passed out, which had the effect of throwing water on a puddle of flaming gasoline. The number of pictures that were taken and the texts that were sent out increased geometrically. Those closest to Demeter tried to get her to respond. They wondered what had happened to her makeup that made it appear to be sagging. It was almost as if she was pranking them by wearing a wrinkled 'granny mask'. Someone made the suggestion of removing Demeter's wig and loosening her clothes. When they did, they were all shocked to see that her normally-brown hair had turned to a pale shade of grey.

At 1:20, 17-year-old Harvey Drexler stood to see over the rest of the audience. He turned his back on the action and was sending his friend Duke a video message via *Skype Mobile*. "Whoa, dude! Can you see this, man? It's Demeter Bronco! But, *geez*, look at her! She's starting to look like my great-grandma!"

At 1:22, the studio medics arrived, and everybody moved aside to give them room. After a few seconds, they started administering CPR on the young actress. Apart from the chatter between the medics, and the cell phone activity in the audience, all was eerily silent.

At 1:27, after several attempts to revive her, the medics pronounced Demeter Bronco dead. Cause of death appeared to be – as strange as it sounded – heart failure brought upon by old age. A brief pause of silence was followed by waves and waves of spontaneous grieving.

By this time, executives from the studio were on the scene. In a vain attempt to put a lid on information being leaked to the media, they called Security to corral the audience into a side room and confiscate all their electronics. But it was far too late. Dozens, possibly hundreds, of photos had been sent to friends and family, or posted to websites throughout the Internet. And text messages were being forwarded faster than a California wildfire.

The mainstream news media would be informed of the tragedy through normal in-studio channels. The gist of their story would be, "Actress/singer Demeter Bronco tragically died suddenly while filming her award-winning show *Verona Arizona*. Cause of death has not yet

been determined, but an official investigation is underway. We would also like to quell the rumors that drugs were a factor in her death; Demeter has never taken drugs in all her life."

Demeter Bronco would be praised for her talent and all she accomplished in her short life. Across the United States, spontaneous memorials of cards, flowers, handmade signs, and stuffed animals would crop up overnight. And any mention of bizarre testimonies of those who actually witnessed the events of the actress' death would be chalked up to "shock and youthful imaginings".

CHAPTER FIVE

Sandy, Oregon: Sunday Morning

The bus was noisy, and the people aboard sharing the ride with Karen Eidemiller even more so. Carlina was sitting in her motorized wheelchair, listening to her mp3 player and singing three octaves off-key. George and Carol were continuing an argument they had started at breakfast, and the rest were mercifully quiet. It was a good thing, too, because something was disturbing her.

Just then, her cell phone rang. It was an unfamiliar ring, but she answered it anyway. "Hello?"

It was a female voice. Young. "Karen Eidemiller?"

"Yes. How can I help you?"

"My name is Delaney," she identified herself. "You don't know me."

"Delaney Matthews?" Karen replied without hesitation.

There was a confused pause on the other end. "Yes," she acknowledged.

"I was expecting your call."

There was another pause. Karen pressed the phone closer against her ear, hoping the surrounding noises hadn't kept her from missing Delaney's response.

"Then you know my purpose for calling," Delaney finally said.

"It's about Mark," she said without hesitation.

Arronaxe: Sunday Noon

The ride back to the residences was quiet as the three men in the transport reflected on the church services. CSI had its own non-denominational church, with preaching rotated amongst several preachers and guest speakers. It oftentimes made for a very interesting service. After parking the vehicle, Clark addressed Mark and asked, "Stop by for a moment before you two head out."

"Of course," Mark Eidemiller responded, as Perry headed to unlock the door.

Clark went into the blue dome and set his Bible down on an entryway table. The preacher had been talking about facing one's fears, using a quote from the Old Testament as a reference. It was very thought-provoking, as Clark walked into the living room and lowered himself onto a couch.

"Sir, you have a call coming in," informed Sebastian.

He ran through his mind the possible callers at this time. "On screen, please."

The main screen came alive with the image of the *Orion's* Chief Prayer Officer, Delaney Matthews. Her expression was friendly, but serious.

"Good afternoon, Delaney."

"Good afternoon," she returned. "I need to talk to you, Perry, and Mr. Eidemiller. It's urgent."

"What's the problem?"

"I'd prefer to wait and tell the three of you together."

"Certainly. *Sebastian?*"

"Summoning them now, sir," the AI responded like a loyal butler.

Clark tried to read Delaney's expression. He had known her ever since she'd come aboard the *Orion* for this wholly unique position, and he knew her well enough to believe without a doubt that her requests were not to be taken lightly. The door opened after a few seconds, and the two men entered the house. "Over here," he gestured.

Perry looked up at the screen while Mark took a seat. "Hey, Laney – what's up?"

"I need to talk to all of you," she replied.

"Including me?" asked Mark.

"*Especially* you, Mark." Before any of them could ask questions, she continued. "Doc, Perry, you both know the strength of my integrity. You know I would never suggest anything frivolously or on a whim."

"Of course," answered Clark, and Perry agreed.

"Mark, I understand that you need to return to Portland before tomorrow morning, am I correct?"

"Yes. I've got to be at work."

"I'm afraid those plans will have to be altered," she stated almost apologetically. "You will need to be aboard *Orion* for an unspecified period of time."

Mark shook his head. "*What?*"

"I've been having dreams – dreams sent from God – showing you aboard *Orion*."

Perry raised his hand. "We were planning on coming down for a visit today. Then I'd fly him home before evening. Could that have been what you saw?"

"No," she stated firmly. "What I saw was not for just an afternoon, but for several days."

"But I can't stay!" argued Mark. "I'm needed at work! And, besides, Karen will be returning from Oral Hull and she'll be expecting me!"

"**Mark?**" a new voice from overhead speakers interrupted the exchange.

"*Karen?*" Mark reacted.

"Yes, hon. I've been talking with Delaney. She called me this morning. And what God has shown her, He has shown me."

"***But you need me!***" The tone of his voice was almost frantic.

"I'll be okay," she reassured him. "Shaun and Shawna are right across the way. If I need anything more than that, I can call Judy."

"But ... work ..."

"Is there some way I could help," Clark asked calmly, standing. "If I spoke to your supervisor, or perhaps their supervisor?"

"I ... don't know." Mark stood and began pacing the floor. I'd known my friend for years, and had seen his many moods. But right now he was turning into a basket case, and it concerned me. "I-I don't understand this," he continued. "What is going on here? I'm nothing ... nobody. What could I do that someone else couldn't?"

Clark intercepted him and gently, but forcefully, said, "Don't sweat over what you ***can't*** do, but be open to what you ***can***."

Mark looked up; I thought I saw a hint of anger in his eyes. "That's not fair," he hissed.

"***Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we shall reap a harvest if we do not give up,***" Clark added.

Mark went silent. Clark hadn't released his shoulders, so he couldn't turn away. Finally he let out a sigh. "Okay ... you win."

"It's not a matter of winning," Clark whispered to him. "It's a matter of letting God work in you."

"I still don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Don't worry," I said, joining them. "You will."

A few moments later, Mark looked towards the ceiling. "Karen? You sure you're going to be all right?"

"I'll be fine," she said comfortingly. "For some reason, God wants you there. I'll be backing you in prayer. You want me to bring in the troops?"

"Might as well." He was starting to loosen up.

I looked back to the screen. "Are you guys in a hurry to get him there? I mean, we were planning on heading out in an hour or so, but if you need us to take off right *now* ..."

"Whenever you were planning on leaving should be fine," admitted Delaney.

I took Clark aside. "Considering all, I'd like to stay close to Mark. Is that going to be okay with you?"

He gave me a reassuring smile. "It's fine. I was planning on being here for a few more days, anyway. I'll see you in a week." He turned back to the screen. "Delaney, Karen ... are there any other details you can provide?"

"We both pictured Mark aboard the *Orion*," Delaney repeated.

"And, hon," Karen added to Mark. "You were *flying*."

That detail suddenly caught my attention. "With or without an airplane?"

"*Without*," the two women said simultaneously.

Mark looked up. "*Without* an airplane? You mean a flight suit?"

I turned to my friend and smiled. "Remember when you guys had the dream that Dot and I would be skydiving over an island? I told you I never had an interest in skydiving. Remember what you said?"

He smiled in spite of himself. "I think I said something like, 'you better get one soon'."

"And you were right. We parachuted over Caroline Island when we took it back. So now, brother, it's your turn to listen to someone else's dreams. We'll have to see if we can find you a Double-X-Large flying suit."

"I'll start working on that," Delaney told us. "We'll see you when you get here. Delaney out." And the screen went black.

"Well," I realized, "I wasn't planning on staying. I better pack."

"Hon?" called out Karen.

"I'm here," Mark replied.

"I love you!"

"Love you, too!"

"Before we split up," Clark suggested. "I think we need to pray."

None of us could argue with that.

Clark stood outside the blue dome, watching the silver Porsche ascend to flight level and soar off towards the southeast. He went back inside his blue dome and sat on the couch, contemplating the change of events God had placed in motion.

"*Sebastian?*"

"Call your wife, sir?"

Sometimes that AI is more intuitive than most humans. "Thank you, Sebastian."

The large screen lit up with his wife's face. They smiled at each other.

"Hey, tall, dark, and bronze," Bonnie greeted.

"Hello, Commander," Clark replied mock-formally.

"Perry and Mark leave?"

"Just. Can we talk?"

"Yeah. Hang on."

The screen entered into a neutral pattern. Clark could picture her momentarily turning over command to one of the Elric brothers, then going into her Ready Room adjacent to the Bridge. Almost on cue, her face reappeared; she was sitting at her desk.

"Okay. What's up?"

"What do you make of this?"

"Delaney's never been wrong when God's speaking to her. We'll we ready for anything." She paused. "I heard Mark didn't take things very well."

"Not at first. I thought he was going to lose it entirely."

"What made the difference?"

"I reminded him of something he had told *me* yesterday."

"Really? What?"

"Well ... I was having my daily crisis of faith, feeling useless. And Mark pointed out something. He said I should look at my situation more as a *facilitator* than an inventor. And he reminded me of Bill."

Bonnie considered the words, nodding gently. "Yeah, I think he's right. If you hadn't taken him in your care, he would've ended up rotting in some jail, and there'd be no stasis chambers. Think how many lives *that* would've changed." She paused. "You've got the experience, the intellect, the knowledge, that can point others in the right direction. I mean, you know the scripture as well as I do – *'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.'*"

Clark recalled the reference from the first book of Corinthians. The Apostle Paul had seen well-meaning Christians boasting of who they followed, and so he set them straight. *'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds.'*

"You're absolutely right," Clark agreed, smiling. "I'd almost forgotten that." He looked afar off. "Back at the beginning, when Perry first took me in, on the walls of the room where I stayed were hand-written scripture posters ... actually, they were all over the place, but I remember how it made such an impression on me. Everywhere you turned, there was the Word. I kinda miss that."

"Didn't Moses write that we should keep the Word on the doorposts of our houses?"

"Yes. He knew the people needed to have the Word of God nearby, so he told them to keep them close, review them often, and talk to their children about it. Speaking of which ... are the kids nearby?"

"In their playroom," she smiled, anticipating his request. "You want to talk to them?"

"Please."

"Sebastian?"

While he and Bonnie looked silently at each other, Clark again pictured what was happening. In the other room adjacent to the Bridge, designated as the triplets' playroom, Sebastian was telling them that, "Your father is on the communicator in your mother's Ready Room." Then the doors

opened. Nothing more needed to be said. Clark could hear the squeal of children running madly, each trying to be the first to see Daddy.

As they crowded around the screen, all talking at once, Clark couldn't help but marvel at the genetic differences in his three children.

All three had a similar bronze tint to their skin, but it was more pronounced on Sarah, with her coppery hair tied back in a ponytail. He wondered if his cousin Pat had looked like that when she was a child. Also, only Sarah's eyes carried Clark's characteristic gold flecks; both Jenny's and Jason's eyes were brown. Jenny's hair was a deep red, and Jason's brown.

Jason was a stocky child, his additional bulk attributed to muscle mass, not fat. As the only boy with two sisters, he tried using his larger mass to his advantage; Clark made a mental note to remind him about not bullying his sisters; considering the assertiveness of Sarah and the calculating intellect of Jenny, they might decide to double-team him and make him regret his actions.

"Okay, one at a time," Bonnie corralled them. "Jason."

"Good afternoon, Father," little Jason said in his most mature, little-man voice.

"Good afternoon, Son," he returned in like tone and attitude, altering his posture to sit straighter. "You are well?"

"Yes," he returned. "I have been keeping the others from misbehaving."

"I am pleased. You have done well. Now let me talk to the others."

His little man demeanor deflated, and his shoulders shrugged. "*Awww!*"

"Come on," Clark smiled at him. "Give your sisters a turn."

Sensing new motivation, he straightened up. "Okay. Love you, Dad!"

"Love you, too," he returned, his heart aching to hug his son. "See you soon."

Jenny stepped up to the monitor. Over her pink coveralls she wore a 'Larry-Boy' *Veggie Tales* tee-shirt. "Hi, Daddy!"

"Hi, Princess!" Ever since she'd started acting like a little girl from the movie *Kindergarten Cop*, he would affectionately call her Princess. "Are you having fun?"

"Yes, Daddy! You comin' home soon?"

"A few more days. But your Uncle Perry's flying out there right now."

Her eyes went huge; it never failed. For some weird reason, Perry was her favorite uncle, and no one could stand in their way. But every time Clark asked Perry why, all his friend could do was smile and shrug.

"I *love* my Uncle Perry!" she squealed.

"I know," Clark replied with a grin. "See you soon, Princess. Love you!"

"Love you, too, Daddy!" and she planted a smooch on the screen before backing off.

Sarah came within range of the monitor next, while the others returned to the playroom. She had on a pink coverall like Jenny's, but had a tee-shirt with the message *AIN'T MISBEHAVIN' (MUCH)* stenciled on the front.

"Hi, Daddy!" she grinned.

"Hi, sweetheart! New tee-shirt?"

"Yeah! Aunt Lizzy got it for me! Ain't it cool?"

Clark pictured that type of humor from the young purple-haired com tech; it was harmless. "Yes, it is. Have you been doing a lot of climbing?"

"Yeah. I been climbin' the trees next to the house." She was referring to the manmade grove of trees under *Orion's* large dome, next to their house. Clark wanted to caution her about falling, but held his tongue.

"And how high have you been going?" he queried.

"Bastian said it was about twelve feet. That's really high!"

Good, thought Clark, hiding his relief. *Sebastian's better than a babysitter.*

"Yes, it is," Clark commented. "I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Daddy! I think I hear Jenny callin' me! I love you, Daddy! See you later!"

"Love you, too, sweetheart," he echoed, smiling.

Sarah also planted a quick smooch on the screen before leaving the Ready Room. As the door closed, both Clark and Bonnie released a simultaneous sigh.

"They're gettin' big," commented Bonnie. "Five going on twenty."

The two of them shared a chuckle.

"Oh, speaking of which, I met an old friend from our jaded past."

She gave him that look. "You never had a jaded past, big guy."

"It was back during that part where the two of us were buried alive under that house."

"It wasn't just the two of us ..." Her eyes mirrored her surprise. "*Tammy?* Little Tammy?"

"Not so 'little' anymore," he corrected her. "She's majoring in hydraulic engineering *and* robotics here at CSI."

"Not little indeed," Bonnie whistled, impressed.

"She's come up with an interesting idea she presented to us yesterday. It's a mecha, a lifting machine for use in clearing debris at emergency sites. She calls it her *Walking Bulldozer*. She's got a prototype that's not half bad. All it really needs is a little work, and she'd be in business. *Sebastian*, do you have Tammy Elders' presentation?"

"Yes, sir. Shall I send it now?"

"Please." He smiled at Bonnie. "You'll like it, I'm sure."

"I'm sure," she agreed. "Especially with your endorsement."

"I was thinking about taking it a step farther."

"What's on your mind?"

"I'll talk to her and her father, see if she might want to test her prototype under actual field conditions. That tornado clean-up last month would've been perfect for her *Walking Bulldozer*. I'm sure we can find something to test it with. If it works, I'd be willing to bankroll it myself. What do you think?"

"I think Mark was right." Bonnie said flatly, causing Clark to stop. "You *are* a facilitator."

Clark shrugged and smiled. "Maybe I just know when to back the right horse. Speaking of which, I better call them before I forget about it."

"*Forget about it?*" Bonnie smiled. "I know your *infallible* memory. You're hot on a trail."

"Perhaps."

"Let me know how it turns out, okay." Her eyes turned soft. "Love you."

"Hug the kids for me."

"Will do. Love you, too. *Orion* out." And the screen went dark.

"Sebastian? Would you call Virgil Elders, please?"

A few moments later, a man's face appeared on the screen. He was in his late 40's, with sandy hair and the weathered face of a farmer. "*Doc?*" His face brightened. "Doc, how are you?"

Clark smiled back. "Fine, Virgil, fine! Tammy told me you were at CSI. Please forgive me for not visiting you."

Virgil scoffed, "It's okay. I've seen the news; you've been busy. Besides, *we* haven't visited *you*,

either."

"Then let's see what we can do to make that up. I'd like to come by your place and talk to you."

"**Talk?**" Tammy burst in on the screen. "**About what?**" she gasped, breathing excitedly.

"Hi, Tammy," Clark greeted, figuring the girl was waiting just out of camera range.

"**Talk about what?**" Tammy repeated.

"Well, I'd like to talk to the *both* of you about testing her *Walking Bulldozer* in some real-life situations."

"**Really? You like it?**" Tammy squealed repeatedly, pushing closer to the monitor.

Virgil finally had to pull his daughter away from the monitor in order to inquire, "What kind of real-life situations?"

"You're aware of our activities in the *Orion*."

"Helping out – *whatever, wherever, whenever*."

"Pretty much covers it," Clark agreed. "You remember the tornados in Texas last month? We really could've used your *Walking Bulldozer* there."

Tammy got closer to the monitor, but she'd calmed down somewhat. "I remember the pictures on the news. All those poor people who'd lost everything they had!" She got the point. "Yeah, Hugo could've really helped out."

"*Hugo?*"

She chuckled. "It's my pet name for the Bulldozer. We've been reading Phillip Wylie's *Gladiator*. The main character's name is –"

"– Hugo Danner," finished Clark, keeping his amusement to himself. *I'll have to tell Hugo about this*, he thought. *He'll be flattered*. "Yes, I've read the book. That's a good name."

"So," Virgil brought things back on track. "You're suggesting taking the *Walking Bulldozer* to one of these disaster sites?"

"Yes. I'd like to discuss it more at your place."

"Tell you what," suggested Virgil. "Tammy told me you're batching it. Why don't you join us for a nice home-cooked dinner?"

Tammy clapped her hands together and repeated, "**Please, please, please, please!**"

"Thank you, Virgil. I'd be honored. What time would you like me there?"

The *Curtis* neighborhood consisted of simple houses with a 1950's flavor. The Elders home was brown with a two-car garage, and a few trees in the yard. Clark parked his *ElectroCar* in the driveway and climbed out. The front door was open, and Virgil was walking towards him.

"Welcome!" greeted Virgil. "Can I take one of those?"

Clark handed him one of two bottles. "Sure."

Virgil looked at the label. "LaCroix Wineries? My God, I haven't seen this label in years! What kind of wine is this?"

"It's not wine. It's part of Jacob's private stock, a very special blend of his finest grapes. And the best thing is that it's completely non-alcoholic. Jacob and Charlene sent us a case for a wedding present," Clark grinned. "Told us to save it for special occasions."

"I'm honored that you'd consider this a special occasion. Come on in." Virgil opened the door for Clark. "Do you need any special accommodations, Doc?"

He shook his head. "No. I think I'll be fine."

Tammy came up to him and gave him a hug. "Dinner's almost ready. After we talked, I went and got Hugo, in case you wanted to see him in person."

"Yes, I would like that."

"Dad, can you keep an eye on the roast?"

"Sure," Virgil took both bottles. "I'll keep these chilled."

They went into the back yard. The *Walking Bulldozer* stood almost fifteen feet high.

"Impressive," Clark nodded appreciatively. "How does it do against the elements?"

"Really well!" she said enthusiastically, then corrected herself. "Okay, it's not as good as it could be. It handles okay with snow and dry weather. It'll take a rain shower without problems, but I don't think it would last if I tried wading through deep water." She looked at Clark with apprehension. "Are you still interested?"

"Of course," Clark smiled. "Nothing's perfect. It's through the tests we find out what needs work."

"Thanks." Tammy gave him a hug, then looked thoughtfully at the device. "Did I tell you how I got the idea for Hugo?"

"No."

"You and Bonnie."

Clark did a double-take. "What?"

She smiled up at him. "When we were down in that basement. I remember that image of you, then Bonnie, holding up the ceiling. You looked like giants."

"I remember that."

"And that image stuck with me."

"Thank you, Tammy. I'll tell Bonnie."

Virgil called Tammy's name. "I think it's ready!"

Jacob LaCroix's special grape juice was enjoyed by all, and brought the topic of conversation to the others back at Pine Corners. As they had known before, the winery owner finally married his housekeeper of many years, Charlene Cornwell.

"They make a cute couple," added Tammy.

"Scott's in France; he went shortly after his father married. According to Jacob, he's touring the various wineries, working here and there to get experience." He thought a moment. "Chief Randolph and Marilee Felipé are still in their jobs." Randolph was the police chief, and Merilee was the town's doctor.

"What about that friend of Sunni's, Romney ... Romney Wordsworth?"

Tammy laughed. "Romney's still active in the local library. For his age, he runs rings around the other employees."

"How about Sunni's friends, Deek and Rhonda? Did you ever know them?"

Virgil took a sip of juice as he thought about it. "I think I know who you're talking about. Big boy, baby face ... girl blonde and pretty?"

Clark nodded. "That's them."

"If I remember right, they got married not long after the Quake. It didn't last, however. I don't know much more than that."

"Of course. You had other things to consider." Clark took a bite of pot roast. "Speaking of which, I never had a chance to ask Tammy what happened to *you* since Pine Corners."

Virgil laughed. "Well, you remember *Larsen's Kar Kingdom*? I was one of the mechanics there. When Larsen's family deserted him and Larsen went to jail, the business fell into the hands of us workers. We turned it into a kind-of co-op. By that time, Tammy and I had moved closer into town while our house was being rebuilt – thanks, by the way."

Clark understood Virgil's gratitude. After the Pine Corners Quake, services and goods flooded into the region, helping the people return to normal. An impressive amount of it came from the Bronze Avengers (credited to 'anonymous humanitarians'), while another huge chunk came via *Second Chances Ministries*. The Elders' house had been one of those rebuilt.

"Dad brought me in on his work," continued Tammy.

"She took to it like a fish to water," added Virgil, smiling proudly. "The way she picked up theories and practical stuff was almost embarrassingly easy."

Tammy nudged her father. "Genetics," she explained. "And then I got the 'anonymous' scholarship to CSI."

Clark gave them an apologetic look. "Honestly, I don't know where your scholarship came from. I can look into it, if you like."

"It wouldn't matter now, anyway," Virgil shrugged off. "Except to thank them."

"Since Dad's got skills in automotive mechanics, we both moved here until after I graduate."

"Do you have any prospects for after graduation?"

"Not at the moment," Tammy answered. She fluttered her eyes at him. "You offering anything?"

"Actually, I am. That's the reason why I came here in the first place. We were talking about putting your *Walking Bulldozer* through some real-life situations, aboard the *Orion*. In order to do that, Tammy, we want you to come along with it."

The girl's eyes went large, her jaw dropped, and she went silent. Virgil looked at Clark, then at his immobile daughter. He put a hand on her shoulder and spoke her name. In a burst of activity that took both men by surprise, she sucked in a deep lungful of air, followed by letting go with a near-hypersonic squeal of delight. "***You want me to join you?***"

"Yes, I do," Clark said calmly. "Now, first, let me assure you both that I have no intent of putting Tammy into harm's way. She and the *Walking Bulldozer* would accompany us aboard *Orion*. We would go about our normal business, and, if we run into an emergency, we would determine if a situation existed where the *Walking Bulldozer* could be tested. If so, she'll be sent down with a team." He turned to Tammy. "We'll never send you in alone. You'll always have support. And we will be constantly monitoring you, recording Hugo's performance."

"What about her classes?" Virgil asked.

"I'll talk to her instructors, see if they can remote it to the *Orion*. Should be fine."

"That'll work," Virgil agreed.

"Did you want to come along with her? I'm sure it wouldn't be a problem."

He gave his daughter a smile. "Thanks, but I've got work here. Besides, it wouldn't be fair with

her old man making her all anxious on the job." She laughed and they hugged; Clark was happy to see such a good relationship between father and daughter, and hoped he'd be just as good with Sarah and Jenny.

"How soon?" asked Tammy, suddenly serious.

"Well, we've got a few days, so we're not in a hurry. You said you needed a fuel cell?"

"Yes. The one it's using poops out too quickly for any decent work. Even in the films I took, the scenes were only a few minutes long."

"I can definitely improve on that." Clark smiled; he kept his ace for last. "You know, if the *Walking Bulldozer* performs as good as promised, I will personally authorize construction of a fleet of them – with all credit and royalties going to Tammy, of course."

Clark thought that Tammy would faint. So did Virgil, as he reached out and put a steadying hand on his daughter.

"I didn't think it would hit you that hard, Tammy," Clark apologized. "I'm sorry."

Tammy put a hand on his arm. "It's okay. I ... just never could've imagined this." She suddenly rose from her seat and kissed Clark on the cheek. "*Thank you.*"

Clark knew it was late, but he knew he had to update Bonnie. When she appeared on the screen, she was sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed in a nightshirt that accentuated her tight figure. His desire for her was strong, but his body could no longer act upon those desires in the ways she needed. So he quickly buried his carnal emotions and gave her a tender smile. "Hi. I was hoping you'd still be awake."

"I knew you'd call," she returned. "So how did it go?"

He summarized the evening with the Elders. She laughed at Tammy's choice of nicknames for the mecha. "They were both excited about Tammy joining us aboard *Orion*." He sighed. "Actually, I almost made a mistake by telling her I'd personally fund a fleet of her mechas. I was afraid she'd become hysterical or pass out."

"Is she okay?"

He nodded. "Yes. She was just overcome with excitement." He paused. "We've got a few days before heading out. I'm going to see what I can do to improve what she's got."

"Such as?"

"The fuel cell is woefully inefficient; I know I can get her a better one. And it could do with some serious waterproofing. I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks." She shifted on the bed. "Well, Perry and Mark got here just fine. First thing we did

was measure him for a flight suit, then set him up with quarters."

"Did he take the guest house?" Clark was referring to the third house under *Orion's* large main dome; next to their own, it was intended for guests like Monk or Renny.

She shook her head. "Too big. He went for one of the VIP apartments down on four. He's been very overwhelmed by the whole experience, but I think he'll be fine."

"Sounds good, hon."

"He joined us for dinner tonight. We went fancy." Her reference was to the Captain's Dining Hall. "I had Carter Firebird join us; give the two of them a chance to get acquainted."

"Carter's an excellent flight instructor. How'd Mark take to things?"

"Remarkably well." She smirked. "They were talking about doing a little late practice."

"On a full stomach?" Clark knew that nausea was common among first time flight suit students.

Bonnie shrugged. "I figure Carter knows what he's doing. But I'll talk to him in the morning." She turned her head in an attempt to hide a yawn.

Clark chuckled. "Go to bed."

"Yes, dear." Her eyes went lazy. "Quick prayer?"

Clark knew she'd start drifting after a few seconds, so he made his prayer short and to the point.

"Good night, sweetheart," Bonnie said, blowing Clark a kiss.

"Good night. Kiss the kids for me."

And they disconnected.

CHAPTER SIX

Three weeks earlier

"Lily, dear?"

"Yes, John?"

"Would you be a love and get me another Mint Julep?"

The bikini-clad off-duty bellhop rose from her lounge chair. She smiled and took the glass from Fleming. As she sauntered off, Fleming followed her with his eyes.

His first week back in the Bahamas had been relaxing. The only regular activity he'd been involved in had been his daily video check-in's with Basil Dunston at MI6.

"**John**," Dunston hissed impatiently. "The Ministers are starting to get impatient! They keep asking me if you've made a decision!"

"Relax, old boy. You'll give yourself a heart attack. By the time I return, I'll have a decision."

Dunston just gave a tired sigh and disconnected.

In the privacy of his room, Fleming also released a tired sigh. "I just hope I'll **have** a decision by then," he said to himself.

Now, as he waited for Lily to return with his drink, he surveyed the others around the pool area. He occasionally caught the eye of one of the other women, and returned their smile.

The women.

The younger ones, like Lily, saw him more as a father figure than a potential lover. The older ones (the Americans referred to them as 'cougars') preferred the company of younger – *far* younger – men. These cougars, for reasons known only to them, took voracious care of their bodies to make themselves desirable. Over the past few years, some of these women gravitated in his direction, resulting in a few brief assignments; it was good to know that his sexual prowess was still acceptable, and that he could turn a *cougar* into a *tigress*.

Apart from his check-in with Dunston, he spent his time indulging in various local activities. During the day he lounged by the pool, imbibing in wine, cigarettes, and women. Not one to lounge around all day and let the vices of the flesh get *too* much of a hold on him, he exercised regularly, in the hotel's fitness center, swimming in the pool, or venturing out for a SCUBA dive off of some reef.

He also rented a sailboat and did some sailing. By this time, he and Lily had connected, and he discovered she was also a lover of sailing. On her day off, they would sail out to Fleming's little island and look over the house, planning. He discovered that, despite the difference in their ages, their first impressions had been more than accurate, and he enjoyed her company.

As he leaned back and looked up at the cloudless sky, the reason for him being here came back to haunt him. And, once more, he weighed his options.

If I accepted, he thought to himself, it certainly wouldn't be boring. I'd be the one leading rather than following, choosing the agents I feel would be best rather than following the absurd choices of some never-been-in-the-field armchair commando. On the other hand, if I declined and stayed here ... would it be so bad just to retire and enjoy my remaining years? I mean, it's not as if I'm strapped for cash. And, even if I did accept, it wouldn't be me going into action, but some young buck probably using my number.

What do I do?

Just then a name entered his head: *Roger Knox*. He smiled. They'd gone through school together, and entered the Service together. But while Fleming chose a more-dangerous field, Roger chose to go the way of support. And he was good at it. But his main reason for taking that position was enmeshed in his faith. *Roger was a religious man ... no, not just religious. He was a **Christian**; he'd never let me forget that, when I'd rib him about his faith. In one respect, Roger had it easy; if there was a dilemma facing him, he'd just pray to his God for an answer. Apparently this worked, because he never sat around stewing about his choices like I'm doing. Roger retired a few years ago; I must look him up one of these days.*

Lily returned with two drinks; she handed him the Julep. "Ah, *Kentucky*," he commented after that first sip.

"Kentucky, America?" Lily echoed. "You've been there?"

"Yes, my dear. Many years ago, on business. Very peaceful." *As long as you're not dodging razor-brimmed bowler hats*, he mentally added.

"John?"

"Hm?"

"Can we go to *Excesses* tonight?"

It took him a moment to remember the new casino on the island. He'd visited the other clubs, the ones he was more-familiar with. But, despite being so close to *Excesses*, he'd never actually taken it in.

"Certainly, my dear," he answered. "Have you been there before?"

"No, but I've always wanted to," she said eagerly.

"Then it shall be a memorable experience for the both of us."

The silver Aston-Martin DB Mark III merged with the small convoy of automobiles leading to *Excesses'* club side.

"Appears to be quite popular," Fleming commented.

Lily was beaming with anticipation at the evening to come, and he was enjoying every minute of it. Despite the fact that they knew there was no defined code of dress there, they nonetheless wanted to arrive in style. He wore a simple white suit with a black tie. She was dressed in a floor-length ivory colored evening gown that accentuated her figure in all the right places. Put together, they made a handsome couple.

They reached the marble-pillared entrance to the club. Fleming turned his keys over to the valet and Lily came around the back of the vehicle to join him. She took his arm and gave him a smile.

He led with his walking stick as they joined the queues approaching several sets of double doors. About them, there were people in suits and dresses next to others in flowered shirts and short pants.

There were several young men and women dressed in matching uniforms – green blazer jackets, white long-sleeved shirts, black bow ties, black slacks – greeting people as they arrived. A young girl with the name tag *Clarice* met them.

"Good evening, and welcome to *Excesses*." Her tone was sincere but mechanical from constant repetition. "Is this your first time here?"

"Yes," Fleming answered.

"Are you staying at the resort?"

"No. I trust that won't be a problem."

"Of course not!" she replied with a smile. "You'll both need to go through security – a necessary precaution in these days, I'm afraid – then visit our bank. To eliminate the risk of our guests being robbed carrying large sums of cash, all transactions here are done using 'funds cards' like this." She held up a plastic card the color of her blazer, with the *Excesses* name and logo on the front and a magnetic strip across the back. "At the bank you can choose how little or how much money you wish to deposit into your card – or you can tie it directly to your home credit or debit account, and any expenses will automatically be added or subtracted as you go. Once that formality is done, you can go anywhere you wish." She gestured to a poster. "May I interest you in our show in the Sunlight Room? All week we've been featuring world-class celebrity singers performing their famous show tunes. We've already had Matt Monro, Jr. and Nancy Sinatra." She took a breath, and her face brightened. "Tonight we're having Dame Shirley Bassey in one of her *rare* personal appearances!" Her expression switched to apologetic. "Anyhow, do either of you have any questions?"

"No," Fleming said. "This is all quite organized."

"Then right this way, sir, miss."

They went through Security, where his cane passed easily, then headed for the row of bank stations.

In a private office elsewhere in the complex, a phone buzzed for attention. The man behind the desk answered it, "Speak."

"It's Salem, boss," the voice on the other end identified himself. "Check out camera seventeen."

On the wall of the office was a complex array of display monitors. The man behind the desk flipped a switch, and one particular image shifted to a giant display screen. Using a trackball, he panned the area, then zoomed in on a man and a woman just leaving the bank. His thin lips

turned up in a tight smile. "Thank you, Mr. Salem," he said into the phone. "Do not approach, but keep me informed of his movements." He paused, then added, "And if they spend any time gambling, keep their winnings *just* high enough to maintain their interest." And he disconnected.

He leaned back in his chair. A thin smile appeared on his lips as he said softly, "It's about bloody time."

The sound of light 50's rock and roll shared the atmosphere of the large anteroom with announcements of current and future events. They considered the various areas of entertainment that were accessible to the club's patrons.

"Well, my dear," addressed Fleming. "What would you care to indulge in first?"

She looked around thoughtfully, then smiled at him. "I'd like to do a little gambling."

"Sounds daring."

"How are you at baccarat?"

"I've played a time or two," he returned her gaze with a smile. "Shall we throw caution to the wind, my dear?"

She smiled and took his arm.

The phone in the private office buzzed for attention.

It was Mr. Salem. "Just checking in, boss. The couple have left the gambling room and have purchased tickets for tonight's show in the Sunlight Room."

The man consulted a timetable; the next show was in fifteen minutes. "Thank you, Mr. Salem. Inform Virginia and Candy that we will be attending. Make sure that I will be noticed."

"Will do, sir."

After two hours of baccarat, blackjack, and roulette – resulting in a surprising net gain of \$2,300 – they decided it was time to take a break and get a bite to eat. As they stood in the anteroom, the poster of Dame Shirley Bassey caught their attention. After a short wait for tickets, they were escorted to one of the half-moon-shaped booths facing the stage. They ordered drinks and appetizers, and observed others coming in as they waited for the show to begin.

One particular trio seemed to cause a considerable commotion from the other patrons, illustrated by spontaneous exclamations of admiration. It was a man and two shapely women. They walked deliberately to a table just ahead and to the right of where he and Lily were sitting. Fleming tried

to get a clear view of the man's face, but there wasn't enough light on him.

The dimming of the house lights drew his attention from the stranger to the stage. A pair of spotlights illuminated the platform. The room hushed as a man appeared and stood in the glow. "Ladies and gentlemen. Any introduction I would give would be a gross understatement of this lady's talent. With a career that has spanned almost sixty years, she has performed to audiences all over the world. Entitled a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1999 by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, she has chosen to grace us here with her talent. Now, without further ado, let me present ... Dame Shirley Bassey!"

The singer, dressed in an orange sleeveless gown, stepped into the lights to the accompaniment of a thunderous standing ovation. She bowed generously, and removed the cordless microphone from its stand. The crowd hushed in anticipation.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen for your kind welcome," she said softly. "But before I begin, I wish to acknowledge a *special* presence in our audience: our host, and the owner of this resort, Mr. Xander Sanders!"

A secondary spotlight illuminated the man and the two women at the other table. The ladies were quite stunning, but – by Fleming's trained eye – also probably served as Sanders' bodyguards. As the man stood and waved easily to those around him who offered polite applause, there was something about him that looked familiar to Fleming. He was of average height and weight, in his late 30's. As he offered a toast to Dame Bassey, he turned his face so Fleming could see it straight on – especially his eyes.

And Fleming stopped breathing.

"*John, what's the matter?*" Lily suddenly inquired, placing her hand on his.

He turned to her and blinked. "I'm sorry, dear ... what were you saying?"

"You suddenly went *pale*," she explained. "As if you've just seen a ghost."

Fleming glanced back at Sanders; the resort owner had returned to his seat, the spotlight on him had turned back to the stage, and the show was about to properly begin.

"No, my dear," he dismissed. "I thought I saw someone I knew."

The music began. Dame Bassey's rich tones filled the air.

But John Fleming was deaf to it. *Could it have been ... him?* he thought to himself, willing for his heartbeat to relax. *It can't be ... I killed him.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

The present

Clark didn't get much sleep that night. It wasn't that anything was troubling him, for it wasn't. It was that his mind was abuzz with activity, reviewing and analyzing his assessment of Tammy's *Walking Bulldozer*. His mind had noted several aspects of the mecha that could be improved upon. Far be it from him to dare to challenge Tammy's creation, he sought to see potential chinks in the armor, then determine a way to fix that chink.

Fortunately, he had the ideal secretary in Sebastian. Whenever he had an idea, all he had to do is address the AI as if he were speaking to a Dictaphone, inserting whatever names were needed, and Sebastian would take care of the rest. He composed emails to various department heads and contacts throughout CSI (copying Tammy to keep her in the loop), requesting help and pointing them in Tammy's direction for details. He smiled, picturing Tammy's face in the morning, waking to find several emails from him, suggesting minor improvements to her mecha. He hoped she wouldn't think his actions as taking over her project, but rather trying to help her. As an afterthought, he dictated a separate email to her – to be sent first – that would inform her of his intentions, and state clearly that *she* would have the final say on any of his suggestions.

Clark didn't get much sleep that night.

But it didn't matter.

As he sat in the Auditions Room, watching the latest group of applicants make their presentations, Clark kept his PADD close at hand. The device silently kept him informed of his earlier emails. All of the department heads he had contacted were eager to help, which pleased Clark. And, as he had hoped, Tammy was overjoyed at Clark's suggestions. "I don't know why I didn't think of that," she commented in her reply. "I'm looking forward to working with the other department heads."

In addition, he got a message from Mitch Drake: "*Call me when you've got a 'private' moment. I've got some new toys for you to play with.*" Clark grinned at the use of the word 'toys'. *With Mitch, that could mean anything*, he thought to himself, and made a note to call him following the afternoon session.

In the privacy of his front room, he instructed Sebastian to contact his friend.

A few moments later the screen came to life with the black man's smiling face. "*Hey, Doc!*" He was one of the many who were overjoyed to be able to address him by his old title.

Clark smiled back. "Hey, Mitch! What's up?"

"I stopped by *Orion* this morning. Bonnie said you'd be coming home towards the end of the week."

"Thursday," Clark supplemented.

"I also dropped off a package for you. It's a Power Suit. It'll be applied over the top of your exoskeleton, and provide ... well, let's just say it's made for *extreme* situations."

"Why couldn't you have brought it here?"

"It's top secret, pal," Mitch provided. "I made it for you to use in open combat situations."

"You know I don't do that anymore," he sighed.

"That's why I said it was made for *extreme* situations. Call it a 'just-in-case' suit." He gave Clark a disarming smile. "Anyhow, I told Bonnie not to peek until you were there."

"That's *mean*," Clark replied, knowing how curious his wife could get. "How could you tempt her like that?"

"She gave me her word."

Clark just shook his head and changed the subject. "Perry told me you guys are going on vacation together. In all the years we've known one another, this is the first time you've taken any actual vacation time. Are you all right?"

Mitch's expression turned serious. "Doc, I made a decision."

"A decision about what?"

"About Jesus Christ."

Clark's eyes grew wide. "***Well, praise the Lord!***" he boomed. "*When?*"

"Last week; it was all very private. I didn't want to say anything yet, but now the news is bound to get out."

"Why?"

"Delaney cornered me on the *Orion*. She knew."

That made sense to Clark. "God had shown her."

"Right."

Clark smiled. "That's wonderful news, Mitch. Does anyone else know?"

"Only us. You can let Perry and Dot know, but I want to tell Jill this weekend."

"How do you think she's going to take it?"

His expression became concerned. "I really don't know. I hope she'll understand."

"Have you ever talked about it?"

"Apart from a few comments through the years, no."

"I'll be praying for you," he assured the black man.

"Thanks. I'll need it. Anyhow, my other news. The Power Suit was just *one* of my toys for you. How'd you like your very own personal aircraft?"

"Only if I can operate it like this."

"It will be fully accommodating. But I don't want to say any more. You need to see it to believe it."

"Okay," answered Clark, dubiously. "When?"

"How about if I come to CSI on Wednesday," he suggested. "I can show you how things work, and we can take it for a joyride at the same time."

"Sounds interesting. Can you give me any more information about it?"

"Nope. Why spoil the fun?"

"That's what worries me," Clark muttered. "So, about your vacation. Perry said you invited him and Dot to come along, all expenses paid."

"Yep. Ever since Perry saved her life back there on Caroline Island, she's wanted to thank him in a *big* way. *This* is the way. It's important to her."

"I can understand that. So where are you going to be staying?"

"It's a new place: *Excesses*. It's supposed to be the hottest thing on the island. Jill's group's going to be playing there. And ... her birthday is next Tuesday."

"Really?"

His eyes sparkled. "Yes. That's too much to refuse." He lowered his voice. "She said it would be the best birthday ever."

"I'm sure it will be."

"That's what I thought. Hopefully it won't change her mind once she finds out I'm a Christian."

"I'll keep you in prayer for that, too. Have fun."

"Thanks. Anyhow, I'll let you go. I'll see you on Wednesday; I'll give you a buzz to let you know when I'll be landing."

That evening, back at home, before making his usual calls to Bonnie and Perry, he called Tammy to ask how things were going.

She laughed. "Better than I could've ever imagined! Boy, do you know how to pull strings! That fuel cell is a hundred percent better than what Hugo had in him before. And I hadn't seen the weakness in the waterproofing in the legs – one wrong step in a bog, and he'd be out for good!"

"What about the protection around the fuel cell?"

"I thought I had it covered, but you busted me," she shook her head incredulously.

"We had the same problem with the flight suits. Perry stumbled and landed on his back, and it was just enough damage to put it out of commission until it could get replaced. If it had been a critical situation where the flight suit was needed, it could've been real bad. I saw that same weakness in Hugo."

"Well, it's going to take a little retooling, but it's going to work just fine. Thanks, Doc!"

"Hey," Clark shrugged. "You're Hugo's momma; I just figured out a couple of ways of keeping him safe when crossing the street by himself."

They both laughed.

"We'll be heading back to the *Orion* on Thursday. Do you think you'll have it ready by then?"

"I'll do my best." He could see she was starting to get stressed.

"Don't risk things by rushing," he cautioned. "You'll have a workshop on the *Orion*; you can finish things up there."

"Okay," she nodded.

Clark gave her a big grandfatherly smile. "Relax, Tammy. It'll all work out."

"Thanks, Doc."

After letting Tammy go, he called Perry. During the course of the conversation, he asked how Mark was taking to the change in his plans.

"Well, I'll tell you," Perry grinned. "Mark's taken to the flight suit better than Kal."

"You're kidding."

Grinning even wider, Perry went into detail about Mark's progress. He and the full-blooded Navajo Carter Firebird had gotten along famously. After a bit of an awkward first flight, he took to the flight suit like a bird leaving the nest. By Monday morning, he had soloed.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he'll be able to fly rings around us both by the time you get here," Perry declared.

"What's his secret?" Clark asked, astounded.

"I wondered about that, too. But then I realized what he started with. Overweight. Diabetes; diabetic neuropathy in both feet. Arthritis in his ankle and knees. Weakness in his legs from sciatica." Perry paused. "Now he's a fraction of his original weight."

Clark got the point. "The freedom must be *unimaginable*."

"Yep. I'm proud of him. If flying's got anything to do with what God's got planned for him, he'll be more than ready."

Clark brought up Mitch.

Perry's cheers of praise drew a surprised Dot to the monitor, where she received the news and joined in with the celebration. However, several moments later, she suddenly came to a screeching halt; her hands went to the sides of her head, and her face contorted into a painful grimace.

"Another headache, hon?" asked Perry, concerned.

Dot nodded. She gave a brave smile and a weak wave at Clark, then slowly walked out of monitor frame. Perry turned back to Clark and informed him, "She's been getting headaches lately."

"Migraines?"

"Possibly. She's been pretty quiet about the details. But she's been keeping a journal of sorts, so you might be right." He turned in her direction. "I'm going to let you go, okay?"

"You take care of her," Clark said quickly. "I'll see you on Thursday."

"Okay." And he disconnected.

Clark made his final call of the night to Bonnie. She was as equally thrilled about Mitch. And, as he found out, it wasn't a surprise to her.

"Had that feeling, did you?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "When he dropped off that mysterious package, I could sense there was something *different* about him. I couldn't put my finger on it, but now it makes sense, praise God. Does Jill know?"

"Not yet. He's planning on telling her this weekend."

She nodded. "I'll be praying."

"Did Mitch happen to mention anything about an airplane for me?"

Bonnie shook her head. "No. He just dropped off that mysterious package."

"Have you peeked yet?" Clark smirked.

She returned a thin smile. "I have been tempted. I have been *sorely* tempted. But I've been good."

"I'm proud of you, hon."

"But as soon as you get aboard *Orion* ..."

He grinned. "I completely understand."

They continued to talk for a few more minutes before he started feeling tired. They had a quick prayer together, then she let him go.

Tuesday

Tuesday was a little more sedate than the previous day. More auditions. He explained to his fellow Panelists that this would be his last day for awhile, that he would be returning to *Orion* on Thursday, and that Wednesday would be spent in preparation. The others said they'd miss him, but they'd see him next time he was 'in town'.

That evening, Tammy reported that the upgrades and improvements were coming along well, and she hoped to have it completed by Thursday morning at the latest.

Perry reported that Carter was starting to put Mark through some 'flight suit challenges'. Clark knew that meant advanced maneuvering, obstacles, and even using firearms to see how a trainee reacted to the recoil while in zero-gee.

Bonnie reported that Sarah had fallen from one of the trees under the big dome near their house. Apart from a momentary surprise, she suffered only a couple of scraped legs. Moments following her fall, Sebastian had summoned a medical team to her side, and had informed Bonnie of the incident, emphasizing that the injuries were not serious. Her injury earned her a private Daddy-moment; Clark was understanding, and spoke to her soothingly. She apologized for trying to go higher than the day before; Clark gently shushed her and told her that trying to go higher is nothing to be ashamed of, "as long as you're careful about it." She smiled and told her Daddy how she loved him.

Wednesday

Clark rose as usual, using his chair to take him to their gymnasium for his two hours of exercise. He had done some modifying of the room, hanging leather straps at regular intervals from the ceiling. It was something he had seen in an old 60's spy television show that Perry had introduced him to. He'd grab a strap and raise himself off his chair, then use the straps to move about the room. It strengthened his arms and reminded him of his old friend, Lord Greystoke.

He closed his eyes, and his mind went back to the cavern.

It was dark. He'd been in a lot of dark places in his life, but that cavern had a darkness that seemed to have a personality of its own. It was ... evil. In his rational mind, he knew that was not possible, that it was just his imagination, or a momentary delusion. When he actually got out of this chamber, his limbs were useless with atrophy. He actually rolled out of the chamber and onto the floor of the cavern like a baby escaping his crib. It was demeaning. He didn't even know he was in a cavern until he fell onto the floor of it. He could feel the ground, the dust, the rock. Since he needed to get out, and he was determined to get free, he proceeded with his isometric exercises. Slowly he made progress, being able to stand in order to analyze the inside of the cavern, and the stasis chamber. Eventually he found a way to get out, to seek out food and water to replenish his emaciated body. As he satisfied his needs for survival, he sought to determine where in the world he was, and how long he had been in that chamber. He knew it had been quite some time, given the degree of atrophy he had suffered. He knew things were different. Even the air wasn't as he had remembered. The pollutants in the air reminded him of the coal towns of Pennsylvania. In fact, he had to admit, when he realized he was in Oregon and not Pennsylvania, he was slightly embarrassed.

"*Sir.*"

Clark opened his eyes. "Yes, Sebastian?"

"Mr. Drake left a message. He will be arriving at the helipad in two hours."

"Thank you."

"I've run a diagnostic on the exoskeleton, sir. It's fully charged and ready."

Clark smiled. Sebastian took good care of him. "Thank you."

Clark walked to the helipad. The wind was brisk, but he didn't let the chill bother him. He looked up at the sky over the valley and waited.

He had been trying to guess what this 'new aircraft' would be like. In all his years, he'd dealt with a myriad of exotic flying craft – many of his own design – so he didn't expect to be too surprised at what Mitch had. Clark checked the time; Mitch was notoriously prompt, so he would be arriving in seven minutes. Since he would be coming from Florida, Clark faced south-southeast and waited.

Seven minutes passed, then ten. He hoped that Mitch hadn't run into a spot of trouble with the new aircraft, and reached for his cell phone. But before he could make the call, it buzzed in his hand; he saw Mitch's name on the Caller ID and answered it. "Mitch, are you all right?"

"Oh, yes," the other man replied calmly.

"I thought you'd be here by now. Is there a problem?"

"Problem? No problem. Actually, I've been here for three minutes. You're just not looking in the right direction. Turn around."

Clark turned to see a flying saucer.

It was hanging in mid-air, about a hundred feet away and thirty feet above the ground. Clark was shocked that his sensitive hearing hadn't detected it. It had a wide, round base that angled up to a short, cylindrical section. The outer skin was smooth and featureless, without even a window to interrupt its lines. Suddenly a viewport appeared in its bronze-colored hull; Mitch gave him a big grin and a friendly wave.

"Can you see me now?" his voice came over Clark's cell.

Clark nodded.

"I'm sorry ... what did you say?" Mitch teased.

"It's ... amazing," Clark muttered.

"Well, now that I've dazzled you, let me put 'er down and give you a tour."

"Yes. Please." And he disconnected.

The saucer silently curled around and hovered over the helipad, a gentle breeze the only physical indication of its existence. Clark was taken aback by the comparisons to the *Air Force One* saucer of the other timeline. This one was far smaller than that one, but much of the design was strangely similar. The side of the hull facing him split horizontally to form a clamshell door.

"Welcome to the X-51," introduced Mitch with a grin, as he stood in the doorway. "Would you care to come aboard?"

Stepping up the gradual ramp formed by the lower half of the door, Clark entered the saucer. It was spacious – *too* spacious. There was the cockpit area to his right, with two seats. But the rest of the saucer's interior seemed to be completely empty.

"Well, pal, what do you think?"

"It's very nice," Clark replied. "But ... is this supposed to be a passenger area?"

"Yes, it is, and –" Mitch's expression suddenly turned to shock. "Oh, my God! I forgot the seats! *Quincy?*"

As Clark watched, a half-dozen luxury airline seats appeared to grow out from the deck. Once that was done, Mitch strode over to them and sat in the front row.

"Quincy," Mitch proudly explained, "is the AI for this craft. He's one-of-a-kind. Introduce yourself, Quince."

"Greetings, Mr. Savage. May I call you *Doc?*"

Clark angled his head up slightly – a natural reaction when addressing AI's – and said, "*Doc* is fine, Quincy. Good to meet you." He turned to Mitch. "Malcolm McDowell?"

"Loved him ever since *Clockwork Orange*," the black man replied as he stretched out in the seat. "This saucer is top-of-the-line in adaptive technology. From what the tech boys tell me, it has to do with *shape memory alloys*, or SMA. Since an alloy is a metal that is made up of two or more different elements, an SMA would be an alloy that has a shape memory behavior. It can actually 'memorize' a shape. This SMA can be morphed into whatever form we need it, such as a floor or a seat ... or several seats. Quincy, how about a footstool?"

As Clark watched, a cube-like object formed out of the floor at Mitch's legs, elevating them until it was even with the chair's seat. The black man put his hands behind his head and faked a yawn.

Clark laughed.

Mitch straightened up and stood. The footstool melted into the floor. "Now that you've seen what it's got, let's go for a ride."

They moved to the cockpit area. "Quincy, left seat for Clark." The seat widened to accommodate the exoskeleton, then pivoted to face him. Clark moved around and settled in; it was comfortable but sturdy. He pivoted the chair back to the console.

"This craft has more bells and whistles than a music warehouse," declared Mitch proudly. "There's a movie Disney put out in '86 called *Flight of the Navigator*."

Clark nodded. "I've seen it."

"What they did in that movie with special effects, we're attempting to do in real life. Right now this craft looks like a flying saucer, but it can be modified to adapt to its environment. As far as power and flight systems go, this baby's got it all: cloaking projectors, inertial dampeners, and an impulse drive."

"Impulse drive?" Clark stared at Mitch. "Space travel?"

"Yes," Mitch smiled. "Now, I wouldn't test it out by hopping to the moon, but I wouldn't say it's impossible."

Clark's mind flashed back to his alternate self, who admitted to having a Fortress of Solitude on the dark side of the moon. "Amazing," he commented.

"So, pick a destination," grinned Mitch. "*Any* destination."

Clark thought a moment. "Australia."

"Quince, you got that?"

"Yes, sir," replied the AI. "Approximate distance: 8,700 nautical miles."

Mitch put his hands on the console, going over the various controls. "You shouldn't be surprised about this – Quincy is the ultimate auto-pilot. He'll help you a little or a lot; it's up to you. So are you ready?" Clark nodded. "Okay. Quincy, anything in our airspace?"

Quincy reported two airliners and a private plane within a ten-mile radius.

"Thank you. Cloaking field on."

"Acknowledged," replied the AI.

"And here ... we ... go!"

The flying saucer went straight up.

It was only Clark's remarkable capability for having a face of flint that kept him from gasping in surprise at their speed. As it was, though, he did blink as they punched through several layers of clouds. He was thankful for the inertial dampeners that kept them from being turned into puddles of goo on the floor. Before he could take a half dozen breaths, the clouds and blue sky gave way to blackness and a panorama of stars.

"Wow," Clark muttered.

"Impressive, isn't it." Mitch took his hands off the controls and turned in his seat to face Clark. "Since Quincy has our course laid in, I'll let him take us to our descent point."

"Acknowledged," anticipated Quincy. "Descent point in three minutes twenty-seven seconds."

Clark's mouth opened, but no sounds came out.

"I know what you're feeling," observed Mitch. "This thing belongs in some science fiction movie. But here we are, three minutes away from landing in Australia."

"Yes. And you're giving it to me?"

Mitch nodded. "I can't think of anyone more worthy to use it." He glanced out at the curve of the earth, and gave Clark a smirk. "So, did you have any particular place you wanted to go ... or were you just daring me to put up or shut up?"

Clark gave a brief chuckle. "This is fine. I think it's fair to say that you have knocked my proverbial socks off."

"Descending into Sydney, Australia, airspace," announced Quincy.

"We're still cloaked," Mitch added. "So you wanna try your hands at the controls?"

"Yes." Clark beamed. "Yes, I would."

For the next few hours, the world was their back yard.

They touched down in a deserted field in northern France and walked to a nearby village. At first, the villagers were somewhat fearful by Clark's *Frankenstein*-like visage, but that all changed after one of the young boys recognized him and quickly showed everybody the magazine cover with Clark's face on it. Once that was done, apologies were made and the red carpet was rolled out for the two *Américain*. Since they were both fluent in French, there was no miscommunication. As all of the villagers gathered around and gawked at their visiting *célébrité*, Clark and Mitch were given a fine meal and some excellent fellowship. Finally, after accepting gifts of food and wine from the gracious villagers and autographing the young boy's magazine cover, they were escorted to their saucer and bid *adieu*.

"Okay, we're on course back to Florida. Then it's all yours, pal."

"Mitch, the name of this craft –"

"X-51," provided Mitch. "You have a better name?"

"I do. I was thinking about the name *Sky Cheetah*."

"*Sky Cheetah*," Mitch repeated the name several times, letting it roll over his tongue. "You know, that's not bad. Quincy, what do you think?"

"It follows the examples Mr. Savage has used with personal transports in the past," the AI said nonchalantly.

"Too true, Quincy," agreed Mitch. "Can you put the name on the outer hull?"

"*Completed*," replied the AI a moment later. "Doc, would you care to adjust the color scheme of my outer hull while I'm at it?"

"Not right now. But I'll consider it." He paused. "Tomorrow, when I return to *Orion*, I'll be bringing a young student and her project: a mecha we will be field testing. How are we going to get it on board?"

"No problem. Like I said, this craft is adaptable. All you'll need to do is say the word, and the back end'll morph into a sufficiently large door and ramp. Once you have it where you want it, Quincy will form a cradle around it. It'll be more secure than a baby in its mother's arms. That good enough?"

"Yes."

"Preparing for descent to Alpha Base," announced Quincy.

"Home again," Mitch smiled.

After dropping Mitch off, Clark returned to CSI. The whole trip took just over ten minutes, and the controls were so intuitive that he didn't need Quincy's assistance. Near the helipad was a group of aircraft hangars; Gumball used one for his Osprey when he visited CSI. Clark radioed ahead to have one of them opened and ready for his arrival. The two attendants looked bug-eyed as he silently glided the craft in and parked.

"Thank you, Quincy," he said as he walked to the open door.

The two attendants stood outside, gawking. Clark smiled. "It's okay. It's my new ride."

As they commented, Clark reflected on this new development. He eyed the name on the side and was reminded that Quincy had added the name *while they were in flight*. Of all the amazing aircraft he'd ever worked with, this was by far the most fantastic. But, as illustrated by the reactions of the two near him, he was certain to attract more than his share of attention. And since a flying saucer was not commonplace in this world, he would need to let the world know that he was not the predecessor to an alien invasion.

He turned to the attendants.

"Would it look better in a different color?"

One of the men tilted his head. He spoke with a New England accent. "Perhaps."

The other nodded. "Got anything in mind, Doc?"

"A couple." Actually, he had several ideas – from the practical to the whimsical – but didn't dare reveal them yet. Besides, he hadn't taken this detail to prayer yet.

"What are your names?" They identified themselves as Roy Neary and Barry Guiler. "I need to get back to my residence as quickly as possible. Could one of you give me a ride?"

The two men were only too happy to help, and Clark was soon back in the blue dome.

"*Sebastian*," he said as soon as he was behind closed doors. "I need you to set up a few calls for me. Let's start off with Karleen Bush and Dean Ottey."

"You have an incoming call from Tammy Elders."

"Okay. Put her through." He paused. "Hi, Tammy."

"**Doc!**" The tone of her voice was anxious. "***Did you see it? Did you see it?***"

"See what, Tammy?"

"See ***what?*** That UFO that buzzed the valley! You must've seen it!"

"Was it saucer-shaped ... kinda rusty in color?"

"You ***did*** see it!"

"Yes, I did. But that was no UFO. You might say, that's my new car."

The other end of the line went silent.

"Breathe, Tammy," he reminded her.

There was a great inhaling sound on the other end.

"Before you freak out too much," Clark spoke quickly, "why don't I show you. Meet me down at Hangar 4, near the helipad."

"Awwwww." She sounded depressed. "I've got Professor Harachi in ten minutes."

"Then give me a call when you've got some time, okay?"

"You bet!"

They disconnected. Clark smiled and shook his head.

"Doc?" spoke up Sebastian. "Dean Ottey on hold."

"Put him through."

"Hi, hon."

"Clark!" exclaimed Bonnie over the comm. "My God, you look exhausted! Are you okay?"

Clark managed a weak smile. "Yes, I'm fine. It's just been a busy afternoon."

"You want to talk to the kids?" she asked cautiously.

"Are they still up?"

She shook her head.

"Then let them sleep. Give them hugs and kisses for me, and I'll see them tomorrow."

"I will. So what happened that's pooped you out so badly?"

"If you get a chance, watch the movie *Flight of the Navigator*. Mitch gave me a real-life equivalency." He grinned. "It's a flying saucer, hon – and it's more fantastic than anything either of us have ever seen. Let's put it this way ... we traveled from CSI to Sydney, Australia in less than ten minutes."

"Holy cow!" Bonnie exclaimed.

"After I got back here and hid the saucer in one of the hangars, I made a few calls."

"Karleen?"

"Yes. She's the best one to tip the world off to the fact that my personal aircraft is now a flying saucer. She'll do it right."

"Definitely," Bonnie agreed.

"Then Tammy met me out at the hangar."

"How did she take it?"

"About as well as you'd imagine."

"That shocked, huh?"

"Yes. After I gave her the tour, we returned to her house. Over dinner, the three of us talked about all kinds of things, including their take on the saucer's name and color scheme, how we'll get Hugo aboard and the security precautions on the saucer."

"Did Monk get ahold of you? He tried calling here earlier."

"Yeah, he did. Lea's visiting the grandchildren, so Monk thought he'd come visit me. I told him I would be heading back to *Orion* tomorrow, and I'd pick him up on the way."

She smirked. "Did you tell him what you'd be arriving in?"

Clark's eyebrow mischievously arched. "And spoil the surprise? Not a chance."

They shared a laugh. They continued for a couple more minutes, until Clark's persistent yawning became contagious. "Go to bed. I'll see you tomorrow," she smiled warmly.

"Okay," he agreed, his eyelids beginning to droop. "G'night, babe. See you tomorrow."

Once the connection had been ended, Clark spoke. "Sebastian, I think I'm going to need a little help. Authorization Alpha-Echo-three-five. Take me to bed."

"Acknowledged."

With Sebastian now remotely controlling the exoskeleton, Clark slowly got to his feet and walked woodenly to the bedroom.

Thursday

Clark arrived at the hangar in his *ElectroCar*. The large door had been opened, and Tammy and Virgil were waiting inside for him. Tammy's luggage was also inside; there were several suitcases, a rolling duffel bag, and what appeared to be a large metal steamer trunk resting on four wheels. There was no sign of the mecha.

"Where's Hugo?"

"Right here." She walked over to the steamer trunk and patted it affectionately. "Forgive me for not showing you this yesterday. Getting one or more full-sized *Walking Bulldozers* to a work site would be a problem if you didn't have a SkyCrane or something equally big enough to carry them in. However, in Transportation Mode – here – it's a snap to fit two of these in the back of any conventional helicopter."

"Very practical," Clark nodded. "Well, let's get aboard. *Quincy?*"

The back of the saucer suddenly opened up like a great mouth. Tammy had retracted a handle from the compacted mecha, and now pulled it around and up into the craft. Clark and Virgil followed with the luggage. Quincy guided Tammy to a lighted outline at the back of the saucer, then encompassed the trunk in a protective mesh that fit like a snug security blanket.

"*Way cool,*" repeated Tammy as she examined the net.

Clark gave Virgil a quick tour of the rest of the saucer while they secured the luggage.

"So, Virgil, what do you think of the *Sky Cheetah?*"

"Impressive. Reminds me of my first car ... a '68 Pontiac GTO ... candy apple red paint job ... hideaway headlights ... mag wheels." He sighed nostalgically. "Sorry."

Clark leaned in. "To be honest, one of the ideas I had for the paint job was a metallic cherry red. I thought it might be *too* impulsive."

"It's a flying saucer. Nothing is *too* impulsive."

The two men shared a laugh.

"If you two boys are done talking about your hot rods," quipped Tammy, standing with her hands on her hips, "I'd like to get going."

Clark and Virgil shared a guilty smirk.

Clark took a seat, and motioned for Tammy to take the co-pilot's seat. "Just letting you know, Tammy, we'll be making a quick detour in Tulsa to pick up Monk."

"Tulsa ... *Oklahoma?*" Virgil echoed. "That's over a thousand miles from here!"

"It's okay, Dad," countered Tammy. "This thing's supposed to be *real* fast."

Clark turned to Virgil. "Ride with us to the helipad?"

"Try and stop me," he grinned. "Where do you want me to sit?"

Quincy raised an additional seat behind the pilot and co-pilot seats. Virgil cautiously put a hand on it and tested it to make sure it was real before sitting.

Clark fired up the saucer; there was barely any sound as they hovered above the concrete and glided along the road to the helipad. As they settled there, a side door appeared. Virgil stood, shook Clark's hand and thanked him for the ride, then went over to his daughter and gave her a final hug and a kiss. Tammy promised she'd call him as soon as they settled aboard *Orion*. Glancing back as the seat melted into the floor, Virgil silently mouthed, "Wow," and stepped out of the saucer. Standing a safe distance away, he gave Clark and Tammy a final wave, then watched as the saucer rose slowly into the air. About thirty feet up, it suddenly put on a burst of speed and vanished into the clouds.

"Oh, yeah," muttered Virgil to himself. "That's fast."

"**HOLY COW!!**" exclaimed Tammy, watching the landscape disappear below them.

"Wasn't expecting it to be *that* fast, did you?" Clark smirked.

"I didn't feel any acceleration!"

"Inertial dampeners," Clark informed.

"Sounds like something out of *Star Trek*."

"Yes," he agreed. "Yes it does. We'll be making orbit in a few seconds."

"Did you say *orbit*?" she repeated. "Doc, just how high *can* this craft go?"

"To be honest, we've not tested it thoroughly yet."

Her face burst into a huge grim. "You want to test it out now? *Please?*"

"No." He paused. "I know you're anxious, but I haven't seen my family in quite a while, and I can't wait to get back to them."

"Ooh," she uttered, realizing her blunder. "Sorry Doc."

"Tell you what," Clark amended. "When I'm ready to test the limits on this thing, I'll make sure you're with me."

"I'm going to hold you to that, Doc," she beamed.

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Monk Mayfair stood under the shelter next to the helipad. Next to him was his well-worn brown leather flight bag. The weather was less than ideal; in fact, it was downright nasty. The rain was setting down a mesmerizing pattern on the nearby lake, and a cool breeze had prompted him to wear his woodsman coat and Greek fisherman's cap.

He shrugged it off; he'd seen far worse.

Doc had called Monk a few minutes earlier, letting him know he was on his way to pick him up, and to be ready. Finding out that Doc would be flying the plane to meet him caused him a few anxious moments. It wasn't that he doubted Doc's prowess with an aircraft – in all their years together, he'd seen Doc fly everything from a glider to a multi-engine high-altitude jet to a dirigible.

His concern was in his prowess since his accident. To his knowledge, he hadn't flown since he became paralyzed. However, since there was nothing tangible he could do for his good friend, he fell back to the obvious – he prayed.

As he waited, he suddenly perceived something beyond the rain. He was expecting the sound of an aircraft engine, but this wasn't like anything he'd ever experienced. He poked his head out from underneath the shelter and looked up. As he saw the flying saucer, he uttered a rare profanity and reached back to a niche under the shelter's bench. He pulled out an armed-and-ready .45 MAC-10 machine pistol, flipped off the safety, and prepared to open fire.

He pointed the weapon skyward and waited for the first target to present itself, when his eyes caught the large letters on the underside of the craft:

DON'T SHOOT, MONK ... I COME IN PEACE

He softly repeated the profanity as he lowered the weapon and returned it to the niche.

The saucer continued descending, as Monk's alertness turned to curiosity. As it settled on the pad, a clamshell door appeared in the side, and a teenage girl stood in the doorway.

"*Hi, Mr. Mayfair!*" she greeted, protected from the rain by the top section of the door. "Are you ready to go?"

Monk ambled into the craft.

"Stow your bag?" she offered.

"Sure," he muttered, handing the flight bag over to her and giving the craft a quick scan. It was impressive, despite the fact that the interior was a bit sparse. Up front – what he assumed was the front – were seats for pilot and co-pilot. The girl sat amidships, next to a mesh-covered object. Clark got his attention and waved him forward. Monk settled into the co-pilot's seat, and was surprised at the comfort of the chair.

"So, what do you think?"

Monk gave him his first impressions. "But don't you think it's a bit ... bare?"

"At the moment," Clark agreed. "But there's a lot more to this craft than meets the eye."

"Uh huh," he nodded. "Mitch?"

Clark grinned. "Who else?"

"Do you realized I almost opened fire on this UFO before I realized it wuz you?"

"I suspected you might. That's why I had the words put on the bottom." He put his hands on the controls. The saucer silently climbed above the lake and entered the cloud cover.

"Monk, this is Tammy Elders," Clark introduced the girl.

They exchanged greetings.

"You a student at CSI?"

"Yes. This is my baby." She patted the metal box. "It's a mecha. I'm going to field test it aboard *Orion*."

Monk turned to Clark. "Another prodigy?" he said softly.

Clark nodded.

Just then, the saucer pierced the atmosphere and leveled into orbit. Monk's expression instantly turned into one of disbelief. "**Blazes!**"

Five minutes later, they began their descent over Arizona.

"Already?" exclaimed Monk. "I didn't even have a chance to use the head!"

Clark grinned. "Quincy, open a channel with *Orion*."

"*Orion* here," Bonnie's voice said shortly. "Good to see you. Is that the new toy you were talking about?"

"Yes. We'll come in horizontally." There were two ways of approaching *Orion's* hangar bay: straight in from the front, or down through a large opening in the top of the station, just behind the Bridge.

"Roger," acknowledged Bonnie. "Keep an eye open for Perry and Mark. They'll probably steer clear of you, but be on the lookout just in case."

They pierced the *Orion's* camouflage field, causing the flying platform to suddenly fill their field of vision. Tammy gasped with surprise.

Clark smiled as he carefully maneuvered the saucer before the hangar bay entrance, not wanting to give away his own anxiety.

Outside the *Orion*, Mark and I had been playing a little game of 'Follow The Leader'. I had been watching him over the past few days, and I was more than impressed at how he'd taken to the flight suits. Truth be told, I was even a tad jealous. But I came back to the reason why he was here, and knew that God was preparing him for 'something wonderful'. After several days inside, I felt it was time to try his prowess outside the station. After a momentary hesitation, he followed me out and into the open air. As I suspected, he took to the new environment with the anticipation of a kid at Christmas.

We had been flying about for several minutes when Bonnie informed us about an incoming craft. We were both surprised at seeing a flying saucer enter our airspace. I asked Bonnie who was at the controls. "It's Clark. The saucer's a gift from Mitch. It's his first time docking, so don't make him nervous."

"Will do," I acknowledged. "We'll keep our distance until he clears the threshold."

The saucer lined up before the hangar bay, then smoothly glided in. I waved Mark to join me, and we watched the Landing Signal Officer help maneuver the saucer into a parking space, and the flight deck crew secured it. We flew in after them and approached the craft. A clamshell door appeared in the side, and I was surprised at seeing Monk in the doorway first.

"*Klaatu Barata Nikto*," he greeted with a mile-wide grin, giving us a Vulcan salute.

I put on a shocked expression and exclaimed, "***Look! Escape from the Planet of the Apes!***"

Monk's grin turned into a smirk. "Ha ... ha ... ha," he mocked. "Very funny, Perry!"

Then we both laughed and came together into a bear hug.

Mark approached and extended his hand. "Good to see you again, Monk."

"You, too," Monk greeted, returning the handshake. "So how 'come *you're* on this rust bucket?"

"I'm on a mission from God," he stated. "Although I don't know what it is yet. Delaney and my wife got the word. Now I'm just trying to be as prepared as I can."

"You looked pretty good out there. How long you been flyin'?"

"Just a few days," Mark answered.

Monk's jaw dropped.

I explained, "He's *really* taken to the flight suit."

Just then, Clark and Tammy appeared in the doorway. They joined us and we exchanged hugs.

"Nice ship," commented Mark.

"Thanks. I named it the *Sky Cheetah*." He turned to Tammy. "There'll be a crew down here in a few minutes; they'll escort you to your work area. Now, if the rest of you will excuse me, I haven't seen my wife and children in three dimensions for several weeks."

"Go," encouraged Monk. "She's probably waitin' for ya."

Clark smiled and headed for the elevators.

We all watched as the doors closed. Then I turned to Monk and said, "How much you wanna bet Bonnie's going to ambush him?"

Monk grinned and said, "No bet."

Ed Elric sneaked a glance over his shoulder.

As soon as Sebastian had announced that Doc was on his way up, Commander Savage jumped to her feet and rushed over to the elevator doors, smiling from ear to ear and rocking back and forth on her heels in rapt anticipation. Ed shared a conspiratorial grin with his brother Al, who held an open hand down at his side between the two of them and counted down from five.

When the elevator doors opened with a hiss, the Commander pounced. She wrapped her arms around Doc and planted a world-class kiss on him.

"*Sebastian*," whispered Ed. "Would you hold the elevator doors, please?"

After a few moments, their kiss ended, and they stepped away from the elevator.

"Would you suspect I missed you?" she grinned.

"Not a clue," he grinned back.

They walked to the command seats. The Elric brothers welcomed Doc back.

"Thanks," Clark told them. "It's good to be home."

Bonnie took the center seat, and Clark took the one to her left, with their hands intertwining in the middle.

"That saucer is definitely interesting. Does it run as good as it looks?"

"And then some. It's not like anything I've ever experienced. Would you believe we got from CSI to Tulsa to here in less than ten minutes?"

Her jaw went slack. "You're not joking."

"You pick a destination, and we'll get there faster than anything you've ever seen."

She analyzed his face. "That I'd like to see."

"Uh, Doc," Al said apologetically. "Hate to break this up, but the kids know you're here."

Clark and Bonnie looked at each other. She squeezed his hand, then looked to Al. "*Unleash heck.*"

"DADDY!!"

Three midjet missiles burst from their housing and unerringly headed straight for Clark.

In the hangar bay, Tammy's support crew arrived in an electric flatbed truck. The man in charge introduced himself as Max, then the others carefully placed the mecha onto the truck bed. With Tammy up front with Max, they quickly sped off.

Which left Mark, Monk, and me.

"Perry, you ain't heard the half of this buggy's features!" He paused. "It took us less than ten minutes to get here from my place."

"That's not possible," I responded incredulously.

"Tammy and me are eye-witnesses." The simian head nodded. "From my place, we went straight up and out of the atmosphere, then traveled along the curve of the earth until we were over this place, and went straight down until we got to here."

"Orbital?" I was definitely impressed, and nodded approvingly. "*Way cool.*"

7:00pm

Had it been any other time, Clark would've preferred his first dinner back to be private, with just him and his family. But, since Perry and Dot were going to be leaving the next day, they decided on a dinner party with friends and family. The Captain's Dining Hall boasted of a large rectangular table and a breathtaking panoramic view of the Arizona landscape. What would've been even more astounding was the fact that the view was coming from a sophisticated monitor array capable of displaying three-dimensional and high-definition images from cameras placed outside of *Orion*.

The dinner was superb, starting with French onion soup, then moving to a main course of tender roast beef, garlic mashed potatoes, mushrooms and Brussels sprouts, and croissants.

During the meal, Clark updated everyone on what was happening at CSI, emphasizing Tammy and her *Walking Bulldozer*.

"So what do you think of your workspace?" asked Bonnie.

"It's amazing! It's more than I had back at CSI ... plus I really appreciate Max and the crew you picked to help me out."

"You're near Dome Five, so we can set up practice courses for you to test your mecha."

"Yeah, I already walked the dome."

Over dessert, the subject changed to Perry and Dot's vacation, then to Jill Woodward.

"I tell you, she's sure come a long way," Bonnie commented, sipping a mocha. "What was the name of that club we found her at ... the one in Reno?"

"*The Sandbox Casino*," answered Dot with a laugh. "They had this life-sized poster of her out front, wearing this slinky dress."

"But the biggest surprise was when we first heard her sing," Perry added. "She was good."

Bonnie nodded. "I'd worked with her for years, but I never suspected she could sing!"

"Has she ever considered recording?" asked Mark.

"No," Bonnie answered. "Where she's at is sort of like Witness Protection. But, when you think about it, it's been several years ... she was declared legally dead ... and there's nobody out there who's after her anyway." She shrugged. "Who knows?"

"When did she add the backup singers?" asked Dot. "Was that two or three years ago?"

"I'm not sure," said Bonnie. "She performed solo for quite a while before some of the other girls in the group began to take an interest and came to her. I can't remember who was with her first, but they became dissatisfied with just singing at clubs. So Mitch set them up with a few contacts in the recording business, and Jill went hunting for more. She's got ... let me see ... Alexandria Foster, Phyllis Hudson, and Cherry Pratt. The last time I talked to him, Mitch said their harmony was off the scale."

"So," asked Clark. "Have all the arrangements been made?"

Perry nodded. "The majority of our luggage was shipped yesterday, and they're already holding it for us. That leaves us with just a couple of overnight bags with our personal stuff."

"So you're going to be staying the night with my boy?" asked Monk.

"Yeah," answered Dot. "I think the last time we saw Aunt Lucy was before the kids were born. And since he's right in the neighborhood, so to speak, we thought we'd stay overnight, then take a taxi to Miami to meet up with Mitch at the airport."

"We *will* keep in touch, of course," emphasized Perry. "We'll have our cells with us in case there's an emergency."

"God willing, you won't need it," Bonnie added.

Bonnie and Clark were in Hold 12, on the other side of Dome 5. Before them was a large metal canister that looked more like a deep submergence vehicle propped on its tail end.

"Okay, I've been a good girl," said Bonnie. "But, now I'm chomping at the bit to see what's in there."

"Mitch called it the XV-12," said Clark. "From what he told me, it's impressive."

Bonnie examined the container. "Okay, so how do we open it?"

Clark suddenly smiled. "It's Mitch, remember. *'Do right to all, and wrong no man.'*"

The metal canister cracked open at the center and the lid spread apart dramatically.

"Okay," muttered Bonnie. "Now I am officially impressed."

"I would agree," added Clark. "I think Mitch has outdone himself. Would you like to help me on with it?"

"Yeah. Where do we start?"

Clark reached in and took out a booklet. "The instructions."

Bonnie plucked an envelope that had been sticking out of the booklet. Opening it, she pulled out a note and an old clipping from a newspaper. "He knows us well. *'Clark and Bonnie. I knew you'd check this out together, so I stuck this note in to give you a little background. Since you work with John Stonebrake, you'll find it interesting to know that much of the technology here came from Miles Hawkins' MANTIS suit, along with technology taken from a private research project from the mid-1970's codenamed Exo-Man.'*"

Bonnie looked at the enclosed clipping, which made her eyebrows lift in fascination. Then she showed it to Clark. "Very interesting," he commented, briefly looking away from the manual. "For a forty-year-old endeavor."

"So have you figured out how to get inside?"

He handed her the manual. "According to this, I'm supposed to stand in front of it. Then you start the procedure by activating the controls over there."

Clark stood before the chamber, facing outward, while Bonnie found the controls. "Ready?"

"Yes."

She pressed the proper combination.

"**Beginning initial body scan,**" said a mechanical voice from within the chamber. At the same time, a blue beam of light slowly played over Clark's body from head to foot. "**Processing,**" it announced, followed a few seconds later with, "**Applying. Please do not move, sir.**"

As Clark stood immobile, metal arms extended from the chamber, carrying seemingly unrelated pieces of metal and plastic, and applying them to the exoskeleton. At first there appeared to be no rhyme nor reason to what was being created around the bronze man's body. But, as brushstroke after brushstroke brings form to a blank canvas, so Clark's armor took shape and became a thing of wonder. A helmet with a great clear front assembled around his head. Finally, after about two minutes, the remote manipulators retreated into the chamber.

"**Complete,**" announced the voice. "**Now processing systems check and integration.**"

Bonnie waved her hand before Clark's face. "Can you hear me? Can you move yet?"

"I can read your lips," he mouthed. "Testing, one, two, **THREE, FOUR** –" Bonnie grabbed her ears as the sound boomed from the helmet's speakers. "Sorry."

She nodded. "I can hear you now."

"I can hear you, too. It's an interesting feeling, kinda like being in a deep-sea diving suit, but easier to move about. How does it look?"

"Just let *me* break this to the kids, okay?"

"That frightening?"

"Not the type you'd want to meet in a dark alley, sweetheart."

"Understood."

"**Process complete,**" the voice announced. "**You're free to move around now, sir.**"

"I anticipated you'd want to test it," Bonnie explained. "So that's why I put it next to Dome 5. I'll get the door and we'll see what that diving suit of yours can do."

Clark took a step. It wasn't as difficult as he would've thought. He concluded that, since it was joined to his existing exoskeleton, it would operate as an extension of it. He followed her out of the hold and into Dome 5.

Underneath the large center dome, in the house belonging to the Liston's, Dot was doing some last-minute arranging of her backpack. She brushed her hand against a furry arm trapped by some other items, and carefully drew it out until the purple teddy bear came into the open. She cupped the bear in her hands and said, "Sorry, Grape." She gave it a gentle kiss on the head, then set him next to the bag. A special teddy bear is a thing to be protected, to be taken care of. When being transported, it had to be the last to be packed, otherwise it could get hurt.

And Grape Juice was *her* special teddy bear.

Perry was in the shower when the call was announced. "It's Dr. Cunningham."

Dot's reaction was one of panic rather than geniality. "*Patch it through to the den!*" she quietly ordered, and ran to the other room. As she locked the door behind her, she ordered the call to be put through.

Diane's face appeared on the nearby monitor. "Dot, you okay?"

"I wasn't expecting you to call me here!" she blurted.

"You haven't told Perry yet?"

She shook her head slowly. "No. He's been so excited about the vacation, I couldn't. I will tell him, though."

The blond doctor's expression said that she didn't believe Dot for a moment, but she gave her the benefit of the doubt. "All right. You keeping up the log?"

"Yes. I'll send you daily reports."

"All right. Just because it's your vacation, don't push yourself. Dot?"

She smiled bravely. "I'll try."

Then they disconnected. Dot flopped into a chair and seemed to collapse. "I'll try," she sighed.

The next morning, after some final hugs and a short group prayer, Perry and Dot climbed aboard a bronze Bell 222B helicopter with *Savage Foundation* markings. A few moments later, they gracefully rose through the top of the hangar bay. As the well-wishers returned to their jobs, Monk suddenly noticed someone was missing. He glanced back and saw Mark Eidemiller staring up at the ceiling as if he was looking through the ship.

"Mark!" he called out. "You okay?"

The big man looked at him and gave him a half-grin. "Yeah, I think so." He didn't sound very convincing. "It's just a feeling ..."

Monk walked back to join him. "What sort of feelin'?"

"Can't put my finger on it. It's probably nothing."

"Hey, don't shrug this off so easily," Monk reassured. "Around here, instinct is a big thing. Tell you what ... I'll call my boy Ham and let him know you want to hear from Perry when he gets in. That help?"

"Yeah. I think it might," Mark nodded, relieved. "Sorry."

"Don't let it bother you, kid. This kinda stuff is par for the course."

The Bahamas

"Right this way, ladies."

Jill Woodward patiently brought up the rear as Alexandria, Phyllis, and Cherry were escorted through the resort to the artists' accommodations. From the moment their plane touched down, and they boarded the *Excesses* courtesy van, the girls had been going bug-nuts – pointing, giggling, and taking pictures of practically everything. *And why not?* mused Jill. *After all, this was Paradise.*

The courtesy van was met by the Floor Manager, Mr. Benson Hedges, who chatted about the resort as they headed for their rooms.

"After you settle in," he explained, "I'll take you to the Sunlight Room. Things don't open until nine, when the evening crowd begins to assemble, but I can show you back stage so you can get familiar with where you'll be performing."

They came to the girls' room, a suite just a few yards from the back entrance to the Sunlight Room. As soon as the door opened, the girls rushed to claim bedrooms, then darted about checking out the features. Besides the three bedrooms, the suite consisted of a living area, kitchen, dining room, and a balcony.

"Guys?" she interrupted their glee. "Are you going to be okay with this?"

At that, they froze in their tracks and turned to her. Then they left what they were doing, went to their friend's side, and wrapped her up in the center of a group hug. It was a habit of theirs started years ago when they acknowledged their rag-tag group as a family.

"Don't sweat it, girl!" they each absolved her of any guilt.

"After all," added silver-haired Phyllis Hudson. "It's the *Bahamas*, for goodness sake!"

She returned the hug, and they continued exploring the room.

"Alex, Phil, you guys remember the signal?" inquired Cherry Pratt.

Alexandria Foster recited, "*If the hangar's on the door, don't come in!*"

Everyone laughed.

Jill turned to Mr. Hedges, who had been patiently waiting all this time. She apologized to him.

"It's fine," he shrugged it off. "I can show you the Sunlight Room at 4:30, if that is acceptable to

you."

"Yeah, that's great! Do you want us to meet you there?"

"Yes, thank you."

She turned to the girls. "You got that? Four-thirty, in front of the Sunlight Room."

The girls acknowledged her.

"Now, if you'll follow me," said Mr. Hedges. "I'll show you to your suite."

Jill took one last look back at the others, then followed the nice man.

"Mr. Hedges," Jill asked along the way. "The suite for the Listons ... is it ready?"

"Yes, ma'am," he acknowledged. "We received their luggage yesterday, and it's been moved to their suite."

"Good. I want everything to be special for them. Let's just say I owe them big time."

Mr. Hedges smiled and nodded. "It's one of our finest suites."

As they walked in silence, Jill reflected on how much had happened in the last eleven years.

Back then, she'd been a scientist, working for Patricia, Inc. Cosmetics. It was a good job, and she had a boyfriend, Daniel, who also worked for the company. Then she got wind of things that were happening, allegations of unethical practices. There was one in particular that caught her attention. Jodie Sims was a young woman who had been using some of the company's 'hypo-allergenic' cosmetics and had experienced an extreme allergic reaction that scarred her entire body and made her unable to show herself in public without being covered up. She tried to sue Patricia, Inc., but the company's high-priced lawyers buried her in legal complications and forced her to back down.

The whole treatment of Jodie Sims changed Jill's perspective on her employer's ethics. She tried to voice her concerns, but was turned away. Eventually she resigned and attempted to expose the unethical practices, but she, too, was shot down, and labeled publically as 'a troublemaker.'

So she decided to take matters into her own hands.

She befriended Jodie Sims, and the two of them assembled a rag-tag group of women with one thing in common: they had been burned by the cosmetics industry, and especially Patricia, Inc. Within a short time, they had become an oddball commando group, seeking vengeance on businesses that exploited women. Their attacks were not meant to injure others, but they did serious damage to a number of businesses, with a focus on Patricia, Inc. holdings. With the help of Jill's boyfriend feeding her information from the inside, they came very close to forcing the company into bankruptcy.

But then the president of the company, Penelope Savage, suddenly fled to a secret location in

South America. Following her, Jill and her group discovered a hidden valley of Mayans, and an unlimited supply of gold. They seized the valley, captured Penelope, and forced her to see the horrors that her company had caused. In the process, however, they discovered Penelope's big secret – there was no 'Penelope Savage'. The woman heading the company was actually Patricia Savage, chronologically in her 80's, who had been taking a youth drug and had invented a faux daughter to explain it all away.

Jill and her group planned to blackmail Pat into correcting her company's atrocities, but that was interrupted when Pat's cousin Clark 'Doc' Savage covertly raided the valley and took it back from them. Things really changed then. They all discovered that Jill's boyfriend Danny had been seducing Pat at the same time he had been seducing Jill, and had been playing both ends against the middle. While they were all out of communication range with the outside world, he accused Jill and her group of kidnapping 'Penelope', and effectively took control of Patricia, Inc. Once everybody realized who the true villain was, they combined forces to return to the outside world and take back the company.

Before that, however, there was one last twist. Daniel Franklin had been using one of Jill's girls, Deuce Robinson, as he had the others. She was his mole, his undercover assassin, and had instructions to kill Jill and Pat should anything go wrong. She would've succeeded if it hadn't been for the literal intervention of Dot Liston. After that, they were able to take back Caroline Island and Pat's company, with some help from Doc Savage's friends.

Patricia Savage became a changed person. Seeing what her company had done in her name, she vowed to change things. She used the drug she had used on herself, and reversed the damage done to Jodie Sims. She turned her island – formerly a spa for the wealthy – into a haven for abandoned children all around the world. Then she dissolved her company, which would have life-changing repercussions on 9/11.

Some of Jill's group – those who had survived – were helped by Mitch Drake's organization, while others found new lives and new families on Caroline Island. Even Jill's lieutenant, Bonnie Clayton, became head of security on Caroline Island before she eventually married Doc Savage and became the mother of triplets.

And Jill herself? She worked with Mitch for awhile, then decided she needed to do something totally different. She went to Reno, adopting the stage name Delores Van Allen, and became a lounge singer. She found that she liked it, and was good at it. She brought in some of her girls as backup singers. She had wanted to keep a low profile, but – who could pass up *Excesses* in the Bahamas?

After eleven years, and some hard times, the future looked good for them all.

This was going to be an unforgettable time in Paradise.

They went up in a private elevator, opening into a corridor leading to a pair of suites. Mr. Hedges gestured to one door. "This suite is for the Listons." He gestured to the other suite. "And this is for you and Mr. Drake; your luggage will be delivered shortly."

"Thank you," she smiled conspiratorially,

He handed her the key card and wished her well.

As she entered the opulent suite, high above the rest of the resort, she couldn't wait until Mitch saw where they'd be staying together.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It's A Neuf Day was Nickelodeon's flagship series, and black-haired teenage beauty Heidi Neufswanger, was the figurehead at its bow. She had just finished filming her first movie, *It's A Neuf World*, with her boyfriend, singing star Timmy Turner.

At 3:15pm, Heidi was heading back to the studio in her personal limousine. In the back seat, she was being interviewed with Mason Gable from *Entertainment Tonight*. Donna Clu, Gable's assistant, was recording the interview with a small digital video recorder.

At 3:19, Gable was asking Heidi how she felt at the death of fellow teenage star Demeter Bronco. Taking a sip of her bottled water, the teenage star's expression was very sad. Her voice was low and choked with emotion as she went on about how she was distraught over her dear friend's tragic death, and how great a loss it would be to all of Hollywood.

Inside, however, she was anything but sympathetic towards Bronco's death. *Miss that bimbo? Hardly! With her out of the picture, I'll have a better chance of getting the People's Choice Award this year. I'll even make a suggestion that they give her a special honor ... posthumously ... while I get the award for Best Actress in a Comedy Series. With her gone, my ratings will go through the roof.*

At 3:26, Heidi began to feel odd. Her eyesight began to blur. She muttered to Gable to stop taping. He said he would, but the reporter knew that something newsworthy was going down. He gestured to his partner to keep recording, then asked Heidi how she was feeling.

"Not ... so good," she admitted weakly.

"Do you want us to take you to the hospital?"

"No, no," she waved him off. "Take me ... to ... studio."

"Is there something you can take?" he asked. "Something in your bag?"

She shook her head.

By 3:31, her head had sunk into the back of the limo's seat, and she appeared to have fallen asleep or passed out. Her jet black hair had been slowly losing its dark hue, and her face was changing. Gable's hand darted out to keep Donna from screaming in horror.

By 3:40, it was over. When Gable realized that the girl wasn't breathing any longer, he carefully reached his hand to her wrist and checked for a pulse. He looked over at Donna and instructed

her to turn the camera on him; crying, she bravely continued doing her job. "I can't believe it, but you've seen it here, live. Heidi Neufswanger ... is dead. This is not a product of special effects or tricks of the camera. It's exactly as you've ... we've ... witnessed."

Gable gestured to Donna to stop filming, and handed her a tissue from nearby. Only then did he frantically pound on the partition separating them from the chauffeur. "***Quick, get us to the hospital! I think Heidi's dead!***"

By 4:00, the limousine arrived at the hospital, and everything went wild.

The police arrived at the hospital at the same time the news hit the airwaves. Like with Demeter Bronco's death, details weren't revealed until after the investigation.

Representatives of Nickelodeon arrived as soon as they had heard what had happened. They came with security people who brazenly confiscated Donna's camera. However, they were too late; minutes earlier, during the confusion, they'd transmitted their footage to the main studios, and had stashed the memory card in a pay locker near the cafeteria. The security people tried to hold the two for questioning, but a hastily-summoned legal team from *Entertainment Tonight* showed up with a second camera crew. The Mexican Standoff was over quickly.

However, before Mason Gable and Donna Clu could be released, they had to pass muster by someone else – the *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*. Almost supernaturally, a team of CDC scientists came on the scene and commandeered the floor. They isolated the chauffeur and the two *Entertainment Tonight* reporters, and tested them thoroughly for any sign of what happened to Heidi Neufswanger. They fully cooperated with the CDC people. Several hours later, after displaying no signs of what killed Heidi, they were all released. And Mason Gable and Donna Clu got their fifteen minutes of fame.

Even though the news had been released to the public, the memory card was recovered and the footage digitally analyzed for authenticity. Nickelodeon tried applied legal pressure on *Entertainment Tonight* to surrender the card, then tried to discredit the footage as fiction and not fact. Unfortunately, it was a matter of 'too little, too late'. Heidi's final minutes had made it to the Internet. YouTube alone had registered 12,000,000 hits. Someone had seen the 'Dorian Gray' association between the deaths of Demeter Bronco and Heidi Neufswanger, and coined the term *Dorian Gray Virus*. Social networks around the world enthusiastically shared the matter around the clock, discussing theories on who or what was responsible.

The body of Heidi Neufswanger had been placed in a stasis chamber and transported to a CDC lab, where tests and a thorough autopsy were performed. A few days later, in a press conference, the CDC would report that their tests showed "no sign of a known virus or biological agent." The body would be returned to family members, and she was buried shortly after.

Months later, at the *People's Choice Awards*, both Demeter Bronco and Heidi Neufswanger would be posthumously presented with a special lifetime achievement award.

CHAPTER NINE

Three weeks earlier

John Fleming was troubled.

Since Lily had to work the next afternoon, he took her to her apartment, then proceeded to the *Royale*. He took a leisurely shower and tried to sleep, but his soul was uneasy. Resigning himself to the fact that he wouldn't sleep without knowing the truth, he rose, ordered up a pot of coffee from Room Service, then sat down before his secure notebook and logged into MI6's database.

In all honesty, he didn't need to call up the dossier on Ernest Richard Tillman. He knew it as well as a schoolboy knew the multiplication table. Tillman had been Fleming's archenemy since they first met. *Archenemy*. Despite the fact that that word was the perfect description for Tillman, he'd never use it around others. It sounded like something more at home in comic books – or, as Sherlock Holmes would refer to Professor James Moriarty, in literature.

He hesitated, then called up the dossier and reviewed the familiar information.

Ernest Richard Tillman. Born, August 15, 1922. Parents unknown, believed to be a Polish father and a Greek mother in Germany. Schooled at the University of Warsaw where he studied economics and political history, and then the Warsaw University of Technology to study engineering and electronics. He was involved in espionage for the Nazis during World War II, but escaped the Nuremberg Trials by fleeing to Argentina. He worked within several espionage organizations. Assumed killed in 1993.

"*ASSUMED?*" he roared, jumping to his feet.

*There was nothing assumed about your death, Tillman, Fleming reflected. You murdered my Tracy. Your only mistake was not in killing me at the same time. I followed you from one end of the earth to the other, killing red herring after red herring until you were the only one left. Amsterdam. That's where we had our final showdown. I did **not** miss. I emptied a full clip into your body. I checked your pulse; there was none. Still, I was not satisfied. I pressed them to do a DNA test on the body, where they confirmed it was you.*

Only then have I been able to live again.

Fleming started to pace the floor.

But now he had questions ... doubts. *Why did MI6's dossier say that Tillman's had been assumed killed?*

And then there was this man, this Xander Sanders.

The resemblance was uncanny. He looked like the Tillman I knew so many decades ago, back in Paris when he was running stolen diamonds for VULTURE's Number One, Kier Descartes. Could one of Tillman's decoys have survived? No – this man was far younger than that. He

paused, and tried a different angle. *Could Tillman have had a son? Possible.*

Or ... what if all of this was just a painful twist of fate ... that random chance resulted in Tillman's face on another man?

No! his gut flooded his brain. *I have to look into this further. But I can't bring MI6 into this; if I'm wrong, it could be a gigantic embarrassment for the Service. No. Until I have more to go on, I dare not involve them.*

Fleming looked over at the bar and reached for a glass. But he stopped short. He didn't need a drink now. He needed a cool head, a sober mind. Walking out onto the balcony, he looked out at the stars and took a deep breath. Then it occurred to him, he wasn't at all tired from being up all night. In fact, he felt quite ... rejuvenated.

The call of the mystery was making his blood pump faster, his adrenaline soar. Fleming smiled to himself.

His game was afoot.

"John? John?"

Lily cautiously opened the room door and called Fleming's name. She stepped in and her eyes took in the room. A few of the lamps were still burning. On the table next to the closed notebook computer was a tray with empty dishes and a pot of cold coffee. Carefully entering the room, she moved into the bedroom. She saw her man fully clothed and spread out on the kingsize bed. She was relieved that he was still breathing, and so moved closer. She reached out and placed a hand on his arm, speaking his name.

However, in the next instant, she was flat on her back, her arms pinned to the bed, and Fleming was wide awake and alert.

She let out a gasping, "***John! You're hurting me!***"

This successfully snapped Fleming out of his defensive stance. He released her and helped her to sit up. Then he held her close and repeatedly apologized, "I'm so sorry, Lily! Please forgive me!"

"What the hell got into you?" she flared.

"I don't take well to being awakened suddenly," he explained, lowering his eyes. "The war, you know."

Now it was her turn to be apologetic.

"What were you doing sleeping in your clothes?"

"I was surfing the Internet, and I lost track of time. I thought I'd catch a quick catnap, but I guess I slept longer than expected."

She smiled. "I can relate; sometimes I get carried away myself." She glanced at her watch, and stood. "I've got to get back on shift! Are you sure you're okay, John?"

"Yes, dear." He smiled up at her. "Forgive me for worrying you."

"Shall I see you later?"

"Of course," he reassured the young girl. "I have some errands to run, but I'll see you tonight."

She leaned over and kissed him, then walked out of the room. Fleming took a deep breath and got up off the bed.

He took a sip of the coffee; it was cold and bitter, and helped to wake him up. Then he checked the time and realized he was late with his check-in with Basil. He opened the notebook computer and established the secure video connection. He apologized for the tardiness, explaining it as, "I had a late night."

"Yes," Dunston replied dryly. "I'm sure you did."

They talked for a few minutes, Fleming giving no indication to his research, then rang off.

As he showered and shaved, he mentally reviewed what his research had gotten him.

After reading through the dossier on Tillman, he called up the files on Xander Sanders. The results were informative but didn't go past what one would find in *People*. Xander Charles Sanders had been born in 1973, in Vienna, to Benjamin Harrison Sanders and Olivia Jean Sanders. He had no siblings. His mother had succumbed to cancer in 1983. His father had perished in an industrial accident in 2005. The elder Sanders' fortune had come from steel and precious metals, and Xander did well following in his father's footsteps in business. In 2006 Xander moved to the Bahamas, and in 2010 began work on *Excesses*. It was a monumental project – especially when there were several world-class resorts already on the island. But Xander went through with it anyway, and it's been financially successful in the few months it's been open. The files pointed out that Xander was somewhat of a recluse, which Fleming found odd, especially after the personal appearance he had made the previous night.

The report was disappointing. Granted, he was reading the accounts looking for some sort of connection to Tillman, something that would justify his suspicions.

Alas, it was not there.

At that point he resolved to continue his 'research' at the local newspapers, checking out their archives.

The Aston-Martin DB Mark III approached *Excesses* along the road leading not to the club, but to the resort. No valet parking here; he parked on the outskirts, and strolled in with his cane at his side.

Earlier, Fleming had spent several hours checking out newspaper archives. Apart from a few photos of the man, in and around the resort, he learned nothing new on Sanders. What was interesting was that both father and son looked amazingly like Tillman before his 'death' in Amsterdam, that there were no pictures of father and son together, and the son had seemingly made no public appearances until after his father's death. Not surprising, the father's funeral was a closed-casket affair. Fleming wondered if they'd find an empty box if they dug up the father's grave?

Fleming next went to the resort. His logic was that, in the same way one could learn about Walt Disney by going to *Disney World*, he felt he could learn about Sanders by snooping about his creation, *Excesses*. He took in all the resort, letting his finely-honed senses take everything in. He paid more attention to the security precautions, and was surprised at what he found. There were the obvious security cameras, as big and bulky as they had been two decades ago. But his trained eyes spotted the sophisticated state-of-the-art micro-cameras that outnumbered the larger ones 4-to-1. Likewise, he'd seen the uniformed security guards, but there were twice as many plain-clothed operatives blending in with the tourists.

It occurred to him that the timing of Sanders' appearance at the Sunlight Room, and the fact that he'd sat within eyeshot of his own table, might not have been mere coincidence. *If Sanders indeed was Tillman*, he considered, *he would've seen me a mile away. And his appearance last night would've been the proverbial throwing down of the gauntlet.* He berated himself for his sloppiness as he wandered over to the casino. The Sunlight Room wasn't open, but the rest of the casino was. He casually engaged in some light gambling for appearances' sake, but most of his attention was focused on what he could learn about Xander Sanders.

In a private villa, some miles from *Excesses*, a servant answered a cordless telephone, then carried it out to a man sitting in a private library.

"Mr. Winston, sir," announced the servant, handing the phone over.

"Speak," said the man.

"Boss, you were right," Mr. Winston confirmed. "He's here, snoopin' around. And he was checkin' out the newspapers earlier."

"Good," the man smiled to himself. "He cannot hurt us, Mr. Winston. Let him proceed."

"Right, boss!"

The man disconnected the phone, setting it on a glass table next to his chair. "And the pawn moves." He called for the servant. "Within the next few days, we shall have a visitor." He gave a general description of Fleming. "When he arrives, invite him in. We shall have coffee on the veranda."

"Very good, sir," the servant expressionlessly acknowledged him and walked away.

The man on the veranda gave off with an amused laugh.

CHAPTER TEN

The present Coral Gables, Florida

The helicopter ride had been comfortable enough, and the weather cooperative, but the closer we got to Florida, the more antsy my wife became. As soon as our pilot informed us as to our ETA to Coral Gables, Dot called Hamilton and relayed the information to him.

The building that housed the law firm of *Allen, Patte, Drescher and Mayfair* was a squat brick edifice with steel and glass accents, and a flat top with a helipad on a raised platform. Standing next to the helipad was a figure that resembled a slightly scaled-down version of a famous cinematic New York City skyscraper climber.

Of all of Monk and Lea's children, Hamilton Tyler Mayfair most resembled his father. At six foot six and close to 300 pounds of solid muscle, he was an accomplished partner of a prestigious law firm. Those who knew him could describe him as 'Perry Mason meets Planet of the Apes' without fear of being punched out. He distinguished himself just a few years ago by leading Doc Savage's legal defense team.

"You can open the door, now, Perry," the pilot called over the sound of the rotor blades. "Just remember to keep low."

I climbed out first. Dot handed me the backpacks and followed. We thanked the pilot one last time, then headed for the edge of the helipad. A set of wide metal steps led from the helipad to the roof of the building; Hamilton waited about halfway down. As soon as Dot got to his level, he swallowed her up in his massive arms, then extended a hand to shake mine.

The three of us finished going down the stairs and entered the building.

"There," sighed Hamilton once the door was closed behind us. "That's better. I hate yelling over helicopters. So, how was your flight, guys?"

"Fine," Dot answered. "Everybody says 'hi'."

"Is that all your luggage?"

"Everything else was sent on ahead," Dot explained. "This is just enough for overnight."

"Good thinkin'. Lucy's lookin' forward to havin' you two over."

After a flight of stairs and a short elevator ride, we reached the floor where Hamilton's law firm was. Sitting at the desk, in front of Hamilton's office, was a woman in her mid-30's, of medium build, and with short brown wavy hair.

"Marion?" said Dot.

She looked up, and her face broke into a smile. Dot moved around the desk as the girl stood, and the two women hugged like good friends. It took me a moment, but then I remembered where the two became acquainted. It was during the early days of Clark's trial, and Hamilton had summoned Marion Carter to Lincoln City to provide general assistance. Dot had told me how Marion had fallen in love with the beach, despite being a Florida native; she explained that it was because it was her first time to the West Coast.

"How've you been?" Marion asked.

"Fine! And you?"

"Good! Ham told me how you were on your way to a vacation in the Bahamas, you lucky duck!"

The girls laughed.

"Hey, Perry," Ham got my attention. "Pop called me with a message for you. Call your friend Mark."

"Is he okay?"

"Pop didn't say," he shrugged his big shoulders. "I gotta give Lucy a call, let her know you both got in okay. Then I got some paperwork to wrap up ... take me about a half hour. After that we'll be on our way." He took a step towards the office, then stopped. "You guys like barbecued ribs?"

"Who doesn't?" I answered. "Let me give Mark a call, see what's up."

Marion pointed to an empty office. I thanked her and pulled out my cell. In the office, I perched on the edge of a desk, dialed, and waited for Mark to answer.

"Perry?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

He hesitated. "I just wanted to make sure you guys were okay."

"We're fine," I reassured him. "Actually, we just arrived a few minutes ago."

"Okay." He paused. "I'm sorry. After you guys had left, well, I had this feeling. I was going to let it slide, but Monk wouldn't let me."

"And he was right in doin' that. What kind of a feeling?"

"A gut feeling, something having to do with Dot. Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine," I answered. "Except for the headaches, of course."

"Headaches?"

"Yeah."

"Migraines?"

"Probably. She's been having them for a few weeks. I don't know much more than that."

"Karen gets migraines, too. What's Dot taking for them?"

"Sorry, I don't know."

"If you get a chance, ask her and let me know. And ... keep an eye on her, okay?"

"Always do," I lightly reminded. "Mark, I'm goin' on vacation in the Bahamas. Apart from a little sunburn, what could possibly go wrong?"

"They said that about *Westworld*, too," he recalled the ad phrase of the old movie. "Okay, have a good time."

"Thanks." And we disconnected.

I returned to Dot's side. "Mark 'had a feeling' about us," I explained aside. "I reassured him we were fine."

I visited the rest room while Dot and Marion talked. Hamilton finished up after a few minutes and asked if we were ready to go. We followed him down to the basement parking and climbed into his blue-green hybrid SUV. Within a half hour we were pulling into the driveway, next to a red minivan, in front of the two-car garage. Their house was in the style of Mediterranean Revival, characterized by flat or low-pitched terra cotta and tile roofs, arches, scrolled or tile-capped parapet walls and stuccoed wall surfaces and articulated door surrounds.

The front door of the house opened, and we were greeted by Hamilton's wife, Lucy. She was a striking woman in her early 40's, with jet black hair that cascaded down her back. She hugged Dot first, then me. Then she wrapped her arms around Hamilton and, as he bent over and easily lifted her off her feet, they exchanged a very passionate kiss.

"The barbecue's heating up," Lucy informed her husband. "The ribs are in the kitchen. And the kids are out back."

"Terrific, hon!" He turned to us. "I'm the one doing the barbecuing. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to change, and then start on dinner." And he left us to Lucy's hospitality.

We followed Lucy into the house, letting her give us a tour of the place as we walked from the front room to the living room to the back yard. The house was nicely cooled to counteract the Florida weather outside. The porch was covered with a wide awning, and an impressive gas barbecue sat waiting to be used. The sizable yard contained several trees with a considerable

number of limbs stretching outward. And in the middle was a jungle gym larger than anything I had ever seen before.

A seven-year-old girl was about halfway up one of the trees, while a six-year-old boy was casually hanging upside-down, thirty feet above the ground, at the top of the jungle gym; both of them waved to us as soon as they saw us.

Lucy grinned. "That's Louise and Peter."

"Take after their father, do they?" I commented.

"With the exception of his facial hair," Lucy added *sotto voce*, smiling.

Dot gawked. "They're going to be really good in school sports."

Just then, Hamilton came up from behind us. He was wearing a tank top and shorts. Over his hairy frame was an apron that read I AM THE GORILLA AT THE GRILLA. He carried a tray containing the ribs, an assortment of spices and jars, and various cooking implements.

"Okay," he announced. "If you wanna eat, lemme through!"

We parted and opened the door for him. I followed him while Dot hung back with Lucy.

"That barbecue sauce smells familiar," I commented as I closed the sliding glass door.

"It's Pop's Special Recipe."

"Of course!" I slapped my forehead. "Now I remember! It was there before we planned for the trial. We were there for the triplets' first birthday, and Clark was barbecuing using your Dad's homemade sauce!"

Hamilton grinned. "He still won't give out the recipe. He'll probably take it to the grave."

"Who knows?" I joked. "There's always the possibility he'll put it in his will. In the meantime, have you considered chemical analysis?"

"I have. Do you think Mitch Drake could help me?"

"As close as he is to this group? I don't think wild horses could hold him back."

"I'll give him a sample tomorrow."

"Don't you dare!" I stopped him. "He's going on what just may be his first vacation in God-knows how long. He doesn't need anything to distract him."

"Fair enough," Hamilton dipped a finger into the jar, smiling as he licked the sauce off. "I'll do my best to save him a sample ... if there's any left."

Over dinner, the topic of how Hamilton and Lucy first met came up. They tried shrugging it off, but the combination of me, Dot, and both kids was too much to dismiss.

"Very well," started Lucy. "I was born outside of Havana, Cuba, so that should give you an idea of what my childhood was like living under Castro's communist regime. My Papa owned a tobacco plantation, and we lived rather comfortably. You have heard of the *Mariel Boatlift*?"

"It was during the 80's, wasn't it?" I answered. "A ton of people left Cuba in a makeshift flotilla of boats."

"Over 125,000 people over several weeks," supplied Hamilton.

"Needless to say, Fidel Castro did not take well to all those people leaving his country, especially with all the revenue they provided. Seeking to recoup his losses, he took possession of many plantations – including my father's. We went from living comfortably to barely living at all. And that is when my father decided that we would immigrate to the United States, where everything we have lived for could not be taken away on the whim of a single man. Since we feared being caught and punished for what we were going to do, we escaped by night, evading the patrols, and made our way towards Miami."

"So where do you come in, Uncle Ham?" asked Dot.

He held up a finger. "Soon," and pointed back at Lucy.

She gave him a grateful nod, and continued. "We made beachhead by first light, believing that we were now free. But then the U.S. Coast Guard intercepted us. Unbeknownst to us, we had violated some obscure regulation, and they would have sent us back to Cuba ... if it hadn't been for Hamilton."

She reached out her right hand, and slap-tagged Hamilton's outstretched left hand.

"Having lived in Florida for many years," he continued the narrative, "I was no stranger to the plight of the Cuban refugees. During the '80's, I wanted to help refugees of the *Mariel Boatlift*, but didn't have the capability to do so. Now, when Lucy and her family came to Florida and were detained and threatened to be deported back to Cuba, it caught the attention of the local media. I watched them pleading to stay. But this time, there was something I could do for them. I pulled a few strings and called in a few favors and personally presented the Coast Guard with an inescapable loophole that kept them from returning Lucy's family to Cuba. I even found them a place to live."

Lucy grinned. "The news media picked up the story. They called us a real-life 'Beauty and the Beast'. And they were right. Our necessary acquaintanceship turned into a friendship ... and that turned into love. And the rest, as they say, is history."

After dinner, the kids went up to their rooms, and us adults went outside and sat on the porch. The evening was cooler by that time, and we relaxed, and drank iced teas until Dot and I started

pooping out. Ham showed us to their guest room, and pointed us to where the bathroom was. We wished everyone a good night, and prepared for bed.

As I came out of the bathroom, I saw Dot sitting on the bed. The expression on her face was one of pain. I recalled the question Mark had about what medication she was taking. Once I knew she was okay, I asked her.

"Topamax," she replied. "A low dosage. Ten milligrams."

"Is this what was going on a few days ago when Bonnie said you were on a 'personal errand'?"

She gave me an embarrassed smile. "Yes. Sorry. I didn't want you to worry."

I sat next to her and gingerly wrapped her up in my arms. "It's okay, babe," I said softly. "Mark told me that Karen gets migraines, too; she's pretty much got them under control." I softly pressed my lips against her temple and kissed her. "Perhaps that's what he was talking about, with his 'feeling'."

"*Perhaps*," Dot whispered back, her eyes closed.

The next morning, we woke up to the smell of eggs, sausage, and pancakes. And we were surprised by going-away presents from the family. From the kids, a small framed family photo personally wrapped in newspaper. From Lucy, a very nice hand-carved wooden crucifix. And from Hamilton, a gift bag with Coral Gables tee-shirts and travel mugs.

"This is so cool," I said. "I really wish we had something to give you."

"But," quickly added Dot. "the next time you're in *our* neck of the woods, expect to be treated like royalty!"

As we all laughed, my cell phone rang. I glanced at the Caller ID. "Good morning, Mitch."

"I'm in town. You guys ready to travel?"

"I thought we were going to take a taxi to Miami, and meet you at the airport."

"I changed my mind. I brought my own transport, a seaplane. I'm at a boat launch area just off of South Prospect Drive."

I relayed the information to Hamilton. "Do you know where that is?"

"Yeah, sure," he nodded, taking another bite of sausage. "It's just a few miles from here."

"We're not far," I told Mitch. "We'll head out in a few minutes."

We'd already collected our stuff and packed it away. So, after putting all of our presents into the gift bag and hugging Lucy and the kids, we headed out. It wasn't hard to find the boat launch at

the end of South Prospect Drive. It was an open lot connected by a dirt road to the drive. By the number of trucks and empty boat trailers parked around the perimeter, it was quite a popular place.

And at the edge of the water was a seaplane.

But it wasn't just *any* seaplane. It was a Grumman G-21 "Goose". Considering that the Goose was popular back before Clark was frozen, it was in remarkable shape. Standing next to the open door was Mitch Drake, dressed in flight gear that looked like it came from the same time period, complete with brown leather bomber jacket, leather flight helmet, and oversized goggles. He grinned from ear to ear as he posed next to the seaplane.

I climbed out of the SUV. "Who are you supposed to be, Mitch – one of the *Tuskegee Airmen*?"

"Don't diss the *Airmen*, Mister," Drake hissed. "My uncle Henry was with them in '43."

"Sorry," I quickly apologized.

"My pop used to talk about them," added Hamilton. "They were an *amazing* group."

"That they were," Mitch agreed.

"I like what you did with the plane," commented Dot.

The seaplane was painted a blue-grey, with white on the undersides of the wings, pontoons, and main hull. On the sides of the nose were classic Air Force insignias.

"Thanks," he returned, walking over to us. "Did it myself."

"Original?" I inquired, carrying our bags to the airplane.

Mitch nodded. "I found it in California some years back. I've been slowly restoring it. Now that it's done, figured this is a good time to bring it out."

I called back. "I'm surprised you didn't paint it candy apple red with flames around the hood."

"Thought about it," he admitted. "But in the end I went for the classic look."

There was a set of metal steps hanging from the bottom of the open doorway of the seaplane. I climbed up and ducked my head to step inside. I set the bags on a seat near the back, then poked my head out and called, "Check this out, Dot! The inside looks as good as the outside!"

Dot gave her uncle a final hug, then walked over to the seaplane and climbed in.

Back at the SUV, Mitch asked Hamilton. "How've you been doing?"

"Good, good. You?"

"Can't complain. Thanks for taking care of my friends."

"Your friends, my family." They shook hands. "And you're welcome. Have a good flight and a good vacation."

"Thanks."

Hamilton returned to his SUV, while Mitch headed to the seaplane. He climbed aboard, then pulled up the stairs and swung them away from the door. Walking up the narrow aisle, he explained, "Just between us, not all of this plane is an antique. For example, the the original seats back there weren't very comfortable, so I took a few ... personal liberties."

Dot and I sat right behind the cockpit, on opposite sides of the aisle. "You did a good job," I complimented him, as I reached out for Dot's hand.

From the cockpit, Mitch lowered the oversize goggles over his eyes. He called out, "**Contact!**" and kicked in the turboprops. The Goose backed up off of the beach and bobbed in the water. We turned to face the ocean.

He pushed the throttles forward, and we jumped ahead. A moment later, we were airborne.

"Next stop, the Bahamas!"

The Orion

"Diane," greeted Clark. "I'm here for our check-up."

"Hey, Doc," she smiled, looking up from her computer monitor. "Have a seat ... I'll just be a minute."

Clark moved to a nearby chair.

Dr. Cunningham finished her work and stood. "So, how've you been doin', Doc?"

"Well, since Miranda's been supplying you with daily reports on my health, I'll assume that's a rhetorical question."

The blonde doctor laughed. "From a medical perspective, yes. But I'm asking in regards to the *rest* of you."

"Since when have you taken up psychotherapy?"

Without hesitating, she smirked, "Since five minutes after we met."

"That long, huh?" he countered with an equally-amused smirk.

"So how *are* you?"

Since it was pointless to lie to his good friend and physician, he opened up to her about his feelings and emotional challenges he had been experiencing.

"One good thing I learned of in the last few days. When Perry's friend Mark was visiting CSI, he said something to me that made great sense. He pointed out that, at this time of my life, I was more of a facilitator than an instigator. He cited Mr. Sloan as an example. And when I was working with Tammy Elders on her *Walking Bulldozer* project, it was almost embarrassingly clear."

"That's good to hear, Doc. You have that sense of being needed?"

"Yes," he quickly agreed.

"And the bouts of depression?"

"I won't say they're gone entirely, but, as long as I'm active, they're greatly diminished."

"Excellent."

The Bahamas

It didn't take very long for the Goose to reach its destination. Mitch explained that *Excesses* had its own marina. "Since some of their customers come from all over the world to stay or gamble, a lot of them sail in, or fly in like us." He pointed down. "Look!"

We looked out of the side windows, and saw an impressive collection of yachts. One area was designated for seaplanes; half a dozen were moored.

"I checked things out ahead of time," Mitch told us. "Believe it or not, they've got valet parking for seaplanes. Hey, Dot, I'll circle around a couple of times to give you a good look before taking us in. Get your pictures while you can."

"Okay!" Dot scrambled for her digital camera. "Thanks!"

Mitch banked the seaplane into an easy curve, and Dot captured everything on video. Then he came around once more, lined us up into an open space to land and descended. There was a slight jerk and then the hiss of the water under the hull. Mitch throttled down and moved us slowly towards the area for valet parking, and reversed his engines. I spotted Jill Woodward standing on the dock behind some uniformed attendants. Dressed in a stylish pantsuit and a wide-brimmed hat, she waved at us. The attendants moved in. Two of them secured docking lines to the seaplane while two others rolled a set of mobile stairs to the door.

Mitch announced cheerfully, "Thank you for flying *Air Drake*."

I stood up and moved down the aisle to the back, then cracked open the door and received our end of the stairs. I handed the bags to the attendant, who placed them on a luggage cart. He

offered Dot a hand down the stairs as she preceded me; she accepted it, and went down and into Jill's waiting hug. I was next out, joining the two ladies. Mitch followed me a few seconds later. He was carrying a leather satchel as he stepped down to the dock. He handed the Goose's keys to the attendant, then joined the rest of us.

Mitch set his satchel down on the dock, wrapped Jill up in his arms, and gave her a tender kiss.

"Welcome to the Bahamas ... baby," she cooed. "Now, who are you supposed to be?"

"Disappointed?" Mitch asked.

In response, she nuzzled him closer. "*Never*, baby. Now let's get you all checked in."

With one of the attendants following with our stuff, we headed for the shoreward entrance to the resort.

"So when did you get in?" Dot asked Jill.

"Yesterday," she answered.

"So how was opening night?" asked Mitch.

"Good, but I think we can improve it. Tonight we'll be better."

"I'll be looking forward to it."

We went up to the front desk and identified ourselves. Once they realized we were in the two *Mount Olympus* suites, their demeanors became a whole lot friendlier. They gave us each an information packet and a green funds card, and wished us a good stay. Then we followed the attendant with our luggage.

"Oh, yes," Jill informed us. "I have special passes that'll get you in to all of our shows during our stay. Now that doesn't mean you're under any obligation to attend all of them – although it *would* be nice – but it gives you the option if you want."

We took a large glass-walled elevator up, giving us a magnificent view as we ascended high above the rest of the resort. The elevator opened into a corridor with two doors.

The assistant pointed to the left and announced, "Mr. and Mrs. Liston, this is your suite. May I take your luggage in?" We told him yes, and he went inside. A few moments later, he came out with the empty cart. He handed Dot the key card as I tipped him.

He next walked over to Mitch and Jill. "Mr. Drake, Ms. Van Allen, this is *your* suite."

"*Our* suite?" Mitch repeated, maintaining a poker face.

Jill held up the key card, gave Mitch a seductive smile, picked up Mitch's satchel, and let herself in.

Mitch numbly tipped the attendant, then looked in our directions with an expression that we'd never thought we'd see in this man: *stunned shock*. But it was only natural, taken from a Christian perspective. A proper, decent, Christian man would never share his room with a woman unless it was his wife. And God was convincing Mitch Drake's heart to this fact.

"*Mitch?*" Jill called. He hesitated for a moment, then went into the room.

Dot and I didn't need to discuss our next move. We went into our suite, disregarding the grand opulence around us, joined hands, and interceded for our friend.

When we broke from prayer, we had a chance to check out the suite.

Jill had outdone herself.

It was like something out of *The Travel Channel*. It had a living room, master bedroom with Jacuzzi, sauna and eucalyptus steam room, a compact kitchenette with fully stocked bar, refrigerator, and pantry, and a media room with a 60-inch flatscreen television and home theater system. The overall amenities included wi-fi throughout the suite, as well as Bose stereo sound with individual volume controls. As I stood on the expansive terraced balcony, looking at the incredible view, I wished we had brought our flight suits.

We unpacked our luggage in our bedroom, as we discussed the situation.

"What can he do?" asked Dot.

"The direct route," I said, "is to break the truth to her. She's an adult; she'll get over it."

"I don't think she'd take that well."

Suddenly there came a knock on our door. We hesitated ... waited ... until we realized, much to our embarrassment, that there would be no AI to announce the identity of the visitor.

I rushed to answer the door.

"Hi, guys," asked Jill Woodward. "Just thought I'd stop by and see what you think of the place."

"It's remarkable," Dot said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Thanks."

She put a hand on my shoulder. "Hey, I owe you my life. This is just my way of paying you back."

I looked into her eyes. "You know that's never been necessary, Jill."

"I know," she responded. "Still ..."

I knew I'd never win this debate, so I opened my arms and gave her a hug. Dot joined us a moment later.

After we'd separated, Jill inquired, "What do you say we get together for dinner. How about 5:00, down in the *Thunderball Restaurant*?" She glanced at her watch. "In fact, I'd better head down there now and make the reservations."

"Sounds good," Dot commented. "We'll see you there at five."

As soon as Jill left our suite, and the door was closed, we asked each other, "Well, she didn't look like someone who received bad news. I hope things worked out."

Almost on cue, there was another knock at the door. I let Mitch in. Knowing that we wouldn't have much time, I got right to the point. "*So?*"

In the years that I've known Mitch Drake, I've seen him express a myriad of emotions. But up until that moment, I never saw him ... confused.

"You didn't tell her," Dot said simply.

Mitch sat down on a nearby chair. He looked deflated. "I've never felt such a struggle before. Usually I'd have no problem knowing what to do. This time, I felt ... like a damned schoolboy on a first date."

I sat down near him. "That's totally understandable, Mitch. You read much out of the book of Romans?"

"Some," he admitted.

"In Chapter 8, it says, '*The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.*'" I paused. "There *is* a conflict within you, between the spirit and the flesh. And right now you're caught in the crossfire."

Dot asked. "So what did you do?"

Mitch looked down at the floor, embarrassed. "I gave in."

I went over, knelt down next to my friend, and put a hand on his back. "It's okay," I softly told him. "Don't beat yourself up. Just remember – no, *memorize* – Romans 8:1. '*There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*'"

"God'll provide the right time to tell her," added Dot. "In the meantime, we've got your back."

He looked up. "Thanks."

"Here's something else to consider that might make a difference. Tomorrow's Sunday, and we usually go to church then, wherever we are. There's a little church called *Lifegate Baptist*, not very far from here. Why don't you join us?"

"What about Jill?"

"It's an invitation," said Dot. "We're inviting the *two* of you."

Mitch looked better, more like himself, less scared. "That's not bad. Let's see what happens."

It was still an hour before dinner, and Perry was catching a quick nap.

Dot was standing on the balcony, appreciating the peaceful view of the ocean, when there was a sudden, stabbing pain in her head that made her knees weak; she gripped the railing to keep from losing her balance. Once she was able to move, she went back into the suite and headed for the bathroom. Thank God, there were two ways to get there, so she was able to avoid the bedroom.

The bathroom had *His* and *Hers* sides, complete with individual sinks, lighted mirrors, and vanity drawers. She opened the drawer on her side. There was a bottle of pills up front, but she pulled the drawer all the way until she reached the very back. There, hidden, was another bottle of pills. The label on the bottle read *Cytoxan*.

She wrestled briefly with the child-proof cap, then took out one of the pills. Quietly pouring herself a glass of water, she drank the whole glass with the pill. She replaced the bottle in the drawer, carefully took a deep breath, then went back into the living room. She sat in one of the reclining loungers and put the controls on low vibrate.

As she carefully touched the spot on her head where the pain was, her mind went back to her meeting with Dr. Cunningham a couple of weeks earlier. The doctor had been stubborn about making sure Perry knew about her condition. "It'll be obvious in a few weeks," her friend had emphasized. "He *needs* to know."

Mitch wasn't the only one who was reluctant in telling someone they loved the truth. *Please, God*, she prayed. *Help us both*.

8:35 pm

We arrived at the club section of *Excesses*. Outside the Sunlight Room was a large sign advertising *Delores Van Allen and Zenith*. And there they were, Jill and the girls, in a Diana Ross/Supremes pose. They wore gowns and wigs that had a definite 70's touch.

I asked, "What kind of a name is *Zenith* for a singing group?"

Mitch gave me a sideways smile. "What's another word for *Zenith*?"

I thought about it for a few moments. "Pinnacle? Peak? Heights?" Then it hit me. "Apex." I grinned, barely holding in the laughter. "Nice pun!"

"She thought so, too. And nobody would suspect."

"What made her pick this image?" asked Dot.

"The big change was when she went from a solo act to a group," Mitch explained. "And, since she always admired Diana Ross, it just kinda ... evolved. I pulled a few strings and got Diana's blessing."

"You actually spoke to Diana Ross?" Dot softly blurted.

"Well, first with her agent. Then with her. She's actually a very nice person."

Dot and I were stunned.

The doors opened after a couple of minutes and we followed the rest of the audience in. The crowd was a decent mix of men and women of various ages. We were escorted to a booth near the stage; Dot scooted in between me and Mitch, and we waited.

"Mitch," asked Dot. "What did Jill say about church?"

"She was noncommittal," he replied. "She said she'd think about it."

Just then the room lights dimmed and the stage lights came up.

"Ladies and gentlemen," a male voice came from overhead. "And now our feature attraction ... the nostalgic Motown sounds of *Delores Van Allen and Zenith!*"

The opening notes to Ross' song "Like a Heat Wave" came over the speakers as the curtains parted and the four of them slid forward onto the stage. Like Diana Ross, Jill sang in a thin, calm voice, and her vocal styling was matched by the others. They were dressed in similar floor-length sequined gowns; Jill's was red, while the others' were gold. They appeared onstage in detailed make-up and high-fashion gowns and wigs, with surprisingly graceful choreography.

With the background music supporting them, they started off their set with a medley of Supremes' hits: "Heat Wave" was followed by "You Can't Hurry Love", "I Hear a Symphony", and "You Keep Me Hangin' On". I glanced around at one point; the rest of the audience was lapping it all up and enjoying every minute of it. Jill and the girls were professionals, with remarkable harmony, and I could understand why they were so popular.

They were three-quarters into their first show when Jill stepped forward to address the audience personally.

"Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of myself and my girls, we want to thank you for the way you've taken us into your lives. For our last two numbers, I'd like to dedicate them to a very

special man in my life." She looked straight at Mitch, then stepped back as the introduction to the song played.

The last two songs were the Mary Wells/Smokey Robinson hit, "My Guy", and the Little Peggy March song, "I Will Follow Him".

Jill was terrific. You could see her love for Mitch as she sang.

On the other hand, I sensed something else from Mitch.

From all my years with Clark, I had developed a sense of reading past his 'face of flint' to what was truly going on inside of him. That talent now showed itself with Mitch, and I saw what was underneath the black man's smiling veneer.

And I think I knew why.

There was a movie a few years back, called *Sister Act*. It was about a brassy, rebellious, Vegas lounge singer, wonderfully played by Whoopi Goldberg. After accidentally walking in on a murder involving her gangster-boyfriend, Harvey Keitel, she fled to the police for protection, and they hid her in the last place *anyone* would expect her to be – in a church, as a nun. There was the usual comedic friction, as Goldberg resisted the cops and the church authorities, all who just wanted to keep her safe. The turning point in the movie came when Goldberg used her musical talents to breathe new life into the musically-pitiful church choir. Finding her niche, she brought out their talents, forged them into a harmonic team, and ended up breathing new life into this on-their-last-leg church.

As part of this process, they took a couple of secular songs, changed a word or an attitude, and turned them into Christian praise songs. These two songs were "My Guy" and "I Will Follow Him".

Assuming that Mitch had also seen the movie, I suspected that these particular songs were touching his heart.

I tapped Dot three times on the leg to signal her that prayer was needed; she tapped twice on my legs to acknowledge it.

The show finished, and the ladies bowed to the applause of the audience. Then they moved behind the curtains as the lights came up and the room started clearing out.

I asked, "We going backstage?"

Mitch slid out from his side of the booth. "No. Jill told me they need time to wind down after a performance. She'll meet me back in the suite."

"Then what about going to the second show?" I asked.

"Well, we've got the tickets," Mitch reminded us. "And it might be in poor taste not to see both shows on our first night here."

"Works for me," Dot seconded. "So, Mitch, how are *you* doing?"

"Okay," he answered, sincerely. "I'll manage."

The second show was just as good, if not better, than the first. The two songs from *Sister Act* directed at Mitch didn't have such a shocking effect on him. Afterward, Mitch said he'd be going back to the suite to think and pray, and Dot and I decided to go for a romantic walk.

The night was nice; the temperature not half bad. And the company was wonderful.

Unfortunately, we couldn't finish things. We were walking, hand in hand, when we both stopped.

"I love you," Dot turned to me. "But Mitch needs us."

"Yep," I looked into her eyes. "You're right." I kissed her. "Let's go home."

The door to the *Mount Olympus* suite opened. Mitch Drake quietly stepped into the room. He set the key card on the table next to the door. There was enough moonlight coming in through the windows that he didn't need to turn the lights on. He stopped, took a deep breath, and let it out in a sigh. Then he walked out onto the balcony, and looked up at the stars.

"God," he started praying, "I really don't know what to do. If I tell her I'm a Christian, and she doesn't understand, it could really make things difficult. I don't want to hurt her feelings, but I can't turn back from the things I know I have to do. I can't just pretend not to be a Christian, even for Jill. I know what your word says, not to forsake the assembling together of the brethren. But it also says, wherever possible, I should live at peace with all men." He let out another tired sigh. "*What ... do ... I ... do?*"

Sunday morning

"Babe," Jill yawned. "Why you up so early? Come on back to bed." She patted the mattress.

Mitch was looking in the mirror, tying his tie. "I'm goin' to church, remember?" He gave her a smile. "Come on, join us."

Jill looked at him. "It's been a long night, babe. Thanks for the invite, but I think I'll take the opportunity to catch a couple more hours sleep. You have a good time."

Mitch finished dressing, then went over to the bed and kissed Jill. "See you later."

He crossed the hallway to the other suite and tapped on the door. Dot answered it.

"Mitch?"

"Yeah? You guys ready for church?"

She faltered. "Almost. Come on in!"

Mitch stepped into the suite. I was just coming out of the bedroom, and was taken by surprise when I saw him. But before either of us had a chance to ask how, Mitch explained, "She opted out."

"Fair enough," I commented.

"Thank you," Mitch smiled. "So are we ready to go?"

"You need a Bible?" I said as I grabbed mine.

He pulled his PADD from a jacket pocket. "All taken care of. Let's go."

We caught a taxi downstairs and, 20 minutes later, were pulling into the parking lot of Lifegate Baptist. It was a small neighborly church, with a truncated steeple and a cross on top, just like the pictures we saw on the Internet. We strode up the walk to the glass double doors, and a middle-aged man opened it up for us. He introduced himself as Buford, shook our hands, and gave us copies of the church bulletin.

Straight ahead of us were the doors to the auditorium. To the left was a hallway where the church offices and restrooms were. To the right was a bulletin board advertising upcoming church events, and a rack containing various related leaflets and tracts. We went into the auditorium. The pews were laid out in a fan shape, angled slightly downward from the back, with two aisles separating them.

"Any preference?" I asked Mitch.

"Where would you guys usually sit?"

"Usually down towards the front," Dot answered. "But that's just us."

"Then that's fine with me," Mitch answered and headed down the nearest aisle towards the front.

Taking a seat, we looked over the church bulletin while we waited. It was just a single page affair, containing basic information about the church: address, phone number, website, email address, church times. The pastor's name was Dan Brown.

Ahead of us was a raised platform that served as a stage. Apart from a basic podium was a piano, some feedback speakers, a few microphones on stands, and a couple of guitar stands. As we watched, three men and two women stepped up onto the stage. Later we would find out that the one behind the piano was Ryan. The one in front of the piano was Adam. The tall gentleman at the electric guitar was Pastor Brown. The two women singers up front was Samantha and the pastor's wife Melea. Unlike many churches where the praise team wore matching outfits, all of these people were dressed in their own clothes. It was all very relaxed and comfortable.

They began with a contemporary worship and praise song; the words to the songs were projected on a screen at the back of the platform. Mid-way through they shifted into an instrumental bridge, and Adam announced that it was greeting time; everybody around us began milling about. Several people came over to us, shaking our hands, introducing themselves and welcoming us. After a couple of minutes, the instrumental bridge ended, cuing everyone to return to their seats, and the song was finished.

Pastor Brown stood and greeted the congregation. He made a couple of announcements, reminders of upcoming events and meetings. He announced that they would be continuing their present study – "Basic Training" – with prayer and intersession. *Good timing*, I reflected.

We returned to singing. I was rather surprised to hear Mitch's singing voice; I don't think I'd ever heard him sing before, and he was pretty good. The songs were uplifting, and our spirits felt refreshed.

Then came the message. Quoting scriptures from Colossians and the Gospels, Pastor Brown emphasized the need for prayer in regular daily life. He gave examples from his own life to illustrate his points. I glanced over occasionally to see how Mitch was receiving the message; by the look in his eyes, he was receiving it just fine. The service concluded with prayer and an altar call for those who had special needs. At this point, Mitch went forward. "Considering all, I need all the help I can get," he explained. The congregation was dismissed and slowly dissipated. We stayed around for a few minutes to talk with the pastor and some of the other parishioners. Then we caught a taxi and headed back to the resort.

"Okay," said Mitch at the door to his suite. "Lemme see if Jill's awake. Then we can all go out and do somethin'."

"Sounds good," returned Perry, as Dot opened the door to their suite. "See you later."

Mitch stepped into the suite. "Jill, you here?" he called.

She came out of the bedroom. She was dressed in slacks and a colorful top. They met and kissed.

"Hon, do we have anything planned for the afternoon? I was thinking we could get together with Perry and Dot and do something."

"No, things are pretty much open until late afternoon. I promised the girls I'd meet them for a bit of practice."

"Any preference as to where to go?"

"I was wanting to check out some of the shops."

"Yeah, we saw a couple of them between here and church. They looked interesting."

Jill got strangely quiet. "Church," she whispered under her breath. "Y'know, hon, I didn't think *church* was something you were interested in."

Mitch turned to face her. He gave her a smile. "Is there a problem?"

"No. Not ... really."

"Jill," he said calmly, taking a seat. "Quite a few of my – *our* – closest friends are Christians. Their influence may be subtle, but it cannot be dismissed. I was a Christian when I was a kid, before my mother died and my father and I relocated, and I walked away from the faith I had then. In the last few months, I've been inspired to ... reexamine things."

"Meaning what?" she said, her eyes narrowing. "You?"

Mitch couldn't lie about this. It was time to put up or shut up. He sent up a mental prayer and then nodded. "Yes. I'm a Christian. A few weeks ago."

"And you were planning on telling me this ... *when*?"

"I was waiting for the right time. Looks like this is it. I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier."

Jill was silent for several seconds. "You are a ... Christian ... and ... we ..."

There was a long pause. Then Mitch said quietly, "Do you want me to move out?"

She nodded.

Mitch stood and headed for the door. "I'll send Dot to get my things." He wanted to tell her he loved her, but God was keeping his mouth shut.

He left the suite, and crossed the hall.

Mitch looked terrible. We asked him what had happened, and he gave us the gory details.

"You did right in leaving when you did," I commented. "There was probably nothing more you could've done."

"Dot, I told her you'd be over to get my stuff."

"She'll be expecting me," she said as she headed for the door. I didn't need to tell her we'd be covering her in prayer; it was a foregone conclusion.

She left the room. Mitch and I started praying.

"Come on in, Dot," Jill called from inside. Dot let herself in.

"So, he told you?"

"Of course. You want to tell me your side of the story?"

"Not really. You'll just take his side."

Dot smiled. "If that was the case, then why would I want to hear *your* side?"

"Point taken. Have a seat."

Jill sat on one end of a couch, and Dot took the other end. The two women turned to face each other.

"When I woke up this morning, and he was getting ready to go to church. I know he had mentioned it yesterday, but it had slipped my mind until he announced he was heading out. It took me by surprise."

"Did he explain why he was going to church?"

"Yeah. He told me he was doing it for you guys. But there was something about it that didn't sound right, and I asked him about it when he came back. And that's when he told me ... that he was now a Christian."

"How did that make you feel?"

"I was surprised. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was." Her head had been lowered, but now she looked right into Dot's eyes. "When I was a kid, my folks sent me to Sunday school, even though they never went to church. It was fine and all that, but as I got older, I did things that were wrong. Every kid does. It's all part of growing up, right?" She paused. "Forgive me, but, up until meeting you guys, I thought all Christians were self-righteous nuts who spent their time looking down their noses at people like me." She gave Dot an apologetic look. "You wanna know what first made the difference in me?"

"Sure."

"It was back there in the Valley. You guys had taken it back from us and stuck us on that Island of Shame. It was just a matter of seeing what would happen next to us. Then Doc took me off to the side, to a clearing where they'd laid out the bodies of the dead from the fighting." Jill's eyes began to mist as she got emotional. "With them were some of my girls, including some who hadn't even made it into the valley; their chopper had lost control and crashed in the mountains. But there they were – all of them. Doc told me that the Mayans had retrieved them, in order to give them a proper funeral. I'd never seen anything like this before. We had treated them like crap, and they were treating us with honor."

"Did you know they were all Christians?"

"Not then, but I found out later. And then there were you guys. It really shook up my image of what a Christian was like. But when Mitch confirmed that he was a Christian, I guess I got

scared. I started to look at him as somebody who would look down on me. I know now, that's not right, but I don't know what to do. And what's worst of all, he slept with me last night! I may not know a lot about being a Christian, but I do know they don't sleep around! ***Why couldn't he have told me right up front that he was a Christian?***"

"He didn't because he cares for you!" Dot answered point-blank. "All of us were looking forward to this time together. The Bahamas ... you and the girls playing here ... ***and*** it being your birthday. He didn't want to spoil this time by breaking this news to you, ***especially*** after you arranged for the both of you to share this suite. He didn't know how you would react, and he didn't want to upset you."

Her eyes flared. "Who does he think I am – a bloody *teenager*? My God, I'm a grown woman!"

"In all fairness," Dot defended. "He *was* thinking of *you* and *your* feelings. He truly loves you, and he didn't want to hurt you. So don't rake him over the coals too quickly."

Her anger lost a bit of its steam.

"Do you really want to send him away?" Dot probed.

Jill looked away. The expression on her face showed that she was thinking. "No," she admitted.

"Then how about giving him another chance? I'm sure we can work something out with the accommodations."

She shrugged. "I've always got a room down there by the girls. It's not as good as this one, but for some place to sleep ... ***alone*** ... it'll work."

"Does that mean you can forgive him?"

"Can *he* forgive *me*?"

Dot laughed. "Jill, he already has. And if you want to hear it out of his own mouth, he's right next door." She paused. "Jill, can you accept him as a Christian?"

"I'll try."

"Realize, he's no different than the man you have always known. In fact, he may get better by being a Christian."

She smiled thinly. "Okay, let's go."

They arrived at our suite to find us both, still on our knees, praying.

"See?" said Dot aside. "Told ya."

Jill's eyes went wide with surprise. She went over to Mitch and looked down at him. He didn't

make any effort to get off his knees, but looked up at her and said, "Can you forgive me for keeping this a secret from you?"

She responded by slapping him sharply on the cheek. "Apology accepted."

Mitch blinked a couple of times at the pain, then got to his feet. "I'm certainly glad all you did was slap my face." He winced. "I can move to another suite."

Jill was silent for a moment, then she shook her head. "There's a room set aside for me in the artists' accommodations. I didn't think I'd need it. But I'll use it – for sleeping. The rest of the time I've full intention of spending in *our* suite." She gave him a sharp look. "Fair?"

Mitch took her in his arms and kissed her. "Fair."

At that point, I knew everything would be just fine.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Orion Sunday Late Evening

By land area alone, Canada ranks fourth largest in the world. By contrast, however, its population density (3.3 per square kilometer) is one of the lowest in the world.

At 2:39am, a 6.3 earthquake struck within the province of Saskatchewan, touching several areas within its thirty-mile radius. Word reached *Orion* via the *Savage Foundation*, and the giant craft headed for Canada. Long before they reached the area, satellite scans had told them where the critical areas were located, and gave them an idea of what they would expect. The biggest damage was to main roads leading to isolated areas, so restoring those roads to wheeled vehicles was a priority.

The transports from *Orion* arrived after sundown and discharged a crew of brawny workers and one very excited teenage girl. While the crew set up floodlights, Tammy Elders unloaded the *Walking Bulldozer* and started preparing it for work. She wore an orange flight suit – something Doc had insisted on in case of an emergency – with an AI-augmented helmet that would give her the ability to see in the dark and analyze the situation before actually stepping into it. She gave the outside a once-over before climbing in. As the mecha performed a systems check, Tammy looked ahead and started sizing up the situation.

By the time the check was completed, she was suitably psyched. Sitting in the mecha's seat, she signaled to the men behind her, "***Okay, guys, here we go! Try to keep up with me!***"

Then she put her hands on the controls and prayed under her breath, "Please, God, don't let me screw up!"

She approached the first obstacle, a rockslide covering both sides of the road. She seized ten pound rocks in both hands, lobbing them off to the side like tennis balls. The bigger ones could be pushed clear or smashed into smaller, more manageable, pieces. Tammy and Hugo made quick work of the rockslide, then moved on while her crew came in behind and made the road smooth enough for traffic.

Next was a tree that had fallen across the road and was resting atop a car. "No life signs," reported the AI. Tammy knew this could be good or bad. There could still be a body inside the car, and that wasn't something she wanted to see. Nevertheless, she took a breath, grabbed the tree, and hefted it past the shoulder of the road. Then she looked into the car. Much to her relief, the car was empty. Pushing it off the road, she continued.

She maintained this level through the night. It was tiring work, but she knew there were others waiting to provide assistance to the towns ahead.

By dawn they'd reached the village of Fairview. None of the homes had been quakeproof, and the people were feverishly attempting to dig their neighbors out. When Tammy saw the first row of collapsed houses, her eyes narrowed and her breathing became rapid. Then she strode towards the first house with a vengeance.

"MOVE OUT OF THE WAY!" her amplified voice blasted. **"LEMME THROUGH!"**

Her AI was an invaluable help. It showed her just where people were trapped, where potential weaknesses in the structures were, and exactly where to grip without bringing the whole thing down on the people she was there to save. As soon as she had cleared enough debris to make reaching them easier, she'd back off and move on to the next house, leaving the delicate work to the villagers and rescue workers.

By mid-morning, Tammy had been forced to take a break. The power cell on the mecha needed switching, and she took the opportunity to scarf down a couple of nutrition bars with a bottle of water. As she climbed down from the mecha, she realized just how cold it was in this part of the world, and was glad her outfit was insulated.

After a few minutes, she settled onto the ground and leaned back against one of Hugo's legs. Her head drooped as she started to feel the fatigue from the past few hours.

"Hi!"

Tammy's head jerked up. There, standing before her, was a girl of about eight years old. She had a blanket wrapped around her against the chill. Her face was dirty, and it looked like the dress she wore was torn. But it didn't lessen the ear-to-ear smile on her face.

"You're the one!" she said. "You're the one!"

"Scuse me?"

"That's our house over there." She pointed to a collapsed building.

"You guys okay?"

"Mom got hurt, but she's okay now; she's over there with dad."

"That's terrific! My name's Tammy, what's yours?"

"Alicia Renaldi McCarthur," she recited.

"Good to meet you, Alicia."

She looked up at the *Walking Bulldozer*. "Is he yours?"

"Yeah." Tammy reached up and touched it.

Despite the fact that the mecha was quite dirty, the little girl wrapped her arms around it and gave it a grateful hug. "Thanks, Mr. Giant!"

Before she ran back to her folks, she hugged Tammy and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Sitting at the feet of her creation, Tammy Elders started crying.

"Thanks, Mom," she whispered under her breath.

Mark Eidemiller felt like a character out of a post-apocalyptic science fiction movie as he walked through the deserted streets of downtown Hailey. Everybody else was in the southern half of the village, where the quake had damaged homes and farms. Somebody needed to guard the businesses, and the big man volunteered.

North of the village was a compound of survivalists headed by one Manuel Diego. Normally, Diego's men got along quite peacefully with the people of Hailey. But it was feared that having a deserted village right at their fingertips would be too much to resist. The biggest target was *Burroughs' Hardware Store*, which carried camping supplies, building supplies, guns, ammunition, and bladed weapons.

To a group of survivalists, it would look like a smorgasbord.

Dressed in his black padded flight suit, his helmet momentarily retracted, Mark was reminded of an earlier time, when he and his best friend, Rex Amex, would take their toy guns and roam the hills and valleys of Leverich Park in Vancouver, Washington, pretending they were spies or soldiers or such. It was all good fun then. But, despite the fact that he still felt like a kid, this was serious business.

For this mission, he'd tried something new. He'd used the flight suit to reduce his body weight to half normal, and had left his cane aboard *Orion*. He'd walked the streets, checking the area out, then waited at the hardware store.

Ten minutes later, his AI announced, "Vehicle approaching. No RFID tag. Vehicle speed is in excess of local limit. Seven life signs."

"Armed?"

"Very likely."

"Okay," he sighed. "Helmet up. Directional amplifiers to plus ten." The helmet extended over his bald head, adding to his robotic appearance. Mark took a deep breath, exhaling it slowly between pursed lips. "*Showtime.*"

The pickup truck screeched around the corner.

There were three men in the cab and four more standing in the bed. Their ages ranged from eighteen to thirty-five. The ones in the bed carried shotguns, small caliber rifles, and two scoped hunting rifles; the ones in the cab could carry anything from pistols to submachine guns.

The truck slowed as they spotted Mark standing before the hardware store like some ebony automaton. The men in the back raised their weapons, and Mark's helmet picked up their confused utterances.

Mark raised his arms and spoke. "***YOU WILL STOP NOW!***" His booming voice shook the armed marauders. "***IF YOU'RE HERE TO LOOT, TURN BACK NOW AND YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED.***" He paused. "***CONTINUE ... AND DIE.***"

The truck stopped, and the four in the back and the man in the passenger seat of the cab opened fire. Their aim was good, repeatedly slamming into Mark's Paradox armor. The special polymer kept him from ending up like Swiss cheese, but the residual impacts knocked him off his feet and sent him into the reinforced glass of the hardware store. He fell forward and lay still.

"Your injuries are minor," reported the AI.

"Easy for you to say," Mark groaned within the helmet. "What are they saying?"

His speakers played back the voices of the men as they congratulated themselves on their 'kill'.

"Arrogant little smegheads, aren't they?" Mark commented to himself. "Okay, take me up."

As Mark's weight lessened, he got to his knees, then to his feet. He casually dusted the front of his armor off and smiled behind the helmet as the men in the truck went collectively silent.

"Weapons online," whispered Mark. "Target all but the driver and passenger in the middle."

Mark held his arms out before him, the fingers of his empty gloves grasping intangible pistols. But then, almost too fast for the others to follow, components emerged from the gauntlets and formed barreled weapons. Even Mark was impressed at this latest revision on Doc's signature weapons, the superfirer.

To the men in the truck, it looked like magic.

"***NOW IT'S MY TURN!***" his voice boomed.

Guided by the AI, the weapons in Mark's hands erupted in selective fire. The mercy bullets were swift and sure, and all but two of the men in the cab immediately dropped where they were, some falling out of the truck with their guns still in their hands.

It was over in seconds.

"***YOU TWO, IN THE CAB!***" he addressed, pointing both superfirers directly at the front windshield. "***TOSS YOUR WEAPONS OUT OF THE WINDOW, THEN COME OUT OF THE TRUCK WITH YOUR HANDS INTERLACED BEHIND YOUR HEADS!***"

The two men complied instantly, tossing pistols and bladed weapons clear of the vehicle. As they climbed out of the driver's side door and assumed the position, he heard one of them tell the other, "It's <bleep> Robocop!"

"Scan," Mark smirked. "Are they unarmed now?"

"Yes," responded the AI.

"Okay. Helmet down, weapons offline."

The helmet retracted into the suit, and the superfirers disappeared back into the gauntlets. Mark walked over to the truck and circled it. He kicked most of the weapons clear or unloaded them, but picked up a .45 Glock automatic. Turning it over and sighting down the barrel, he scoffed and commented, "Primitive."

He held the Glock down at his side as he approached the two men.

"***Don't kill us, man!***" one pleaded, and the other echoed his sentiment.

"Identify yourselves."

They gave their names as Street and Haraldson.

"Look," Mark casually addressed them. "First of all, your friends are not dead. They're just unconscious." He angled his head towards the bodies and took a step back. "Check them out. But please, don't try to pull a fast one on me." He pointed the Glock skyward, his finger resting on the trigger. "Do we understand each other?"

Knowing that the Glock contained live ammunition, they quickly accepted the armored man's conditions. They checked out their men. After a few seconds determining that they all had pulses, weren't bleeding, and that falling from the truck hadn't caused any injuries, they stood and faced Mark.

"Just who the hell ***are*** you, mister?" Street asked.

"My name's Mark. I'm here to stop looters from taking advantage of these good people while they're helping their friends." His expression went hard. "Now, the truth – you were here to clean

this place out, weren't you?"

"Yeah," nodded Haraldson. "We needed supplies."

Mark smiled. "Thank you for being honest. We know you've got a base nearby, and we have no intent on stepping on your turf. How hard were you hit?"

"Not bad. Mostly just shaken up," informed Street. "A couple of people hurt."

"You need a doctor?"

"No, we're good."

"You said you needed supplies. Were you straight about that?"

"Yeah," acknowledged Haraldson.

"Okay, so what do you need?"

"Huh?" said both men.

"You said you needed supplies. Now, if you're open to asking for help, I think we can do business."

"Why would you want to help us?" asked Street, disbelieving.

"Let's just say it's the Good Samaritan in me," he grinned. "As long as you keep your hands off of this village. In fact, you might just consider helping out the rest of these good people. As long as you're sincere, they'd be fools to turn you away."

The two men looked at each other. They discussed it quietly, but Mark heard every word. Then they turned to him. "You're asking a lot. We need to talk this over with Diego."

"Be my guest. But please ... don't make me regret trusting you two."

They just nodded.

"Now, what kind of supplies do you need?"

"Bonnie?"

"Yes, Mark."

"They were right about the survivalists – they tried to do a little one-stop shopping. I had to put a few of them out in order to get their attention; by the way, the superfirers worked quite well. Anyhow, they might be willing to work with us, but they'll need to discuss it with their leader first."

"Anybody hurt?"

"They said they've got a couple of injured people, but they don't need medical assistance. They *do* need supplies, however; I'm sending you the list."

Bonnie looked at the display. "I don't see any problem with this. Why don't you coordinate a rendezvous?"

"I can do that. I don't expect trouble, but false courage sometimes comes with numbers."

"Too true. We'll make sure you're covered."

**The Orion
Two days later
Afternoon**

"Virgil? It's Clark."

"Hey, Doc," the man smiled back. "Is Tammy okay?"

"Yes, she's fine. She's been busy. I just wanted to give you an update on her. You heard about the quake in Canada?"

"Yeah. It's been on TV. They said that help had come from the Foundation."

"Well, Tammy and Hugo have been very busy since we got here. She started off clearing debris from the roads coming into the towns. Then she helped in rescuing people trapped under collapsed buildings and homes. From what I heard, she was instrumental in rescuing over fifty people."

"Oh, my God! That's wonderful!"

"For a while there, she was really pushing it. I finally had to order her to stand down. She's sleeping now, but I'm sure she'll be back at it soon enough."

"That's my girl. When she was building Hugo, there were several times I caught her bent over her desk, sleeping."

"Well, she's done a great job. I haven't told her yet, but I'm convinced that her *Walking Bulldozer* would be a fabulous asset, not just for us, but for the world."

"That's great, Clark! She'll be thrilled to hear it!"

Under Orion's main dome, in addition to the houses for Clark and Bonnie, and Perry and Dot, was a natural area that encompassed one fourth of the area. It contained a grove of trees, a

manmade pond, and an actual waterfall. There were even a few birds living under the dome.

However, the sounds of nature were not alone.

Sitting on the grass, his back resting against a tree, was Mark Eidemiller. A harmonica was cupped in his hands, tilted slightly at an angle. His eyes closed, he played: mostly songs of praise and worship, classic hymns, a folk song or two, and some light improvisation.

"What'cha doin'?"

Mark's eyes burst open. Standing directly in front of him was five-year-old Jason. "Did I scare you?" the little one asked.

The older man smiled. "You took me by surprise."

"What'cha doin'?" he repeated.

"I'm playing the harmonica," he answered. "Aren't you a bit young to be around here alone."

"Yes, yes, I am. Sebastian's my baby-sitter."

Mark nodded thoughtfully. "Want to join me?"

Jason sat on the grass in front of Mark and watched curiously while the older man continued. He played a few notes, but was having a problem focusing. He lowered the instrument.

"Have you ever played a harmonica?"

"Nope. First time I've seen one."

"You've *never* seen a harmonica?" Mark asked, incredulously.

The boy shook his head, fascinated by the little instrument.

"Come on over, I'll show you," Mark invited, and Jason scooted over next to him. "This is in the key of C." Mark showed him the harmonica, explained how to make music with it, and then handed him another one that he had on the ground. "This one is in the key of G; it'll sound a little different from mine. Go ahead, try it out."

Jason held it in his tiny hands and copied Mark's movements. He squealed with glee at the first notes he made. For the next few minutes Mark tried to show him how to find a single note, and how to play a song. He chose a simple one, the classic campfire song, *Kum Bah Yah*. After a few tries, he was able to get the melody out, even though his timing was lacking. Mark was encouraging as Jason missed notes and blew too hard or drew too soft.

"Mister Mark?" he asked after finishing the song. "You got any kids?"

"No, I don't."

"How 'come?"

"It's a long story, and very complicated."

"Uncle Perry and Aunt Dot can't have kids neither."

Mark decided to change the subject. "Jason, how does it feel to be the only boy with two sisters?"

"They tease me," he pouted.

"They're probably jealous," he replied. "You're the only boy. But you've got a lot to live up to. Your daddy's a famous man. A lot of people look up to him. They probably expect a lot out of you, too."

"Yeah, they do."

"Have you thought about what you want to be when you grow up?"

He smiled. "I wanna be a scientist!"

"Like your daddy?"

His little head bobbed up and down. "I wanna make him proud 'o me!"

"You will, Jason," reassured Mark. "You most definitely will."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Three weeks earlier

On the viewpoint above Xander Sanders' villa, concealed behind some foliage, John Fleming had been observing for over three hours now.

And he hadn't learned a bloody thing.

Well, he amended, truth to tell, his surveillance hadn't been a *complete* waste.

If Sanders was indeed Tillman, he'd picked a really ludicrous place for a lair. His biggest mistake was in not capturing the high ground, leaving himself wide open to an attack from a mortar team, or at the least a sniper. His only advantage was that it was perched on the edge of a sheer cliff; besides providing an excellent view, it provided a natural barrier to access on that side.

He grimaced at the stabbing pains in his legs, the product of the previous day's SCUBA dive. *If something was odd about this villa*, he rationalized, *it would first show up where most people couldn't see it – underwater*. And that was when he had discovered an inlet in the cliff side, well

below the water line. It was covered by a steel grille, and was big enough for a man to swim through. He had tried tracking down architectural plans of that side, to see if he could learn more, but it told him nothing.

Well, not exactly nothing.

The grounds themselves carried the usual high walls with razor wire topping, iron gates, security cameras, roving patrols with attack dogs, and so on. The grounds had several buildings, but the most predominant was the large main house and a separate domed structure that appeared to be some sort of a personal observatory. There were extensive gardens and well-kept lawns.

Surrounding three-fourths of the main house was a massive terrace with a swimming pool; two bikini-clad ladies – the same two he saw with Sanders at the *Sunlight Room* – were sunning themselves at poolside. Fleming's earlier deduction about the pair being Sanders' bodyguards seemed to be confirmed by their well-toned bodies. But then – Fleming chuckled to himself – bodyguards came in all shapes and sizes, remembering a pair of Vegas man-eaters named Bambi and Thumper.

Fleming took a break from observing, and reconsidered his motives.

Could it be possible that his suspicions were wrong? Was he behaving like a Don Quixote, tilting at windmills, pursuing monsters and demons that existed only in his imagination? But then his mind kept coming back to the entry in MI6's database, saying that Tillman was 'assumed dead' in spite of everything Fleming knew to be true.

"*Mr. Fleming?*"

Fleming cursed himself for letting himself be blindsided. He rolled onto his back, looking up the man dressed in the butler's outfit, as casually as possible, said, "Yes? Is there something I can do for you?"

"I represent my employer, Mr. Xander Sanders," he identified. "He requests that you join him for coffee."

Fleming smiled. "I would be honored. Would you be so kind to lend me a hand?"

The butler helped him to his feet. He dusted himself off and tilted his head. "After you."

They walked to an electric golf cart and rode down towards the main gate. The butler opened the side gate with a small remote attached to the cart's dash. It continued through, stopping at the main doors, and the two men entered the villa. Fleming followed the butler through the house and back to the terrace, a few yards from the pool; the two female bodyguards were in the pool, seemingly oblivious to his appearance. The butler gestured to a wrought-iron table with a glass top.

"Mr. Sanders will join you in a moment," he announced, and disappeared into the house.

Fleming tried to maintain a poker face as inside he condemned himself for his stupidity. *This was a damned rookie mistake, he chastened, and now it could get me killed.*

A few minutes later, Sanders came out of the house. He reached Fleming and extended a hand in greeting. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he apologized. "My name is Xander Sanders."

"I'm aware of who you are, Mr. Sanders. How did you know who I was?"

The butler appeared, carrying a tray with an ornate coffee pot and a pair of cups and saucers; he poured two cups of coffee, then retreated.

Sanders continued, "I make it my business to know who ... *spies* on me."

"Spying?" Fleming feigned a surprised expression. "What makes you think I was spying? I was merely bird watching."

Sanders' expression was a combination of disappointment and boredom. "Come now, Mr. Fleming. You came ill equipped for ornithology. You were watching this villa."

Fleming considered. "Well, yes, I suppose it did seem that way. I mean, you do have a fine home."

"And you have been looking into me and my history."

They've been watching me, Fleming thought. He must be Tillman!

"Yes, I did look into your history. But – if you'll forgive the overused line – you reminded me of someone I knew many years ago."

"No harm in that, is there. I'm used to many people looking into my background." Sanders' mouth turned up in a thin smile. "This person I reminded you of ... was he a friend or a foe?"

"He was an old adversary," Fleming responded point-blank. "He apparently had died several years ago, but seeing you at your club a few days ago prompted me to ... snoop, I'm afraid. I meant no harm in it."

"You are forgiven, sir." He paused to take a sip of coffee. "So, Mr. Fleming, are you in the islands for business or pleasure?"

"A bit of both."

"And what if I were to tell you that your instincts were correct?" he said nonchalantly, his eyes not meeting Fleming's.

"With regards to ...?"

"About ... who you believe me to be."

Fleming jumped back from the table, separating the sword from his cane in one swift move and

swinging it towards the other man. However, as if he knew what the older man would do, Sanders intercepted the blade with the tongs of an ordinary fork, then gave it a simple twist, adding to the weakness from his earlier surveillance, and making it just enough to throw Fleming off-balance.

Pinned to the ground by the two scantily-clad bodyguards, Fleming groaned behind clenched teeth, "Tillman, you *bastard!*"

Still sitting in his chair, his legs casually crossed before him, Sanders chuckled. He clicked his tongue, and addressed Fleming like a father chastening a child. "John, John, John. When will you cease this childish behavior? We're both grown men. Had my intention been to kill you, I could've done it while you were watching me from the high ground."

"But *I* will kill *you!*" swore Fleming between clenched teeth.

"That is an empty threat, dear boy. As you can see, I'm quite well protected. Now I'm going to instruct these lovely ladies to let you up. Resisting them will only cause you more pain." With a gesture, the bodyguards climbed off of Fleming and helped him to his feet. "Now, please, have a seat. Let's chat."

Fleming knew the odds were against him. The only thing he could do is buy himself some time and look for an opportunity to kill him. With the two women standing nearby, and his cane far out of reach, he allowed himself to be assisted to his feet. He straightened his clothing and returned to his chair.

"Very well, Tillman. How did you do it?"

"Do *what?*" he replied. "Survive, or *this?*" He indicated his youthful look.

"Let's start with surviving."

"It wasn't for your lack of trying, dear boy. You very nearly got me. However, I used an old Indian fakir's trick to slow my heartbeat until my associates could spirit me away. I ended up here, where I recuperated for quite a long time."

"And the youthful look? Cosmetic surgery again?"

Tillman chuckled. "Cosmetic surgery is prehistoric next to this. Are you familiar with the field of nanotechnology?"

"They're microscopic machines capable of performing programmed tasks at the molecular level," Fleming answered without skipping a beat.

"Yes!" Tillman exclaimed. "Well, I was able to program nanobots to *re-write* my own DNA and make me as young as you see before you."

Fleming poured himself another cup of coffee. He thought about tossing the hot liquid into his nemesis' face, but a quick look out of the corner of his eye told him the bodyguards would be on

him in a heartbeat. He offered the pot to Tillman; he covered his cup, signaling that he did not want more.

"You've done a remarkable job," Fleming commented. "Nanotechnology is not easy, nor is it inexpensive. Surely you have more ... *diabolical* ... possibilities for your discovery."

"I may," he smiled beatifically. "The nanobots are capable of making the hands of time go backwards ... or *forward*."

"Rapid aging, at *your* fingertips," observed Fleming. "Extortion?"

"I *have* considered it," he said, lips turned up into a thin smile.

"And so, now that you've revealed your heinous plot, I am to be eliminated."

Sanders laughed. "Have you lost your mind, old man? Why would I want to waste my time in killing you? You and I are from a far simpler era. You will soon be leaving this world for the next, and I shall be without a suitable challenger. I would like to change that. I propose that we bury the hatchet and cooperate. As of late, I've been having problems with drug traffickers on the island. They have been making things difficult for my own people, and I would like them to be stopped. That's where *you* come in. In exchange for shaving a few *decades* from your chronological age, you take care of my problem with the drug traffickers." He paused. "What do you say?"

"I may be over seventy, Tillman," smiled Fleming. "But I assure you, I am not senile. In fact, I might just decide to *help* your drug traffickers."

Tillman gave him a sober look, his eyes narrow, his lips pursed. "I'll give you one thing, Fleming. You certainly are staunch in your beliefs. Very well. You've finished your coffee, and our business is concluded." He looked at the girls. "Please escort him from my house. Return his cane to him once he's beyond the gates."

The girls moved toward Fleming, but the man didn't rise from his chair.

"Well?" Tillman gave him a second look.

"Do you actually expect me to believe that you won't ambush me once I leave this room?"

Sanders sighed. "I can't say I'm surprised. And yet, I'm disappointed. I thought there was more to you than Queen and Country. As dangerous as you make yourself sound, you're not really a threat to me anymore. You're just an old man. I suppose I'll miss you after you're gone; I may even put flowers on your grave. But it's not in my best interest to kill you. Since I have other business to attend to, I would like you to leave." He grinned. "And, please, continue to enjoy my club; I'll even credit you a million at the casino, for old times' sake."

"And then rig the games?"

Sanders laughed. "Would you have expected less? Besides, it's the *playing*, not the winning, that

really matters."

Fleming stood and offered his elbows to the girls. "Shall we, ladies?"

The three of them walked to the front door and outside. The butler handed him his cane before the gates closed. After they were certain that Fleming was heading away from the villa, the two women returned to the terrace and approached Tillman.

"You're just letting him go?" one of them bluntly asked Tillman.

"You realize he'll report this to MI6," added the other one.

"Of course he will," Tillman smiled, walking into the house. "After all, he's a loyal secret agent. But what can they do? If anyone checks, Mr. Fleming came to my villa, joined me for a bit of light conversation over coffee, and he left. He was not harmed in any way." He paused and smiled. "But my plans for Mr. Fleming are not over yet. Summon Mr. Gamma; I have a job for him."

Fleming was suspicious – closer to paranoid – as he left the villa.

His cane had been returned to him, complete with sword, and a quick-but-thorough inspection told him that it hadn't been tampered with or altered. He wasn't followed as he returned to the *Royale*. He spent several minutes inspecting his room, thoroughly searching for bugs, tracking devices, or explosives. The fact that he found nothing out of place made him even more on edge, and he wished he had one of Special Branch's high-tech scanners. *I'm supposed to be on holiday, so why would I need something like that?* he reminded himself.

Believing himself to be safe for the moment, he fixed himself a drink and set about the task of preparing his report for MI6. His suspicions had been correct: Tillman was still alive. Through nanotechnology, he'd been able to make himself younger, and had assumed the guise of Xander Sanders, owner of *Excesses*, a resort here in the Bahamas. He was beginning to describe in detail his meeting with Tillman when his eyelids began to droop. He took a sip of his drink; the shock of the alcohol snapped him out of it. He continued. After the second try focusing on a paragraph, he rose and fixed himself something stronger. It helped for a few minutes, but he finally set it down. *Never mind*, he pressed through, *I'll finish the report and see about spending some of Mr. Tillman's credit*.

He returned to the computer, but he seemed to be moving in slow-motion. Too late, he realized he had been drugged. He cursed himself. *Was it in the drink?* he wondered, sniffing the liquor. He went to set the glass down, but his fingers didn't seem to want to cooperate. He tried standing, but his body didn't want to comply. His vision blurred, then everything went black. He didn't even feel it when his body fell out of the chair.

A few minutes later, the door to the room opened. Several men dressed all in black down to the ski masks entered the room. They were led by a giant of a man, easily six and a half feet tall. Without a sound, the men split up and went about their work.

Fleming was injected with something to keep him unconscious; his body was placed on a bed sheet, then transferred to a wheeled gurney. All around the apartment, everything that could've indicated a human presence was either cleaned, replaced, or removed. The room was sanitized in a matter of minutes, making it appear as if no one had inhabited it for days. The giant sat before the computer and silently worked at the keyboard. All of Fleming's possessions were collected and placed in an empty laundry cart. They gathered in a service elevator marked OUT OF ORDER and drove away in a nondescript service truck from the basement parking lot.

That evening, when Lily finished her shift and went to Fleming's room, she discovered that the room was vacant. A quick check at the front desk confirmed that John Fleming had checked out suddenly – so suddenly that no one actually, physically, saw him leave. Shocked that he had apparently abandoned her without so much as a 'sorry, love,' she checked to see if he was still on the island. The rented Aston-Martin DBIII was back at the rental agency, and the sailboat was at the marina with a FOR RENT sign on it. Playing a hunch, she took it out to his little island, but it, too, was deserted.

Alone in her apartment, Lily cried and pouted and finally resigned herself to the fact that John Fleming was out of her life.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The present

John Fleming woke up in the darkest corner of Paradise.

As the cobwebs started to clear from his head, his senses began to bring in valuable information about his environment. He was horizontal ... lying naked on a mattress that smelled of years of copulation mixed with an assortment of cheap scents, both male and female. His mouth felt as if he'd been rinsing with sawdust. There was the music of steel drums in the distance; *okay, so I'm probably still in the Bahamas*. The room was dark, and the absence of noise beyond the room suggested that it was nighttime. His arms moved outward from his sides, and the tips of his fingers lightly brushed against the smooth, bare arm of a young woman.

Just then, his instincts kicked in, his senses turned dark, and his smile vanished. The woman's cool arm hadn't responded to his touch, and there was a grim familiarity to the feel. He moved down to the wrist and felt for a pulse; the absence of one elicited a sharp profanity. The harsh reality of death brought his mind out of its lethargy, and he rolled off of the bed, his senses reaching out as he remembered what had happened prior to his waking in this room. *Oldest trick in the book, and I fell for it. He didn't kill me when he had the chance, because he wanted to frame me for murder*. It was a good bet the police would arrive at any moment.

Seconds passed, and nobody entered. He knew better than to let his guard down, but he needed to know who the girl was. No light came in from around the door, and the floors confirmed his conclusion that he was in a bungalow. He could waste time crawling about on the floor, or dare

to find a source of illumination. He moved around the bed to a side table, and felt a lamp. He switched on the light, and quickly became accustomed to the brightness.

The room didn't have windows, which suggested he was not in a bungalow but a room in one of the smaller motels on the island's far side that catered to locals and the occasional frugal tourist. He quickly looked at the girl, and let out a sigh of relief. She was black – not unusual for the region – and very pretty. *But it's not Lily*. A cursory examination of the body told him that she had been strangled; her final expression had been one of wide-eyed terror. He groaned; it wasn't the first time he'd seen a dead girl in his bed, but he didn't have to like it.

Now he was fully convinced that he was being set up. He needed to get dressed and get out as quickly as possible. His clothes were on the floor at the foot of the bed. As he slipped on his trousers, he noticed his reflection in the cracked mirror of the dresser across the room.

The man in the mirror was younger by several decades.

He froze as if captured in amber, and his breath caught in his throat.

"No," he said aloud, shocked. "No!"

So distracted was he with the image in the mirror, that he didn't sense the approach of the police until they actually battered in the door and flooded into the room with guns drawn.

It was on the morning of our tenth day in the Bahamas that we received the horrifying news.

Dot and I had decided on a modest breakfast in our suite, taking advantage of the abundant food provided by the resort. We were in the midst of going through our recreational options when there was a rapid knock at the door. I opened it and let Mitch in.

"Jill just got a call from the police," he said anxiously. "Cherry's dead."

Dot rushed past us and headed to the other suite. "Door's unlocked," Mitch called behind her.

"What did they tell you?" I asked.

"I only know what Jill told me, which is very little. It looks like she may have been murdered."

"Oh my God," I muttered.

"**Guys!**" It was Dot.

We quickly crossed the hall; the door was open. Jill was standing there crying, while Dot comforted her. When she had pulled herself together long enough to talk, she explained. "The other girls said that Cherry went out for a cigarette break about a half hour after the last show, and never came back; she didn't take her cell phone with her. The police said that her body was found in a cheap motel on the far side of the island, apparently along with the man who killed her."

"So they caught the guy?" I asked.

"Yes. They want me to come down and identify the body. I can't do this alone."

"We'll all go," Dot promised.

We arrived at the police station around 9:00.

We checked in and were met by Lieutenant Luke Darnell. He was a tall, brown-skinned man in his late 30's. He instructed Jill to follow him. The rest of us wanted to go – if anything, for moral support – but Jill reassured us she'd be okay going in alone. So while she was gone, the rest of us sat on a bench and covered her in prayer.

I could see that Mitch wasn't taking this well. It was understandable. He had lived a life of violence and justice-anyway-you-can-get-it. It had to be a struggle not to take matters into his own hands, but leave it up to God's justice. Finally he said, "I'm going to see if I can get in to see the guy that did this."

"Are you sure that's such a wise move?" I asked.

"I promise, I won't kill him," he reassured us. I didn't believe him, but I couldn't stop him. All I could do was pray his word was good.

"Who's in charge here?"

A uniformed policeman turned to face the black man. "I am. And you are –?"

Mitch brought out a leather ID wallet and flipped it open in one swift, professional, move.
"Mitchell Drake. NSA."

"What can I do for you, Agent Drake?" the man responded, impressed.

"Your prisoner – the one who was found with the dead girl. What can you tell me about him?"

The policeman retrieved a clipboard. "He keeps claiming he was framed."

"What's his name?"

"Fleming ... John Fleming."

Drake blinked. *John Fleming?* "I need to see him."

"I can't take you into the cell block, sir, even with your credentials," the policeman explained.
"But you can see him from the observation room. This way."

They went down a hallway, and took a turn into a darkened room. Light filtered in through a pane of one-way glass. "He's in cell four. Right there." He pointed.

The cells were simple, containing only a cot, a sink, and a toilet. The prisoner was laying on his back on the cot; it was doubtful that he was sleeping. Drake stood there a few moments, hoping to get a better look at the man's face. Then, on impulse, he tapped on the window. The man on the cot tilted his head up to look right at the glass – and Drake recognized him. *It's him! This man's a British agent. I worked with him on several occasions early in my career! But this man – how can he look so young? Could he be the son of the man I once knew? With the same name? Couldn't be. I need to know more.*

The policeman read Mitch's expression. "Do you know this man?"

"No," he lied. "I thought I did, but I was mistaken. When is he scheduled for trial?"

"We're still examining the evidence. It shouldn't be more than a couple of days. But the evidence is overwhelming."

Drake nodded. "Thank you."

It hadn't taken Jill long to identify Cherry, and she was sitting between me and Dot on the bench. Dot held her as she cried.

I saw Mitch; he was gesturing for me to join him. I excused myself.

"That man – I know him!" he whispered anxiously. "If he is who I think he is, he's a British intelligence agent – or, at least, he *used* to be. But something is very bizarre here." He paused; I could see the desperation in his eyes. "I need to talk to him privately!"

"What does it take to get from here to there?" I probed.

Mitch outlined the corridors and doors before reaching the cellblock. Afterward, I smiled. "On that, I think I can help you. The ring is working."

"Since when?"

"A couple of weeks ago," I informed him, looking around at our surroundings. "We're going to need a diversion."

Mitch looked over at the ladies on the bench. "I need to talk to Jill."

While Perry talked to Dot about distracting the police, Mitch took Jill outside. He held her and comforted her as she told him about identifying the body.

"I've seen dead bodies before," Jill admitted. "Of friends, of people I worked with, fought alongside. I don't know why I'm falling apart right now."

He held her close. "I think I may know the guy they caught. If it's him, he could never do something like this."

"But they caught him next to her body!"

"I know. That's why I need to get in there and talk to him."

"How?"

"Perry. He can become invisible again. He can smuggle me in. Dot's going to distract them while we make our move. But I didn't want to do anything without telling you first."

She was quiet.

"Talk to me, babe," he gently prodded.

Jill sighed. "Let's get this over with." She didn't sound very enthusiastic.

He kissed her. "I love you," he sighed.

"Let's do this before I change my mind."

"Okay, let's do this," Mitch announced.

"What do you want us to do?" added Jill.

"Us?" I repeated.

Our friend's eyes were intense, her expression hard. "I can't just stand by and watch, okay?"

I nodded and turned to my wife.

"It'll work better with the two of us," commented Dot, taking Jill's hand. "Follow my lead."

As the two of them moved away from us, Mitch and I subtly headed in the direction of the door leading to the cellblock. Suddenly, Jill erupted into hysterical tears, instantly turning all heads in her direction. As they did, I made myself invisible, and extended the aura around Mitch.

"*Wild*," he whispered at the experience.

I shushed him. "*Let's go.*"

Moving in unison, we made our way into the corridor to the cell blocks. Mitch nudged me to the right. "*Number four.*"

Standing in front of the cell, Mitch addressed, "*John? John Fleming?*"

The man on the cot looked around for the source. "Who's there?"

"Who are *you*, agent?"

"I'm saying nothing until I know who's talking to me!"

"Do you recognize the name Mitchell Drake?"

"Drake? Yeah. Black guy, worked for the CIA back in the 70's."

"*The monkey is blue.*"

Fleming had to think a moment. Then he said, "*The bananas are red.*"

Mitch turned to me. "Lemme out."

I withdrew the aura from around him, making him visible to the surprised man in the cell.

"Drake?" he asked, hesitatingly.

"Yes, John, it's me. What the hell is going on?"

"Never mind that – how did you do that?"

"Later," Mitch shot back. "We don't have time to waste. What happened?"

"I was framed is what happened! It's that bastard, Tillman!"

"But you killed him years ago."

"So I assumed. But he's alive, and he's made himself younger like this." He gave a short, bitter laugh. "He's been here on the island all these years. He's calling himself Xander Sanders. He runs a resort on the island."

"*Excesses*," provided Mitch. "I know the place. That's where I'm staying. I'm on vacation."

"So why are you *here*?"

"My lady's singing at *Excesses*. The murdered girl was one of her backup singers."

Fleming cursed. "I'm sorry, Mitch. I swear, I never saw her before."

Mitch nodded. "I believe you." He changed the subject. "Are you still with MI6?"

"Officially, I don't know. I've been out of contact for two weeks. I can only assume they believe I've turned, and have disavowed me."

"Have you *tried* contacting them?"

"No," he said resolutely. "The last time I returned after being missing for any length of time, I tried to kill M with a cyanide gun. Besides, how would it look? I'm missing for two weeks. When I finally surface, I'm forty years younger. If they check their records, they'll find that the last thing I was working on was research on a man I was *supposed* to have killed. The only conclusion they can make is that I defected, then Tillman paid me off by making me younger." He paused. "Doesn't look very promising, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," agreed Mitch. "Why didn't you let MI6 know you were doing research on Tillman?"

"I wasn't sure it was him, and I didn't want to drag them in if it was a wild goose chase." He let out a tired sigh. "So, you see, I'm all alone."

"You're *hardly* alone, my old friend."

"You still with the Company?"

"Nope," he smiled. "Lots better. Now, relax; we'll have you out in no time. Then we'll go after Tillman." He looked back. "Perry, let's go."

Fleming looked around. "Who are you talking to?"

Mitch smiled as I tapped him on the back. "A friend."

I wrapped Mitch in the invisibility aura, causing him to disappear before Fleming.

"Keep the faith, John," encouraged Mitch's disembodied voice.

We made our way from the cellblock to the privacy of the men's' room, where we became visible.

"Perry," Mitch said. "For the moment, let's not mention the thing with Sanders to Jill – not until we can confirm things."

"I agree. I'll check my sources, and you check yours."

We left the men's' room and rejoined the ladies. We stepped outside.

"What did you find out?" Jill asked.

"I was right," Mitch said thoughtfully. "The man in there is a friend of mine; his name is John Fleming, and he's with British Intelligence. He swears he was framed, and I believe him. I want to see if we can post bail for him."

"Are you sure?" asked Jill.

"Yes," he replied resolutely. "I'll be right back."

Mitch quickly pivoted and headed back to the police station.

Jill turned to me. "What do you think? Is this guy innocent?"

"Gut feeling? Yeah."

"Does he know who framed him?"

"He has his suspicions, but we need to check them out first."

Mitch returned. "They won't post bail for the crime he's accused of," he informed us. "He's going to trial."

"I was afraid of that," Dot commented. "He's going to need a lawyer. I'm going to call my Uncle Hamilton."

"Do you think he can help us?"

"Oh, yes."

"I've got to get back to the hotel," Jill informed us, trying to focus. "There's so much that needs to be done. I've got to break the news to Alex and Phyllis; they're waiting for me. Then there are arrangements to be made. I know Cherry didn't have any kin, but ... was she seeing anyone? Did she have a will? And –" She let out a sharp profanity. "– the *show*! What are we gonna do about tonight's show?"

Mitch wrapped her up in his arms as she began to hyperventilate. "Don't worry about it, babe," he soothed. "We'll get it taken care of."

I touched Mitch on the shoulder and said, "I'm going to update your friend."

He nodded, and I returned to the police station. Invisible, I slipped into the cellblock.

"*Mr. Fleming*," I said softly. "Please don't look up. I'm a friend of Mitch's. We're unable to get you out on bail, but we're going to secure an excellent criminal attorney."

"Thank you," he whispered back, glancing in my direction. "Wait! *Where* are you? *Who* are you?"

"Where I am is not important, sir. And my name is Perry."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The four of us returned to *Excesses*.

Almost as soon as the taxi dropped us off, we separated. Jill told us she was heading to the girls' room to break the news to Phyllis and Alex.

"You want us to come along?" asked Dot.

Not really paying attention, she shook her head. "No. This is something I have to do alone."

"We'll be praying for you," I added as she walked away.

As we headed up in the elevator, Dot suddenly asked me, "You okay?"

"Huh?"

"You're acting strange."

She probably spotted the apprehension in my attitude, knowing what I did now about this place and the man who owned it.

"I'm fine. Just thinking."

She nodded. The elevator opened and we headed to our suites. Mitch looked determined, and I wasn't about to interrupt that.

As soon as we got in the room, we prayed, and I hugged my wife.

"Hon," I said softly. "I need to talk to you."

We moved over to the couch.

"Do you remember when I said that Fleming had his suspicions as to who had framed him?"

"It's more than just a suspicion," she concluded.

"He gave us a name."

"Who?"

"Xander Sanders."

Her eyes went wide. "*Our* Xander Sanders?"

I nodded. "According to Mitch, he's actually some kind of international criminal mastermind. Fleming's been after him for years ... thought he'd killed him, too, but he wasn't dead. Anyhow, it looks like Sanders made himself young somehow, and did the same to Fleming."

"Why would he do that to his enemy?"

I shrugged. "I haven't a clue. Anyhow, now you can see why we held back on that little detail."

"The way Jill was feeling? This could've pushed her off the edge."

"Mitch and I are going to research Sanders and this Tillman guy. He'll check his sources, I'll check ours. Then we'll get together tomorrow and compare notes."

"And if Sanders *is* Tillman?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Guess we'll deal with that when we come to it."

She hugged me again. "I better call Uncle Ham."

While Dot called Hamilton, I stepped onto the balcony and called *Orion*. When I finished, I returned to the front room. Dot was sitting on the couch.

"Is Ham going to take the case?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "But he's not going to be able to break away until late tomorrow."

"Better than nothing."

"And you?"

"I talked to Bonnie and told her what happened. She knew Cherry, so she's a bit shaken up from the news."

Dot grimaced. "Did you have a chance to talk to Doc or Granddad?"

"They were busy. *Orion's* en route to Indonesia."

Just then, Mitch came to our room.

"I made contact with base," he informed us. "I ordered research on Tillman, Sanders, and Fleming."

"Fleming?" Dot repeated.

"Makes sense," I agreed. "Fleming told us that, given the circumstances of his 'disappearance', MI6 would disavow all knowledge of him."

"And I want to confirm that," finished Drake. "Just to cover all the bases. How 'bout you?"

"I gave *Orion* the basic facts of the matter and requested the research. I hadn't considered researching Fleming."

"It's okay," Mitch shrugged. "I think we've got it covered."

"I got ahold of Uncle Ham," Dot informed. "He won't be available until late tomorrow." She

paused. "Have you seen Jill since we got back?"

"No. But, considering what she has to take care of, I'm letting her have all the time she needs."

In another part of the resort, Jill approached Mr. Hedges, the floor manager. She informed him of what had happened to Cherry Pratt.

Mr. Hedges was shocked. "I'm so sorry, Ms. Van Allen! Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes, you can. It's about tonight's show ..."

"Oh, don't worry about that!" he interrupted. "You're not under any obligation to finish your run, and I'm sure Mr. Sanders will be willing to pay for your full time!"

Jill held up her hands. "No, no – you don't understand! We *want* to go on tonight!"

"Excuse me?"

"We're going to finish our run; we *have* to. Cherry would've wanted it this way, and we're doing it in her honor."

Mr. Hedges' jaw dropped. Finally, he said, "Why, I'm astonished, Ms. Van Allen. But, of course ... I'll see to it personally."

That evening, *Zenith* went on as usual with their show.

Jill had told us what had happened, and we sat at our usual table, quietly waiting and praying. The stage was darkened. Then someone approached the microphone. It was obviously a man, but his face was shrouded in shadow. Anticipating the show, the audience hushed. Then the man gestured, and the spotlights on the stage came up. We were floored to see that the man was Xander Sanders himself!

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he identified himself. "My name is Xander Sanders, and I am your humble host. I usually don't introduce acts in my casino, but this one is ... special. Last night, one of the backup singers was tragically murdered by a homicidal maniac who was caught and now awaits trial. Under such circumstances, I would be quick to excuse these artists from having to perform. But they refused my offer. They informed me that they would continue, and the show would be dedicated to the memory of their fellow singer. I felt it was only fitting that I inform you of this marvelous act of compassion and honor. They only request that they be given leeway if their voices happen to falter. It is now with great pride do I introduce to you ... *Zenith!*"

As Sanders backed off the stage and Jill, Phyllis, and Alex moved into the spotlights, the audience stood and applauded. With mixed emotions, we joined them. A few seconds later, the

opening notes of their first song rang out, and the girls started singing. The applause tapered off and the audience sat to enjoy the show. Jill had told us ahead of time that they would be doing a couple of new numbers that Cherry had especially been fond of. Apart from one moment when Phyllis' voice cracked during a chorus, the performance went off extremely well. And it surprised everybody as they received a second standing ovation during the first show. Sanders didn't appear at the other evening show, but the word had gotten out.

When they were finished for the night, we joined them back in the dressing room. They collapsed in each others arms, both elated and drained. We congratulated them all, and escorted them back to their rooms. There were no after-show celebrations; the mood was sober and respectful.

The next morning, after breakfast, Mitch visited us. "I didn't want Jill to walk in on us, so I thought I'd come over here instead. I got the information."

"Same here," I replied. "Have a seat."

We set up both computers on the dining room table. "Go ahead," Mitch directed. "Do you have any coffee in your pantry?"

"Second shelf," answered Dot. "Sit ... I'll take care of it."

"Thanks." He joined me at the table.

I started reading. "Xander Charles Sanders. Born, September 12, 1973. Parents, Benjamin and Olivia Sanders. Mother died from cancer in 1983. Father died in an industrial accident in 2005. Educated around the world – Paris, Vienna, England. After the parents died, Xander inherited the family fortune. He did well following in his father's footsteps in business. In 2006 Xander moved to the Bahamas, and in 2010 began work on *Excesses*. He's not exactly a recluse or a party-all-night playboy, but he's somewhere in the middle." I paused. "How'd you do?"

"My sources came up with a few more details, but yours is a good summary. What about Tillman?"

I switched files. "Ernest Richard Tillman. Born, August 15, 1922. Parents unknown, believed to be a Polish father and a Greek mother in Germany. Schooled at the University of Warsaw where he studied economics and political history, and then the Warsaw University of Technology to study engineering and electronics. He was involved in espionage for the Nazis during World War II, but escaped the Nuremberg Trials by fleeing to Argentina. He worked within several espionage organizations. Assumed killed in 1993."

"According to my research," added Mitch. "Fleming and Tillman go way back together. Tillman attacked Fleming and his bride Tracy shortly after their wedding; she was killed."

"Blood feud," I commented.

"Sounds like obsession," added Dot, bringing Mitch the coffee.

"Yeah, that pretty much covers it. Now, from what I understand, this Tillman character had a habit of creating surgically-identical doubles of himself to act as decoys and sitting ducks for Fleming to shoot at."

"Not exactly a job with a future, is it?" I quipped sarcastically.

"No," Mitch agreed. "Fleming took time away from MI6, and it was rumored he went around the world eliminating all of Tillman's doubles until the only one remained. In 1993, he finally got Tillman ... supposedly. The records aren't clear. Considering all, I can't picture Fleming giving up until he'd turned Tillman into a charred corpse."

"The first rule of every slasher movie," Dot commented. "Never turn your back on the monster even when he *looks* dead."

Drake worked in silence for a few seconds. He pulled up a picture of Sanders, then processed it through a facial-recognition program, comparing it to pictures of Tillman. When the program was complete, it declared that there was a 99.3% possibility that the two men were the same person.

"Short of a confession, I think that settles it," Mitch concluded. "Sanders is Tillman."

Just then we heard a knock at the door. Dot went to answer it as Mitch and I hid our findings.

"So *here's* where you are?" she said. "Figures." She came into our suite. "We just got done putting Cherry's stuff away. We just put it back in her bag. I don't know what we're going to do with it." She suddenly stopped, cocked her head to one side, and looked at the two of us sitting at the table. "What's going on?" she asked suspiciously.

"What makes you think something's going on?" Mitch said innocently.

"You both have your computers out. And you look like you're hiding the cheese from the cat."

I couldn't say anything. We hadn't prepared a cover story in case of this.

"You're right," Mitch said. "We're working on some research. Come on over and have a seat."

She did.

"Remember when I talked to John Fleming? At the time I said that he had his suspicions as to who was responsible, but didn't know for sure? Well, that's not quite true. He told me who he suspected as being responsible. But you may not like the answer."

"Why? Who is it?"

We showed her our screens.

"Xander?" she identified.

"Actually, his real name is Tillman. Ernest Richard Tillman. And, to put it simply, he's a criminal mastermind, with a history going back decades."

"You must be joking. He's a nice man."

"Both of us checked our respective sources," I informed her. "We came up with the same conclusions. We can show you."

"Yeah," she said defiantly. "Show me!"

She sat there, quiet, as we went through our evidence again. Once we were done, Mitch reached out and put his hand on hers. "I'm sorry to hit you like this."

"Wait a minute," she suddenly said. "That can't be right! Tillman was born in 1922, and Sanders was born in 1973. That's a 51-year gap. And yet they look identical. Could it be that they're two different people?"

"We thought that, too," answered Mitch. "Let me bring up a couple of pictures." He tapped and dragged on the PADD, and brought up two pictures side-by-side. "The picture on the left was a recent picture of John Fleming, taken from MI6's database. The picture on the right was also taken from MI6's database, of John Fleming taken back in the early 70's." He paused. "When I saw John in the cell, he looked like the picture on the right. I also used an old sign/countersign that would be nonsense to anyone *but* the John Fleming I used to know. And he remembered it. As odd as it is, he looks considerably younger. And he said that Tillman was younger, too. I suspect he made Fleming younger to discredit him with MI6."

"So," Jill said thoughtfully. "You're saying that Cherry was ..." She couldn't get the word 'murdered' out. "... just so Tillman could frame your friend? That there was no meaning to it, that she was just picked at random?" It was a rhetorical question; we all knew the answer to it. Her breathing became more rapid, and she started pacing the suite. "You know, it really *pisses* me off that someone used one of *my girls* in that way!"

"So what do we do about this?" I posed.

"He needs to be brought to justice," answered Mitch.

"*No*," countered Jill. "I'm not going to see him taken before some World Court like an ex-Nazi, and get off on a technicality! Besides, what evidence do we have that could prove such a thing to any court?"

"Do you have another suggestion?" asked Dot.

"Yes, I do. Terminate the son of a bitch," Jill said without hesitation. "An eye for an eye."

"I don't blame you," added Mitch. "But, again, unless we have definite proof of his identity, we'd be no more than murderers."

"So how do we get the proof?" I queried. "Mitch, why not contact MI6? After all, Fleming *is* one

of theirs."

"*Was*. I checked. When I asked what his current status was, they told me he no longer worked for MI6. He's been off the radar for two weeks without checking in, he appears to be fifty years younger than he is supposed to be, *and* he's been accused of murder. Too much spotlight for a so-called 'secret' agent." He paused. "That's SOP for them, and only the highest brass would know otherwise."

"But there's an explanation for why he's fifty years younger."

Mitch nodded. "And for the four of us, who are familiar with the bizarre, it's par for the course. But MI6 isn't used to this kinda activity."

"Okay," I understood. "But you're the boss of *Thunderhead*. Why don't you have your people do something?"

"What, like order an air strike? It wouldn't help. No, I think it's best to sit tight and see what happens. Besides, Hamilton's coming, and I'd say he's the best thing for Fleming from a legal standpoint." He paused. "What about calling your side? See if Doc could help."

"They're in Indonesia," I dismissed. "I'll let them know what happened, but I don't think they can do anything but back us in prayer." I paused. "Okay, so then we're on our own. So how do we get sufficient evidence on this creep?"

"How about *Excesses*?" offered Dot. "Sanders might have a private office."

"I might be able to sneak in there," I added. "But I don't have the equipment if he's got a safe or a secure computer."

"He's got a villa a few miles from here," informed Mitch. "Security might be more lax. But how to get inside?"

The suite had a small wet bar; Dot and I didn't need it. Without hesitation, Jill went over to it and poured herself a drink. Then she walked out onto the balcony while the rest of us watched and waited. After a few minutes, the drink half gone, she came back into the suite. "I think I have an idea. What if I go to Sanders and tell him about our new backup singer?"

"What new backup singer?" I asked.

She smiled and looked at Dot. "*You*."

Dot reacted. "*Me*?"

Jill nodded. "We could visit Sanders at his villa. I can explain that you're a friend of mine, visiting on the island, and that you're willing to be a backup singer for the rest of our run. I'll want to talk to him directly to ask his permission. While we're talking to him, Perry checks the place out."

"It sounds dangerous," Mitch muttered. "I'm going along; we can say I'm your fiancée."

"What if he recognizes you as an intelligence agent?" I asked.

He narrowed his eyes. "I'll take that chance. Jill?"

"Okay," she agreed. "Dot, you in?"

Dot looked over at me. I nodded. "We're in," she said.

"I'll talk to Mr. Hedges, the floor manager. I'll make the suggestion to him, then ask to talk to Mr. Sanders directly."

"Yeah, but what if Sanders is in his office?" asked Dot.

Jill looked at Perry. "You sneak in behind us. It'll give you a chance to look around the office, maybe peek over his shoulder and get whatever information you can." She shrugged. "What can I say? We're making this up as we go."

Later that day, Jill went to the floor manager.

"Mr. Hedges, we need to finish this run – for Cherry's sake. And I have an idea. A friend of mine is here on the island. She's not a half-bad singer. Would you allow her to take Cherry's place for the rest of the gig?"

"Even in your unusual circumstances, that's highly unorthodox."

"If I may be so bold, I could bring her to Mr. Sanders' villa and he could hear us sing. Then if she meets with his acceptance, she could finish the gig with us."

He was hesitant, but finally said, "I'll take this to Mr. Sanders."

Jill returned to Mitch's suite, where she drank sparingly from the bar while the others prayed in the living room. It was unusual to see Mitch on his knees in prayer; she wanted to talk to him about it, but kept her tongue. Eventually, she had to join the girls for the evening's performance. Before they began, however, Mr. Hedges came to her and informed her that Mr. Sanders would be open to hearing her at his villa. "Be there at 9:00 am."

**The next day
8:55 am**

The taxi pulled up in front of the Sanders villa. The security cameras picked up three people – one man and two women – leaving the vehicle. As they headed for the main gate, an invisible Perry tapped Mitch twice on the shoulder; he'd been invisible from the moment they left their

suites, in order to avoid all surveillance. At the front gate, they introduced themselves through the intercom; a moment later the gate opened and they walked to the front door. A butler let them into the house and escorted them to the library.

"Mr. Sanders will join you soon," the butler said.

He left the room and the others wandered about. The library was impressive, with twin ladders on rails to be able to reach the many high shelves. Mitch's trained eyes – more attentive due to the circumstances – spotted the cleverly-hidden surveillance cameras, and hoped there wasn't anything that could sense Perry's invisible form. Dot talked with Jill, then they both took seats on an antique couch.

A couple of minutes passed, then Xander Sanders entered the library. He wore a smoking jacket, and carried a cigarette in a long holder. He went straight to Jill and took her hand.

"Ms. Van Allen," he addressed her. "How are you and your girls doing?"

Jill was good, holding in the violent feelings against this man. "As well as can be expected, thank you. This is my fiancée, Mitchell Drake. And *this* is the one I was telling you about – Dorothy Liston."

Dot stood and offered a hand. "Please, call me Dot."

Sanders took a seat in an upright chair and took a puff of the cigarette. "So, let's hear how you sound ..."

That was my cue.

Since the library door didn't make any noise when we entered, I slipped out of the library without making a sound. Pausing momentarily to pray for a direction, I found some stone steps and started down.

Many years ago, before I became a Christian, I played Dungeons and Dragons with some friends of mine who owned a comic book store. We'd get together late on weekends and play in their closed store. It made for an interesting location, and it was fun. As I went down into the depths of this villa, it reminded me of some of those fictitious locations. The walls were made of stone, and it didn't seem to be well-heated. I half-expected to find flaming torches on the walls along the way, and the sound of chains rattling from shackled prisoners, but it wasn't so. The lights on the ceiling were modern energy-efficient bulbs, and there were no rattling chains.

There wasn't a lot of people down here either, which was to my advantage.

I went down several levels. Each level contained a corridor. Branching off of each corridor was one or more rooms of varying sizes. And here's where the D&D similarity ended. There were a number of laboratories down here, with equipment that would've been more comfortable in a science-fiction movie.

It made me wonder why would Xander Sanders have such equipment. But the answer wasn't hard to figure out. If Sanders was some kind of super-criminal, and this place was his secret lair, then this all made sense.

I poked my head into another laboratory. It was full of electronic equipment, almost like it was taken from a Borg ship. Off to one side was a very tall man – taller than Clark – dressed in a dark suit and tie. I slipped into the room, keeping my breathing slow and shallow, hoping not to be detected; he didn't seem to notice. He moved away from where he was standing, and began to slowly walk about the room. Suddenly he stiffened, turned, and looked straight at me. I had not done anything to give myself away, but he started moving towards me.

I glanced towards the door, wondering if I could get there before he could. But before I could try, he cleared the distance between the two of us and grabbed me by the throat.

"You are invisible," he declared almost conversationally. "You will become visible now, or I will kill you." He tightened his grip around my throat, and I knew he meant business. I complied, and became visible.

He released his hold around my throat, but put a firm grip around my arm. He directed me upstairs and back to the library.

"How did you know I was invisible?" I asked out of curiosity.

In a monotone that reminded me of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the first *Terminator* movie, he answered, "I saw you."

As soon as the two of us entered the library, and the others saw me in, we knew our plan had failed, and we were in serious trouble.

"This one was spying below," the big man reported to Sanders. "He had made himself invisible. He is the husband to this one." He indicated Dot.

"Thank you, Mr. Gamma," Sanders addressed. "Well, this is all *very* interesting." He stood and took a casual pose. "Now, what am I going to do with you?"

The giant released my arm, and I moved over to Dot. "Are you okay?" she asked me. "Yes," I replied, although my neck *did* hurt. I just didn't want to worry Dot.

Sanders finally spoke. "I'll be right back. Mr. Gamma, please keep them covered." He turned to us. "Please do not make any attempt to escape. Mr. Gamma is quite capable of inflicting *considerable* pain."

Then he left the room. Gamma stood like a sentry, silently watching us.

Mitch turned to me. "What happened?"

"I was poking around downstairs. He spotted me."

"Spotted you?" the black man whispered. "Weren't you ...?"

"Yes. I don't know how, but he saw me. Even told me I was invisible. Threatened to kill me if I didn't become visible. Then we came here."

We remained silent for a couple of minutes. Mitch was looking our captor over; I had a bad feeling that he was going to try making a move on him. I started reaching for his arm to hold him back, but I was too late. The man wasn't more than a dozen feet from us. Mitch suddenly put on a burst of speed, intending to tackle the giant. But the other man was faster – much faster. With almost embarrassing ease, he pivoted out of Mitch's way, then brought down a mallet of a fist on Mitch's back, sending him crashing to the ground.

He didn't move.

We rushed over to him and helped him over to a chair. He groaned and muttered several profanities. When he'd regained his senses, he apologized for his language.

Mr. Gamma had not budged. When he knew he had our attention, he declared without emotion, "Next time you die."

The door to the library opened. Sanders led the way, followed by his butler, and a half-dozen hoods with baseball bats. Sanders gestured towards something the butler was carrying; it was a silver tray, with four crystal glasses of a clear liquid, and an equal number of ominous black capsules.

"I offer you a choice," Sanders addressed us. "Take the capsules and become unconscious, or my men will use their baseball bats to achieve the same result. You will decide now."

Talk about the lesser of two evils. I looked at my wife. I did not want her injured in any way. But not knowing what was in the glasses or the capsules was truly torture. At least with baseball bats, you knew what damage it would do. Not so with the capsules. At the very least the capsules would do as Sanders had said, and render us unconscious. However with everything we had seen and knew and suspected about Sanders, it would not be logical for him just to knock us out and let us go.

This wasn't the first time I had faced death. But I feared that this would be the last time. I knew death wasn't the final stop, but was just a transition into God's kingdom. But I had more to be concerned about. I prayed that God would show mercy on Jill, forgive her and take her home with the rest of us.

Then I took a step towards the butler, took one of the glasses and one of the black capsules, and smelled the liquid in the glass. Then I took a sip. "'Water," I reported. "Chilled."

One by one, we removed the items on the tray.

I looked at Sanders with suspicious eyes; he returned my glance with nonchalance. I looked around at my friends. Mitch was the first one to put the capsule into his mouth and drink the

contents of the glass. I was next, followed by Dot and Jill. The butler held out the silver tray, and we returned the crystal glasses to it.

"You have made a wise choice," Sanders commented. "You will feel sleepy in a very few seconds. You may wish to sit or lie down."

"And then what?" asked Mitch. "You kill us?"

Sanders' gave us an amused look. "You will be taken a few miles from here. The pills are to make sure you don't resist. Do not return here."

I assisted Dot to one of the chairs. Before I lowered her down, I held her in my arms. "I love you," I whispered. "I'll see you on the other side."

When she went limp, I reached out and checked her wrist. Inwardly, I rejoiced at finding a pulse. Mitch guided Jill over to the couch, then both succumbed to the capsules.

I was amazed that I was the last one standing, so to speak. But I knew I didn't have long. I met Sanders' eyes, smiled, and said, "I'll be back."

Then I sat down on the ground at the feet of my wife, and gave into the blackness.

I could see light, although I couldn't make out any details.

The first thing that came to my mind was, *I'm alive, thank God*. I took in a deep breath, and felt a few aches and pains that hadn't been there before.

"Perry?"

My spirits soared. "Dot?"

"Perry!" she returned; she was off to my right. I twisted my body to sit up. "Mitch? Jill?"

"Yeah, I'm here!" groaned Mitch. "But I can't see worth beans."

"Same here," chimed in Jill.

"Must've been a side effect from that stuff they gave us," replied Mitch. "Where are we?"

"Don't know," I answered. "I can't hear anything around us. Smells like grass, or dirt."

"Hey, my vision's starting to get better!" declared Dot. "We're on a dirt road ... some hills around us. No buildings ... nothing."

"My cell phone is missing," reported Mitch. "My wallet, too!"

I checked my possessions. My wedding ring and my uncle's ring – my only connection to invisibility – were both gone.

"They cleaned us out," commented Jill. "They wanted us to look like mugging victims."

I got to my feet. The others were standing also, checking themselves out. I went over to Dot and held her close. "I was so afraid ... " She cut my words off with a deep kiss.

"I don't see any familiar landmarks," Mitch indicated, looking about.

I moaned, "I really wish I hadn't had you take that subcutaneous transceiver out of my head."

He put a comforting hand on my back. "Too late now, partner. At least we're alive. But what I'm trying to figure out is *why*?"

That was a good question, and I said so.

"If they left us alive," he continued. "Maybe it's because we don't pose a threat to them ... or we're not going to be around long."

"You really know how to inspire confidence, sweetheart," muttered Jill.

"Sorry," Mitch apologized. "We need to find a way of contacting the outside ... *then* I'll order that airstrike."

"So let's get walking. Which way?"

Dot looked up at the sun's position in the sky. "West ... that way."

Nobody had any objections, so we followed the road westward.

We walked. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes. I was in the lead, but I knew the others weren't far behind me. I was feeling the aches and pains that had hit me when I came out of the pill's effects. I didn't know what they had done to me ... to us ... but it made walking a painful task. I thought of Mark, the way that he walked on neuropathetic legs; I wished I had one of his canes, or at least a walking stick. No such. So I pressed on.

Suddenly I heard two things simultaneously. Mitch calling my name. And Dot's scream.

I turned around. The others were farther back than I had thought. And Dot was on her knees, bent over, her hands pressed to the sides of her head. I rushed back to her as fast as I could, feeling pain with every step. I glanced to my right; Mitch was bent over, and Jill was trying to support him. I dropped to my own knees, regretting the pain of my action, but not letting on. I put my hands on Dot's shoulders and pulled her close to me. I didn't notice the fact that her brown hair had touches of grey through it.

"What is it?" I asked Dot softly. "Is it the migraines?"

"No ... not migraines," she replied through tightly clenched eyes. "Brain ... tumors ..."

I paused. *Had I heard her right?* "What? Did ... you say brain tumors?"

As I held her close, I felt her head nodding against my chest.

"How long?"

"Weeks," she said under her breath.

"Does Diane know?"

Again, she nodded.

"Is there anything she can do? Anything you can take?"

"Back ... at ... room."

"Is there a doctor –"

Her head raised and her eyes seemed to burn into mine. "*It's ... terminal,*" she said in a pained whisper, then her head buried itself back into my shoulder.

I was dumbfounded. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Dot ... dying?

I heard Mitch groan loudly, and turned to look at him. He was massaging his hip, pain mirrored in his face. He looked differently; so had Jill. Their black hair looked like it had been dusted with salt.

What in God's name was going on? I prayed. And I heard within my head a couple of verses from the book of Isaiah: *'Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all you who remain of the house of Israel, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.'*

"We're getting older," I stated the obvious. "Mitch! Jill! We're getting older! We need to get help!"

I moved my hands to my wife's shoulders. "Hon! We've got to get moving! If we stay here, we'll die of old age! I know you can do it, hon – come on!" I forced myself to stand, putting the increasing pain aside, helping Dot to her feet.

"What?" asked Jill. "How are we getting older?"

"The capsules!" exclaimed Mitch. "Fleming said Tillman made him younger! Why couldn't he make someone else older?"

"The deaths in Hollywood!" hollered Jill. "Two girls – teenage actresses – died mysteriously! There were rumors that they died *of sudden old age!*"

"How long did it take?" I probed.

She thought about it. "Not long. Within a half an hour."

"We might still have time!" I blurted, my heart pounding. "We've got to get to a hospital! If they can put us into stasis, and get a message to *Orion*, they can find a cure!"

"Yes," agreed Mitch, pressing through his own pain. "Yes!"

"But which direction?" asked Jill, starting to panic. "***Which direction!***"

"*Direction*," I repeated. "Mitch, Dot – ***prayer!***"

Mitch's head came up. The light had come on in his head, too. He shuffled towards me, his hand out. Dot was already looking into my eyes again, and I knew she was in agreement.

"Do it!" grunted Mitch. "I'm with ya!"

Without hesitation, I led us in a quick but very urgent prayer. Jill watched, but didn't comment. As we said our amens, the three of us pointed in the direction of a hill and said in unison, "***That way!***"

As we said that, I felt a surge of energy and strength. Dot must've, too, because her face showed a relief that hadn't been there a few minutes earlier. I glanced over at Mitch; he was standing straight as he reached for Jill's hand. Dot took my hand and took a step in the direction of the hill. I smiled and held her hand tight as we started walking.

A few steps behind us was Mitch and Jill.

"What was that all about?" Jill asked, a bit confused.

Mitch released a low laugh. "I'd say it's the power of prayer," he answered. "It's the only thing that makes sense."

"But how do you know there's a hospital over that hill?"

"I'm getting older by the second, and I'd say the muscles and tendons around my replacement hip are feeling that age." He paused. "Somebody once told me that if we lift our foot in faith, we'll set it down in power. Well, I believe, and you see the proof."

"Okay," she quietly acknowledged.

After walking a few more yards, Mitch said, "I told myself I wouldn't say anything, but I gotta ask – why are you so dead-set against God?"

"Wait a minute!" She stopped and faced him. "I never said I was dead-set against God!" Her eyes lowered, as did her voice. "But ... I've done so many *things*. Why would God want me?"

Mitch laughed, and grunted as pain hit him. "Babe, you know me, and the business I'm in. I'm far from being a Boy Scout. I've ordered others to take lives, and I've taken lives with my own hands. For the longest time, I asked myself the same question you have. But then I got reading my Bible, and found out about some people who were accepted and used by God. Let's keep walking, and I'll give you a few examples." They continued towards the top of the hill. "Cain got jealous and murdered his brother. Both Adam *and* Eve lied to God when they were caught, then tried passing the buck. Noah was a drunk. Lot's daughters got him drunk and *both* had sex with him in order to bear children. Abraham was too old and had a child by his wife's handmaiden. Isaac was a daydreamer. Jacob was a liar and a con man. Leah was ugly. Joseph was abused by his brothers. Moses tried passing the buck and had a stuttering problem. Gideon doubted and was afraid. Samson was a real gem; despite being a womanizer, he killed thirty men for their clothes just because he lost a bet – and don't get me started about his anger management problems. Rahab and the woman caught in adultery were hookers. Jeremiah and Timothy were too young. King David had an affair, got the woman pregnant, then ordered her husband to be killed in order to cover it up. Elijah was suicidal. Isaiah preached naked. Jonah ran from God. Naomi was a widow. Job went bankrupt. Peter walked on the water with Jesus until he let himself get distracted by the storm around him; later he denied Christ, not just once, but three times. The disciples fought about who would sit at God's right hand in Heaven, and a couple of them tried using their mother to persuade Jesus; later they all fell asleep while praying. Martha worried about everything. The Samaritan woman had gone through multiple husbands, and was living with a man she wasn't married to. Zaccheus was too small. Timothy doubted. Paul persecuted Christians in the name of the religious leaders. Timothy had an ulcer." He paused, then added, "Oh, yeah, and Lazarus was *dead*."

"Wow," muttered Jill. "And all of those people were in the Bible?"

"Yeah. Can you say you've done worse than them?"

"In some cases, yeah. But ... God accepted them?"

"Not only accepted them, but used them in wonderful ways."

They continued walking, but Jill was silent.

"I have something to admit to you. When they gave us those pills, I'd really wished you were a Christian. I mean, if I'd died, I would've known where I'd go. Same with Perry and Dot. But you wouldn't have gone to the same place. And it hurt me knowing we'd never be together in heaven."

"It's *that* important to you?"

"Yeah. But I want it to be important to *you*."

Jill shook her head hopelessly. "I don't understand it all."

"At first, I didn't either," he empathized. "And, in a lot of ways, I still have a ton of questions. But it's a matter of making a choice – of just saying 'yes' – and believing that God will take care of the details."

"Do I have to feel the warm fuzzies?"

"I didn't. I just made a logical choice. I asked Jesus Christ into my heart as my Lord and Savior, to take over the life I've messed up. No lightning down from heaven. No dove landing on my shoulder. Just a step of faith."

"How do you know if God forgives you?"

"The Bible says it in a bunch of places, but you just gotta believe it by faith."

"So what if I'm not completely sincere?"

"You mean like a foxhole conversion?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know. It's up to you if you're in it just for a 'get out of Hell free' card, or if you really want to make a change in your life. When I lied to you when we ... you know ... I wondered if God would kick me out because of that. Now I know, it's a process. We'll always make mistakes. It's just what we do with it that'll make a difference."

They continued walking. With both of them getting greyer moment by moment, they had to help one another with the next step.

Mitch had been focused on Perry and Dot, still a couple hundred yards ahead of them, when Jill suddenly squeezed his hand. "Okay."

"What?" asked Mitch.

"What do I have to do?" she inquired.

"Are you saying you want to pray to become a Christian?"

"Yes."

Mitch grinned, then yelled up the hill, "***Perry! Dot! She wants to pray!***"

They were moving slowly, but they had heard. Showing a lot of pain in their faces, they came down the hill and to their sides.

Dot put a hand lightly on Jill's shoulder and forced out a grin. "Sure took your time about it."

Jill smiled back. Then the four of them joined hands. Perry looked like a man in his 70's, his hair white, and his face wrinkled. "Go ahead," he instructed Mitch.

"Jill, do you want me to lead you in a prayer?" he asked.

"Sure," she accepted.

And Mitch began.

The pain in our bodies were still there. But it didn't matter. We were rejoicing with all the host of heaven over the addition of our new sister in Christ. Our hugs may not have been as firm as they could've been, but they were definitely given in love.

Then, with one last surge of strength, we pressed up the hill, determined to reach what was on the other side.

Several minutes later, we crested the hill.

"Holy cow!" said Mitch.

"I don't believe it," added Jill.

Dot and I just started laughing.

It was a building. It wasn't very large, and some of the brown paint on the walls was peeling, but the sign identified it as a hospital. On the side were the words

CLARK SAVAGE, JR., MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

I commented, "I knew Doc had founded a lot of hospitals over the years, but I thought they all vanished after the Senate hearings."

"Well, thank God for this one," Mitch smiled despite the pain in his hip. "Let's go!"

It was easier because we were going downhill, but the uneven ground slowed us down. We didn't know if we would make it to the door before one of us gave out.

Twenty-seven year old Alan McClure was an orderly at the Savage Hospital.

It had been another excruciatingly long day of nothing – come in to work, keep things clean, check the inventory, change the sheets on the beds – then go home and start it all over the next day. They hadn't had a patient in weeks, and there was talk of closing some sections down – and letting some of them go – if things didn't improve.

McClure had stepped outside for a cigarette, and had just lit up when he saw the people coming down the side of the hill. *Tourists*, he thought. *Probably got separated from a Senior Citizen group and got lost.*

When one of the old gents stumbled and fell, McClure tossed the cigarette to the ground and rushed into the building. A moment later, everybody who had been on the floor flooded out and ran across the parking lot to help the foursome.

My toe had hit a rock on the way down and I stumbled.

I heard the sound of many voices approaching us. We were surrounded and carefully lifted onto gurneys. I couldn't really do anything but relax and let them take care of us. We were carried into the building. A man came to my side and introduced himself as Dr. Christopher Perez.

"My name is Perry Liston," I introduced myself. "I am a colleague of Clark Savage, Jr. I need to get a message to him, urgently!"

"And you shall, sir," he responded. "But we must check you out first."

"We don't have much time! We are rapidly aging! We need to get into stasis chambers as quickly as possible!"

"Stasis chambers?" he echoed. "Why didn't you say so? We have them here!"

"Then please, take us to them! My wife is dying!"

I thanked God that Dr. Perez understood our urgency. He quickly barked orders, and we were briskly wheeled to a room on the second floor.

"I must take blood samples," Dr. Perez insisted. "It will help Dr. Savage diagnose your condition."

I didn't have the strength to argue. A small crew of nurses and orderlies swarmed around us, prodding, poking, and taking samples from us, trying to glean as much information as possible. None of us really had the strength to resist.

I looked over and saw the stasis chambers, and thanked God. They gingerly lifted Dot and placed her in the first chamber. Before they closed the lid, I forced myself off the gurney and to her side.

She opened her eyes and gave me a weak smile. "Goodbye, my love."

"I love you." I leaned down and kissed her. "I'll see you soon."

I stepped back and let the attendants finish putting Dot into stasis. Someone saw my unsteadiness, and helped me into a wheelchair. My hands were shaking, my eyesight was blurring, and I felt like I would pass out at any moment. I asked to see Dr. Perez.

"Yes, Mr. Liston," he said as he came to my side.

"I need you to give a message to Doc Savage." He pulled a notepad and pen from his lab coat, and I hastily dictated. "The number is for Doc's private cell," I added.

"I will give this to him! But we must get you into the stasis chamber!"

I nodded and allowed them to put me into the stasis chamber. I relaxed and prayed until time stopped.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Orion

If some people would suggest that Delaney Matthews had a cushy job, she would hurt herself falling off her chair with laughter. Certainly, she spent many hours of the day sitting, her eyes closed, giving one the impression that she was asleep. But as *Orion's* Chief Prayer Officer, she was to intercession what Arnold Schwarzenegger was to *The Terminator*: *unstoppable*.

It was during one of those times that God spoke to her so intently that Delaney's eyes popped wide open and she leapt out of her chair.

Clark was exercising when his cell phone got his attention. The Caller ID was an unfamiliar number.

"Mr. Savage?" the voice on the other end asked. "Mr. Clark Savage, Jr.?"

"Speaking."

"Mr. Savage, it is a profound honor to speak with you."

"Thank you. How can I help you?"

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Dr. Christopher Perez. I am chief physician of the *Clark Savage, Jr. Memorial Hospital*, in the Bahamas, and I'm calling on behalf of Mr. Perry Liston."

It hadn't really registered that this gentleman was calling from a hospital named after him, located in the Bahamas. He just heard the words Perry and hospital. "What's wrong?"

"He and his three companions arrived here about a half hour ago. Mr. Liston said they were experiencing rapid aging. I observed this personally. We took blood and tissue samples before placing them in stasis. Before Mr. Liston went into stasis, he gave me your phone number and this message – '*Clark. Mysterious aging deaths responsibility of Tillman aka Sanders. Seek out Fleming through Hamilton.*' Does this mean anything to you?"

"No, I'm afraid it doesn't. Did you say 'advanced aging'?"

"Yes, sir. I've never seen anything like this in all my years of medical practice. We have the samples here in storage. Will you be coming here?"

"Yes. I'll be there as soon as I can. I'll contact you when we're on our way. And thank you, Dr. Perez." Clark disconnected and set the phone aside. "*Sebastian!*"

"Right here, sir."

"Okay," he started as he changed clothing. "Analyze the message from Perry. Research the names *Tillman* and *Sanders*; look for any connections in and around the area of the Bahamas. Next, inform Dr. Cunningham of the situation. Let her know we'll be leaving within the hour; have her provide four replacement stasis chambers to the *Sky Cheetah*. Next, check on all recent reports on rapid aging leading to death. Next, contact Hamilton Mayfair." He paused. "Let Bonnie know I'm on my way to the Bridge; it's urgent."

"Acknowledged," the AI replied.

Clark arrived on the Bridge. The Captain's chair was empty, and the door to the Ready Room was open. He made a beeline for the room and sat in the chair on the other side of Bonnie's desk. He had just summarized the call from Dr. Perez when Sebastian informed him that Hamilton was on the phone.

"Put him through," replied Clark. "Hamilton?"

"Yes, Doc. What's up?"

"We've got a situation. I think you know someone who's involved."

"What?"

"Do you have a client by the name of Fleming?"

"I do. He's been arrested for murder. Dot told me he'd been framed."

"Have you had a chance to talk to him yet?"

"Not really. I introduced myself to the authorities and got their side of the story. The evidence against Fleming is rather overwhelming, plus they found him with the body. I was getting ready to talk to him when you called."

"Are you secure?" spoke up Bonnie.

"Hi, Bonnie," he greeted. "Yeah, I'd say so."

"Mitch Drake's girlfriend has a singing group," Clark supplied. "They're playing at Excesses. The victim was one of her backup singers."

Hamilton let out a profanity. "Guys, I'm sorry."

"I'm going to be coming down there, Hamilton. I'd like to talk to Fleming if I could."

"Sure."

"What kind of ground transportation do you have?"

"Rental car. If you're concerned if it's big enough for you and your exo ... if I can fit, you can fit. Satisfied?"

Clark and Bonnie both smiled. "Satisfied. Thanks. See you later."

"Sure. And I'm sorry about your friend."

"Thanks. Talk to you later."

The call disconnected.

Clark turned to Bonnie. "I didn't want to tell him about the others, not until we can get more information."

"Don't blame you," Bonnie agreed.

"Sebastian, do you have the research I requested?"

"Yes, sir." And the AI started describing the deaths of Demeter Bronco and Heidi Neufswanger. The official cause of death had been ruled as natural causes. Their respective networks had tried hard to confiscate or otherwise repress any visual records related to the girls' deaths, but private footage had reached the internet before anyone could stop it.

"Let's see the footage," ordered Clark.

Sebastian had organized the video clips of Demeter Bronco's final minutes sequentially, so they could follow the order in which things happened. They sat there in silence, and it was clear that the actress had aged decades in a very few minutes. Then Sebastian showed the footage made by the reporter from *Entertainment Tonight* of Heidi Neufswanger's death; the time stamp on the video showed exactly how much time had expired before the young girl died.

"Wow," commented Bonnie. "Is it possible the videos could've been fabricated or altered?"

"Comparing several different version from various internet sites, it would be highly unlikely that they *all* could be fabricated. In addition, given the pressure put on the source of the Heidi Neufswanger video to block its broadcast, as well as repress its reproduction and rebroadcast, it would be counter-productive unless the video was genuine."

"I'm sold," Bonnie commented. "But why didn't we know about this?"

"It must've slipped past us," shrugged Clark with regret. "I've been more focused on things ... *closer* to home, than mysteries around the world." He paused. "Sebastian, what about Sanders and Tillman?"

"Xander Sanders was the owner of *Excesses*, the resort where Perry, Dot, Mitch, and Jill have been staying. There were several references to people with the last name of Tillman, but none involving the Bahamas." He paused. "This may be useful: two days ago, Mr. Liston made a similar request for information on both names."

"Let's see it," Bonnie ordered. "Override protocol Alpha-four-seven."

Sebastian gave them the same information the others had viewed.

"But what's the connection between the two?" asked Bonnie afterward.

"Perry's message said Tillman aka – *also known as* – Sanders. They're one and the same. Was there anything more in Perry's research, Sebastian?"

"Nothing from his computer."

They were both silent for several seconds. Then Bonnie spoke up. "Look at the age difference between Tillman and Sanders. How can they be the same person?"

"If someone has the capability of making people age rapidly," mused Clark. "They might be able to reverse things ... and then some."

"Instant youth," Bonnie nodded. "That's how Tillman could be Sanders."

"Which I think is as far as I can go here." He leaned over and kissed his wife.

"Is Monk coming along with you?"

"I hadn't thought about it, but it's a good idea. *Sebastian?*"

"I shall inform him, sir. Hangar bay?"

"Yes, thank you." He turned to Bonnie. "We're not paying him enough." He stood, leaned over, and kissed his wife again. "I'll keep in touch."

"Take care, love."

And Clark left the Ready Room.

As Clark descended to the flight deck, the doors suddenly opened and Delaney Matthews burst in. "Doc – *thank God!* I need to talk to you!"

"I'm on my way out," he informed her. "Can this wait?"

"No, it can't!" she exclaimed. "God's given me an urgent message for you!"

Clark was quite aware that, had any other person made such a claim, they would appear to be

sick or demented. But with Delaney, the statement was good as gold. "What is the message?"

"There will be a man by the name of Fleming who will ask you to do something you wouldn't normally do! God wants you to do it, whatever it is!"

Since Fleming's name was limited to only a few close people, it was unlikely that Delaney could have learned it any way but supernaturally.

"Do you know *why* I should do it?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Okay," he gave her a tender hug. "Thanks."

Monk was talking to Dr. Cunningham when Clark reached the flight deck.

"Doc, what's this about my kids being in stasis?" Monk demanded.

"Tell you inside," replied Clark as the side door opened for them.

Three seats had appeared near the front of the saucer, and the four stasis chambers were resting comfortably within the same mesh-like netting that was used for Tammy's *Walking Bulldozer*.

"Clark, this thing's alive!" declared Dr. Cunningham. "I brought the stasis chambers down to the hangar bay with a team to help me get them aboard. While we were standing here, the back end opened all on its own and a voice told us to put the chambers inside, within the lighted outlines. And the strangest thing? The voice sounded like Malcolm McDowell!"

"That's Quincy, the *Cheetah's* AI," answered Monk. "McDowell provided the voice. Ain't it a kick?"

"Okay," she accepted.

"Now, what's going on, Doc?"

"Hold on a second," he replied. "Quincy, you have the destination. Take your time."

"Will do," the AI said.

Clark turned away from the console and faced his two friends. "Diane, you've already got the gist of the situation. Monk, you don't yet. Have you seen anything on the internet regarding a couple of teenage actresses dying of advanced old age?"

"Yeah, I did. I thought it was some sorta gag."

"It's no gag. It's real. And now Perry, Dot, Mitch, and Jill have been affected."

"*Blazes!*" exclaimed Monk. "That's why –"

"That's why they're in stasis; it's the only thing separating them from death. But if we don't find a cure, they'll never get out of there."

"So we're going to do ... what?"

"What we're going to do," stated Dr. Cunningham soberly, "is pick up their chambers from the hospital, switch 'em with these new ones, and get me back to Orion so I can get to work. After that, you can do what you want to."

"Yes, ma'am," they both responded.

"*Ready for reentry,*" Quincy informed them, causing Dr. Cunningham to exhibit a flawless double take.

Clark faced forward, then pulled out his cell phone and called Dr. Perez. "We will be landing in the next few minutes. Can we use your parking lot?"

"Of course. It will be emptied immediately."

"We probably won't need that much room. But we will be in an experimental aircraft, so please do not be alarmed by its appearance."

"I will inform my staff, and we will meet you there."

Clark disconnected and took the controls back. They were in stealth mode as they came in through the cloud layer. Monk was the first one to recognize the name of the hospital and bring it to everyone's attention. Clark smiled. "I didn't think there were any more left."

"Could use a paint job," Monk observed as they touched down in the deserted parking lot.

"I noticed," Clark replied. "We'll take care of it."

As the side and rear doors opened, they split up. Stepping from the craft, they were greeted by a man in a white lab coat who introduced himself as Dr. Perez. He recognized Monk, but Clark introduced him to Dr. Cunningham.

"Thank you, sir," she said, shaking his hand. "I have your replacement stasis chambers."

"Excellent. I'll see that they're taken in. Now, if you'll follow me, I'll take you to your friends."

They headed towards the hospital. Needless to say, seeing Doc Savage in his exoskeleton was like a double surprise for the workers, but everyone kept a respectful distance as they looked on in awe.

In the room with the stasis chambers, Dr. Cunningham rushed over to check the controls. Pleased, she went over to Dr. Perez.

"They are accurate?" Dr. Perez asked.

"Yes," she sighed, relaxing. "Forgive me. They are all very close friends."

"I understand. Here are the samples." He removed a protective box from a refrigerator, and handed them over. He also handed her a file folder. "Here are our observations and readings from when they first arrived. We did not run any tests on the samples; we assume you probably have far better equipment for that than we."

"You're probably right," Dr. Cunningham smiled.

Meanwhile, Clark and Monk stood before the stasis chambers. Clark joined Monk in front of Dot's. The simian chemist was crying. "Dammit, Doc," his voice choked. "Look at her. What kind of sick bastard could force something like this on *her*?"

"We'll get them, old friend," Clark promised. "We'll get them."

Both Clark and Monk helped move the stasis chambers to the *Sky Cheetah*, making sure they were all secure aboard and connected to the saucer's power source. Quincy gave Dr. Cunningham a seat by the chambers so she could keep an eye on it during the flight back to *Orion*. After making sure the replacement stasis chambers were in good order, and after thanking Dr. Perez and his staff, they all boarded the *Sky Cheetah* and returned to *Orion* in record time.

"Diane," said Clark, as the stasis chambers were transferred to elevators. "We're heading back to investigate."

"Godspeed. I'll let you know if I find out anything."

"Okay." Clark turned to Monk. "Let's go."

"Not just yet," the other man disagreed. "I ain't headin' into an unknown situation without some muscle. You know ... superfirers? ... anesthetic gas? ... C-4?"

"You're absolutely correct. Bring what you feel is *necessary*. I'm going to brief Bonnie. Meet you down here in, say, ten minutes?"

"Gimme twenty, okay?"

"Twenty."

While Monk headed for the elevator, Clark stepped back into the saucer.

"*Quincy*? We'll be heading back to the hospital within a half hour. Would you contact Hamilton Mayfair and have him meet us there? We'll provide an E.T.A. en route."

"Will do, Doc."

"Thank you."

Clark left the aircraft and walked to the elevators.

By the time Clark returned to the hangar bay, Monk was waiting in *Sky Cheetah*. He gave Clark a rundown of the various items he had procured from the armory and stores.

"Isn't this a bit ... much?"

"Hey, who was the one who used to wear a fifty-pound vest full of gadgets?"

Clark cleared his throat. "You're not going to let that one go, are you?"

Monk just grinned and shook his head. Then he stowed the gear and joined Clark up front. He strapped in, and Clark took the saucer out of the hangar bay.

The sun was descending into the horizon by the time *Sky Cheetah* arrived in the Bahamas. A section of the parking lot of the *Clark Savage, Jr. Memorial Hospital* had been cordoned off with orange cones. On the outside of the saucer, the words *Savage Foundation* were predominately displayed, along with the warning EXPERIMENTAL, hoping to dissuade the curious from getting too close. Clark and Monk were once more met by Dr. Perez.

"You have been to your base and returned in such a short time?" he gawked. "This is such an amazing aircraft."

"It's a prototype," Clark informed. "It's not dangerous, but we don't want to take chances ..."

Dr. Perez smiled. "I completely understand, sir."

Just then a blue van arrived. It parked loosely in the lot, and Hamilton Mayfair climbed out and gave them a wave. Introductions were made and greetings exchanged, then the subject changed to Hamilton's client.

"I would like to talk with him," informed Clark.

"It's getting late, but I persuaded them to stretch the rules. Once we arrive and pass through security, we'll meet with him."

"Security?" muttered Monk. "Clark, can I see you off side for a moment?"

The two men talked quietly, and something was passed from one man to the other. Then they returned to the rest.

"Hamilton," addressed Clark. "Considering the composition of my exoskeleton, passing through security might be a tricky matter."

"No problem. It's obvious you can't separate yourself from the exoskeleton without considerable inconvenience. They might give you a quick once-over, looking for weapons or such, but I don't think there'll be any problems."

"Good. Shall we go?"

At the police station, Clark and Monk went through security. Monk emptied his possessions into plastic bowls that were examined, while he walked through the arch of a metal detector that was almost too narrow for his wide shoulders. Monk took it all in stride, joking and kidding around with the security men who'd recognized the two celebrities gracing their station. Three security men checked out Clark's exoskeleton, admiring it more than checking for dangerous objects. While they went through security, Hamilton arranged to have Fleming transferred to an interview room.

The interview room was quite Spartan. A metal table was bolted to the floor, and Fleming's handcuffs were connected to the table by a heavy length of chain. Hamilton made the introductions, and Fleming stood and awkwardly shook their hands.

"I know you," said Fleming. "We've never worked together, but I did work with your man Littlejohn, some years ago. I'm sorry to hear about his passing."

Clark acknowledged him, then got right down to business. He removed a small digital recorder. "I would like to record this conversation. You have my word, anything said here will be kept in the utmost confidentiality."

Fleming nodded.

"Mitch Drake is a close friend of ours. He and three others have been subjected to something that caused them to age rapidly. Right now they're in stasis while we find a cure. Since you're at the center of this, we need to know everything you know."

"Very well. My name is John Fleming. Although you may find this difficult to corroborate, I work for MI6. A little over a month ago, I was informed that I was next in line to replace my old boss as Minister of Intelligence ... a high honor, to be sure. Some people would've jumped at the opportunity. I, on the other hand, needed to think it over. After all, I was getting along in years – " He chuckled at the irony of his statement. "– and was considering retirement. The Bahamas have always had a soft spot in my heart, and I own a small island with a house ... what you'd call a fixer-upper. So I took an extended leave of absence here, to give me time to make up my mind." He paused. "Well, I was enjoying the attractions of the island, and I had made the acquaintance of a young *lady*. One night, we visited *Excesses*. We gambled a bit and took in the night show – Dame Shirley Bassey. Before the show, they spotlighted the owner of *Excesses*, Xander Sanders. But I saw someone else, someone I thought I had killed in 1993. Earnest Richard Tillman."

"And who is Earnest Richard Tillman?" probed Clark.

Fleming's face got dark. His eyes narrowed, and his voice lowered. "If it could be possible, I'd say he was evil personified." He took a deep breath. "To the world, he's a criminal mastermind. I've encountered him more times than I'd like to count, and foiled almost every scheme he's thrown against the world."

"Could you give us some examples?"

He took another deep breath, then began to list off a myriad of criminal endeavors. Thefts: artwork, jewels, people. Information: buying, selling, and exploiting. Terrorism and extortion: chemical, biological, nuclear, and a few things Clark wouldn't have thought possible. And a few events that couldn't even be categorized. Yet in all of them, Fleming's recollection was amazing. Almost all of them occurred during the fifty years Clark was in hibernation. Monk, however, was able to confirm several of the events, even though he was amazed that the man before them was influential in their resolution.

"If all of this is true, pardner," Monk commented skeptically. "You've saved the world more times than we have!"

Fleming just shrugged.

"I think that's sufficient," Clark said. "Back to your story. What happened after you recognized Sanders as Tillman?"

"At first it confused me, especially seeing him younger than he was. I didn't want to bring in MI6; if I was wrong, it could be a monumental embarrassment to the Service. So I investigated. I did research on the man. It was when I was spying on his villa that I bollixed things up – I was discovered. I tried faking things with the old bird watcher ploy, but it didn't seem to work. Instead, to my surprise, they invited me in for coffee, and that's when I met Sanders face-to-face. Then, while we're talking, he all but admits he's Tillman. I tried attacking him, but his guards were faster than me."

"Did he actually identify himself as Tillman?" asked Hamilton.

"No. But, when I called him Tillman, he didn't deny it. He acted just as if it had been Tillman, right down to the mannerisms. He told me that the secret of his youth was nanobots. He said that he could make people older as well as younger. *That* was his scheme: worldwide extortion. Then, of all the absurd things, he offered me a job. He told me about some drug dealers who were treading on his action. If I took care of them, he would make me younger. He treated me as if we were 'old friends', as if we were somehow ... inseparable, two sides of a single coin as if were, the yin and yang."

"*The Nemesis Constant*," Clark muttered, and everyone looked at him. "It was something that ... an old enemy of mine once told me. The logic is the same: to every hero there must be a villain. To every Jesus there must be a Judas. To every Holmes there must be a Moriarty. One or both believes that he cannot exist without the other, and that's what keeps them incapable of killing the other."

"That's preposterous!" countered Fleming. "The last thing I'd ever want is to keep Tillman alive! But I'm the one facing a murder charge. You think he plans on rescuing me at the last moment, just to keep me alive and possibly in his debt?"

"I couldn't say," Clark shrugged.

Monk asked, "So what your response was to his suggestion of a partnership?"

"What do you think? I told him to go to Hell! I mean, I figured there'd be no way he'd let me out of there alive, anyway. But, instead, he seemed to be disappointed. He told me I was not a threat to him anymore. Then he told me to leave." He paused. "Now, I'd had enough experiences with this man to know not to turn my back on him. He finally had me escorted out by his female bodyguards. I went, preparing myself for anything. But it never happened. I got back to my room, checked it out, then poured myself a drink and prepared to send off my report to MI6. Now, I'm not sure if they tampered with my drink glasses or my liquor, but the drug they used put me out quickly."

His expression was one of self-loathing. "I was cautious. I should've been paranoid. But they sucker-punched me. The last thing I remembered was sitting at my computer preparing to send my report to MI6. Then I was in that room with the girl. I knew I'd been set up – framed. I was ready to get out of there and run when I saw my reflection in the mirror. Imagine seeing yourself thirty, forty years younger. I'm sorry, but I was shocked. I couldn't think of anything else. And the police just walked right in and arrested me. According to standard procedure, I'm certain MI6 has disavowed me, believing me to have turned to the other side." He took a deep breath and lowered his head. "That's my story."

Clark glanced over at Monk and gave a quick nod of his head. Monk raised the small aerosol can he had palmed in his hand, and sprayed the contents into Fleming's face. The agent raised his head and his eyes glazed over.

"**Pop!**" exclaimed Hamilton. "What did you do?"

"Verity-3," explained Clark. "It's a truth drug. Mr. Fleming, can you hear me?"

"Yes," he said woodenly.

"You are compelled to tell the truth. Did you murder the girl that was found with you?"

"No," he answered simply.

"How old are you?"

"Seventy."

"What is your affiliation?"

"MI6. British Secret Service."

"Now, please tell us what happened, again, from the reason you came to the Bahamas."

Fleming went through his story again, this time without the emotions. Everything was the same; his story didn't waver from what he had told them previously. It was clear: this criminal Tillman had framed Fleming, and had made him young using nanobots.

"Hamilton, forgive me for my subterfuge," said Clark. "It is impossible to lie when under the influence of Verity-3. We needed to know the absolute truth, and now we do. When I bring him out, he will have no memory of being subjected to the drug."

"Unless, of course, *you* tell him," added Monk.

Hamilton shook his head. "You *know* this kinda thing creeps me out. No, I'll keep quiet. But if you do this again, please give me a head's up."

"Thanks, Son," apologized Monk.

Once out of his Verity-3 trance, Fleming blinked his eyes a couple of times, and acted as if he'd never been interrogated.

"So Tillman used nanobots on himself and you?" mused Monk aloud. "It's not such a crazy idea, when you think about it. I grant you, Long Tom would be able to explain this better than me, but, as a chemist, I can relate. I know what can be accomplished by mixing a drop of this and a dash of that. All a nanobot is, is a mechanical way of accomplishing a chemical process. One teeny little nanobot, performing a single function like moving a molecule, is nothing ... less than nothing. You can't even see it with the naked eye. But a million billion nanobots, all performing a single function like moving a molecule, can move a mountain."

"Nanobots can't do anything without programming," stated Fleming.

"And if it can be programmed," added Clark. "It can be *re*programmed."

"Mr. Savage, you said that Mitch and others are suffering from a form of advanced aging. Does that include someone named Perry?"

"Yes, it does. Do you know Perry?"

"When Mitch came to visit me, I could hear his voice, but couldn't see him. Then a few minutes later, someone came to my cell. I couldn't see him either. He identified himself as a friend, and told me that help was on the way. Before he left, he said his name was Perry."

Clark and Monk looked at each other. "He can become invisible again?" asked Monk.

"It appears so," replied Clark.

"Do you two know what this is all about?" piped Fleming.

"Yes. But right now it's a moot point. He's in stasis with the others, and we need to get to the heart of the matter and find a cure ... or, in this case, a way of reversing the effects of the

nanobots. You believe that this Tillman is masterminding this all?"

"Yes. Without a doubt."

The room was quiet. Then Clark asked, very deliberately, "Then answer me this. In all honesty, what do you want, Mr. Fleming?"

"In all honesty," Fleming replied, his eyebrows arched, and his voice cold. "I want Tillman dead."

"I can accept that. What do you want *right now*, Mr. Fleming?"

"I've got a gut feeling. That bastard's up to something. I don't want him to get away with it. In order to do that, I need to get out."

Clark looked to Hamilton, who just shook his head. "They won't accept bail or recog."

"What if I took personal responsibility for him?" offered Clark.

"That might work."

"Then let's add something else to the pot," Clark smiled. "I'll put up a million dollars in gold as security."

"A million *in gold*, Doc?" Hamilton whistled. "That oughta make them sit up and bark."

"Mr. Savage," said Fleming. "You are willing to risk your money and your reputation for me?"

"Yes, Mr. Fleming, I am. And I trust you not to give me cause to regret it."

Fleming held out his shackled hands. "You've got a deal!"

Hamilton stood up. "I'll run this past the magistrate."

As they waited for Hamilton to return, Clark asked, "Once you get out of here, Mr. Fleming. What do you have in mind?"

"The answers must be inside that villa of his. I think there's a way of getting in there from the Oceanside. But I'll need some special supplies."

"Waddya need?" spoke up Monk. "We got pretty much anything you need."

"I'm sure you do," Fleming gave him a thoughtful grin. "But what I need belongs to an old friend. His name is Bernard Coggins. He's known me for most of my time in MI6. His specialty is exotic weapons and equipment. He retired a few years back. But, if I know Coggins, he'll have what I need." He paused. "How are you for transportation?"

"Where to?" asked Clark.

"Glasgow."

"*Scotland?*" exclaimed Monk.

"Yes." Fleming nodded.

Clark cleared his throat. "You realize that's a *considerable* distance from here, and would take hours even with a private jet ..."

"I do. However, I was hoping that, since you are capable *and* comfortable with putting up a million dollars in gold to help in my release, you might possess something a little *faster* than the average aircraft."

Clark smiled. "You are an excellent judge of character."

"It's a talent."

"And, in this instance, you happen to be correct."

Monk started laughing.

A few minutes later, Hamilton came back. He wasn't smiling.

"Sorry, guys. He went home. Considering the late hour, I shouldn't have been surprised. I called him with the offer. After a very long pause, he actually listened to it. Then he said he'd sleep on it and give us his decision in the morning."

"Okay, so we stay the night," Monk said. "Son, you got digs?"

"Yeah. The Hotel Baia; it's right up the road. I think they can spare a couple more rooms."

Clark stood. "Sleep well. I believe we will have quite a busy day tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mr. Savage."

"If we're going to be working together, please call me Doc."

"Thank you ... Doc."

The Hotel Baia was a nice hotel, but their only available room was one with twin queen beds.

"Actually, that'll work out well for us," explained Clark. "I could use Monk's help with the exo."

"Okay, then," grinned Hamilton. "I'll see you in the morning. Good night."

Once inside their room, as Monk helped Clark out of the exoskeleton and into bed, the two old friends discussed the details of the past few hours.

"This guy's got quite a history," commented Monk. "If we can believe it, he's made a career out of saving the world."

"Agreed. It all sounds very amazing. But then, who are we to talk?"

"You do realize, as soon as he gets his toys from this Coggins-fellow, he's going to bolt and run?"

"Yes. And we won't stop him."

"Why?"

"Before we left for here this last time, Delaney caught up with me in the elevator. She relayed a message God gave her: whatever Fleming asks us to do, do it."

"She doesn't know Fleming, right?"

"Never met him. So whatever scam's going on inside that head of his, for right now we go along with it."

"Anything you say." He stood. "I thought I'd take a little walk and call Lea, let her know I'm okay. How 'bout you – you good?"

"Yes. The exo's plugged in, and I've taken care of business, so I was thinking about calling Bonnie as well."

"Sounds good." He headed for the door, his cell phone in his hand. "If I'm not back in an hour, call the zoo and see if they've got a new addition." He was guffawing loudly as he left the room.

Clark grinned at his old friend's self-deprecating humor. Then he was reminded that Perry was in stasis, suspended between life and death; it sobered him up immediately.

Suddenly his phone rang. Clark smiled; it was Bonnie.

"Good timing. I was just about to call you."

"Let's say that I felt a disturbance in the force." Her voice was smiling; it helped.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I was thinking about Perry, and was feeling a bit down. So how are you doing?"

"Well, we've got things pretty much wrapped up in Indonesia. Should have it done by tomorrow afternoon." She paused. "Diane told me she found nanobots of some sort in the samples we got."

"That agrees with what Mr. Fleming told us. I interrogated him with Verity-3, and he corroborated everything. It appears that this man Tillman is behind it all."

"Good. I need to talk to you about a couple of things."

"What is it?"

"Well, I've been thinking about Alex and Phyllis, Jill's other backup singers. I called them this evening. Ever since this all went down, they've been sitting there in limbo, not knowing what's going on. They did one show after Cherry's death. Then Jill talked to a Mr. Hedges, saying something about meeting with Sanders the next morning. That was the last they heard from her. She never showed up, and they had to cancel the show. Now, I've worked with both of them back in my Apex days, and I can relate to them. I'd like to see about coming down there and bringing them back to *Orion*. It'd be safer here. I'd also like to see what kind of arrangements I can make about bringing Cherry's body back. If I remember right, she didn't have any next of kin. If that's true, we can arrange for a proper funeral."

"That's a good idea."

"I also got thinking about those suites that Perry, Dot, and Mitch were staying in. For the moment let's assume we're not going to be getting them out of stasis soon. So the rooms aren't in use, and their possessions – including computers, personal items, etc. – are still inside where anyone can get to them. When I come down to get the girls, I'd like to bring a team with me to clean out the rooms and bring their stuff back here where it'll be safe."

"Good. Tomorrow we'll have Fleming released. He's got a friend in Glasgow, Scotland who has some special gear he needs."

"Glasgow? What kind of stuff is he planning on getting?"

"Monk and I figure weapons. And then we figure he's going to bolt on us first chance he gets."

"Then why are you doing this?"

Clark relayed the story from Delaney.

"Okay, can't argue that point. I'll keep you in prayer. You want me to give Delaney the update?"

"She'll probably know it already. But sure, you can share it with her. We'll take off first thing in the morning, as soon as Fleming is released. We'll return to *Orion* after that."

"Sounds good. How's everything else going?"

"As well as possible."

Bonnie knew there was more to this than her husband was saying. But she knew he was a proud man and it was between him and God now.

Of course, she wasn't exactly without influence. "Wanna pray?"

"Sure."

The front desk manager at the Hotel Baia steered them in the direction of a good restaurant for breakfast as Clark and Monk checked out of their room. Then they returned to the police station, where they got the good news that the magistrate had accepted their offer. Once the paperwork was all filled out, they snuck Fleming out of the building through a back door. Monk was waiting outside at the wheel of the van.

At the hospital parking lot, Fleming gaped at the flying saucer. "*This* is yours?"

"John," Clark put a hand on the other man's shoulder. "Weren't you the one who said I might possess something a little *faster* than the average aircraft?"

"Would you believe I was bluffing?" Fleming smiled.

"Hey, Pop," Hamilton addressed Monk. "I'm going to stick around here. If I were to suddenly disappear, it could look suspicious."

"Okay." He hugged his son. "Take care, and don't do anything rash."

As the side of the saucer opened, Clark and Fleming shook Hamilton's hand and thanked him for everything.

"We'll keep in touch," Clark informed Hamilton.

As the three men took seats inside the saucer, Clark asked, "Quincy, do you have coordinates for Mr. Coggins?"

"Plotted in," the AI responded. "Airspace clear; cloaking available at your discretion."

"Cloaking?" repeated Fleming.

"Make it so, Quincy," instructed Clark. "Take us up."

The saucer began to ascend.

A phone rang in Sanders' villa.

"Sir, it's Chesterfield," the contact at the police station identified himself. "Fleming's been released."

"How?"

"He was turned over to some big shot in a suit of armor by the name of Clark Savage, Jr. The guy's taking personal responsibility for him – plus he posted a million *in gold* for him. They just slipped him out the back way."

Tillman was silent for several seconds, thinking. Then: "Very well. Keep me posted."

He hung the phone up and went downstairs to one of the laboratories. It was full of electrical equipment, and one man was working at the controls to a strange machine.

"Dr. Geiger," he addressed the man. "Fleming's been released. It looks like we're going to have to speed up our timetable. Subject Three has been taken care of?"

"Last night," he informed Tillman. "And I've got three more I can activate whenever you're ready."

"You may proceed, doctor."

Tillman left the laboratory, heading back upstairs. As he did, he remembered how much he owed the old German scientist.

His story to Fleming about slowing his heartbeat way down to keep him barely alive had been a line of bull. He had been very close to death following Fleming's attack on him. But then Dr. Hans Geiger had found him, and had spirited his body away to where he was nursed back to health. He didn't understand how one man could have such loyalty to him, but he appreciated it. They retired to this lair in the Bahamas, taking on the alias of Benjamin Sanders, then later fabricating the 'death of the father' story to assume the name of Xander Sanders.

He had spent quite a long time recuperating from Fleming's attack, and it got him thinking about actually retiring from his criminal enterprises. But then, a few years back, he saw his old foe again. He'd been in disguise, but seeing Fleming sparked old feelings of retaliation. Since he wasn't in the best of physical health, he took his time to observe Fleming and plan a proper revenge.

Then Dr. Geiger told him about the nanobots.

To someone who dealt in the tangibility of a gun, knife, bomb, or garrote, this sounded like science fiction. But Dr. Geiger persisted, and so he provided the old fellow with a lab and a sufficiently-high budget with which to play with his toys. Then Dr. Geiger came up with some amazing breakthroughs. They still sounded like fantasy, but he made Tillman a believer. He proposed using nanobots to make test subjects grow old swiftly. And, looking at his own wrinkled body, he asked if there was a way of taking it the other way – to make someone *younger*. Dr. Geiger was hopeful that, with a little more study, he could. So he expanded his research. The homeless and dregs of society served as guinea pigs, and a pit of hydrofluoric acid made quick work of failed experiments.

But the good doctor succeeded far beyond his wildest dreams. And now it was coming to a head. *God, it felt good to be back in business again!*

Glasgow, Scotland

Not wanting to shock Mr. Coggins, they landed the Sky Cheetah in an open field and began to walk in. They'd not gotten far from the main house when a sudden beam of heat seared a line in the ground.

"HALT! IDENTIFY YOURSELF!" boomed a Darth Vader-like voice out of the distance.

The three of them froze.

"Coggins, it's me!" he stepped ahead of the others. **"Fleming! John Fleming!"**

"PROVE IT!"

"You're using one of those laser rifles from the StarShovel mission, you old coot!"

There was a laugh, and an old man stepped out into the clear. His weapon was at his side. As they closed the distance, he exclaimed. "My God, John! That *is* you! What the hell happened to you?"

"That's what I'm here for. Coggins, these are some friends of mine. This is Clark Savage, Jr., also known as –"

Coggins was already shaking Clark's hand. "– *Doc Savage!* It is such an honor to meet you, sir! And you're Monk Mayfair!" he shook Monk's hand. "A great pleasure!"

"Likewise," responded Monk.

"So what's going on, John?"

Fleming put his hand on his old friend's shoulder. "It's a long story. Can we go inside?"

"Sorry," he apologized. "Yeah, sure. This way."

They walked down a dirt road with a split rail fence to a nice two-story house. We stepped up to the covered porch and went inside.

"Make yourselves at home," Coggins greeted. "Would you like something to drink ... tea, John?"

"Maybe later." He turned to Clark and Monk. "You?"

"No, thanks," waved Monk.

"Pass," added Clark, settling his frame on a sturdy couch.

Coggins returned to the living room. "Needed to put away the laser."

"So how'd you know we were here?" asked Monk. "Were you watching us?"

"This is a big farm. Just because we're in Scotland doesn't mean we have to live with technology of the 1600's. It took a while, but I've got this place wired better than the Pentagon."

"Then why didn't you know it was us?" probed Fleming.

"I may have this place wired, but my cameras are hardly top-of-the-line resolution." Coggins laughed. "My proximity alarms told me there was somebody out there, so I took a peek. And, what do I see but a UFO parked out in my field. Three figures walk towards my house, including *Bobo the Gorilla* and *The Colossus of New York*. Now you tell me, John – what else am I suppose to assume?"

Nobody answered him.

"So what brings you here?" asked Coggins.

"Have you heard about those deaths in the States?"

"Those two poor girls? How tragic!"

"Tillman's behind them."

"Tillman's dead, John – you killed him years ago!"

"He's not dead. I've seen him, talked to him. He's the one who did this to me. And he's the one responsible for subjecting those two girls to rapid aging."

"Three," Coggins sighed. "There was another death, in London. A BBC newscaster. He was delivering the nightly report when he suddenly started aging. They pulled him off the air, but he was dead of old age within a half hour."

"Have there been any demands?" asked Clark. "Anybody claiming responsibility?"

"None yet."

"Tillman's behind it," Fleming insisted. "And that's why I need your help."

"All right, I'm in. What do you need?"

"Equipment."

"What kind?"

"The kind you specialize in," Fleming smiled. "Best in the world."

"Flatterer." Coggins smirked. "Follow me."

The four of them left the main house and walked to the barn. Coggins went over to a worn wooden bench. He reached under the edge and pulled out a handprint recognition pad. Coggins placed his hand on it. With an impish smile, he gestured in the direction of an old rusting tractor. A moment later, the tractor raised into the air, revealing a large steel elevator car.

"Impressive," commented Monk.

Coggins stepped into the car and gestured to the others. "Gents?"

The elevator descended for several seconds, and opened into a hallway. Coggins led them down the hall to a room. As he passed before an electric eye, the large door at the end raised up into the ceiling. They stepped into an armory ... a big one.

Monk leaned over at Clark. "Doesn't this remind you of somewhere?"

"Florida?" agreed Clark. "I was thinking the same thing."

"So let's take the tour, see if we can find something we *don't* have."

Fleming grabbed a large leather duffle and began wandering the aisles. He seemed to know just what he was looking for.

Coggins met up with Clark and Monk. "So, gentlemen, what do you think?"

"Not bad," commented Clark. "Impressive."

"I noticed you've got one of our old superfirers," added Monk. "Where'd you get it?"

"I'm not quite sure. Do you want it back?"

"No," answered Clark. "Please, keep it."

"How'd you like to get one of the latest model?" offered Monk.

"I'd be honored!"

"We've got a few in the *Sky Cheetah*," he informed. "I'll give you one when we leave."

"Very kind of you, Mr. Mayfair."

A half hour later, they returned to the surface. Clark and Monk headed for the *Sky Cheetah* to retrieve one of the superfirers for Mr. Coggins' collection, while Fleming and Coggins exchanged words several yards away.

"Thanks," He patted the duffle. "With this I'll be able to kill Tillman once and for all. And I won't let anything stand in my way ... including *them*."

"*Them?* What do you mean?"

"These people are *Christians*. Their motto is 'live and let live'. Odds are they'd never let me get close enough to put a bullet between that bastard's eyes." He paused. "So, as soon as I can, I'm going to ditch them."

"So, as soon as I can, I'm going to ditch them."

Clark and Monk were out of earshot, but not eyeshot, of the private conversation. And since they were experts at lip-reading, they both knew Fleming's plans.

"Called that one right," commented Monk.

"Yes," agreed Clark. "Especially after seeing that arsenal below." He paused. "He's likely to destroy the controls to the nanobots before we can get to them."

"So we'll need to get there first."

"Yes."

"Hey, Doc? On our way back, I'd like you to drop me off at the Bahamas. Hamilton's capable of handling himself, but I'd feel a lot better if he had someone covering his back."

"Certainly."

"I'd also like to hang onto that bag of stuff I packed ... just in case."

"That's understandable."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I couldn't believe what I was experiencing.

I suddenly found myself in the – for lack of a better term – white place. If it hadn't been for the solid surface beneath my feet, it would've been highly disorienting. I'd recently seen the George Lucas film *THX-1138*, and now I saw a similarity here with the detention area that Robert Duvall had to endure. In the movie it was a white void, with white blocks that represented some sort of furniture and point of reference. Beyond that, it was impossible to determine where the floor ended and the walls began.

This place now brought *that* place to my mind, along with a considerable degree of awe at God's capabilities.

"Where are we?"

I turned around at the sound of Dot's voice, and two things caused my jaw to drop. One, in my past experiences here, I'd been the only person – correction, only *living* person – to appear in the white place. Two, she was young again, as if the nanobots hadn't aged us.

She didn't appear to be in pain, but she *was* frightened. I wrapped her up in my arms.

"Perry, where are we?"

Before I could answer here, however, two more voices came from nearby, both asking the same question. It was Mitch and Jill, both as confused as Dot.

"We're young again!" exclaimed Mitch. "What's happening?"

"It's okay," I reassured everybody. "I know this place."

A moment later, Dot blinked and asked, "This is your 'white place'?"

"Well, it's not actually *my* 'white place', but ... yeah."

"Perry," addressed Mitch. "What are you talking about?"

I tried to explain. "When I was hanging on that cross back on Caroline Island, there was a time that I was *physically* there, but ... *not* there. I don't understand how it works, but I know that it is outside of normal time and space."

"Is it heaven?" asked Jill.

"I don't know. Maybe it's a piece of it. I've been here twice before, and it's always remained the same. No details, no answers to all the questions."

"You said that Long Tom visited you the first time," mentioned Dot.

"Yes. It was amazing. He had two good legs. He told me that I needed a 'time out' from the pain I was experiencing on earth." I paused. "I am *thoroughly* convinced that God is in control of this place."

"Are you sure you weren't hallucinating from the shock of the beating?" asked Jill.

"I'd accept that for the first time, but not the second. The second time I was brought here was just before Kal and Lois fell out of the dimensional rift and practically landed in my lap in the middle of Lake Chaac." I paused thoughtfully. "I don't know why all of us were brought here together, except that God knew we needed it."

"So are we still in the stasis chambers?" asked Dot.

"Oh, yes," I said without hesitation.

Jill started looking around, peering into the unfathomable distance. "Where are the walls?"

"I don't know. Personally, I don't think you'll find any."

Then she got down on her hands and knees and tried rapping on the floor with her knuckles. "I wonder what this is made of?" she mused aloud.

"This is very suspicious," muttered Mitch warily. "Are you sure we're safe?"

"Oh, yes," I repeated.

"Look!" Mitch pointed at a couple of figures in the distance. "We're not the only ones here!"

I turned. He was right. Two figures were walking in our direction. I couldn't make out who they were yet.

"The first time I was here, Long Tom appeared. The second time, it was Long Tom and Ham. The only thing in common was that they had died Christians."

"They're not men," observed Jill. "They're women."

As they got closer, we noticed that they were both wearing floor-length robes.

"The one on the left," observed Dot. "I think it's Queen Monja."

I nodded. "I think you're right. But who's the other one?"

As they got closer, and we could make out the face, it was certain that the one was Queen Monja.

"It can't be," I muttered, suddenly recognizing the other woman.

I was confused. And no wonder. The last time I saw her was on Caroline Island, and she was at the business end of a bullwhip.

It was Deuce Robinson.

We'd never really known her fate, but, from the evidence, we'd pieced together her last moments. She had been compatriots with Daniel Franklin. However, it appeared that he had shot her and left her for dead. But she wasn't dead. Franklin headed to his escape boat where he ran into Clark. Clark used the Verity-3 on him, immobilizing him, then moving on to attend to another matter. Mortally wounded, Deuce arrived on the scene. Realizing Franklin was conscious but unable to resist, she dragged him down into the water to drown. Deuce's body was found a few yards from the edge of the water, where she'd died from her wounds.

At the time, we'd wondered if any of the Christian teachings Franklin and Deuce had received during their exile in the Valley of the Vanished had made a difference. At first, we didn't think so. But now, if I could believe what I was seeing, I had my answer.

The others had also recognized her, and their first instinct was to protect me. Mitch and Dot quickly stood between me and the two approaching women.

"I'll protect you!" Mitch declared.

I continued to look as Deuce and Monja drew closer. I placed a hand on their shoulders and gently parted them. "I don't think that'll be necessary."

"But what she did to you –" started Dot.

"It's okay," I said softly. "I don't believe any of us can be harmed here. Let's hear what they have to say."

The two women got to within a half dozen feet of us before they stopped. I hadn't taken my eyes off of Deuce's face. I saw something in her eyes – something I hadn't seen before.

It was peace.

Monja looked just as radiant as she had before her death. She smiled and addressed us.

"Greetings unto you ... Perry, Dot, Mitch, Jill."

I offered a slight bow. "Greetings unto you, Monja. Deuce, is that really you?"

Her smile was uncharacteristic. "Yes, Perry, it is."

"How?"

I didn't need to elaborate on my question. She understood what I was asking, and answered it without hesitation. "Daniel had shot me and left me for dead. I was dying, but wasn't dead. I found Daniel in the clearing near where our escape boat was moored. Doc Savage did something to make him unable to move, then he left the area. I went over to Daniel. I ... dragged him down to the water and dropped him in head-first. As he was drowning, everything suddenly made sense to me. I saw my own wretchedness, my own sin. With my final breath, I repented and begged God to forgive me. Then I died, and found myself in the arms of Jesus."

"But you killed Franklin," Mitch countered.

"Yes, I did. I don't know why God accepted me ... except just to say that His grace is wonderful." She gave a smile.

"Do you know what happened to Franklin?" asked Jill. I remembered that she herself had once been in love with Franklin.

Monja answered. "He had every chance to repent, but did not. He died in his sins."

I was quiet. There was a lot going on here to consider.

"So why are you here now?" Dot asked, with not a little cynicism in her voice.

"God has given me the opportunity to repent to you ... to all of you ... for what I did." Then she dropped to her knees before me and bowed her head. "Especially to you. Please forgive me for hurting you, Perry. It was so horribly wrong." She looked up and to the others. "Dot, please forgive me for all the evil I did to you, and for what I did to Perry. Jill, I'm so sorry for deceiving you even while I was in your group. I am without excuse."

I was stunned. I was being repented to by someone already in Heaven. I had no reference points to this. But I couldn't refuse it. "Of course I forgive you, Deuce. Get up."

"I don't know," commented Jill to me as Deuce stood. "Something that emotional would bring me to tears. But she's not crying."

Dot reminded her. "If this is Heaven, or close enough to it, then she can't. There are no tears in Heaven."

I turned to Monja. "Monja. Are you here to confirm her validity?"

The Mayan queen nodded. "She speaks the truth. She has become a child of Jesus the Christ, and she is my sister in the Spirit of God."

"So you were here in case we didn't believe Deuce?" questioned Mitch.

"That is correct."

I asked Monja. "Would I be allowed to hug Deuce?"

Monja smiled back. "I see nothing wrong in that."

I held out my arms to Deuce, and she stepped into them. Her fingers were tender when she touched my back. After we separated, Dot reached out for a hug. As they did, Deuce repeated, "Please forgive me for hurting your husband. By the way, you have a good right hook."

Dot grinned. "At the time, you deserved it. I forgive you. And I'm glad you made it."

"Forgive me for lying to you when I was working for Daniel. I learned only too late how evil he really was."

Deuce turned to Jill. "I am glad you are here."

"Me, too. And I suppose I can forgive you, too."

I asked Monja, "Long Tom was able to see events occurring in our world. Are you?"

"If you're asking me if I know about Clark and Bonnie, then yes, I do. Bonnie is a good woman, and they have three fine children. I am happy for them."

"And what happened to Clark – his legs?"

Her expression sunk. "He has his struggles. But I am pleased that his faith is still strong, and he has many friends to support him."

"Would you like me to pass that message along?"

"Please. And tell him 'I am fine'."

I nodded.

"Are we still in stasis?" asked Mitch.

"Yes, you are," confirmed Monja.

"For how long?" asked Jill.

Monja smiled. "Not long."

"How long is 'not long'?" pressed Mitch.

Monja smiled. "Not long."

I put a hand on Mitch's arm and grinned. "Take it from me. Don't bother trying."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

After dropping Monk off in the Bahamas to rejoin his son, Clark and Fleming headed towards *Orion's* coordinates in Indonesia. The secret agent was visibly startled as *Sky Cheetah* pierced the camouflage field, and the huge flying station appeared before them. Fleming tried asking all sorts of questions about how things were done, but Clark kept his answers vague. They sailed into the hangar bay and parked.

Fleming wanted to keep his duffle bag close to him, but Clark was insistent that the bag would be delivered to his quarters without examination. He finally acquiesced, and they took the lift to the Bridge.

Introductions were made, and explanations as to what *Orion* was. Bonnie had already set him up with temporary VIP quarters on the same deck as Mark Eidemiller.

"We're just finishing up here," Bonnie informed them. "Then we'll head back for the Bahamas. In the meantime, hon, since that buggy of yours is so fast, how 'bout you taking me and my team to take care of the clean-up?"

"Sure," replied Clark. "Just say when."

"You're returning to the Bahamas?" asked Fleming.

"Yes," answered Bonnie.

"You mind if I join you?" offered Fleming. "I can help."

"I'd rather you not," answered Clark. "If you were spotted, it could cause trouble. Might as well just stay here and relax."

"Yeah ... sure," agreed the agent. But it was obvious that his response – as well as his attitude – was somewhat less than agreeable.

"Mr. Fleming," inquired Bonnie. "Before you settle in, I'd like you to go to Sick Bay for a blood sample. Since your youth is the result of nanobots from the same source, I'd like Dr. Cunningham to compare them with what she found in the others' blood."

"Certainly," Fleming acknowledged.

"How soon do you want to go?" Clark asked Bonnie.

"I've got my team on standby. We can be ready in ten minutes."

"Sounds good. It'll give me a chance to show John his quarters. I'll meet you in the hangar bay."

Clark and Fleming left the Bridge. They stopped off at the hangar bay so Fleming could get his bag. Then they went to the VIP level. Mark Eidemiller was just coming out of his quarters. Clark introduced the two men.

"Fleming?" repeated Mark. "*The* John Fleming? The one in the books? Agent Oh-Fourteen?"

"The same," Fleming admitted. "Although I didn't think it was *that* obvious."

"To be honest, it wasn't. It was a hunch, a gut feeling. Glad I was right; I would've hated to have embarrassed myself on a first meeting." He held out his hand.

"Well, it looks like you've got things in common to talk about. I've gotta help Bonnie take care of some loose ends in the Bahamas."

"Is everything okay?" asked Mark. "I stopped off at sick bay and looked in on Perry and Dot." His face was pained.

"As well as can be expected," answered Clark. "We're going to collect their stuff and bring it back here."

"Yeah, I suppose that makes sense. Can you do me a favor, Doc? The teddy bears ... let me take care of them, okay?"

Clark didn't question the strange request, but just nodded.

"Mark, will you show John around the ship?"

"Be happy to."

"See you both later," Clark said, and walked away.

"I was getting ready to go up to the big dome. It's like a habitat up there – marvelous! Would you like to join me?"

Fleming looked at the large man. Here was an easy way he could check out the station and find a way to escape without being discovered.

"Sure," he replied. "Let me put my bag in my room first."

The Bahamas

It was all rather well planned and executed.

Prior to leaving, Bonnie had contacted Hamilton and had informed him of her plans and the part he would play in those plans.

A special team headed by a couple of new additions to the crew, Alicia and Alistair Mundy, had the lead in taking care of the two *Mount Olympus* suites. Bonnie had been in contact with Alexandria and Phyllis, and would assure their evac from *Excesses*.

They all flew to the hospital site in the *Sky Cheetah*, which had modified its configuration to accommodate the passengers. From there, they transferred to Hamilton's van; it was crowded, but doable. The van went to *Excesses*, parking near the artists' suites, and everybody but Hamilton climbed out and followed their instructions.

Bonnie met up with Alexandria and Phyllis. She had alerted them that they'd be doing a quick extraction, and had instructed them to have everything ready, including Jill's and Cherry's possessions. They moved their stuff to the van and ran it out to the *Sky Cheetah*. Then they waited for the second team to arrive.

"Allie, you got that door open yet? We're on a timetable!"

"Can it, 'Lish!" replied the boy. "We've been inside for the past five minutes. How are you doing with checking them out?"

"Just finishing. I thought I'd add a sizable tip and a personal kudo from Perry."

"Very thoughtful of you, sis. Wrap it up and join us."

"F.A.B., bro!"

Both Alistair and Alicia Mundy were master thieves, as their parents had been thieves, and theirs, and theirs, leading back to Alistair's namesake. Their grandfather, Alexander Mundy, had worked for a secret organization within the United States government for a time, sanctioned to commit larcenous acts, until they had to disband due to budget cuts. One of the organization's final acts, however, was to give Alexander a full and complete pardon. By that time, he'd found that being one of the good guys was far more satisfying than the accumulation of personal wealth, so he operated independently, skirting the law, to help people who'd been wronged.

He retired in his mid-sixties, having taught his children everything he knew. And they taught their children – Alistair and Alicia – who continued the mission.

It was a friend of the family – Mitch Drake – who had contacted them and asked if they'd like to be part of his crew of operatives. Not exactly working for the government, it being more private practice, they jumped at the chance.

"Ready, bro?"

"F.A.B., sis," the older brother answered. "Let's go."

The elevator wasn't large enough for everything at once, so they took a couple of trips to get everything taken to the basement parking. But once that was accomplished and loaded aboard the van, Hamilton drove them all to the *Sky Cheetah*. It was a challenge to fit it all in, but the AI was quite capable of meeting the challenge. Once Quincy assured Clark everything was aboard, and that things were as comfortable as possible given the circumstances, the bronze man took the saucer up and they headed for *Orion*.

"You couldn't get Cherry's body?" Clark quietly asked Bonnie, who had taken the co-pilot's seat.

"They wouldn't release her to me. The coroner wanted to hold onto the body as evidence for the trial. But I may be able to get her later, once they know what the prosecution will need for trial."

Orion

The flying platform had concluded its business in Indonesia and was on its way to the Bahamas. Alexandria Foster and Phyllis Hudson were billeted in the extra house under the big dome.

A meeting was convened in Conference Room One to plan their next course of action.

The advantage of Conference Room One was the holographic display on the stage in the center. It gave them the opportunity to analyze their target as a three-dimensional construct, looking at the inside through the use of *Orion's* sensors. However, for such a large conference room, only a few people were assembled. There was Clark and Bonnie, Fleming, Dr. Cunningham, and Major Bixby. Bonnie had included Mark Eidemiller in on the meeting, just in case what was said was significant to why God had wanted him here.

Sebastian had scanned Xander Sanders' villa and property, where it now slowly rotated within the holographic display. Central to the property was the main house and a building that appeared to be a personal observatory.

"Can you show us the inside of the observatory?" asked Clark.

The observatory stood alone, and the walls of the dome became transparent, giving a clear view of the inside.

"What kind of a telescope is that?" Bonnie inquired to Sebastian.

"It does not match any known configuration," the AI reported.

"If it's not a telescope," inquired Fleming. "can you identify what it *is*?"

"I will attempt to do so. It will take time, however."

"Okay," Bonnie changed the subject. "Let's see the main house."

The main house now stood alone. Room after room glowed as Sebastian identified them.

"Can you move down?" asked Fleming. "Is there a basement, or rooms below surface level?"

"My sensors cannot penetrate the strata of the ground the house rests on."

"If it was deliberately done to prevent sensor penetration," commented Bixby. "It was a damn smart move."

Fleming stood and approached the display. "Can you show me the cliff side?"

The view expanded, moving around to show the main house down to below the water line.

"I did some SCUBA diving down here," Fleming pointed to below the water line. "I spotted a water inlet down there. Can you take us in closer?"

The view swiveled and descended along the cliff side, down into the 'water', and zooming in on the inlet. Sebastian was able to identify the make and model, but couldn't show anything beyond the metal grating. "What are the odds that the inlet leads to a room or cave under the villa?"

"There is an 87.3% certainty," answered Sebastian.

Fleming smiled; that would be his way into the villa.

"Diane," asked Bonnie, changing subjects. "What can you tell us about the nanobots?"

"Well, the nanobots I found in Mr. Fleming's blood are the same as were in the samples from the others."

"Can I ask a question?" It was Mark. "Heidi Neufswanger's body had been examined by the CDC, but they didn't find any nanobots. No disrespect intended, Doctor, but why were you able to find the nanobots when the CDC couldn't?"

"Fair question," she smiled. "The most obvious possibility is that they're simply keeping it quiet, not wanting to invoke panic. The other possibility is that, since all the samples I've examined have come from *living* bodies, once the host is *dead*, the nanobots self-destruct, and the evidence is destroyed."

Clark summarized. "So what do we know so far? The nanobots are what is causing the aging in the victims. The aging can be rapid – as in the case of the deaths, which took place in mere minutes – or slower as in the case of Perry, Dot, Mitch, and Jill. The same nanobots are also responsible for Mr. Fleming's and Mr. Tillman's youth." He paused. "The person behind this all, as Mr. Fleming has pointed out, is Ernest Richard Tillman."

"Let's just cut to the chase here, shall we?" interrupted Fleming. "You carry missiles on this battle wagon! Why don't you just wait until you can confirm that Tillman's home, then hit it point-blank and obliterate the whole bloody cliff!"

"Mr. Fleming," replied Clark coldly. "It is almost a surety that these nanobots receive their programming once they're within their host. And if that is the case, it originates from here. If we destroy the villa without securing the capability to reprogram the nanobots, we condemn our friends to an eternity in stasis. We welcome your expertise and knowledge." He paused. "You have your goals, sir. But here, our goal is to help *others* first. Now do you have any further suggestions?"

Fleming's eyes narrowed with anger, then he blinked. "All right. What about a bloody jamming signal?"

Bixby answered, "We'd need to know the frequency of the controlling signal. However, we're not taking into the account the possibility of a fail-safe."

"Explain," asked Clark.

"Remember Kananga's operation? He had a fail-safe. If things were cut off on his end, the satellite would release everything in one fell swoop rather than one per day." He paused. "Now, assuming that the nanobots are already in their hosts, they may be receiving some sort of signal from the source – like sending out a ping just to make sure the nanobot is still active. Dr. Cunningham had suggested that the nanobots self-destruct within the host when the host is dead. So, if the source of the signal were somehow interrupted or discontinued, a fail-safe or backup program might kick in – such as causing the nanobots to self-destruct inside a *living* body."

"Excellent point," agreed Clark. "We can't just destroy the nanobots, we have to reprogram them. And for that we'll need to find the control source and take possession of it. So we'll need –"

An alert signal broke their concentration. Sebastian announced, "***There has been another death due to advanced old age. Sending to main screen ...***"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Bahamas

The man in the back of the black limousine had the small television on, tuned to CNN. But he didn't pay attention to it until it suddenly announced a SPECIAL NEWS BULLETIN.

"Ah," the man commented to himself. "It's about bloody time."

He turned up the sound on the female anchor. Her voice was a combination of urgent and professional, with just enough compassion to keep her from appearing aloof. With video footage from ESPN providing the visual details, she summarized the facts of what had happened. Several

members of the Soviet gymnastics team were giving an exhibition in Voltesgrad. Suddenly, three of them – one boy and two girls – appeared to become ill. The team's doctor examined them on the spot, but it became all too clear that they were showing symptoms of the alleged *Dorian Gray Virus* that had already taken the lives of three others. As the video footage emphasized the grisly details, she reported that the three gymnasts were dead within a few minutes, and the others were being held in quarantine. She was beginning to repeat the story when the picture suddenly flickered and changed to a still image. It was a large, blood-red, glowing image of the Greek symbol Omega against a black background.

It was dark and ominous and, to the man in the limousine, perfect.

After a few moments of silence to get people's attention, a voice spoke. It was digitally-altered and equally frightening.

"We are Omega. We are responsible for the deaths you have referred to as the Dorian Gray Virus. The fact that the deaths have occurred all around the world serves to illustrate that we can strike anywhere and at any time." The voice paused. "Our demands are simple: from the three nations who have been affected – the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union – each of you will deliver one hundred pounds of refined uranium pellets to a location we will disclose within the hour. If you do not comply within twenty-four hours, you will witness the death of every man, woman, and child, of a major city in the world. End transmission."

The screen returned to the female newscaster. Her professionalism had been shattered, and she was emotionally shaken. She pointed out that what they had just seen had gone out over every network in the world at the same time but in different languages.

"Excellent," muttered the man, switching the television off. "Excellent!"

The weather was starting to turn bad as the limousine arrived at the villa. *Oh, bother*, the man in the back thought as he considered what it would take to console the inevitable disgruntled guests at his resort. *Another tropical storm*. The driver instinctively pulled into the garage, and the man climbed out of the vehicle. He went through the door connecting the garage with the main house, and made his way to the laboratory far belowground.

"Well done, Hans, well done!" he boomed as he came in the door.

The older man turned around and smiled. *"Danke, Herr Tillman. The second broadcast will be transmitted in –"* He consulted his watch. *"– fifty-one minutes."*

Tillman didn't need to ask if precautions had been taken to keep the transmission from being tracked back to here; the signal had been bounced around the world several times.

"Very good." Tillman paused. "By the way, has there been any news on those meddlers we dispatched the other day?"

"I have heard nothing, Herr Tillman," the man answered. "Their bodies will probably be found in some field in a few weeks."

"Yesss," agreed Tillman. "Thank you, Hans."

Tillman returned to the surface, taking him past the 'observatory'. He stopped and looked at the odd machine pointing towards the skies. Dr. Geiger had procured it several years ago. He called it a mind-control device, and he cared for it like a favorite hobby. Tillman had initially questioned the extraordinary expense, but – considering what the good doctor had done for him – he allowed it.

Tillman walked over to one of the windows that faced the water. Above the terrace he could see a carpet of dark clouds approaching.

Orion

Conference Room One was abuzz with shifting conversations, primarily centered around Omega's ultimatum.

"Three hundred pounds of uranium pellets," Major Bixby sighed. "With that, they can do anything from making their own nuclear weapons to selling them to the highest bidder on the global market. If you'll forgive the compliment, it's brilliant!"

"I'm sure he'd appreciate your praise," quipped Fleming sarcastically. "So how is this going to change your plans?"

"It won't," answered Clark evenly. "Our plans are to confirm the source of the nanobot control signal, send in a team, and capture the installation. All that has changed is the imminence."

Major Bixby asked, "Is it possible to locate just where in that villa the signal comes from? It would make it a lot easier than wandering around searching."

Bonnie referred it to Sebastian.

"A tropical storm system has moved into the airspace above the islands," the AI informed them. "Atmospheric conditions are hindering satellite scans."

"Are you saying that we'll need to be practically overhead before you can accurately determine the location of the nanobot control signal?" asked Bonnie.

"That is correct."

"How long until we arrive in the Bahamas?" Bonnie inquired.

"Eighty-four minutes."

"Okay," Bonnie addressed the group. "So we've got a little bit of time before we reach the Bahamas. Major, you've got your work cut out for you."

"So what else is new?" smiled Bixby. "It'll give me time to make sure the team is ready."

Bonnie stood and dismissed everyone.

"John, you didn't seem too enthusiastic about Doc's plans."

Fleming turned to Mark as they reached their adjacent quarters. "I wasn't. We know Tillman lives there, and that's where the controls are. We should just demolish the whole place."

"It would certainly end the threat. If we knew for sure nobody would be hurt by it, I'd help you blow it up myself." He shrugged. "I'm sure you'll get a chance to do what you'd like to."

The two men disappeared into their quarters. Mark came out a minute later and headed up to the medical wing. Dr. Cunningham was in a separate room next to sick bay.

"You had the same thought?" she asked him.

"Yeah. I was going to my quarters, but I had to come up here. How are they doing?"

She looked at the four stasis chambers. "No change. Oh, I do like your little 'additions!'."

Mark grinned. On top of two of the stasis chambers sat two small teddy bears – one blue and one purple. "I know they can't see them, or even sense they're there. But it's a nice touch."

"Very thoughtful," she added. "I'll make sure they don't fall off."

"Appreciate it." He paused. "There's something special about a teddy bear. Something – if you'll forgive the phrase – *magic*."

"I used to work in an emergency ward in Chicago. I've seen what you're talking about."

He turned to her. "So what about you? You got a furry friend?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Sorry."

"We've got to do something about that," he said with a sly smirk. "I'll get back to you."

She laughed. They stood there for a few minutes, silently observing the stasis chambers. Finally Mark asked, "Do you think we'll find a cure?"

"Nice thing about stasis – as long as there's power to the chambers, they've got all the time in the world. Personally, I don't think we'll need to wait that long. Do you?"

"Yeah," Mark agreed.

Fleming went into his quarters. Normally, he would've agreed with the big man, but he had his own purpose – kill Tillman. And nothing was going to stand in his way. Thanks to his neighbor's tour of the station, he knew how he'd make his escape.

In the hangar bay were aircraft with exotic power sources and mysterious operating systems that were always kept under close guard. However, there were other aircraft, including small helicopters that resembled his own Little Nellie, that weren't guarded quite as closely. One of those would be his escape craft. He would fly it away from *Orion* and ditch it somewhere along the coast near to Tillman's villa. Then he'd swim to the inlet using the compact rebreather unit Coggins had provided, and swim through the inlet to wherever it came out.

He had enough guns and ammunition to kill anybody who came between him and Tillman. And if he couldn't get close enough, he brought enough D-17 – an experimental explosive a hundred times more destructive than C-4 – to pulverize the entire cliff right under Tillman's feet. And if Fleming perished in the process ... it didn't matter. As long as Tillman was definitely and irreversibly dead, he would die a happy man.

His only foreseeable problem was in getting the helicopter out of the station without alerting Bixby and his troops. The obvious solution would be a diversion. And if a diversion didn't come his way ... well, he'd just have to *create* one.

The *Orion* entered the airspace over the Bahamas. But due to the tropical storm, which was increasing in destructive force, they had to carefully watch their altitude. Even then, the ride was a bit bumpy, and precautions had to be made to assure their safety.

This close to their objective, Sebastian had no problem locating the exact location of the origin of the nanobots' control signal. Major Bixby's team had been given the coordinates, and were preparing to depart in their flight suits, when the unexpected occurred.

Tillman stood at one of the large windows facing the terrace. Tropical storms were a necessary evil, even in Paradise. And he had seen his share of them in the years he'd been on the islands. Off in the distance the sky lit up with a flash of lightning. He appreciated them like others appreciated fireworks.

But ... what was that? There was something else up there, something that didn't belong. He walked over to a floor-mounted telescope he used for watching distant ships and angled it up in the direction of the object. Another flash of lightning caused the clouds to glow brightly ... and there it was again! It had the shape of a very large brick, and was huge when contrasted against the backdrop of clouds. In a single moment of realization, he knew it was some sort of aircraft, just floating there in the distance!

He walked over to a small picture hanging on the wall. It was hinged, and behind it lay several buttons, a speaker, and a telephone handset. The handset was not connected; he pulled it free and

pushed the red button. At the same time, alarms went off throughout the house and in the laboratories below.

"**Action stations!**" he barked into the handset. "**Unidentified flying object hovering off the cliff side, altitude unknown! Ready defenses!**"

"**RED ALERT! RED ALERT!**"

All aboard the *Orion*, things changed. The pleasant color scheme of the walls had changed to a utilitarian grey, and Sebastian's mellow Morgan Freeman voice had been replaced by the more authoritative tones of *24*'s Kiefer Sutherland.

"**We're visible!**" exclaimed Ed Elric from his post on the Bridge.

"**Missile targeting!**" exclaimed Al Elric from his post next to his brother. Below them, part of the cliff face had opened up, revealing a bank of missiles. Suddenly, three of them shot out and made a beeline for the large station that was barely obscured in the cloud bank.

"**Evasive!**" exclaimed Bonnie, who had just reached the Bridge. "**Intercept!**"

John Fleming had his diversion.

Grabbing his bag, he left from his quarters and made his way to the hangar bay. Everybody was more involved with their own duties to pay the least attention to him. Reaching the hangar bay, he went right to one of the smaller helicopters, secured the bag behind the seat, climbed in, and started the craft up. As he exited the hangar bay, he felt the turbulence of the storm around him. He allowed himself to fall clear of the *Orion* before pulling back on the stick and banking away from the battlefield.

Tillman watched as his three missiles were easily intercepted by three from the alien craft.

"What a magnificent vessel!" he commented to himself. "I must have it!" With a smile on his face, he barked into the handset, "Dr. Geiger! It's time to use that mind-control device of yours! Take over that aircraft!"

Since he was familiar with the contours of the island, Fleming knew there was a small stretch of beach not far from Tillman's villa. Despite the winds of the storm around him, he was able to set the helicopter down safely. Unloading his bag, he donned his swim gear and rebreather as he periodically glanced up at *Orion* above.

"Nothing personal, Doc," he said to no one. "This is something I need to do."

He slung a water-sealed messenger bag over his shoulder and secured it around his waist, making sure he could move freely. Then he walked into the water and went under.

Mark Eidemiller didn't know what to do.

He hadn't prepared for something like this. Figuring he'd be out of place on the Bridge, he just stayed in his quarters and prayed.

Suddenly he felt a disturbance in the air around him that caused him to open his eyes. On the floor in front of him was a box. He picked it up. At his touch, it seemed to dissolve before him, prompting him to set it on the bed next to him and move away. A few seconds later, all that remained were two odd headbands and a note.

Mark picked up the note and read it: "*Put this on. Give the other to Clark and get him to the Power Suit! Don't tell him about me. This is it. You're ready. Thanks.*"

It was signed *Jenny*.

"Jenny?" he repeated with a chuckle. Then he realized, *This is why God wanted me here. Jenny couldn't get Perry's help, so she sought me.* "Wow."

He looked over at the note; it was dissolving like the box. "Well, what do you know? Self-destructing paper. No evidence from the future."

He looked at the headband. "How do you turn this thing on?" After turning it around in his hands for a minute and seeing no obvious controls, he thought, *Maybe it turns itself on when you wear it.* He slipped it over his bald head, but there was no out-of-the-ordinary sensation. Looking at himself in the mirror, he observed, *I look like Jor-El from the comics.*

"Okay, let's do this," he said aloud to his image in the mirror.

He grabbed a metal cane and the other headband, and left the room.

"Herr Tillman!" reported Dr. Geiger. "The mind-control device is trained on the vessel and is ready at your command!"

Tillman looked through the telescope. "Proceed!"

Everyone aboard the Orion suddenly froze in their tracks. To an observer, their faces took on a blank expression, as if they had been exposed to Verity-3.

Mark was walking as fast as he could through one of the corridors, following the swift flow of traffic as well as he could on his bum legs, when all of a sudden everyone around him stopped. He couldn't stop in time, and rear-ended a man in a green coverall.

He looked down at the man, who was still breathing but didn't appear to be injured ... or moving, either.

"Oh, crap!" he exclaimed at the statues around him. "Sebastian, are you still there?"

"Yes, sir," echoed Kiefer Sutherland's voice.

"Do you know what's going on here?"

"Apart from yourself, everyone has stopped moving."

"Why?"

"I do not know. There is a possibility that an external control has taken over their bodies."

"Mind control?"

"Affirmative."

He nodded, moving his hand up to touch the headband. *Thanks, Jenny*, he thought. "Where's Clark?"

The AI reported Clark's location.

"Okay," he instructed. "Take me to Clark! Shortest trip!"

With Sebastian controlling the lifts and directing him every step of the way, Mark soon found Clark. He was standing in one of the corridors, caught in mid-step, his expression just as frozen as everyone else's. Mark lifted the headband up to place over Clark's head.

Suddenly Clark came to life, and his hands reached up to grab Mark's wrists.

Mark didn't know what he had done to trigger this, but he couldn't get through the bronze man's vice-like grip. Suddenly he shouted, "***Sebastian! Override exoskeleton – authorization Alpha-Echo-three-five! Two second stun!***" Clark was suddenly hit by a wave of electricity that completely immobilized him; it was only his exoskeleton that kept him from falling over. Mark quickly pulled free from his grip and jammed the headset over the top of Clark's head.

Clark's eyes opened, but there was more life in them now. "What happened?" he asked, puzzled.

"I don't know what all is going on. All I know is that these headbands are the only thing separating us from everybody else aboard *Orion*."

He looked around. "It looks like mind control."

"That's what Sebastian thought," he appended. "Do you have some sort of Power Suit on board?"

Clark looked shocked. "How do you know about that?"

Mark chuckled. "Would you believe a guardian angel? Anyhow, we need to get you into that and storm Tillman's villa. It's the only way to free *Orion* and get control of the nanobots."

"Quite right! Let's go!"

"Dr. Geiger?"

"Herr Tillman, they are under our control. What would you have them do?"

Tillman looked up at the *Orion* and smiled. "For right now, let them maintain their altitude. I wouldn't want that magnificent craft to crash with everybody asleep at the controls." He paused, then added, "Just in case there might be someone aboard who isn't under our control, have those who aren't directly in control of the craft be on the lookout for stragglers. If they find anyone ... kill them."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Orion

Clark directed Mark in the application of the XV-12 over his exoskeleton.

"You said Mitch gave this to you?"

"Yes, and I've wondered why he didn't set this up so I could put it on without assistance. It's something I'll have to ask him once this is resolved."

Once the procedure was complete, Mark looked at him and commented, "Impressive."

"You better get your flight suit on."

"It's in the other room," he answered. "So what's our plan of attack?"

"I've got the coordinates of the source of the signal for the nanobots. I'll go after it while you take out the mind-control device!"

"Any guess as to what the mind-control device looks like?"

"I don't know," he answered with an apologetic tone. "Do your best. Besides, *this* is why God wanted you here. I think God will make things clear."

"Now *that* makes sense. Any recommendations on weapons?"

"A few. But we might run into a little interference getting to the armory."

"If they're anything like *you* were, we're talking zombieland. Any way of temporarily putting them to sleep?"

"Anesthetic gas. Since Sebastian's unaffected, he can lay down cover on just those sections between here and there."

"My flight suit's next door; let me grab it, then you can give me the tour of the armory."

Fleming reached the water inlet. It didn't take much for the thermite charge to burn through the steel grating. Slowly he made his way through the flooded duct to an empty underground cavern. He removed the swim fins but kept his rebreather close. He readjusted the messenger bag to make his supplies more accessible. He strapped on leg sheaths and filled them with throwing knives. His bag carried two submachine guns, a couple of high-caliber pistols, plenty of ammunition for both, and a few special items. As he ran across the D-17, he decided to plant a couple of charges in the cavern.

He found what looked like a corridor and a set of stone steps leading upward. *Stairway to Heaven*, he thought to himself. *And Heaven is me, sending Tillman to Hell.*

Clark and Mark stood in the open doorway of the airlock. They could feel the winds of the storm below, and could barely see the villa.

"Nasty," commented Mark through the intercoms.

"Ready, Mark?"

He smiled. "I am now. In the words of *another* Doctor ... *allons-y!*"

And he dove head first out of the airlock.

"*Allons-y*," echoed Clark, and followed.

"What the hell is *that!*"

"It looks like a flying robot, Herr Tillman! No ... *two* ... one big one, and one smaller one."

"They have *robots* aboard? Is that even a vessel of this planet?" He turned to the old scientist. "It matters not. Dr. Geiger, shoot those robots down – use both our missiles, and theirs!"

"Ja, Herr Tillman!"

Sebastian informed Clark and Mark of the attack.

"Keep going!" Clark ordered. "I'll run interference!"

"Gotcha!" Mark replied. "I've run evasion drills like this! See you on the other side!"

With a burst of speed, Mark continued towards the villa. He saw a missile leave its tube in the cliff face, and instinctively reacted to it. He went into a corkscrew dive, barely evading the rocket, and then stopped in mid-air. Clark had been tracking the missile, and sent a projectile of his own to intercept it; his aim was true, and the missile detonated.

Mark suddenly knew where the mind-control device was.

Clark finished taking care of the missiles. He saw Mark make a beeline for the observatory, and smiled.

Then he saw the other man. He was just there, like a statue in the midst of the storm, standing on the terrace. He was dressed in a dark suit that was soaked, but he didn't appear to be feeling the effects of the wind and rain. Touching down on the terrace a few yards from him, Clark's amplified voice boomed, "*Get out of my way!*"

"I am Gamma," the other man replied in a gravelly metallic voice. "You will leave now, or I will destroy you."

Clark raised an arm. From a concealed tube, a burst of mercy bullets sailed unerringly towards their target. They impacted on his chest, but didn't seem to have any effect on him. Then Clark launched a series of projectiles which landed at the other man's feet, releasing a cloud of anesthetic gas. The man appeared to continue breathing, but the gas had as much effect as the mercy bullets.

His only solution was to deal with the man in hand-to-hand combat. Deliberately refraining from using his amplified strength against another human being, he rushed the man and tried to use martial arts on him. However, much to his surprise, the man seemed to have almost inhuman reflexes. He shifted to one side, then delivered a hammer blow to the armored suit as he passed by. Clark went down, but turned and swung his legs to cut the other man's legs out from under him. The strategy worked, and the man dropped to his back. Clark swiveled and tried to deliver an elbow to the midsection; it struck, but didn't seem to have any effect on the stranger.

Whoever this guy is, he's certainly durable. Clark smiled. *Let's see just how durable.*

Bending over and running like a charging rhino, Clark slammed into the other man, sending the two of them through the wall and into the villa in a cloud of plaster and brick. Wrestling like two giants, antique furniture became kindling in their wake. Clark shoved Gamma into a bookshelf,

sending books flying. Then Gamma threw Clark off, sending him flying several yards back into a table.

Laying on his back, his eyes grew large with surprise.

The other man's rain-soaked suit had been ripped and torn during the battle. His left sleeve was missing, and his chest was exposed. But instead of naked flesh, there was an arm of steel, and a chest showing wiring and circuitry.

"*Thank you very much*," he addressed the other man.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I can do *this* without the slightest degree of guilt!"

He raised his arms and launched several of the same projectiles that he used to intercept the earlier missiles. Clark thanked God that they hadn't been damaged during their battle. A few swerved clear of Gamma, but the rest were right on target. The missiles blasted the robot to pieces. Clark raised his arms to protect himself from chunks of flaming metal.

"Well, that was noisy," Clark commented to himself after the blast. "Sebastian, take me to the source of the signal! And let's hope Gamma was an only child!"

Mark Eidemiller landed near the observatory. As he touched down, he pulled out a metal tube a foot long and pressed a stud on the side; it telescoped into a walking cane. He retracted his helmet as he rested his weight on the cane. He grimaced with pain as he approached the strange device they'd seen in the holographic display, the one they couldn't identify. Now he knew what it was.

But the machine wasn't alone. An old man in a white lab coat was concentrating on the controls.

"*You!*" he addressed the old man. "*Away from the machine – now!*"

The man looked up and saw Mark limping towards him. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm here to stop you."

"*You?*" exclaimed Dr. Geiger with a laugh. "You can barely move! You need a cane just to walk! How can you tell *me* to give up?" He yelled out several names, and half a dozen back-alley types with baseball bats came out and surrounded Mark. They circled him and used the bats to poke and prod the fat man. One knocked the cane out from under him; he lost his balance and dropped ungracefully onto his backside. As Mark tried reaching for the cane, one of the thugs grabbed it and waved it tauntingly, laughing.

Mark seemed to deflate.

"I can't fight you," he whimpered. "I was ... bluffing. I've got diabetic neuropathy in both legs, arthritis in my ankle and knees. I'm hardly a threat to you. I was hoping you'd fall for the bluff. But I didn't count on you not being alone." He shakily got to his feet, balancing uncertainly. Then he looked over at Geiger and declared. "You're never going to get away with this."

The others broke into raucous laughter.

Geiger walked away from the machine and looked at Mark. "And what makes you think you can stop us?"

"Would you believe that I know martial arts?" Mark asked lamely.

Again, they broke into rousing laughter, but they spread farther outward from the bald man.

"Martial arts?" spat Geiger. "You can barely move!"

Mark shifted back and forth, putting weight on one leg, then the other. His face mirrored a lot of pain as he struggled to remain steady. "Can you give me back my cane? It's really hard for me to stand without it."

The thug holding it tightened his grip and laughed at his prize.

"Then I guess all I can say is –" His hand fashioned into a gun, his index finger the barrel, and pointed it at the thug. "– *zotz!*"

The thug's expression turned to sudden surprise. All eyes were on him as his body stiffened, then went into convulsions. After a few seconds, he finally dropped like a marionette with its strings cut, and there was the unmistakable scent of ozone in the air.

"Taser canes ... gotta love 'em."

All eyes turned back to the fat, bald cripple.

But he didn't appear to be crippled anymore. In fact, he was standing pretty sturdy now.

"I told you to give me my cane back," he commented nonchalantly. "And you all fell for it, too. While the rest of you were gawking at Stupid getting tazed over there, I was working these controls *here*." He pointed at the controls on his right sleeve. "I've reduced my weight by over half ... takes a lot of stress off the legs, that's for sure. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to demolish that machine over there."

"Are you insane?" Geiger declared defiantly. "We outnumber you seven-to-one! We're armed, and we're faster than you!"

"That may be true," Mark smiled at them. "You smegheads have threatened the world, and have hurt my friends. And I am willing to gamble ... that none of you is one-tenth ... as **PISSED OFF** –" The joviality in his face gave way to intense fury. "– **AS I AM?**"

Then they heard the music.

It emanated from his costume. It consisted of drums and horns and a beat that stirred the soul. It was vaguely unsettling to the other men. But to the fat man, it had a totally different effect. He stood taller than when he first came into their midst, and his face had morphed into a mix of determination, self-confidence ... and concentrated anger.

Dr. Geiger pointed and screamed, "**GET HIM!**"

Five men brandished their baseball bats and rushed Mark.

They didn't have a chance.

Mark exploded into action, moving through them like a slippery fat hog, incapable of being captured. He evaded them and retrieved his cane from the unconscious sixth thug. Then he really became dangerous, attacking like a whirling dervish, striking them four and five times for each blow they tried inflicting on him. Dr. Geiger joined in the fight, only to end up with a number of bruises.

Before the piece of music had ended, Mark Eidemiller stood triumphant. He stopped the music, then checked his leg pockets; the small but insanely-explosive charges were still on him and in one piece. He looked at the mind-control device.

"*Sebastian, are you listening?*" he said aloud. "*Let's blast this thing!*"

Two minutes later, the charges were planted, the others had been dragged a safe distance from the device, and Mark set off the detonator. With an ear-shattering blast, the mind-control device turned into a neat pile of metal and plastic.

Standing, Mark extended his helmet and got on the radio. "*Orion, this is Mark. Come in, Orion. Orion, this is Mark. Can anyone up there hear me?*" Receiving no response, he took a deep breath and yelled, "**DAMMIT, BONNIE – WAKE UP!**"

"Mark?" it was Bonnie; her voice was shaky. "Where ... where are you?"

"In a moment. Is everybody all right?"

"Yes, I ... I think so. What happened?"

"I'm at Tillman's villa. That 'telescope' you found at the observatory was a mind-control device. It's been destroyed."

"Wow," she breathed. "Where's Clark?"

"He went in search of the nanobots signal. I'm going to follow him. Are you invisible?"

"Yes."

"Good. Stand by," he instructed. "And keep us in prayer."

Mark ordered Sebastian to take him in the same direction that Clark went. Then he followed.

CHAPTER TWENTY

As Mark went down the stone steps into the bowels of the villa, he saw a lot of bodies. Many of them were unconscious, presumably the work of Doc's mercy bullets or anesthetic gas. The rest weren't unconscious – they were dead. It sickened him, seeing just how violent one man could be.

He followed the signal and the trail to a laboratory.

At the far end of the room was one whole wall covered with electronics. Standing before them was the man everyone was after: Ernest Richard Tillman, aka Xander Sanders. His hands were poised over a bank of controls, centering around one ominous large red button.

Several yards behind him was Fleming; he was bleeding from numerous wounds, but he still had the strength to hold two submachine guns at Tillman's back. The expression on Fleming's face was restrained fury.

Farther back by a dozen yards was Clark; his Power Suit had taken a bit of damage of its own, but it seemed to still be operational. His helmet was retracted so he didn't look so much like a comic book character. His hands were up defensively before him, and it sounded like he was trying to talk Fleming out of emptying both guns into Tillman.

"Don't kill him, Fleming!" Clark pleaded with the agent. "Tillman! Get your hand off the button!"

"He has to die," he answered coldly, his aim unwavering. "For Tracy."

Tillman removed his hand from the button and turned to face Fleming. He laughed. "You are *so* predictable, my old foe! You have slaughtered everyone in your path just to reach me, and yet you didn't notice the button beneath my foot that lowered a bulletproof Plexiglas wall between us."

He raised a fist and rapped on the invisible shield.

Fleming let go an angry yell and opened fire with both submachine guns. Mark and Clark quickly extended their helmets over their heads to protect themselves from flying shrapnel. Fleming didn't stop until he ran out of ammunition.

Tillman, totally pleased with himself, turned around and poised his hand over the ominous red button. "Say goodbye to New York City," he announced, and pushed the button. Laughing, he pulled a lever, and a bank of electronics slid into the floor, revealing the entrance to a secret passageway. "Farewell, Mr. Fleming! Until next time ..."

And he disappeared into the dark.

"*Nooooo!*" Fleming mourned loudly, and smashed the empty guns ineffectively against the Plexiglas.

Clark retracted his helmet. "It's okay, John," he comforted. "The signal never got out. Sebastian was able to separate the frequencies and jam the fatal one."

Fleming wasn't listening. He dropped the empty guns and reached into the half-shredded messenger bag. He slapped a small object against the Plexiglas, then took a couple of steps back and pulled out a remote control. He didn't face Clark and Mark, but coldly announced, "I'm sorry, but I can't allow Tillman to live." He prepared to push the button.

Clark didn't say a word, but raised an arm and fired a volley of mercy bullets into Fleming's back. They took effect almost immediately, and the man dropped to the ground. Clark rushed over to him and carefully removed the detonator from his hand.

Mark joined him. "*Orion's* okay," he informed. "The mind-control device is trashed."

"Thanks."

"I'm sorry Tillman got away."

Clark looked up at him and grinned. "Oh, I wouldn't be too sure about that."

Tillman was almost giddy with excitement.

It was too bad that Fleming hadn't joined him; it would have been a glorious alliance. But the man was too obsessed with his vendetta.

His plan for ransom had failed, but he still carried out his threat. With all the nanobots saturating the New York City water system, they'd estimated a good eight million people had ingested them. Considering tourists and others who had passed through the city, the body count could number as much as ten million people.

He assumed Dr. Geiger and the others had fallen to Fleming's sense of justice. He would miss the old professor, but casualties were part of the game. He, on the other hand, had a full life as a young man ahead of him. And he had not been lax all this time. He had considered the possibility his lair would be destroyed, his identity revealed. He had secretly prepared many more lairs around the world. And they all had escape routes like this.

He took the secret passageway to a small room where his mini-sub was waiting. Never one to leave out a way for him to escape, this lair had a tunnel that led to a small outcropping of rock a couple of miles from the island. He would take the sub down the tunnel, activate the explosive bolts that would pop open the other end, and allow him to sail into open waters where he would rendezvous with a support vessel. While the rest of the world reeled from the effects of the nanobots, he would flee to another lair and plan his next scheme.

He climbed into the mini-sub, closed and sealed the hatch, and flooded the tunnel. Unhurried, he armed the explosive bolts at the other end of the tunnel and started the sub moving. It smoothly glided through the tunnel on rails. Tillman chuckled at his own cleverness, thinking to himself, *I am a criminal genius, after all.*

The explosive bolts went off, clearing the way into open waters. However, as the mini-sub emerged, he was shocked to see a heavy net blocking his path. Impossible to avoid, he hit it at full speed, and was thrown forward. As he looked around him, feeling like a fly caught in a web, he saw two dark-suited frogmen on either side of him. They attached objects to the mini-sub's outer hull and swam away.

"Ernest Richard Tillman," a somber voice echoed in the small craft. "This is Major Raymond Louis Bixby of the *Orion*. You will surrender your vessel immediately and prepare to be taken aboard. Should you not comply, I *will* detonate the explosive device on the side of your vessel." He paused; the tone of his voice was chilling, even to Tillman. "You hurt friends of mine; I do not take that lightly. And I believe I would be doing the world a great favor by blasting you to Kingdom Come. But I *will* give you a chance to capitulate – just *one* chance. What is your decision: surrender ... or die?"

"But ... how did you know?" Tillman shot back, stupefied.

"What do you think this is – *1968*?" laughed Bixby. "We've known about your escape tunnel for quite a while. All we had to do is wait for you to come to us. Thank you, by the way. Now, sir, my patience is running thin. *What is your decision?*"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Orion

John Fleming woke up in a white room, strapped to a hospital bed.

"Good morning."

Fleming looked over. Doc Savage stood in the doorway. Without being invited, he walked over and sat on the chair next to the bed.

"*Let me out of here!*" he bellowed.

"No," the bronze man said simply. "While you were shooting up Tillman's men, you took several hits – forty-seven, if I'm not mistaken, and that includes the shrapnel you caught from when you were trying to shoot through that Plexiglas shield. After Dr. Cunningham patched you up, she ordered this for your own safety."

"You can't do this to me!"

"You're a fine one to talk, John. You would've blown us all up if I hadn't shot you in the back with mercy bullets."

"I couldn't let Tillman get away!"

"Believe me, Tillman did *not* get away. Our men were waiting for him at the end of his escape tunnel. We've got him in custody now ... and believe me, where we have him, there's no way he can escape."

"Where's that?"

"In one of our stasis chambers."

Fleming actually smiled at that.

"He needs to die," he stated.

Clark asked conversationally, "What good will it do for you to kill him?"

"My Tracy would be able to rest in peace."

"That won't do it, but you won't believe what will."

"I don't want to hear any of your religious crap!"

"I know," replied Clark. "That's why I won't waste my breath trying to talk to you about it. Instead, I can tell you about the stupidest thing *I* ever did. You want to hear that?"

"Do I have a choice?"

The bronze man smiled. "Not really." He paused. "You know about my history. I used to be one of the most famous and influential men in the world. We were the heroes people called upon in times of trouble. We fought villains just about as amazing as yours, if not more fantastic. I strove for greatness because the world expected it from me. I couldn't show weakness because the public would've torn me to shreds.

And then one day I encountered a villain named Wail who claimed to be a demon from Hell. I figured the man to be a lunatic. He took me on a chase deep underground, into the caves of Maine. Monk and I followed, but he fell behind. I, however, was determined to catch him – and I did. I locked him away in a makeshift cell, a locked room with no possible way of escape. Wail claimed that the room wouldn't hold him, but I figured that was just the ravings of a madman. But then he did.

"Well, that was the worse thing that could've happened to me. I was the *famous* Doc Savage. Like Perry Mason, I *never* lost a case, and I always got my man. I was always able to explain the unexplainable, solve any mystery, outthink any villain. But now my pride had been hurt, my weakness had been exposed, and I wasn't about to take this lying down.

"I returned to the caves of Maine. I went alone. I did not tell anyone, let alone my associates, what I was doing. I went unarmed. And I was *blind* to the fact that somebody else had been watching *me*, waiting for me to do just what I was doing. With both eyes open, I walked into a trap. They knocked me out and put me into suspended animation for fifty years. Nobody knew where I had vanished to. All they knew was that I had vanished."

Clark paused. "Did you ever pay attention to the Senate Hearings on the Crime College?"

"Some," answered Fleming. "From what I saw, it was a mess."

"Imagine the world I returned to. Fifty years of my life had been lost. All of my associates had scattered. One had committed suicide. They all believed I had abandoned them. My own cousin, Pat, blamed me for all that had happened while I was in hibernation. When she saw me for the first time, she tried to have me killed. And the world – all those people who used to look up to me as a hero – now saw me as a monster and a criminal."

"But that's changed now," defended Fleming. "You're a free man."

"Yes, that's true," Clark agreed. "But then the strangest thing of all happened. Remember the man I thought was a demon – Wail? Well, believe it or not, he truly was a supernatural being, and he was back to continue to torment me. The old feelings welled up inside of me, and I wanted to destroy him in the worst way. Eventually, we faced off. I tried to fight him on spiritual terms, and was winning. But then he challenged me to a man-to-man fight. He dared me, and I did something real stupid – I fought him. Then, when it looked like I was going to win, he double-crossed me and brought the roof down on me. That's how I got paralyzed."

There was silence in the room.

"You know, John, in all honesty I can't really blame Wail for what happened to me. I was the one who wanted to get my revenge."

"You're not a very good psychologist, Doc, comparing you and Wail to me and Tillman. But Wail didn't murder *your* wife."

"No, he didn't. And, although Wail was instrumental in the events that occurred, the fault is not his. The fault is mine, because I let my pride get the best of me."

"So you're saying that *my* pride is what pushed me to kill Tillman?"

"I'm not saying anything. *You* came to that conclusion. And now that he has been apprehended and will pay for everything he's done, just what are you going to do with your life?"

Fleming stared at the ceiling. "What indeed?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Orion Six Months Later

"Ready, hon?"

Dot called down from the second floor, "Just finishing."

As I waited for her, my mind went back to all that had happened in the last few months. Dr. Cunningham and her scientific crew had made the breakthrough on the nanobots, finding a way not only to control them, but to improve on it. We had been in stasis for three months before they found the way of reversing the aging. They also took care of Dot's brain tumors, removing them completely.

I looked at my hands. Dot and I were able to get replacements for our wedding rings, but it was unlikely that they'd ever find my Uncle Perry's ring in the debris of Tillman's villa. The good news was, I didn't need it anymore. In some way I'll never completely understand, the nanobots were able to give me the capability of becoming invisible as if I still had my ring. Diane said it had to do with all the 'stuff' from the ring that my body had absorbed over the years; the nanobots were able to grab onto that and give me full control over it. In her words, I became a human embodiment of the ring.

Amazing.

Once they had taken care of us, Clark was the next obvious choice. They repaired his body completely and even shaved a few decades off of his chronological age, so he was now closer to Bonnie's age. Granted, it was kinda interesting seeing him in those exoskeletons, but I wouldn't change things for the world.

Dot came down the stairs. She was beautiful. Realizing just how close I had come to losing her, I did not pass up an opportunity to hug and kiss her.

"Impetuous boy," she teased. "Come on; they're waiting for us."

We left our house and crossed the dome to Clark's. The door opened before we reached it, due to Sebastian's attentiveness. Bonnie was standing there, stunning in a blue pantsuit.

"Hey, Bonnie," I greeted. "Ready?"

"Yes. Clark's just getting the wine."

Clark came out of the kitchen; he was holding two bottles.

"Jacob's grape juice?"

"We can always get more," Clark explained. "But these are the last of the wedding present."

We turned and headed for the third house under the big blue dome. For years it had been used as a guest house for visitors – something a little more friendly than the quarters below decks – but now it had permanent residents. The door didn't open like Clark's. Dot knocked, and Mark Eidemiller answered it.

"Are we early?" asked Clark.

"Not at all. The steaks are on, and should be done in a few minutes. Come on in."

We followed Mark into the house. There were still boxes present from the move, but they'd been shifted off to one side. I was amazed at how Mark looked, and reflected on the changes since the streets of downtown Portland. Once the true potential of the nanobots was realized and tested on Clark, it was only natural to use it on others.

Mark was now a comfortable 150 pounds – something he hadn't been since he was a teenager – and his numerous infirmities were gone. The diabetes that had been shortening his lifespan was cleaned from his body – and with it any neuropathy. The arthritis that had resulted from a shattered ankle back in high school was also completely healed. Dr. Cunningham had even taken things a step further; his teeth had been regenerated, and his eyes corrected to 20/20. He still wore glasses because he was used to them, but they were yellow-tinted non-corrective lenses. And his biological clock was turned back a couple of decades.

He was truly a new man.

In private, Mark had told me about how the future Jenny had communicated to him what he needed to do. Once the headbands were no longer needed, they quickly decomposed like the note, leaving no trace of the futuristic technology. We both agreed that this was what God had in mind for Mark, to be there when I couldn't be.

Bonnie took the bottles from Clark. "I'm going to see if Karen needs any help."

"I'll join you," added Dot, and they split off from us.

"Let's have a seat," Mark invited, and we moved into the living room.

"How's Karen doing?" I asked.

"Well, it's taken a bit getting used to, what with being blind for so many years, and occasionally I catch her walking around with her eyes closed, but she's fine. Oh, speaking of which ... Karen wanted me to ask if she could get flight suit training."

"I don't see why not," Clark replied.

"That'd be great!" I added. "We could double-date! I've got a list of the best places to go flying. Just picture hovering over the Grand Canyon, under a starry sky, or standing at the peak of Everest with no fear of falling!"

"Sounds fantastic!" he beamed. "I just want to thank you again for allowing us into this ..."

exclusive group."

Mark was referring to those who had been treated by the nanobots.

The nanobots had the capability of changing all life on Earth – or destroying it. Since there were only a few people who knew the existence of them, it could be contained.

The deaths of the six people were eventually attributed to a mysterious virus that was discovered and reportedly destroyed by the CDC. And the threat from 'Omega' that threatened the world was explained away by the FBI as being an ambitious hoax by computer hackers.

"It may not be exclusive for long," announced Clark. "It's been a difficult decision, but I think we've come up with a possible solution. Actually, it's not a new idea. Karleen's been working on promoting special 'clinics' across the world where we can treat people with the nanobots in a regulated environment."

"Around the world, like ... the Bahamas?" I asked, remembering our helpers.

Clark grinned. "Why not? It's ... providential that things should start there. And I think Dr. Perez and his staff would really appreciate the economic help."

"Do you think a hospital with your name on it is the best solution?" argued Mark. "I mean, is it such a good idea for the world to associate a hospital that does 'miraculous' healing to a noted Christian celebrity like yourself? You're acquainted with the phrase 'Elmer Gantry'; it is *still* being used as a slur against Christians." He paused; he knew he was taking a chance with his comments. "All I'm saying is, you can't afford to risk your reputation now."

"I appreciate your advice, Mark. I hadn't considered that aspect, but I will."

"We'll definitely be praying for you," Mark nodded.

"Changing the subject," I brought up. "How did your work feel about you leaving?"

"It wasn't that bad. They'll find someone else." He paused. "Hey, have you heard anything from the honeymooners?"

"Not a word, which isn't surprising," answered Clark. "When Mitch asked for two weeks in the Valley of the Vanished, he pointed out that it was Jill's idea – something about it being 'the ultimate getaway'."

I laughed. "That's an understatement, especially since he's never been there before."

"Neither have I," mentioned Mark. "Perhaps, sometime ...?"

"Why not?" Clark nodded. "Oh, and I heard from John Fleming the other day. He's doing just fine as Minister of Intelligence. Considering all the experience he has had over the years, plus being as young as he is now, he's rewritten some of the rules for MI6. He also informed me that Tillman had passed away in Dartmoor Prison."

While Tillman was aboard *Orion*, Major Bixby secretly took him aside and interrogated him with Verity-3. He provided the details behind Cherry Pratt's murder and the framing of John Fleming, as well as confessing to several major crimes. Bixby passed that information over to Hamilton Mayfair, which helped him to clear Fleming of all charges. Then, before Tillman was imprisoned, in an example of cosmic irony and poetic justice, he was returned to the age he was before he had used the nanobots to make him young. It grieved me that the man had died without Christ, but Tillman had no remorse for his misdeeds.

"Dartmoor?" I questioned. "Isn't that a *minimum*-security prison?"

"To the outside world, yes. However, Tillman was in a special *very-maximum* security wing deep underground, operated by MI6."

"What about his friend, Coggins?"

"He declined the opportunity to be a young buck again. He told me he had a good long life, and he was looking forward to the next one."

"That's what Monk said, too, but I think we're going to change his mind, especially when he finds out he's going to be a great-grandfather."

"Really?" Mark beamed. "Is it confirmed?"

I nodded. "It's a girl. The due date's early May."

Mark put a hand on my shoulder. "Now if you could arrange it for the 29th of April, on my birthday ..."

"I can *encourage*, old friend. But the final decision is up to God!"

"Dinner's ready!" shouted Bonnie.

As we headed to the table, the ladies came out of the kitchen and started putting the food on.

Karen followed up with the steaks stacked on a platter. Her brown eyes were clear and sharp, and it almost appeared as if her ever-present smile was more brilliant than ever. In addition to giving her new eyes, the nanobots had cured her hydrocephalus – the water on the brain that had pressed on her optic nerves and had destroyed her sight – and had made sure she'd never suffer from migraines again. She was now a shapely 125 pounds, and a couple of decades younger, restoring her grey hair to a natural brown.

We sat down to dinner, and waited for the prayer over the food. All eyes turned to Clark, the obvious one to lead the prayer. Instead, he turned to Mark. "Your house, your prayer," he said with a smile and a tilt of his head.

Mark just nodded, took a deep breath, and bowed his head.

"Dear Lord Jesus. Since You brought Clark into our lives those many years ago, You've done so many amazing things, and we thank You for all of it. We've been through the best of times, and the worst of times: triumph and tragedy, joy and pain, life and death. But through it all, you've never let go of us." He paused briefly to take a breath. "Perry's always saying, 'Sometimes, you never know what God has in mind until you get there.' So here we are, ready to start a new chapter in this magnificent saga you've created. I don't know what you have in mind, but I do know one thing – the best is yet to come. In Jesus' name we pray ... *amen*."

THE END

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I, the author, encourage the sharing of this story. All that is asked is that the text is not to be modified in any way, shape, or form, and that it is never to be used for commercial profit.

THANKS AND DEDICATIONS

I want to give thanks to Lester Dent, creator of Doc Savage. Without his inspiration, none of this would've ever happened. And without the enigmatic ending to *Up From Earth's Center*, the stage would never have been set for Jesus Christ to make a difference in Doc Savage and in all those around him (at least in *this* interpretation).

I want to give thanks to the creators of these characters who've appeared in the pages of the *Bronze Saga*: Hugo ("*Gladiator*") Danner; Romney ("*The Obsolete Man*") Wordsworth; Jim ("*Then Came Bronson*") Bronson; Dr. Douglas Phillips, Dr. Anthony Newman, and Dr. Ann MacGregor from "*The Time Tunnel*", and others. It has been an absolute blessing knowing that, though they may have had unknown, unhappy, or even tragic endings in their own fictional existence, *here* they were given a second chance for life and happiness.

I want to once more thank my extended family – you, the readers. Your voiced interest, and the tens of thousands of downloads through Memoware (www.memoware.com), has kept the *Bronze Saga* alive all these years, and I will carry that honor with me forever. *The Clark Savage Institute* will remain on my own website (TheDoormat.net) as long as I'm around, but I will be working on my new series.

I want to also thank those of you who have helped me in ways I can't express here. Barry, Richard, and Greg, this is for you.

Finally, I'd like to express my great thanks to singer Natasha Bedingfield. God has used her song, *Unwritten*, to encourage me to persevere in some of my most hopeless times. And it is fitting to

end this series with these lines from that song:

*Staring at the blank page before you
Open up the dirty window
Let the sun illuminate the words
That you could not find
Reaching for something in the distance
So close you can almost taste it
Release your inhibitions –
Feel the rain on your skin
No one else can feel it for you
Only you can let it in
No one else, no one else
Can speak the words on your lips
Drench yourself in words unspoken
Live your life with arms wide open
Today is where your book begins ...*

The rest is still unwritten.

Mark Evan Eidemiller – March 1, 2012