

## **The Bronze Saga #6**

BRONZE NEW WORLD

A Doc Savage Novel by Mark Eidemiller

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*Psalms 31:14-15 But I trust in you, O LORD; I say "You are my God." My times are in your hands; deliver me from my enemies, and from those who pursue me.*

*Proverbs 5:21 For a man's ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all his paths.*

*Hebrews 4:13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

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Excerpt, **ENCYCLOPEDIA AMERICANA, Online Millennium Edition**

SAVAGE, Clark, Junior. Born 1901, died?. In the early 1930's and 1940's, Clark Jr. ("Doc") Savage was thought to be an adventurer and crime fighter. However, because of the EDWARD R. MURROW expose into the so-called "Crime College" (see video, 'See It Now: TARNISHED BRONZE') and subsequent investigations (Senator ESTES KEFAUER in 1951, Senator RICHARD M. NIXON in 1952), the picture of the "Man of Bronze" became a major event in the battle for CIVIL RIGHTS in America. Savage was never brought to trial, but his holdings were liquidated by court order for compensation to the Crime College's victims. Rumors abound - especially in the tabloids - that Savage is still alive and in exile, but no proof of this has yet been found.

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### **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

#### **THE ORIGINAL TEAM**

- Clark "Doc" Savage, Jr. (aka Clark Robeson Dent)

In 1948, following the events in "Up From Earth's Center," he returned to the caverns of Maine – alone, unarmed, and in secret – in a determined attempt to recapture the mysterious villain Wail. Instead, he was caught off-guard, rendered unconscious, and placed into suspended animation by an enemy (for more details, read Epilogue, "Bronze Refined as Silver"). Awakened fifty years later and finding himself in Oregon, he wandered into a downtown rescue mission, heard the message of salvation preached by Perry Liston and received Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

Taken in by Liston's church, he faced the harsh reality of the world recognizing Doc Savage as a criminal. Adopting the identity of 'Clark Robeson Dent', he and Liston traveled the United States to reconcile with the surviving members of his team.

He now fights the source of evil as a traveling evangelist, sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost.

- Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett "Monk" Mayfair

Monk tried desperately to keep fighting crime during and after the Senate hearings. However, after several major events changed his life – his marriage to his 'favorite secretary' Lea Aster, the birth of his daughter Caroline, and the shocking suicide of his old friend and sparring partner Ham – he turned his back on his old life of crimefighting and adventuring, and withdrew to a lakefront house near Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he remained in isolation until located by Clark and Perry. Shortly after, Clark was able to lead him to know God's peace.

Several years prior to that, convinced that Doc would one day return, Monk had purchased the land on which the Crime College stood. Later, he, Renny, and Johnny devised a plan that would eventually become the Clark Savage Institute.

He and Lea have five children - Carrie, Clark, Hamilton, Mark, and Deborah - and eleven grandchildren.

- Brigadier General Theodore Marley "Ham" Brooks

Ham was unable to keep the everyday activities and responsibilities of the Savage holdings following the Senate hearings. The resulting stress, compounded by his disbarment from legal practice and a growing alcohol abuse problem, prompted his suicide in 1953.

Ham's wife Dorothy, unable to cope with the loss, abandoned their infant son Donald with Monk and Lea Mayfair, and disappeared.

- Ivan (John) "Renny" Renwick

In 1989, everyone believed that Renny had been killed in the collapse of the Interstate 880 freeway during the Loma Prieta earthquake. He had, however, barely escaped. But his own desire for the adventure of the past caused him to perpetuate the lie and therefore become a fugitive. He ended up in Romania, where he found a reason to settle down and get married. Later, Renny (now Ivan) and wife Amanda returned to the United States, and are now living on their farm in Oberlin, Kansas.

Since Clark's return, both he and Amanda have become Christians, and Renny has played a major part in the design and construction of the Clark Savage Institute.

- William Harper "Johnny" Littlejohn

Breaking from the team during the Senate hearings, he continued his love of archaeology and participated in several digs around the world, accepting a professorship in a small California university, and becoming the head of the Archaeology Department at Drake College in Vermont. He has since moved to the Clark Savage Institute where he is Dean of the Archaeology Department.

- Thomas "Long Tom" Roberts

In the 1960's, technology authored by Long Tom was sold to governments allied to the United States who later became enemies. That technology ended up being used in weaponry during the Vietnam War, causing great loss of life and property. While on a fact-finding mission through a village decimated by this weaponry, Long Tom discovered the connection. Stunned and horrified

at the revelation, he accidentally triggered a booby trap that destroyed his legs and hospitalized him.

While guilt pushed him towards taking his own life, he was drawn to the cries of a little girl also in the hospital, the only survivor of that same village. Compassion towards the girl gave him a new reason to live. He later adopted the girl and raised her as if she were his own daughter. They settled in Lincoln City, Oregon, and spent many years in anonymity before being reunited with Doc.

Shortly after, however, he suffered a heart attack that eventually cost him his life. On his deathbed, though, he was able to clear his conscience of the truth behind the loss of his legs, and, with Clark's help, was finally able to know peace with God before the end.

- Patricia "Pat" Savage

Clark's cousin and only living relative. In light of events chronicled in "Bronze Refined as Silver" and "More Precious Than Gold", she turned her life from one of selfish goals to selfless goals. She is currently developing her island home into a refuge and home for children who have been abandoned or orphaned.

**THE NEW TEAM**

- Perry Liston

A former street preacher from Portland, Oregon, he found his life tied into Clark's. Now, as his friend and companion, he shares the task of evangelism with Second Chances Ministry.

- Dorothy "Dot" Liston

Granddaughter of Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks, wife of Perry Liston. Prompted to accompany Clark and Perry in the reconciliation of Clark's past, she eventually married Perry and is the third partner of Second Chances Ministry. Became a Christian through Perry in "Bronze Refined as Silver".

- Bonnie Clayton

Former mercenary and member of Jill Woodward's APEX group, she encountered Clark and Perry in "More Precious Than Gold". She subsequently became Chief of Security for Caroline Island. Became a Christian through Clark in "Bronze Avengers".

- Clark "Gumball" Mayfair

Firstborn son of Monk and Lea Mayfair. Freelance pilot. First worked with Clark and Perry by rescuing them from Pat Savage in "Bronze Refined As Silver." Has worked with them on several occasions, mostly as a pilot. Became a Christian through Monk in "The Abduction of Amy Roberts".

- Amy Mayfair

Adopted daughter of Long Tom Roberts, wife of Clark "Gumball" Mayfair. She was at her father's bedside when he accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and made the same decision

soon after. What began as a big brother-little sister relationship with Gumball blossomed into a romantic involvement. They married and now live in her family's home in Lincoln City, Oregon, where she carries on her father's electronics research.

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## **PROLOGUE**

### **Arizona 1975**

Ann MacGregor had never seen the place this deserted before. It scared her.

There had rarely been a time she hadn't heard the sound of people scurrying about, or maneuvering in electric golf carts. She unconsciously put her hands in the pockets of a familiar lab coat she wasn't wearing anymore; she recovered herself and was glad that Dr. Swain hadn't seen her *faux pas*. The two of them were surrounded by miles of metal and plastic, as far as the eye could see. But without all the people, it was just an empty tomb. They passed through a series of electric doors, finally arriving at the focus of the facility; like an oval target, metal arcs spread back in concentric circles into what still seemed like eternity.

They paused to reflect ... or was it to mourn?

"Dr. Swain?" the woman asked, the echo of her own voice startling her.

"Yes, Ann?" softly replied the man.

"Who came up with the name *Time Tunnel*?"

Dr. Swain blinked a couple of times. "You know," he said after a thoughtful pause. "I don't think I ever knew. It just was."

The answer was sufficient. They stood in silence for a few long minutes, each remembering the adventures they had seen, and had even been a part of, in this very room. The machines around them were cold, their flickering lights now as dead as the project they served.

"Blasted cutbacks!" Dr. Swain exploded. "They could've at least given us enough to keep it active!"

"Well, at least they're together," she commented enigmatically, releasing an emotional sigh.

Dr. Swain nodded.

The sound of an electric golf cart grew louder. The driver, a security guard, called out their names.

"Sorry Dr. Swain, Dr. MacGregor, but they're getting ready to shut it all down." The tone of his voice said he sympathized with their melancholy. "We have to go."

Dr. Swain looked into the Tunnel. "Goodbye, Tony. Goodbye, Doug. God watch over you, wherever you are."

The woman started weeping. Dr. Swain wrapped her up in his arms while the guard waited patiently. Then she composed herself, thanked Dr. Swain, and walked around to sit on the bench

seat next to the driver. Dr. Swain sat on the rear-facing back seat, grabbed the handholds, and said, "Okay, Jiggs. Let's go."

As Dr. Swain watched the Time Tunnel receding behind them, he held back his own tears and silently prayed, "They're in Your hands now. Please keep them safe."

The lights behind them shut off with a loud mechanical *clunk* that echoed in the empty halls.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

**July 15, 2005**

### **Off the Oregon Coast**

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

*Amen.*

I could definitely say that I had never been more proud in all my life.

On the light cruise ship *Duane C. Bernhardt*, a couple miles off the coast of Oregon, I was officiating in the wedding of my best friend, Clark Savage, Jr.

As we stood at the front of the hall, dressed in our suits, I inquired of Clark, "Nervous?"

His head quickly bobbed up and down once as he stared past the rows of guests to the doorway at the other end of the hall. He wouldn't dare try to get away with "I'm okay" because we both knew I knew better.

Today a new chapter in his life would begin.

The hall of the little cruise ship was filled with friends and family. I scanned their faces, sometimes making eye contact and exchanging a quick smile and a nod of acknowledgement.

I looked out the window at the land not far from us. We were in a good location. When first thinking about where to hold the wedding, Monk had suggested renting out the 86th Floor of the Empire State Building. It had been a tempting proposal, and would have been an ironic one, but we knew that such an endeavor would've drawn the curious and, most probably, the media.

So we settled on the cruise ship.

Besides, it didn't matter *where* it happened. Just as long as it *did* happen.

The still photographers heralded the start of the processional. The video portion would be assembled later from two dozen digital recorders strategically placed around the room. Next came the Maid of Honor - my wife, Dot, on the arm of her grandfather, Monk Mayfair. They separated and Monk took his place as Best Man. He was grinning from ear to ear.

"Oh, and just in case you have any last-minute jitters," said Monk in an aside to Clark. "Some of Mitch's best snipers are on board, armed with high-powered tranquilizer guns; you'll never make it to the water."

Clark gave Monk a wide-eyed double-take, and I held back a belly laugh. It was a long-held tradition to rib the groom at the last minute before the ceremony, and not even the Man of Bronze was immune.

Pat Savage, as Matron of Honor, came down the aisle next, followed by the flower girl; her name was Kenya, and she giggled as she blew rose petals off of her open palm. Next was her older brother Kenji; he proudly held the pillow with the rings while nervously tugging at the collar of his suit.

The last strains of Pacabel's *Canon* faded away into a moment of silence as the last of the bridal party took their stations in front of the dais.

Monk looked straight ahead and whispered loud enough for Clark to hear, "*Showtime.*"

The opening notes of Wagner's *Wedding March* from *Lohengrin* played, and the audience rose to their feet.

The bride walked down the aisle.

Tall and statuesque in her white veiled gown, Bonnie looked like a marble statue given life.

"Have *mercy*," exhaled Monk in awe.

Clark's eyes grew wide, and his jaw went slack.

I smiled, as – I noticed with a quick glance around the salon – did Renny, Pat, and the few others who had known the bronze man intimately. There had been but a mere handful of events, over the years, that had pushed him way past his normal composure, and we all knew that we were witnessing one such event.

At Bonnie's left, escorting her down the aisle, was Johnny Littlejohn. A good foot shorter than Bonnie, the elderly archaeology professor was practically bursting with pride at being chosen to give the bride away.

They reached the front of the hall, and I gestured for the audience to be seated.

"Dear friends and loved ones," I started off formally, then shifted into sudden informality. "Well, didn't think this day would ever happen, did we?" There was scattered laughter. "In all seriousness, it is my *pleasure* and my *honor* to now join Clark and Bonnie in the bonds of Holy Matrimony." I paused and looked towards Johnny. "Who shares in the giving of this woman to this man in marriage today?"

Typically, the response would be an affirmation from the father of the bride or his stand-in. But instead, Johnny smiled, turned towards the audience, waved his arm in a wide gesture that encompassed all those present (including you, the reader) and proudly declared, "*We ALL do!*"

And the crowd went wild.

Reminiscent of the response to the deciding home run of a World Series, or a final second half-court Championship-winning basket, men and women spontaneously leapt to their feet before a very-stunned Clark and Bonnie, cheering and applauding passionately.

In the midst of this flash flood of love, Johnny calmly put Bonnie's hand into Clark's and placed both of his hands around them as if to seal their bond. "She's yours now," he mouthed to Clark, knowing that he would be able to read his lips. Then he stepped back, standing alongside Dot's mother, Carrie Brooks, and her husband, USAF Colonel Lloyd Carpenter, and joined in the applause.

I gave the audience a few more moments, then gestured for them to quiet and be seated. Moist eyes met mine as Clark and Bonnie turned to face me; I smiled back and tried not to join in just yet.

"Usually at this point, the question is asked, that if anyone can show just cause why these two should not be married today, speak now or forever hold your peace. But I don't believe that'll be necessary." More scattered laughter.

I quoted several passages from the Scriptures, defining what God intended marriage to be, and the roles of the man and the woman in that marriage.

"Clark Savage, Jr. - Clark Robeson Dent - do you take Bonnie Jean Clayton to be your lawfully wedded wife, to live together in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others keep thee only unto her as long as you both shall live?"

Clark turned to Bonnie. "I will."

"Bonnie Jean Clayton, do you take Clark Savage, Jr. - Clark Robeson Dent - to be your lawfully wedded husband, to live together in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others keep thee only unto him as long as you both shall live?"

Bonnie smiled. "I will."

Then it was their turn. They had written their own vows, and I turned it over to them.

Clark went first. "A few years ago, as we were parting to go our separate ways, you quoted a verse from a song you heard Dot play often. It spoke about praying for one another, that love would bring us back together. It took a lot of time and endurance for you to wait for a stubborn, bull-headed man like me -" Emotion now choked his voice. "- but now love has indeed brought us together again. And I won't *ever* let you go."

She smiled, holding back the emotion. Surprising everybody, a musical accompaniment track played, and Bonnie began to sing:

*"I can't remember when you weren't there,  
When I didn't care for anyone but you.  
I swear we've been through everything there is,  
Can't imagine anything we've missed,  
Can't imagine anything the two of us can't do.*

By the time Bonnie finished singing *'Through the Years'*, staring into the rapt eyes of her beloved, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. Even Monk sniffled and wiped his eyes off on his jacket sleeve. As I fought back the same emotions, I was amazed that Bonnie could sing so well, let alone hold it in while singing this particular tune.

I continued the ceremony with the exchanging of rings, which went off without a hitch, and we ran across the finish line.

My voice lowered to a whisper. "Okay, you two ... this is it."

Then I raised my voice and announced, "And now, by the power vested in me by God and the State of Oregon, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

And with that, Clark and Bonnie faced each other and kissed. Cameras flashed and camcorders hummed to capture the historic moment.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to present to you Mr. and Mrs. Clark Savage, Jr."

And again, the crowd went wild.

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## **CHAPTER TWO**

The reception was held in the ship's main salon. While the guests milled past the buffet table, a DJ played light instrumental music.

I claimed a table and nibbled on some teriyaki chicken while waiting for the rest.

Each of the banquet tables had a teddy bear centerpiece, graciously contributed from Mark and Karen Eidemiller's own vast collection. The three at my table - identified with paw print name tags - were *Rosebud*, *Cardiff*, and *Super Star Strawberry*.

Clark and Bonnie were still in the reception line. As I watched the people filing past them, I unconsciously picked out the ones who knew of Bonnie's condition.

My mind flashed back to the little private gathering, when Clark and Bonnie revealed all.

"We were riding motorcycles across America," Clark had started. "We'd joined ourselves to a biker gang, and everything seemed to be going as well as possible. Sure, there were a few who didn't care for Christians riding with them ... and they made their opinions quite clear. Well, as we were all back on the road, Bonnie's bike suddenly began acting up on her."

"What we *didn't* know until later," continued Bonnie. "Was that they had stolen Clark's satellite cell phone, put sugar in my gas tank ... and drugged our drinking water."

"What kind of drug?" asked Pat.

"A psychotropic enhancer," Clark declared. "A mood lifter."

Monk, the chemist, casually interpreted, "An aphrodisiac." Then his eyes popped and his face froze in shock.

"We didn't suspect they'd try something like this," continued Clark. "There were certain ... *indiscretions*."

The more observant ones spotted Bonnie's hand subtly resting on her stomach, and understood.

"Oh, *my*!" commented Johnny.

Pat suddenly laughed and clapped her hands. She rushed over to Bonnie and hugged her tight.

"You're *pregnant*!" exclaimed Lea.

"Yes," answered Clark. "We wanted to tell you all here ... privately ... instead of having you find out the wrong way."

"We know we messed up," added Bonnie. "But we've straightened things out with God. And now we just want to make things right with all of you because we love you and don't want anything between us. Can you forgive us?"

Considering that most of the people in the room were Christians, the question was moot. The reaction was hugs and prayers and offers of help. Not one person then or since has had a bad word to say about it.

I was proud of them all.

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"Hey, Perry!" greeted Mitch Drake as he slalomed between the tables. "That was a terrific service!"

"Thanks, Mitch! So, when can I pencil you and Jill in?" I gave him a Cheshire Cat smile and batted my eyes.

He gave me a shocked look. "Bite your tongue, Mister! One step at a time!"

I feigned disappointment. "Okay, Mitch ... have it your way. I just figured, since I've got the words down, why not take advantage of it? So where is she?"

"Jill's holding a table by the window - she loves the view! I just swung by to see how the implant's doing ... not to be harassed."

"Okay, okay. The implant's still working. I've used it a couple of times, and nobody's heard it - not even Clark, with his sensitive hearing."

"Good. That's how it's supposed to be. Hey, I'll catch you later." And he moved on.

I unconsciously reached back to the left side of my head, and remembered when Mitch came to me on Caroline Island with his little invention. "It's a microchip. We'll stick it right behind your left ear, just under the skin. It'll take just a few minutes, with a topical anesthetic."

The boys in R&D had nicknamed it the *Bio Timer*. When I would use my uncle's ring to become invisible, the microchip would kick in. It could tell me how much of my sixty minutes remained simply by thinking about it. When it reached sixty seconds remaining, it would automatically announce every ten seconds, then every second from ten to zero.

I had already seen that God had plans for me and this ring. But now I was ready.

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"I don't think we've met. I'm Pat Savage."

The man at the table extended his hand. "Buddy Brannan. This is my wife Melanie, and our daughter Alena."

Pat joined them. "So, what's *your* connection to Clark and Bonnie?"

"*The Bronze Avengers*," he answered without hesitation. "After the quake in Pine Corners, Sunni got through to many of us via ham radio. We pooled our talents and provided supplies and workers."

"Excellent! Your daughter ... she's very pretty ... she's adopted?"

"Yes. How can you tell?"

"You know my work on Caroline Island?"

"Who doesn't?" answered Melanie.

Pat smiled. "We've taken in quite a few children from the Ukraine. I applaud you two for choosing someone who's challenged. Not many people would."

"We wanted this right from the start. And she's been a blessing over and over since."

"Well, I'm always happy to see a child find a loving home. Congratulations. If there's any way I can help you, please don't hesitate to contact me." She handed them a business card; Melanie accepted it.

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Monk stood up and took the microphone, for the traditional toast by the Best Man.

"Well, I suppose it's my time to give the toast to the bride and groom. I'm not known for my public speakin', so here goes."

He lifted his glass slightly towards Clark and Bonnie.

"You're my boss, you're my friend, you're my brother in Christ. Apart from my own wedding day, I can say that I've never been happier than I am today. I wish for you what God has given me: many years with a loving wife, and many children to carry on your legacy."

"Here, here!" Renny called out, rising to his feet with his glass held high. We all followed suit, ready to drink the toast, but Monk wasn't finished.

"Bonnie," he said, looking at Clark's bride as he laid a hand on Clark's shoulder, "This mug and I have been through some pretty amazing things. Things that'd curl your hair, if you ever heard half of them. Most of the time, it was only because of his courage, and his intelligence, that we ever got outta them scrapes with our skins intact! You should know, probably the most courageous – and the most intelligent – thing he's ever done, was to ask you to be his wife! You're a fitting match for him, and nothing could please me more than to watch him grow old with you by his side!"

"Here, here!" Renny raised the call a second time. This time, Monk nodded and raised his own glass to his lips, and so we all took a long sip together.

Monk handed the microphone off to Pat, and took his seat next to Clark, who turned and put an arm around him, giving him a gentle hug.

Pat cleared her throat briefly, and looked with long affection at both the bride and groom.

"I've got just four words, for you, Clark," she smiled. "It's about time, cousin!"

She paused, for a moment, while the guests laughed at the humor in her words, and then her face took on a more reserved appearance as she continued.

"In all seriousness, I don't think I can top Monk's sentiments. Clark, your influence has touched each and every one of us in this room, and millions more. Your strength, and your faith in God, have been an inspiration to all of us. I wish you joy and health, and a long life."

Clark smiled, briefly dipping his head in acknowledgement, and the expression on his face said he was blushing, even if we couldn't see it for his bronze tan.

Pat turned her gaze to Bonnie.

"Bonnie, I don't *need* to welcome you to our family because, in a way, you have always been a part of it. Still, this day makes you a much closer part than you've been, before. Except for a few annoying years," she faltered for an instant, and those of us who knew her understood why, "Clark has always been much more an older brother to me, than a cousin. So, welcome, sister!"

She lifted her glass in salute, and we drank along with her.

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It was time for the bride and groom to cut the cake.

It was a three-tier masterpiece, resting on a platform supported by columns, and a sparkling cider fountain under the platform. Using a bronze cake cutter with a pearl handle, they slowly made two incisions, then carefully lifted the slice and placed it on a plate.

Nearby, Dot and I conferred.

"What do you think?" asked Dot. "Neat or messy?"

"Look at their eyes," I replied. "We might have to hose them both off before this is over."

Bonnie pinched a piece of the cake between her fingers and lifted it towards Clark's mouth. But at the last moment she speeded up, and two-thirds of the cake ended up on his mouth rather than in. She gave him an apologetic smile, to which he acknowledged.

Then it was his turn.

I muttered under my breath, "And there's the wind-up ... and the *pitch* ..."

Clark had the cake right in front of her mouth when he suddenly changed directions and smeared it from her nose to her chin.

"Oooh, good aim," commented Dot. "What do you think? Spontaneous food fight?"

"Not here," I replied. "Too easy for collateral damage."

Bonnie took a second piece by the fingers, but didn't go in for the kill. She moved slowly and carefully, and the cake went into his mouth without incident. Then, their faces messy with cake, they came together in a kiss, smearing things even further.

Dot and I nodded to each other, then moved in with towels to clean up the bride and groom.

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DJ Jason Hill announced that the dance floor would be opening up following the traditional first dance from the newlyweds. The lights dimmed, and the crowd hushed as a pale spotlight shone on Clark and Bonnie. Then the music softly began:

*Some day, when I'm awfully low,  
When the world is cold,  
I will feel a glow just thinking of you...  
And the way you look tonight.*

\* \* \*

"I didn't think he knew how to dance," Monk commented to me as we hung near the buffet table.

"He didn't," I replied. "Pat gave him a crash course, just for this day."

\* \* \*

*Lovely ... Never, ever change.  
Keep that breathless charm.  
Won't you please arrange it?  
'Cause I love you ... Just the way you look tonight.*

Clark gave Bonnie a last spin. Then he bowed to her as several people applauded. As the lights came up, replacing the spotlight, Jason kicked into a medley of Big Band tunes; others joined them on the dance floor.

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"I've always admired Clark as a quick study," Monk continued. "But then, look who he's got to dance with. I tell ya, she is *some* looker."

I leaned in and quietly cautioned him, "You better watch yourself, Monk, otherwise you're going to get yourself into trouble."

He gave me a defensive look. "Hey, I was a ladies' man long before you were born, junior. Besides ... old habits die hard."

"Understood, dear Father-In-Law," I countered with a grin. "But should I pass this information over to Lea, your wife ... so will *you*."

"You're a treacherous fiend," he smirked. "I've taught you well, my young *padawan*."

I offered a slight bow. "Thank you, *Obi Wan*."

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The music shifted into a medley of 1950's-1960's tunes.

Pat Savage watched her daughter Carrie step onto the dance floor with her new husband - U.S. Air Force Colonel Lloyd Carpenter - and sighed. Pat had never even known Carrie's first husband, Ham's only son Donald.

When her own flesh-and-blood daughter had needed her most, Pat had been too preoccupied with screwing up her own life under the assumed identity of a fabricated daughter.

But that was all behind her.

Now she had a family - and *what* a family. Not just her cousin and all the kids on the island, but a *granddaughter* - Dot - a *grandson-in-law* - Perry - and now a ... well, whatever kind of in-law Bonnie was.

Her thoughts suddenly shifted to the fact that they all had someone to live out the rest of their lives with. She felt the emptiness in her heart. But then her eyes were directed towards a table on the other side of the dance floor, where a solitary figure sat in shadow. Her lips turned up in a thin smile as she approached the table from the opposite side.

As she sat, the other one sitting at the table turned to her with a slightly surprised expression. He addressed her by name.

"Doug," she returned the greeting.

They watched on in comfortable silence for several seconds. Then Pat asked, "Did you ever imagine this day would ever happen?"

"In all honesty, no. I'm glad I was wrong."

"I'm looking for a dance partner. Care to join me?"

He sighed. "I'm afraid I could never keep up with these kids."

"Kids?" she scoffed. "You see Monk and Lea out there? He's older than *you* are, and look at 'em go at it!"

"I see. I'll pass, though."

"Have it your way," she conceded. "Did you know somebody's out there spreading malicious lies about the two of us?"

He gave her a shocked look. "What kind of lies?"

"People are saying you're smitten with me."

"Smitten?"

"Uh huh. Smitten. Infatuated. Besotted. Obsessed. Fanatical. Head over heels. Love-struck. Crazy. Taken. Lovesick -"

"I understand the term Pat," he interrupted her. "Where did you hear it from?"

"Don't remember," she shrugged. "The nerve of some people."

"Preposterous notion," he agreed. "Up until a few years ago, you and I were mortal enemies."

"True. But a lot of water has gone under the bridge since then. You've even saved my life."

"What?"

"You didn't know, did you?"

He just looked at her.

She explained. "You directed Clark towards Mitch Drake. Mitch gave Clark the means to rescue me in the Valley of the Vanished. My *experience* there led to my decision to dedicate my life to children, convert the island ... and move all but a few people out of the *World Trade Center* towers. So, indirectly, we *all* owe you our lives."

"Oh my God," he gasped. "That never occurred to me!"

She reached out and placed her hand on his. "So can you truthfully tell me that you don't have more than a passing interest in me?"

He met her eyes. "Perry and Dot told you, didn't they?"

"Guilty as charged."

His eyes lowered. "I didn't want to say anything because I never could bring myself to think you'd be remotely interested in someone like me."

"Nonsense! I was just an old woman in a young body, living a lie. You went head-to-head with me and whipped me. Ooh, I was *so* PO'd when you sent me that self-destructing videotape!"

"Hey," he countered. "If you hadn't sent your goons to break into my offices, you would've never set me off!"

She smiled. "So now we make love not war?"

"So to speak."

"So, big boy ... you sure you don't want to show these *kids* how the grown-ups used to dance?"

She stood and extended her hand to him. He looked at it for a moment, then gave her a grin and took it.

Together they walked onto the dance floor.

\* \* \*

The offer had been made to all to join the newlyweds on an all-expenses-covered cruise to Caroline Island and back. But to those whose schedules couldn't afford them that luxury, helicopters were made available to take them home.

Treasuring the view of the sunset from the deck of the ship, many couples made their excuses, gave their final thanks and congratulations, and were flown to the mainland.

Dot and I stood on the deck, as I tried to convince her of the truth of my claims.

"Hugo, she doesn't believe me. Can you persuade her?"

"She looks for a sign, an example. Mrs. Liston, what would you have me lift?"

"Are you serious?" she doubted then looked around. "The helicopter. Nobody's using it at the moment. Why don't you pick it up?"

"Very well," he said without hesitation.

We walked out to the helipad. I smirked as Hugo looked at it for the proper place to grip it. Then, just like a scene from *Superman: The Movie*, he took the chopper by the landing strut and effortlessly lifted it about four feet into the air.

All the color drained from Dot's face. I prepared myself to catch her, sure that she would faint. But she didn't. As Hugo put the helicopter down and rejoined us, he hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Was that sufficient, Mrs. Liston?"

"Yes ... yes it is. Wow."

"You should see him jump," I added. "He could probably jump from here to the mainland."

Hugo corrected me. "I wouldn't advise it; the reactive opposing force would cause the ship to shudder markedly, perhaps heel to port or starboard. While it probably would not capsize the vessel, it would certainly result in both people and objects being given sudden unwanted motion in unplanned directions. I wish to cause no injuries."

As we walked back into the salon, I thanked Hugo again for being here.

"Considering the lengths you went to in order to get the invitation to me," he answered. "How could I say no?"

"So what are your plans after this?" asked Dot. "Are you going to join us on the cruise?"

He shook his head. "No. I have work to do in Africa."

"Is there anything you need?" I added.

"Supplies. Always need that."

"Tell us what you need, and we'll have it ready when you are."

Monk stuck his head around the corner. "Dot, you wanted me to let you know when they were going to do the Chicken Dance!"

Dot's eyes brightened. "*All right!* Nice meeting you, Hugo!"

And off we went.

\* \* \*

As the evening came to a close, those still dragging each other on the dance floor were getting worn out. The buffet had been put away hours earlier, and now Mark and Karen were slowly starting to gather the teddy bears from the tables.

There's an oft-quoted verse in Proverbs that says, '*A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.*' Things, then, being the way they are when Christians get together and there's a need to be met, it doesn't take long before there will be several brothers and sisters willing to lend a hand.

Mark and Karen held open vinyl duffel bags while the rest of us gathered the bears. Once they were all present and accounted for - confirmed by Karen's phenomenal memory - we formed a small convoy and delivered them to Mark and Karen's stateroom.

Many decided that was a good enough note to end the evening on, and proceeded to their own staterooms.

\* \* \*

"Johnny!" called Clark, waving him over.

The elderly archaeologist came over to the table where Clark and Bonnie were resting.

"*You* were the one behind the standing ovation!" stated Clark.

He didn't flinch, but gave them both an amused grin. "You don't say!"

"How'd you pull it off?"

"Ah, the magician never reveals his secrets," he replied with a smirk. "Let's just say that I did it right under your noses. And it was worth it just to see the look on your faces!"

Bonnie stood up, towering over Johnny, then leaned down and gave him a smooch on the cheek.

"And that's a bonus," he added. "Thank you both for letting me be part of it. Good night."

He offered a bow and left the salon.

\* \* \*

### **CHAPTER THREE**

**July 19**

Four days had passed since the wedding, and everyone was enjoying the cruise.

The weather was a bit rough on the third day, but Mitch Drake came to the rescue. He'd personally directed the editing from the wedding cameras, and sent the final product on a scrambled transmission to my notebook PC. After burning it onto a DVD, we had ourselves an exclusive screening in the ship's home theater. We *ooh'd* and *aah'd* through the best moments, and there were a few spontaneous tears at the right places.

Then I brought out the DVD containing the 'other' material from Mitch. This included the look on Dot's face when Hugo lifted the helicopter, Pat and Doug Martin's slow dance, and a painful reminder of how bad we did the *Chicken Dance*.

It was embarrassing. It was wonderful.

\* \* \*

As the sun descended over the ocean that evening, Monk and Lea Mayfair stood holding one another at the ship's starboard railing. The simian master chemist cooed in his wife's ear, "Have I ever told'cha how crazy I am about'cha?"

"Maybe, but my memory falters," she replied with a grin. "Remind me."

As he kissed her, his eyes suddenly grew wide and he abruptly pulled them both to the side, crashing into the deck.

"What was *that* all about?" she growled at him.

Monk's hairy arm pointed beyond the ship.

It was a flying man.

Actually, the man was floating in the air about fifty yards from them and closing, tumbling over and over in slow motion. He drifted over the rail and rolled along the deck until he stopped in an ungainly heap against a wall.

Without a word, Monk and Lea quickly scrambled to the man's side.

"Tony? Tony?" the stranger muttered. It had been some time since he'd witnessed the rainbow dazzle of the vortex, and it took a few moments for his eyes to become accustomed to the change in light.

"*Blazes*, Mister!" exclaimed Monk. "Where the heck did you come from?"

He looked up at Monk; his eyes sparkled with recognition. "You're ... you're Monk Mayfair!"

Monk gave the stranger a dubious look. "Okay, pal. It seems you got the advantage over me. Do I know you?"

"I'm Doug Phillips," he identified himself, looking around at his surroundings. "What year is this?"

"Two thousand five," answered Lea.

"What year do you *think* it is?" added Monk curiously.

Phillips smiled. "The last I knew, it was nineteen-oh-five."

"Uh ... I know I'm not the best when it comes to history, but I know that outfit ain't from the turn o'the last century." Then he turned to Lea. Their eyes met and she nodded. "I'll get Clark."

As she walked away, Monk helped the other man to his feet. He was a little shaky. "You okay, Phillips?"

"Yes, I think so."

"We'll get this straightened out," Monk reassured him.

\* \* \*

I'd been talking to Clark when Lea rushed into the room and told us about the flying man. Knowing Lea wasn't prone to visions, Clark took off like a bloodhound on a scent, with me and Lea a few seconds behind. When we arrived on the scene, the stranger looked at Clark with disappointment.

"You're *not* Doc Savage!" he declared.

Clark looked at him for a moment, then acknowledged, "I *know* you. We met many, many years ago. Your name is Phillips. You had a younger partner by the name of Newman. You ... haven't aged." He paused. "Appearances to the contrary, I *am* Doc Savage."

"Believe me, pal, it's him!" seconded Monk.

"All right," he conceded.

"Clark," informed Monk. "He said he wuz from 1905."

"Let's go inside," suggested Clark. "We can talk, and you can explain the situation."

Gently guiding Phillips' by the elbow, we headed inside.

\* \* \*

As we sat in the ship's lounge, the others slowly filtered in, having heard the news of our new visitor. Phillips looked at them with uncertainty.

"All they want to do is help," Clark reassured him. "If you insist, we can talk alone."

The comforting tone of Clark's voice was sufficient. Phillips nodded his assent. Clark motioned for the others to come in and be seated.

"Why don't you start us off with a little background on you and your group, Dr. Phillips?" Clark asked once everyone was present.

Unconsciously taking a stance like a college professor addressing a class, Phillips stood and spoke. "My name is Dr. Douglas Phillips. In 1968, I was part of a government project experimenting in observing events in time as well as personally traveling there."

"Time travel?" asked Johnny with fascination.

"Yes," answered Dr. Phillips, continuing. "We created a device called the *Time Tunnel* to do this. We were making slow progress, but were pressured into testing it prematurely. My partner, Dr. Newman, personally tested it on himself."

"He actually went back in time?" interrupted Bonnie.

"That's correct," Phillips answered, straight-faced.

"Where – *when* – did he go?" asked 'Gumball' Mayfair.

"April 14, 1912," Dr. Phillips announced solemnly. "Aboard the *Titanic*."

There was a chorus of groans as people made the connection.

Dr. Phillips continued. "Once the rest of us discovered what Dr. Newman had done, I followed him, hoping to bring us both back, and – indirectly – hoping we could avert the disaster. No one believed us." He paused. "Since I had a way for the Tunnel to lock onto us, we were both pulled

back into time before the *Titanic* sank. Since then, we've been bouncing all over time, trying to return home.

"Then, all of a sudden, we stopped bouncing. We were in Kansas in 1905, and we finally had to accept the possibility that *something* had happened to the Tunnel to where it had gone silent on us. We resigned ourselves to our fate and settled into our new 'home', trying not to do anything that could affect the timeline.

"Several months after that, again for no apparent reason, I alone was pulled back into the time vortex ... and ended up here. This can only mean that the Time Tunnel is working again."

"Scuse me, Dr. Phillips," asked Monk. "If that whatsis of yours is up and working, then why did you end up *here*, in the middle of the ocean? I mean, why not bring you back *there*?"

"That's occurred to me as well," Phillips admitted. "And yet, I have to assume the Time Tunnel still works; otherwise, how could I travel from 1905 to here?"

"Clark," I got his attention. "If it's a government project, Mitch might be able to find out if they're still active."

"Agreed," he nodded. "Dr. Phillips, allow me to contact a friend of mine."

On cue, Bonnie handed Clark his satellite cell phone. Dr. Phillips looked at it with curiosity.

Monk leaned in. "Satellite cell phone," he explained. "Technology ain't what it used t'be back in the 60's, not by a long shot."

Phillips nodded as Clark called Mitch Drake in Florida. It didn't surprise us that he was able to reach him, even at this hour.

"Good evening, Clark. How's the cruise?"

"Fine, Mitch. I need you to check out something for me. You busy?"

"Not for you. What's the sitch?"

"What can you tell me about an old government project – "

"*Operation Tic-Toc*," Phillips whispered.

" – named *Operation Tic-Toc*?"

"Hang on." Clark heard the rapid clicking of a computer keyboard. "Government project back in the late 1950's to early 70's. At the time, *very* hush-hush. They were all about research in time travel." He paused a beat and repeated, "Time Travel?"

"Is it still active?" asked Clark.

"No," replied Mitch. "Budget cuts. They pulled the plug on it in the mid-70's."

"And to your knowledge it's still inactive?"

"Uh huh. What's your interest?"

"Tell you later. Can you dig a little deeper? I really need to know if it hasn't been reactivated since then, even secretly."

"Sure. I'm assuming you need this in a hurry."

"If you're not busy."

"For you, never. Gimme an hour."

"Thanks, Mitch."

They disconnected.

Clark lowered the phone and looked at Phillips. "It was closed down in the mid-1970's due to budget cuts; he's checking to see if it's been reactivated."

Then Clark spoke to the group. "We're waiting on more information. It may take some time. If we get anything more, we'll get together here."

The assembled group disbursed.

\* \* \*

As others approached Dr. Phillips, I drew Clark aside.

"You said you know him?" I asked.

Clark nodded. "It was a brief encounter. He and Dr. Newman appeared in our old *Hidalgo Trading Company* warehouse, and the watchman summoned us. We brought them to our headquarters, where they gave us their story – just as Dr. Phillips did here. Two days later they vanished before our eyes, leaving nothing behind but a mystery."

"Okay," I acknowledged. "But one thing occurred to me. Since they had come from your future, they would've known about what would happen – did happen – because of the Crime College. Did they say anything to you?"

Clark shook his head. "Not that I recall."

I mused aloud. "If it were me in that position, I'd be tempted to warn you of what was going to happen ... you know, help soften the blow? I wonder why they didn't."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I think I will. Thanks."

A few minutes later, as the group around Dr. Phillips began thinning out, I moved in and introduced myself. After explaining my connection to Clark, I asked, "Dr. Phillips, you had

foreknowledge of the future, including Clark's. Why did you choose not to warn them of what was to happen?"

The time traveler gave me an amused smile. "I tried to convince the captain of the *Titanic* of what was coming by bringing an actual newspaper dated the day *after* the sinking; for all I know, he threw it away. We tried to warn Tony's father of the attack on Pearl Harbor and his own imminent death, but things still happened just as they happened. Our most sincerest attempts have only resulted in changing a few minor details in the timeline." He smiled. "After a while, Tony and I just decided to keep things to ourselves and not try to influence history.

"Besides, Perry, we never knew the full story. Our knowledge stopped at 1968. We didn't know just how things would eventually turn out, as it has here.

"In retrospect, I can say that we were right in our silence; after all, had we altered the past, who knows how things would be today?"

"Good point," I conceded, shaking his hand. "Thanks."

\* \* \*

"I dug *deep*," Mitch reported. "I hit up a couple of my best sources, and they all confirmed that *Operation Tic-Toc* was closed down in May of 1975, and has never been reopened. Now are you going to tell me what your interest is in this project?"

"Did you see the name Doug Phillips in your checking around?"

"Yeah. He was one of the founders of the project back in '58. Declared Missing In Action before they shut things down."

"Phillips is here, aboard the ship."

"What?" he blurted. "How?"

"He materialized," Clark explained without emphasis. "Mitch, he was transported from the past to the present."

"Interesting!"

"Would you care to talk to him?"

"You bet I would!"

Clark handed the cell phone to Dr. Phillips, who spent the next few minutes rattling off what appeared to be a random babble of names, locations, and other data. A few minutes later he returned it.

"Yes, Mitch?"

"Okay, Clark, I'm sold! What can I do?"

"Not sure yet. This was the first hurdle to get past. We'll work on it and I'll give you a call in the morning."

"Okay. 'Night."

"'Night, Mitch. And thanks." He disconnected.

Dr. Phillips' expression mirrored his confusion. "If the Time Tunnel is still shut down, then how did I get here?" he muttered to himself.

"Act of God?" I replied with a shrug.

"Let's get the rest in on this," Clark suggested.

Ten minutes later we gathered together in the ship's salon. There were a few less than there had been earlier, but there was still an interested crowd. Clark and Dr. Phillips stood in the middle of the group and Clark addressed them.

"It seems we have a new mystery here. The project Dr. Phillips spoke of seems to be inactive, and has been so for the last thirty years. As to who or what brought him through time and space to this place ... I suggest we put that on the back burner. What's more important is how to reactivate the Time Tunnel and bring Dr. Newman home."

Clark then turned things over to Dr. Phillips.

"Without knowing what equipment was left behind, and in what condition, I really don't know what we'll need to get the Time Tunnel up and running. More than likely I'll over-compensate." He paused a moment, as he looked thoughtfully towards the ceiling. "Electronics and data processing will be two major needs. I'd appreciate recommendations of specialists in those fields, and suggestions on related equipment."

"Count me in!" volunteered Amy Mayfair. "My field is electronics. And I'm also going to suggest a friend of ours, Sunni."

"Yeah," agreed Gumball. "Sunni's a phenomenon!"

"Dr. Phillips," addressed Pat Savage. "You said you were part of a team. Is there any chance of any of them still being alive?"

Phillips smiled. "Well, considering we had almost 50,000 people under our roof, I would hope so. The core group consisted of only a few. Lieutenant General Heywood Kirk was the main driving force for *Operation Tic-Toc*. Woody got it funded, and sweat bullets every time a review came around. Then there was Drs. Raymond Swain and Ann MacGregor. They were the hands at the controls, the ones who I could always count on to be there; they worried the most over me and Tony."

Clark raised his hands. "I think we've got a lot to plan. However, considering the hour, it would probably be wise to continue this after we've all had a good night's rest ... if that's acceptable."

There were no objections.

"Thank you all. We'll meet in the main dining room, over breakfast." Clark turned to Dr. Phillips. "Let's find you some quarters, then give Mitch another call and give him some things to check overnight."

"I'm not really tired," he confided.

Renny overheard and drew near. "Dr. Phillips, Clark and Bonnie just got married - this here's their honeymoon cruise!"

Phillips looked at Clark with an expression of surprise and embarrassment. "Forgive my thoughtlessness! Yes, of course, we can continue this in the morning!"

As Clark led him out of the room, Renny told him he'd get him some stuff for notes.

As I stood off to the side, I wondered just how much sleep *any* of us would get tonight.

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

**July 20**

The main dining room had put out a buffet for breakfast. As people came through, they helped themselves and headed in the direction of the cluster of tables where Clark, Bonnie, and Dr. Phillips sat. Bonnie worked at a notebook computer while the men focused on a stack of papers Dr. Phillips had created overnight.

Clark stood after awhile and addressed everyone. "Good morning! I hope everyone slept well!"

The scattered laughter confirmed my earlier suspicions.

"To bring everybody up to speed, we heard back from Mitch Drake a couple of hours ago. His spysats confirmed that the Time Tunnel installation is still where it's supposed to be - in the Arizona desert - and hasn't been touched in a long time. He was also able to find the personnel records for the Time Tunnel project; they're going through it now. Dr. Phillips?"

Dr. Phillips stood. "The Time Tunnel uses parts exclusive to its function and operation. Considering our remote location, it was necessary to have sufficient parts for just about any contingency. So, unless they found a way of using those parts elsewhere, it's a good bet they're still there, safe and sound, just waiting for us.

"Our mission goals will be as follows: *one*, successfully gain entrance to the Time Tunnel installation; *two*, analyze and effect repairs as necessary to the power plant - get it up and running - subsequently establishing life support and utilities; *three*, analyze and effect repairs as necessary to the Time Tunnel itself, upgrading systems as necessary; *four*, use the Time Tunnel to successfully communicate with Dr. Newman; and *five*, safely return Dr. Newman to the present."

"For those of you who are concerned," Clark announced. "There are no plans to alter the ship's course at the present time. We'll be arriving at Caroline Island day after tomorrow, spend a day or two there, then head back for the states." He paused. "I just want to thank you all for your support and your prayers."

\* \* \*

"Okay, Mitch, you're on the speakerphone!" announced Clark. "Can you hear us?"

"Yes! Fine! Good evening, everybody! Okay, we're starting to get some matches on the Time Tunnel personnel records. First let me give you the *bad* news: Lieutenant General Heywood Kirk was promoted to a full General in '76, but passed away from leukemia in '96. And Dr. Raymond Swain was killed in an airplane crash in December of '77. Sorry, Dr. Phillips."

"That's ... that's okay, Mr. Drake," Dr. Phillips replied. "After all these years, I couldn't hope that everyone would still be alive. What about Dr. Ann MacGregor?"

"Alive and well!" Mitch announced. "In '82 she married a Eugene Caldwell; he passed away in '95. She's been living in a retirement home in Oakland, California since 2000. I'm sending you the details."

"Any others?" He named a few people he remembered from the project. "What about them?"

"Hang on a second." There was a pause of a few seconds. "Nothing on them yet."

"Mr. Drake, I'm in your debt," Dr. Phillips said, his eyes mirroring sadness at the loss of two of his closest colleagues.

"No problem. Talk t'you later." And the transmission ended.

\* \* \*

## July 21

While the cruise ship was still a day away from Caroline Island, Dot and I shuttled by helicopter to Almeria Airport in southern Spain, then transferred to a Gulfstream executive jet. Nine hours later, we touched down at Oakland International Airport.

At the *Fairhaven Retirement Community*, we tapped on the slightly-ajar door of Room 61.

"C'mon in!" came the grunted response. Dressed in a housecoat, the old woman was lightly reclining on the bed. Flipping channels with her remote, she switched the television off and looked up at us.

"Mrs. Caldwell?" I inquired.

"Just call me *Annie*," she smiled back, looking at us through oval-framed glasses. Her straight hair was pearly white, pulled back into a loose ponytail and tied with a flowery scarf. "Good timing. Only thing worth watching is *Quantum Leap*, but that's not on until 3. So what can I do for you?"

"We'd like you to come with us for a few days," I stated bluntly.

"And *why* would I want to do that?" she asked, giving us a suspicious look.

I looked her straight in the eye and lowered my voice, "It's about *Operation Tic-Toc*."

Her eyes went wide, then her expression got angry. "Get the *hell* out of here before I call Security!"

"Dr. MacGregor!" Dot blurted as she moved between us. "Dr. Phillips sent us! He's back, but we need your help to get Tony!"

Her anger instantly vaporized and her jaw went slack. "Doug ... is *back*?"

"Yes, ma'am, he is." I continued. "He and Dr. Newman were trapped in 1905 when the Time Tunnel was shut down. Then Dr. Phillips was transported into the present *alone*, without Dr. Newman. A team is being put together to reactivate the Time Tunnel and retrieve Dr. Newman. Dr. Phillips wanted us to let you know that he was alive and needs your help."

Her expression melted into hopelessness. "It's been forty years. I've ... I've forgotten all about it."

"He figured you might," said Dot. "But he wants you there anyhow."

"Would you like to talk to him?" I asked.

Her eyes brightened. "Oh, yes!"

I took out my satellite cell, and pressed the speed dial for Clark. "Hi! Yeah, we're here! Is Dr. Phillips nearby?" I paused. "Hi, Dr. Phillips! Yeah, she's here! Okay!"

I handed the cell to Annie; she held onto it like a drowning man clutching a life preserver. She didn't speak for a moment, as if she was afraid it would all be a dream. Then she burst into tears. I don't know what he said to her, but it was more than sufficient to convince her of his validity, and persuade her to join us. After a few minutes she handed me back the phone. Dot moved in to hold the old woman, who continued to weep for joy, while I told Dr. Phillips, "We'll give you a call when we're airborne!"

\* \* \*

Clark stood on the deck of the cruise ship, looking out at the Mediterranean Sea; a telephone headset dangled from his ear to the cell phone as he talked to Mitch Drake. "Mitch, we're going to need a place to put all the parts together when we return to the States."

"Already a step ahead of you! There's a small base in San Diego – codename is *King George* – it's got helicopter facilities and a state-of-the-art computer center. With your permission, I'll have your team meet you there."

"Thank you. I'll inform the Captain that we'll be making a detour before returning to Lincoln City. And I'll let you know of our ETA as soon as we've got it."

"Have you started figuring out who you want on the team?"

"We have a few suggestions. Amy volunteered Sunni."

Mitch laughed. "I'll bet she didn't fight it."

"Amy said she couldn't stop giggling," Clark confirmed.

"You and Bonnie going along?"

There was a pause. "We'll be there. Haven't decided if we'll be part of the team yet."

"That's true ... you are still on your honeymoon." He paused. "I've been looking through my people, and I think I may have a few suggestions. I'll send you their files."

"Good. I've also been thinking about some of the specialists from CSI. I'll get you a list."

"Okay. Talk to you later."

\* \* \*

"Clark," Monk said, poking his head in the door. "Y'got a minnit?"

"Sure. C'mon in."

Monk stepped in, followed by Renny and Johnny. Clark's eyes widened. "The last time the three of you wanted to talk to me, we built CSI. What's up?"

Monk and Johnny sat, while Renny stood.

"Clark," started the big engineer. "I know we've all gone in different directions, and we're scattered all around the US. But you've gotta admit, we've been spendin' a lot of time together since you came outta hibernation."

Clark looked at each of them. "Do you wish to return to your chosen fields?"

"Yes ... and no," answered Johnny. "Even the untrained eye can see that strange occurrences have been attracted to us over the years like iron filings to a magnet. But since we got back together it's even more so. We've all commented on it. And, frankly, these have been some of the best times of our lives."

"Yeah," agreed Monk. "It's good to get back in harness again. But we don't got the 86th Floor to hang our hats anymore - a place where we can go like we used to. So ... what do you think about setting up a new HQ somewhere?"

"Besides, with Bonnie being with child, she'll soon be in no condition for travel," added Johnny.

Monk stood and looked sheepishly. "I ... uh ... happened to overhear you talkin' to Mitch. I heard you ask him about a place for everybody to get together. This is what we're talkin' about. We keep dependin' on Mitch to have a place for us. It don't seem fair. If we had a home base of our own, we'd just meet there."

"It would be *our* place," said Renny. "Not a loaner."

"Please don't misunderstand our intentions," added Johnny. "Mr. Drake has - and will continue to be - a friend and an invaluable asset. We're just talking about a place of our own."

"Points well taken. Any ideas *where*?" inquired Clark.

"Not really," said Monk, shaking his head. "I guess it depends on what we want out of it."

The others agreed.

Clark looked at them thoughtfully. "I'll think about it, guys. Thanks."

\* \* \*

The night sky was dotted with a multitude of stars, as Bonnie and Clark took a late-night stroll on the aft deck.

"Bonnie," Clark suddenly asked. "Why am I doing this?"

"Doing *what*, sug?"

"Dr. Phillips is assembling a team of specialists to accompany him to Arizona. And Mitch asked if you and I are going to be part of it."

"Yeah?"

"I said I didn't know." He paused. "I don't know if I really want us to be part of this one. I mean ... this is our *honeymoon*! Don't we deserve some time just for *us*? Do we *always* have to ... to ... answer the call?" He paused again. "I've seen some of the team's files, and they're very impressive. I don't think they'll be any problem getting things working. I don't have to be a part of this endeavor! So why can't I just turn it over to Mitch and Doug and let *them* sort it all out?"

Bonnie waited patiently for him to finish. Then she guided him over to the railing and turned him to face her.

"My dear, sweet love," she started, looking into his eyes. "The reason you are compelled to go along is simple. It's because you are a one-hundred-year-old *kid*."

He opened his mouth in rebuttal, but she placed an index finger on his lips and he went silent. "You were born and raised to be a solver of mysteries ... it's what you do. It's what you've *always* done. And when God finally calls you home, you're going to be a white-haired old coot trying to get to the bottom of one last puzzle before you go. Until then, you won't be satisfied ... we both know that."

"Perhaps," he reluctantly conceded. "But what about us? Shouldn't we take time for ourselves?"

"And we will," she replied. "Remember, you didn't tell the captain to turn around when Doug came aboard. No. You introduced him to Mitch, helped where you could, then stood back. You didn't force yourself as mediator. And, if you haven't been paying attention, we have been taking time for us ... like now."

"So I should go?" he asked.

"*We* will go, lover," she corrected him. "I kinda want to see this Time Tunnel thing myself. And we'll see what God has in mind while we're there. Fair enough?"

Clark smiled at her. "Fair enough."

And they kissed.

\* \* \*

As they headed back for their stateroom, they saw a light coming from Dr. Phillips' quarters. Clark knocked lightly.

"Yes," came a terse response.

"It's Clark and Bonnie," he identified. "Can we come in?"

"Door's unlocked."

They stepped inside. Dr. Phillips was sitting at the stateroom desk, intently looking at the screen of a notebook computer Drake had provided.

"Doug, it's late," stated Clark. "What are you working on?"

"I'm on the internet," he informed them. "I'm skimming through some articles on quantum physics."

"Dr. Phillips, you need your rest," offered Bonnie.

The time traveler reached for a coffee maker and pulled out the glass pot. He swirled the cold mixture and sniffed at the pot; his face contorted into a brief grimace. Then he poured it into a nearby mug and took a long swig. His face twisted even more in reaction to the bitter brew.

"I tried to sleep, but couldn't," he said, not looking at them. "There's so much to do!" He slowly shook his head. "I keep wondering, is Tony still waiting for me, or has he given me up for dead or lost?" He looked up at them. "He may have stepped into this adventure alone, but we've rarely been apart since then. We don't agree all the time, but at least we've had each other."

Clark took a seat on the edge of the bed. "I know the feeling. It's like Perry and me. In many ways, he's been closer to me than a brother."

"I can second that, Dr. Phillips," added Bonnie. "When Perry was in danger a couple of months ago, Clark would've run barefoot through hot coals to get to him."

Dr. Phillips smiled. "You *do* understand."

"Yes." Clark changed the subject. "Have you been able to contact experts in your field?"

"Yes, for all the good it's done me!" He let go an ironic laugh. "All my knowledge, all my education ... it seems like the world has passed me like I was standing still. They're talking theories that I find difficult to believe, let alone understand. Clark, was it that way for you after you came out of suspended animation?"

"Oh, yes!" grinned Clark. "And even more so, considering how I was before it happened."

"How so?" asked Phillips, interested.

Clark summarized his state of burnout prior to being captured and placed in suspended animation.

He explained about how, for so long, the world had looked up to him as a greater-than-human Man of Bronze, with an almost-godlike reverence. In his attempt to continue to live up to those expectations, he set himself up for a great fall. "In the big picture, being captured and placed in suspended animation for fifty years was the best thing that happened to me. It put me in a place where I was totally and completely humbled. All my 'superhuman' knowledge was left in the dust, and I myself was now looked at by the world as a criminal."

He went on to tell about how he dug himself out of his 'tomb' and wandered into a Mission in the Skid Row section of Portland, Oregon to get a hot meal. "While I was there, I listened to the preacher give his sermon. It was as if he was speaking *directly* to me ... making me realize I needed something that was impossible for me to supply. I needed God."

"Perry was the preacher, by the way," supplied Bonnie.

"That night I became a Christian. Shortly after that, Perry and I set out to find the rest of my old team. We found Long Tom Roberts in Lincoln City, Oregon. Within a day of our reunion, Tom suffered a heart attack and was rushed to the hospital.

"Before my hibernation, I was a master surgeon. But in this time, fifty years later, I was nothing more than an irritant to the real doctors."

"Did Tom survive?"

"No. The damage was too great. But God gave me the opportunity to share the gospel with him and his daughter - that was Amy, by the way." He paused and grinned. "Forgive me, Doug. I wasn't planning on talking so much."

"Understandable. No offense taken." He shook his head. "But you can understand why I can't take a break yet."

"Yes," Clark nodded. "But also realize you can't help Dr. Newman if you're exhausted. Stay aware of your own limitations."

"I'll rest soon," Phillips promised with a thin smile. "I promise."

"We'll be making port at Caroline Island in the morning. Perry, Dot, and Dr. MacGregor are on their way."

"Thank you," he smiled.

Clark and Bonnie headed for the door. "I'll see you in the morning, Doug. Good night."

"Good night."

The door closed behind them. Doug Phillips looked into the coffee mug, sipped a little of it with a grimace, then set it down next to the pot and returned to the computer screen.

\* \* \*

## July 22

The *Duane C. Bernhardt* slid easily through the Mediterranean waters, and docked at Caroline Island just after 11am. Standing on the deck next to the embarkation ladder, Clark gave his cousin Pat one last hug before she disembarked.

"Bonnie's getting off with me; she's going to visit her old security crew," she informed him. "What about you? Surely you're not planning on spending the next 48 hours on this tub?"

"No. I'll come ashore in a little while."

"Good. The kids would love to see you again ... and you might as well get used to the pitter-patter of little feet before you get one of your own - right?" She gave him a mischievous grin. "Maybe I'll lock you in with the newborns for a couple of hours ... let you change some diapers ... yeah, I like that!"

Clark gave her a mock-stoic expression, but didn't reply. A moment later he cracked a smile, and embraced his cousin. Pat gave him a final kiss on the cheek and headed for the gangplank. He waved at people as they headed towards the island's facilities, then went back inside.

A few minutes later, Perry rang through to his cell phone.

Clark asked, "Where are you?"

"Look towards Athens!" he replied. "With your eyeballs, you should be able to spot us!"

Clark pivoted and his eyes narrowed. In the distance, he could see a speck closing in on the island. "Yes, I see you! What's your ETA?"

"Let's just say we'd like to make lunch reservations for three."

Clark laughed. "Your table will be waiting! I'll inform Dr. Phillips, and we'll see you at the helipad!"

"Okay. See you soon."

\* \* \*

"There they are!" I pointed out to Dr. MacGregor, indicating the four people standing on the observation platform adjacent to the helipad.

"It *is* him," she muttered softly, tears quickly forming in her eyes.

We hovered briefly over the pad before settling into place. As the rotors wound down, I opened the hatch and hopped down. I grabbed a small stepping block and gave Dr. MacGregor a hand out. Keeping low, we cleared the rotors' reach and closed the gap between our welcoming party and us.

"Everyone," I introduced. "This is Mrs. Annie Caldwell, also known as Dr. Ann MacGregor. Annie, this is - "

"Doug!" she exclaimed, and ran into Dr. Phillips' arms for a tearful forty-year-overdue embrace.

The rest of us exchanged knowing glances as we waited for them. After a few seconds they separated and spoke to each other.

"You haven't changed," Ann observed.

Dr. Phillips smiled. "Neither have you."

Ann smiled back. "You are such a liar."

"I'm going to try and get Tony back. And I'm going to need your help."

"I don't know what I can do, Doug ... after all, it's been forty years since I even sat at the controls. But I'll do what I can."

"I know you will, Ann. Are you hungry? Tired?"

"Perry said something about lunch reservations. Sounds great! Can't be worse than that retirement home I was in." She wrapped her arm around Dr. Phillips'. "Lead the way!"

\* \* \*

Lunch was excellent.

It was fascinating listening to the two Time Tunnel alumni sharing old times and bringing each other up to speed. Dr. MacGregor had insisted on being called by her maiden name and professional title, rather than as Mrs. Annie Caldwell. "Considering the circumstances, it'll be far less confusing for all of us," she told us.

She continued. "After the project closed down, we all pretty much went our separate ways. Sure, for a while we'd keep in touch with phone calls and the occasional letter, but we'd been forbidden to speak about the project ... as if it really mattered by then. I wasn't able to attend General Kirk's funeral, but I did make it to Dr. Swain's; I recognized a few familiar faces there, and we got together to reminisce. But since then, nothing – until Perry and Dot showed up." She placed a wrinkled hand atop Dr. Phillips'. "I'm so glad you're okay, Doug."

"Me, too," he agreed. "After lunch, we'll go back to the ship and I'll show you your stateroom. Whenever you're ready, I can show you what we've found out."

"Sounds good."

\* \* \*

## **July 23**

Being back on Caroline Island was like a homecoming to me.

It had only been a few weeks since I'd finished recuperating from the wounds incurred at Deuce's hand.

Kenji didn't waste any time letting everyone know that *Spook* - his nickname for me - was back on the island. As I stepped down from the helipad platform, a small multitude of children were waiting for me, their little eyes bright and full of love for the one who had nearly died to keep them safe. They cheered and waved and rushed in for hugs and kisses.

They clung onto my legs and forced me to the ground. For a moment I wondered if I wasn't in greater danger than from Deuce Robinson's whip. But then I heard Pat's voice.

"Come on, kids! Give the man some air!" They climbed off of me and allowed me to get to my feet. Pat saw their disappointed little faces and reassured them, "He's going to be here for a couple of days! I promise, nobody will be left out!"

They let out squeals of joy and closed in on me. A little dark-skinned girl stood nearby, her eyes full of love and her arms reaching up for me. I picked her up and held her. She hugged me and planted a teeny kiss on my cheek. For the rest of the day I felt like the Pied Piper, accompanied by throngs of children.

Later, we checked out the latest inhabitants to the island, the relocated villagers of *Negro Lobo*. With Pat's help, they had moved lock, stock, and barrel to an undeveloped side of the island in exchange for helping them take care of the children and the rest of the facilities on the island. So far, everyone was mutually pleased at the progress that had been done.

\* \* \*

"This is a list of the people we're considering for our team. A few of them are here aboard this ship. The others are being transported to a place in San Diego," explained Dr. Phillips, showing several printed sheets of paper to Dr. MacGregor.

"Have you considered experts in temporal mechanics? After all, a lot of things have changed in the field in the last thirty years."

"So I discovered," he answered. "I've seen the internet. And yes, we're looking into that as well."

"Good. You know, with all the advances in computers since the 70's, I'm surprised that nobody's thought about reactivating the Time Tunnel before." Her eyes turned glassy. "You know, wouldn't it be something if – once we get Tony back – we were able to continue the research on the project?"

"One step at a time, Ann," cautioned Dr. Phillips with a smile. "But I've considered it. I believe Clark would help us with funding if we asked."

"You know, I still find it amazing that Doc Savage is still alive," she mused aloud.

"What's more amazing is that whatever pulled me from the past deposited me precisely on their ship in the middle of the ocean."

"You still don't know how that happened?"

"It's a genuine mystery," he shook his head slowly. "But I'm sure we'll figure it out eventually."

\* \* \*

I ran into Dr. Phillips as I was returning to the cruise ship.

"We'll be leaving in the morning, in case you want to do some last-minute visiting," I offered.

"Thank you Perry, but no. I'm ready to go. Ann, on the other hand, is still ashore."

"Speaking of Dr. MacGregor, she told me a lot about your adventures. It's fascinating, but I've got a question. The way she made it sound, you two always landed right in the middle of the action – including major historical events. Is that true?"

Dr. Phillips laughed. "Ann exaggerates. She forgot about the time Tony and I materialized in the middle of the Grand Canyon, thirty feet *above* the water! Next thing we knew – *splash!* It took us several minutes to swim to shore once we realized what had happened. Nobody around for miles, we're soaked to the bone, and all we can do is wait for the Tunnel to transfer us again."

"I'm surprised your clothes never wore out."

"Good observation. That's something we've wondered as well. No matter how dirty, scuffed, or mistreated our clothes became, they were always like brand new when we transferred. I suspect that, since our patterns were in the computers and the clothes were part of the patterns, it all came together before transferring."

"What about physical damage? Did you ever transfer when one of you were injured?"

"Tony sprained an ankle when we arrived on a Pacific island back in 1945. It had been taped up, but the tape was gone and the injury completely healed when we arrived at the next time period. After this is all over, I'd like to look deeper into that. Is there something here that can be used in medical science?"

"That would be interesting, Dr. Phillips. Please keep me informed."

"I will."

\* \* \*

## **July 24**

### **Seven hours after leaving Caroline Island**

I saw Clark standing by the forward rail and came alongside. "I know that look. To trill or not to trill, that is the question. What's up, Doc?"

He gave me that look he always gives me when I use that old Bugs Bunny cliché. Then he looked out at the water again. "I'm not really *troubled*, Perry. I'm just contemplating something." He took a deep breath. "While you were retrieving Dr. MacGregor, Monk, Johnny, and Renny came to me with an interesting ... observation. They felt that we needed a new headquarters, like we used to have in the Empire State Building."

"Interesting," I chuckled. "Believe it or not, I've been thinking along the same lines."

He turned to face me. "You *have*?"

"When the three of us first started out, we were content to travel about the country like the old Circuit Riders. But ... have you counted just how many mysteries and weird occurrences have crossed our paths?"

"Like iron filings to a magnet," Clark mused softly.

"Sounds like it's occurred to you, too."

He nodded. "Back then, we either lived in the ESB or had an apartment nearby. We were never more than a half hour away, unless we were away on a job or project. The 86th Floor was our magnetic north. Now we're scattered: Monk in Oklahoma, Renny in Kansas, Johnny at CSI, Pat on Caroline Island ... and us more-or-less in Oregon."

"Yeah, it's been difficult bringing everybody together when we need to," I concurred. "There's another factor to take into account, though."

"Raising a child without a place to call home," Clark supplied.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Now, we both know that families can survive in situations such as ours: military families and missionaries, for example. But there's got to be *something* better."

Clark was silent.

"Have you talked to Bonnie about this yet?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"You and I both know that money is no object," I stated. "And Mitch would set us up with the Batcave if we gave the word, just out of admiration for you."

"Yes, he would," he agreed, smiling thinly at my joke.

"It's obvious you need time to think and pray about this." I placed a hand on his back. "And I'll be praying that God gives you the wisdom ... you'll need it."

"Thanks," he gave me a weak smile.

I walked away, leaving him with his thoughts.

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

**July 27**

**Northeast of San Diego, California**

"This is the one, 'Lana. Pull in here."

The sign attached to the chain-link fence read

WAVERLY ARMS WAREHOUSE 14  
AUTHORIZED ACCESS ONLY  
NO TRESPASSING

The small complex didn't look any different from others in the area. Beyond the gate was a main road with buildings on either side, and a third, hangar-like building at the end.

But the two women in the Toyota Camry had no problem spotting the extra security about the place, and knew there was more to *King George* than met the eye.

The driver of the Camry could've passed for Ringo Starr's younger sister. Her passenger was a breathtaking blonde with features that could've made her a supermodel; her straight hair was tucked under a *Houston Astros* baseball cap.

Pulling up to the main gate, an intercom box instructed with a mechanical voice, "Please identify."

"Docket, Alana," said the driver in an even tone.

"Cruise, Elle," her passenger called across the seat.

While they waited, they identified the supposedly hidden cameras watching them.

"Eight," concluded Elle.

"Nine," corrected Alana. "Look at the center of the gate, just about six inches from midpoint."

The blonde looked, then muttered something unintelligible.

"Smile for the camera, sweetie!" Alana joked.

Elle grunted.

A moment later, a human voice came from the intercom. "Good morning, ladies. I'm Lieutenant Williamson, liaison for *Hourglass*. Just drive straight ahead and hang a right at the end. I'll meet you there. Park anywhere you like. Don't worry about your bags - we'll get 'em after you've had the tour."

The gate slid open. Alana shifted into drive and they moved down the main road. As they turned into the parking lot, they saw a man in a military uniform; he was tall and handsome, with a Malibu tan.

"Nice," Elle whistled.

"Rein 'em in, girl. Look at the claim ticket on his left hand."

"Rats!" she grumbled, getting out of the car.

"Elle, why are you so worried?" Alana questioned, coming alongside her friend. "With your looks you'll have no problem scoring a husband. I'm the one printing up business cards with 'spinster' on 'em."

"Knock that off, 'Lana! You're far from being a spinster!"

They silenced the discussion as they got within hearing range of Williamson. He held out his hand and welcomed them again to *King George*. He pointed to the third warehouse, which was now clearly identifiable. "That's the hangar; the Chinooks are already inside. We'll check 'em out after seeing the rest of the place."

They went through a side door. "Have you been briefed on the op?" Williamson asked.

"A little," answered Alana. "We're flying one of the choppers to the Arizona desert. It's a milk run." She shrugged.

"Anything else?"

They shook their heads. "No, sir," replied Elle. "Are we going to be in the loop?"

"Most definitely." He smiled.

They went through a door at the back of one of the warehouses. "You'll be spending most of your time here and in the hangar next door. Layout's simple. We've got living quarters between here and the mess hall at that end. Beyond there are the work rooms - they're kind of like high-tech conference rooms."

"You got a gym?" asked Elle.

"Just off the door we came in through. It's not much more than a weight room, but we've had no complaints."

"It'll do," Alana nodded.

"Let me show you the workrooms and introduce you to the members of the team that have already arrived."

They went down a dimly-lit corridor that looked into several rooms through special one-way glass. "In the 1960's, the United States Government experimented with time travel. It was shut down in 1975 and basically forgotten. But they left a man behind, lost in time. Now a private interest group is trying to reactivate the installation and bring the man back. Part of the team is already here; the rest will be here in a few days."

They came to the first workroom. The walls were covered with high-definition monitors and whiteboards, and there were numerous computer work stations.

"These are the computer techs," introduced Williamson.

"Wait!" exclaimed Elle. "That man on the monitor! Isn't that Stephen Hawking?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. It's been like a scientific Who's Who over the last couple of days. Let's move on, and I'll introduce you to our cast of characters."

Bernard Matthews looked like he was trying to win a Jerry Garcia look-alike contest, with his long hair, beard, and tie-dye clothing. Kim Soong Ha was a short Oriental girl, with silk-like hair the color of turquoise. Harvey Cable appeared to be the only 'normal' one of the three, of average height and weight, and with curly brown hair; he wrote on a tablet PC with a stylus, simultaneously changing the display on one of the whiteboards.

The workroom for the electronics specialists looked like the one they'd just left, but three of the four people in the room were involved in a discussion with a dark-haired man on one of the monitors.

Williamson continued the introductions.

Laura Sunday was an attractive redhead in her late 20's; a single mom, she loved to show off pictures of her two girls. Becky Speed was an overweight brunette in her early 40's. Randy Lane was a grandfatherly type with decades of experience in his portfolio; with his brown hair balding at the crown, he had a Friar Tuck look to him. Josh Middleton was a coal-skinned young man sitting by himself at one of the tables.

"He's the resident genius in temporal mechanics." explained Williamson. "But you won't get him to talk unless *he* wants to." He paused. "The man on the screen is the head honcho for this operation, Dr. Douglas Phillips. Harvey, Becky, Randy, and Josh are from Waverly like we are. Bernard, Kim, and Laura are on loan from CSI."

"CSI?" asked Alana. "*Clark Savage Institute?*"

Williamson nodded.

"Is *he* gonna be in on this op? You know ... *Dent?*"

"I think so. Is that a problem?"

"No, no!" Alana shook her head. "Actually, he was the one who introduced me to Drake!"

"Really? Yeah, he should be here in a couple of days. I hear tell he's on his honeymoon."

"*Honeymoon?* Who'd he marry?"

"I don't know. Sorry."

Their next stop was the hangar, where they met the co-pilot of the other helicopter. Alana had remembered J.J. Judge; the handsome black man was an excellent pilot, especially when it came to the larger transports.

"I'm qualified on the smaller jobs, but babies like this one -" He patted the Chinook's side. "- is where I really go to town."

"So I've heard. I've also heard some of the antics you've pulled with the Sikorsky."

He lowered his head, but was still smiling.

"What kind of antics?" asked Elle, curiously.

J.J. tried to stop Alana, but she explained, "He's been known to rent his services out to colleges for pranks ... such as 'covertly' moving statues or faculty vehicles from ground level to rooftop level."

Elle cracked up laughing, and both of them looked over at J.J. After a moment, he looked back with a smile and said, "Guilty as charged. Promise not to tell anybody and I'll take you up next time I go."

After a moment of silent conversing, the two ladies agreed.

\* \* \*

In the dining room, Alana's name was announced via an intercom. "Ms. Docket, your call has been put through!"

Normal cell phone communications were prohibited while on the base, but the dining hall had been set up with several communication kiosks - however, everyone still called them phone booths.

Alana closed the door behind her and sat down. As soon as she did, the screen lit up with Bonnie's face. "*Alana?* Is that you?"

"Sure is," she smiled back. "Long time no see. How're you doing?"

"Good, good. And you?"

"Fine. I'm here at *King George*. I hear you're going to be joining us."

She nodded. "We'll be arriving in a couple of days."

"Yeah ... Williamson said you guys were on some sorta cruise. He also said that the big bronze guy got married. Who finally caught up to him?"

"*I* did," she replied, holding up her left hand to show off the ring. "We got married on the 15th."

Alana stared at the image on the screen. "You?"

"We tried to get ahold of you, Alana, but all Mitch could tell us was that you were on another mission."

Alana looked down at the floor for a moment, silent.

"Alana? Are you okay?"

"This was awfully sudden, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. Can anyone overhear us?"

She shook her head. "Private phone booth."

Watching her friend from a nearby table, Elle Cruise saw her suddenly bolt to her feet; she could barely hear her exclaim, "You *WHAT?*" It startled the tall blonde. She held back the urge to see what the matter was, but observed her closely. From that point until the ending of the conversation, Alana fidgeted like a child, alternately standing and sitting within the enclosed booth; the brunette would've been pacing the floor had there been enough room to move about. Finally the call ended, and Alana made a beeline for the nearest exit.

Elle followed, finding Alana outside. Pacing back and forth near the wall, she fiercely puffed on a cigarette.

"What did she say?" asked Elle, trying to match her pace.

"She ... got *married*. She had to." Alana slowly shook her head. "She's *pregnant*."

"Bonnie?"

Alana released a sharp profanity. "And I was on a mission!" She cursed again, then took another heavy drag from the cigarette.

Elle didn't know what to say. So she didn't. She remained silent as Alana finished one cigarette and chained into a second.

"You know, Alana," she finally spoke, her voice low. "I haven't properly thanked you for getting me on this assignment."

Alana's smoking stopped as if the breath caught in her lungs; her eyes narrowed and turned towards her friend. "I don't know what you're talking about. Mr. Drake gave *both* of us this assignment."

"Not completely." Elle smiled thinly. "It was because of *your* recommendation. You knew how bad off I was after Frank's death."

Alana turned to give Elle a sideways glance. Then she flicked the half-smoked cigarette away. "I was hoping you wouldn't catch on."

Elle reached over and put a hand on Alana's arm. "Thanks."

"It's okay," she replied. "Let's go back inside."

\* \* \*

## **July 30**

"Grandma? It's Dot."

"Dot, how's it going?" replied Pat with a smile. "Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"No, no!" she replied quickly. "Just wanted to let you know that we're in San Diego and checked in at *King George*."

"What's that?"

"The name of the base."

"So how's everybody else doing?"

"Now that both halves of the team are together, and the formal introductions over, the place is jumpin'. I know they requested a lot of equipment and stuff, but you should see it! They've got two Chinook helicopters, and they're loading them up with everything they can think of – from ATVs to portable area lights, to food and water, to camcorders so they can get the whole thing down for the history books.

"Dr. Phillips' biggest question mark in this whole thing is with the computers. Nobody knows what condition the computers are in the Time Tunnel or the data - hopefully it hasn't been corrupted or wiped clean before they closed it up in the 70's. To hedge his bets, Dr. Phillips and Dr. MacGregor have been trying to recreate as much as they can remember, then integrate it with the latest information in temporal mechanics and quantum physics. It's all way over my head, Pat."

"I can imagine," she commented. "I hope it works."

"Me, too. They're taking a backup computer in case they accidentally fry the first one."

"Good idea. So what are you doing to further the cause?"

"I'm staying out of the way, that's what I'm doing!" she laughed. "I figure my place is to watch and pray."

"Good attitude," complimented Pat. "How's Dr. MacGregor doing?"

"She's been behaving like she found the Fountain of Youth. She and Dr. Phillips have been side-by-side ever since they got together, and she's proved to herself that she *did* still remember something from the old days. In fact, she remembered that they used to have a big problem with power ... spending precious time in recharging ... but they've already got a solution in mind. So that's one hurdle taken care of before we get there." She paused. "By the way, did you see how she was looking at Dr. Phillips?"

"Yes, I did. There's more than just professional respect there. But I think the problem is with Dr. Phillips. He's *too* much the professional ... he's not willing to open up to her. I can imagine what it may have been like back when they were working together. Now there are so many years separating them, I don't think they have a chance together. It's sad."

"Speaking of age differences ... remember what you did for Jodie?"

"Whoa, granddaughter!" Pat interrupted. "I think I know where you're going with this! And I don't think it'll work. Jodie was still a healthy young woman when I used the silphium on her. But Dr. MacGregor is quite a bit older. If I used a megadose of silphium on Dr. MacGregor like I did with Queen Monja ... I don't want another experience like *that* on my conscience."

"It's okay, Pat. I understand. I just figured it couldn't hurt to ask."

"No, no, it couldn't," she agreed. "You just want to help them, dear." She paused. "I'll tell you what. Let me think about this. I'm not making any commitments; I'm just tossing things around. If there's a way we could do this without endangering Dr. MacGregor's life, it could work. In the meantime, though, let's keep this between the two of us."

"Sure! Great! Thanks!"

"How are Perry and my cousin?"

"*Ooh!* Thanks for reminding me. Keep Perry in prayer."

"What is it?"

"Well, at first the two of us weren't planning on joining them in Arizona. But then both Perry and Clark started having dreams of the two of them face-to-face with Granddad Ham."

"But Ham died before Perry was born," Pat returned.

"Yeah. That's what makes it really weird."

"What about you and Bonnie? You two are going, aren't you?"

"At first we were, but then Bonnie started getting sick. Don't worry, the baby's just fine! The doctor said she might have a mild case of stomach flu. So, just to be on the safe side, she's going to pass on going to Arizona, and I'm going to keep her company. Besides, they figure it'll only going to be a couple of days anyway - and, if anything, Bonnie and I can get in some quality shopping time." She released a mischievous laugh.

Pat joined in. "How soon 'til they leave?"

"Right now they're talking Friday morning. The rest of us will stay here, either on the base or in a local motel. I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks, Dot."

"Talk to you later. Love you!"

"Love you, too! Bye!"

\* \* \*

"Hey, 'Lana," called Gumball, walking into the hangar.

The pilot of the other helicopter sauntered over to him. They came together in a casual high-five.

"And this is my partner in crime, Elle Cruise," she introduced.

The tall blonde shook his hand. "Heard a lot about'cha, Captain."

"Believe only half of it ... unless it's good stuff, of course," he quipped.

"I heard you recommended me for this little jaunt."

He downplayed the compliment. "Your name *may* have come up in conversation somewhere."

"*Liar*," she muttered with a sideways smile.

"So this is what we're gonna be working with," he commented, looking at the Chinooks.

"Yeah. Elle and I have been giving them the once over."

"Anything?"

"Naw. They're good to go whenever we are." She fished out her cigarettes and a lighter. "Elle, I'm goin' outside for a smoke!"

"Sure," the other woman replied from the other side of one of the helicopters.

Alana walked outside and lit up. Gumball walked out with her but kept his distance.

"Say, you ever hear from any of the old group?"

His reference was to *APEX*, at one time viewed as a terrorist organization. It had actually been the brainchild of Jillian Woodward, former scientist for *Patricia, Inc.* Jill had seen the atrocities committed under Pat Savage's command – prior to her conversion – and had brought together other victims, misfits, and social rejects, and made them into a formidable fighting force. Striking at establishments that exploited women – including porno shops and icons of the cosmetics and fashion industry – they followed Pat to the Valley of the Vanished and held her hostage until Clark, Perry, Dot, Amy, and Gumball had freed them. Shortly after, they combined their forces to go after Daniel Franklin - the crud who had been manipulating both Pat and Jill against the other - and took back Pat's company.

"A few of them," Alana replied. "Most of them have been helping out on Caroline Island. She's really made a major turnaround from how she used to be." She paused. "She cared for Larabee and Dutton right up to the end."

He gave her a puzzled look.

"Larabee had cancer," Alana supplied. "And Rosa had AIDS."

Gumball's expression and voice softened, "I'm sorry ... I didn't know."

"It's okay. I gotta hand it to Pat, though; they got four-star treatment." She smiled. "Y'know, taking in the kids was the best thing she could'a done. There were a lot of ladies in the group who - for one reason or another - had lost children. Jeannie, Kristi, Alex ... Pat gave 'em a new lease on life. For example, Kristi'd lost a daughter; but since she's been on the island, she's unofficially adopted at least a dozen little girls. It's nothing more than a miracle to see it." She blew smoke away from them. "I heard you and Amy got married. When did this happen?"

"A couple of years ago. Did you hear about the little skirmish we had on the island?"

She nodded. "Yeah. It would've been fun. But they keep putting me on missions elsewhere." She paused. "I missed your wedding ... and I missed Bonnie's wedding."

"Hey, I'm sorry. Really." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, what if I talked to Drake, see what he could do to swing things around when we've got some action?"

She looked at him and her face brightened. "That would be great! Thanks!"

"It might not be the same thing, but we taped the wedding. Before we split, see me and we'll watch it."

"Okay!" She stamped out the rest of her cigarette. "I heard there's going to be a lot of stuff in these two birds. Let's see how best to pack it all!"

The two pilots went back into the hangar.

\* \* \*

"Dr. MacGregor," greeted Johnny Littlejohn.

"Professor," she returned.

He stood across from her at the table in the dining room. "Is anyone going to be joining you?"

"No. Please," She gestured toward the seat.

He set his tray down opposite hers and sat.

"I know you've been quite busy, but I hope you might have a few moments for me."

"Be my guest."

"Good! You know, Dr. Phillips told me of some of your adventures with the Time Tunnel. Being a student of history, I'm truly fascinated at your first-hand insights into history." He paused. "Is it true you had a close encounter with Halley's Comet?"

She laughed. "Yes. We had a time lock on Doug and Tony, but the increased gravitation of the comet turned the Time Tunnel into somewhat of a direct conduit. It made for some very intense moments."

"And is it true that you were actually kidnapped by aliens?"

She shuddered. "Yes. I'd almost forgotten about that. There were quite a few episodes where Tony and Doug - and even us in the Time Tunnel - encountered aliens. Most of them existed in our present, and were bent on conquest rather than exploration. It certainly gave me a new perspective on the unknown."

"Astounding!" exclaimed Johnny, amazed. "Did you ever witness events from Biblical times?"

She nodded dourly, but didn't explain until he pressed it. "We saw ... the Fall of Jericho."

The tone of Johnny's voice lowered in awe. "You *actually* witnessed a miracle of God?"

Her attitude suddenly turned defensive. "It *wasn't* a miracle of God! It was just a whirlwind!"

"A whirlwind," he repeated. "You know, in the Bible it doesn't really explain the actual mechanism God used to bring down the walls. It only explained that the Israelites gave off with a great shout and the walls fell in on themselves. But if you saw an actual whirlwind ... then that's even more proof of the power of God."

"It was not a miracle of God!"

Johnny spoke patiently and compassionately. "Dr. MacGregor ... *Ann* ... you've admitted to seeing *extraordinary* things - things never before seen by man! You've seen - and even *interacted* with - extraterrestrials. You call yourself open-minded, and yet you vehemently *deny* the possibility that there *could* exist a God who could do what you yourself have witnessed!"

"I am a *scientist*!" she stood defiantly. "I cannot allow myself to be distracted by ... *fairy tales*!"

Johnny also bolted to his feet, and the two scientists glared at each other face-to-face. Then Johnny spat polysyllabic, "*Intransigent*! I swear - you're as obdurate as a constituent *Equus Asinus*!"

"I am *not* as stubborn as a mule, you old coot!" she translated his big words with a spiteful glare. "I am a *scientist*! And as for you, maybe you've been working around those mummies for so long that you're starting to *think* like one!"

Johnny stood silently for a moment, then two. His mind formulated another volley to fire at Dr. MacGregor. However, instead, his mouth twisted into a smile, then he laughed and sat back down.

Dr. MacGregor stood by and waited defensively.

"Touché, Dr. MacGregor, touché!" He gave her an easy smile. "I sincerely apologize for my inconsiderate outburst. You are, of course, entitled to your opinions, as am I."

She relaxed. After a moment she also sat back down at the table.

"Since we are going to be working together, would you allow me to engage in further intelligent discussions?"

After a silent moment she nodded. "I'll think about it."

"Fair enough. If you would excuse me ..." He picked up his tray and gave her a smile and polite nod of the head. Then he left the dining room.

As he moved out of earshot, he prayed under his breath, "Lord, forgive me for letting my temper get out of control back there; I almost ruined the witness. Please, God, work on her heart as You worked on mine. And give me the wisdom to know what to say around her, and *when*. Thanks. Amen."

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **August 2**

The silence of Arizona's desert landscape was shattered with the staccato beat of the two helicopters codenamed *Hourglass One* and *Hourglass Two*. *Hourglass Two* carried the gear and the transports, while *Hourglass One* carried the team.

Needless to say, everyone was eager to enter into this adventure.

\* \* \*

"Are you *sure* we're not lost?" asked Gumball, looking down at the expanse.

"Yes," Dr. Phillips patiently replied.

He and Dr. MacGregor stood behind Gumball and co-pilot J.J. Judge. After a few moments, he switched on a small transmitter preset to a particular frequency. "Visitors would arrive by jet and land out here," he explained. "Then a car would take them from the jet into the installation. We'd radio ahead from the car and get clearance." He turned to Dr. MacGregor. "Okay, Ann, let's see if it still works." Then he spoke into the radio. "Mobile Tic-Toc One to Tic-Toc Base. Permission to enter, code Red Lion. Over."

"Yeah, but there's nobody down there!"

Dr. MacGregor elaborated, "It's an automated system."

"Mobile Tic-Toc One to Tic-Toc Base," Dr. Phillips repeated. "Permission to enter, code Red Lion. Over."

A crackling voice suddenly came over the speaker. "*Tic-Toc Base to Mobile Tic-Toc One. Permission granted. Initiate recompression.*"

Dr. MacGregor looked at Dr. Phillips. "Recompression?"

He looked back and shrugged.

A rectangular hole suddenly appeared in the desert floor, exposing a ramp that plunged into the darkness.

"Holy cow!" exclaimed Gumball.

"Now what were you saying about being in the right place?" Dr. Phillips commented. "Take us down, Gumball!"

"Gotcha, Doc!" he acknowledged, switching to the radio connecting him with *Hourglass Two*. "Okay, Alana, we're goin' in. I'll land on the left side of the opening, you take the right."

"Roger roger," came the reply.

\* \* \*

Dr. Phillips was the first one out; he assisted Dr. MacGregor to the desert floor. "You okay, Ann?"

"Yes, Doug, I'm fine," she smiled through the stifling heat. "Let's go."

They walked over to the edge of the ramp. Dr. Phillips stretched out a foot and pressed down firmly. "It wouldn't do to have the ramp give out on us before we get inside, would it?"

They put their hands around their eyes and tried to see down past the darkness.

"I don't see anything?" asked Dr. MacGregor. "Can you?"

"No," he answered. "I didn't really expect I would either, not without a spotlight."

Clark joined them. He took a quick sniff of the air. "Gas and oil," he identified. "And rust."

"The motor pool," identified Dr. Phillips. "The ramp enters into a tunnel, and the motor pool's at the far end."

"I don't know what the air will be like after thirty years," commented Dr. MacGregor. "Do you want to wait before going down there?"

Dr. Phillips shook his head. "Not a chance!" He looked back at the two helicopters, where the others were disembarking. "I'm going to take Randy and Amy; if we can get the generator going, we can get the air scrubbers working."

A few minutes later, wearing portable breathing gear, Dr. Phillips and the two electronics specialists began their descent.

"Be careful, Doug," Dr. MacGregor cautioned.

"Keep in touch," added Clark.

Powerful halogen headlamps obliterated the darkness ahead of them. They paused at the bottom of the ramp to test the transceivers.

"We can hear you fine," announced Clark. "How's the ramp?"

"It seems to be fine," reported Dr. Phillips. "We're moving on."

On the surface, family-sized domed tents with portable air conditioning units were set up to give some comfort from the heat. Equipment was loaded onto trailers pulled by electrically-powered ATVs, and were lined up before the ramp; while waiting, the teams looked over the trailers to make sure everything was secure, and that nothing had happened during the flight. Then we all waited.

After fifteen minutes, Clark announced, "Dr. Phillips reports that the reactor is still in good shape!"

There was a cheer from the crowd.

"It's up and running at 40% strength right now," he continued. "That might not seem like much, but Dr. Phillips said it'll be more than enough for what we have to do. Let's move our gear into the garage bay; the others will meet us there." He went over to Dr. MacGregor. "Dr. Phillips also reported that the air was surprisingly fresh. Do you have any idea why?"

She shook her head. "No. But it could have something to do with something we heard when Doug radioed the code phrase into the automated system to open the ramp."

"What was it?"

"It said, 'Initiate recompression.'"

"What if, when closing down the complex, all of the air was extracted ... to preserve things?"

"And then," she continued his thought. "The air could be pumped back in when and if the proper entrance phrase was received."

"That would mean they were expecting someone to eventually reopen the complex."

"Yes. But ... who? Everything Mr. Drake found says that this place was abandoned."

"Maybe not abandoned," Clark surmised. "But *forgotten*."

\* \* \*

Within the hour, our little convoy moved down the ramp and into the now-lighted tunnel. We moved slowly and carefully, making sure none of our cargo became upset. Dr. Phillips walked before us, and stopped us next to an opening to our right.

His hand was raised for attention. "Before we proceed, I want you all to see something! Follow me!"

We dismounted and followed them up seven steps to a corridor; light globes hanging from the ceiling glowed gently. He pointed to the left. "The ramp over there comes from the motor pool; we'll bring the vehicles up here that way." Then he led us in the opposite direction, down the corridor.

He stopped at a junction. "This is where we'd go through security, then through here ..."

We passed through a wide doorway that opened onto a bridge. "Take a look," he instructed, gesturing to the edge of the bridge.

Curiously, we walked over to the edge and looked.

Some of us were struck speechless, while others couldn't hold back shouts of amazement.

Sunni, standing next to Amy, eagerly asked, "What is it? What is it?"

Dr. Phillips came over and touched her on the shoulder. After identifying himself, he explained what the rest of us were seeing. "We're on a catwalk overlooking what we call the 'Eye of the Storm'. There are over eight *hundred* floors beneath us, with catwalks like this one crossing every fourth floor. The walls facing the Eye are steel and white plastic, with lighted windows in black frames as far as the eye can see. In fact, we can't actually see the bottom from here because a light cloud layer forms about halfway down."

"What a place for a bungee jump," Sunni commented with a grin.

"My dear," added Dr. MacGregor. "When this installation was working at full capacity, we had over 42,000 people living here."

Dr. Phillips announced, "I just wanted you all to grasp the sheer size of this installation before we go any further. It can be very intimidating."

We returned to our vehicles. Dr. Phillips guided us into the motor pool area, then into a pair of cargo elevators as large as studio apartments. It took several minutes to descend the 800 floors to the Time Tunnel level. As we crossed another catwalk, we beheld the monstrous power plant at the base of the Eye which hummed and pulsated with energy.

Bernard Matthews asked what was going on in my mind. "Dr. Phillips! Are you sure it's safe being so close to the reactor?"

"Yes, quite safe," he assured us. "I suppose the builders wanted something suitably impressive, but we never encountered any problems with it."

We continued through another set of doors and entered into a darkened room.

"Wait here," instructed Dr. Phillips. Walking ahead, he disappeared into the darkness; the glow of his flashlight bobbed as if carried by a phantom. Then we heard the sound of breakers being thrown, and the lights came on.

We let out a collective gasp.

Despite the fact that many overhead panel lights failed to come on, and several hanging light globes had also burned out, there was more than enough illumination to be able to see everything. And the concept of 'everything' seemed to be a pale noun at the moment.

To our left was a huge silver pipe that stretched on and on and on and on, seemingly into infinity. As we slowly moved ahead, entering the working area at the mouth of the Time Tunnel, I could see into its maw, at the series of concentric circles stretching as far as the eye could see. Curving around behind us and to our right was a platform lined with control stations that came around to a bank of 60's-vintage computers. On the floor was an orange-and-black graphic of an hourglass; the paint was scuffed from years of foot traffic, but it was still impressive.

"*Wowsers!*" exclaimed Bernard Matthews, as he practically jumped off his ATV and ran past me towards the row of computer banks, with many of the others right behind.

It was absolutely amazing.

Dr. MacGregor walked straight for three consoles directly in front of the Tunnel and poised herself behind the center one. Checking the seat for dust, she sat and ran her fingers across the console; her delicate touch seemed to bring tears to her eyes, as if she was being reunited with an old friend. She flipped a switch, but nothing happened. This seemed to snap her out of her melancholy, as she tested some of the other controls.

Kim Soong Ha called for the others of her team to see something. She excitedly identified objects with the same respect a classic car buff would behave towards a '57 Chevy.

The electronics specialists had vanished behind the banks of computers, checking out things I couldn't begin to guess.

"I'M GOING TO POWER IT UP! EVERYBODY CLEAR!" yelled Dr. Phillips.

He waited for everyone to acknowledge him, then threw the levers. The towers behind the computer banks began lighting up with activity. Then the computer banks themselves became alive with humming and blinking lights, like a Christmas display.

Everyone cheered.

"Thank God," muttered Dr. Phillips. "They didn't disconnect the computers."

"Just like we left it," confirmed Dr. MacGregor solemnly.

I turned to Clark. "Somebody probably figured they'd be back again. Sound familiar?"

He nodded. "Indeed."

"Dr. Phillips, should we start setting up the Cray?" asked Harvey Cable.

"Not just yet," Dr. Phillips replied. "Check through the connections first. Sunni, the spotlight's yours!"

Amy guided the blind woman to the closest panel and backed away. Retracting her white cane into its handle with a quick twist, Sunni dropped it into a belt sheath as smoothly as an Old West gunslinger holstering a six-shooter. Stretching out her arms, opened palms facing the panels, she grinned and declared, "Let's rock!"

Sunni was a very unique lady. We'd first met her in August of 2001. Totally blind, she had a talent for electronics that bordered on the incredible. Single-handedly she had designed and constructed a portable electromagnetic pulse generator. Her motives had, however, been selfish – she'd been using it to fry the electrical systems of cars with annoyingly loud sound systems. Her private crusade would've probably remained unnoticed if it hadn't been for the extraordinary number of vehicles she'd taken out. A local television affiliate picked it up for their 'News of the Weird' feature - and that's how we found out about it.

The four of us - Clark, Bonnie, Dot, and me - had been part of a homecoming visit to Portland. At the same time, Sunni was visiting my good friends Mark and Karen Eidemiller. The three of them came to our tent revival meeting. Despite the fact that her participation was very reluctant, God brought it all together, and brought Sunni to the cross through Clark's preaching. We gave her a

ride back to her home in Eastern Washington, completely oblivious to the fact that she was behind the mystery of the fried vehicles.

Within a couple of days the truth came out - after a hired biker gang had terrorized Sunni. But then an earthquake hit the area, and all the rules were changed. We had to focus on rescue efforts while trying to keep Sunni safe. Afterward, we had to figure out how to keep Sunni from the clutches of the villain of the piece - an ambitious used car dealer by the name of Larson. Our final solution was to fake Sunni's death and have her live with Amy until circumstances reconciled her to her estranged parents.

Sunni's was a unique talent, the ability to 'feel' the movement of electrical current, simply by laying her hands on any electronic device. As she passed her hands over the panels, she made comments like, "This is good ... not this one; it's broken ... okay, okay ... here, too ... not this section; lots of broken connections ... "

The other electronics specialists – still amazed at her prowess – got busy supporting her. One person would make notes according to her observations, then split off and locate the part while another took their place. When Sunni moved to another panel, others would slip in behind and make the replacements.

They made a good team.

\* \* \*

I watched for awhile, fascinated, until I noticed that the others had stopped watching and were getting busy.

The pilots started unloading equipment, setting up folding tables for the others. Some of the computer specialists checked around to determine what kind of connections they'd need to be able to interface with their top-of-the-line data processing gear. I had lost sight of Clark and Johnny; they were, no doubt, on their own exploration mission. I couldn't blame them, I thought.

So I decided to go exploring as well. I grabbed one of the camcorders and a pocketful of DVDs, and looked around for a direction. After a moment, I walked over to Dr. Phillips and explained my situation. "I suddenly realized, how does one keep from getting lost in all this space, anyway?"

He laughed, and then directed me to a cabinet near a desk. He was pleased to see a small stack of thick binders. "This is a directory of the complex. We used to keep them on hand for visitors. Careful, they might be a little fragile after all these years."

He handed it to me. It seemed to still be in good condition, despite the stiffness. "You might want to have a seat and orient yourself before heading out." He placed it on the desk and went right to the page for the Tunnel Room and surrounding area. "Here we are. I'll leave you to it."

I thanked him and started flipping through pages. It didn't take much to follow the schematics, surprised but not surprised by what I saw.

I made a mental note to myself to talk to Clark about integrating some of the features of this complex into CSI's residential community. From its inception, we've tried to make Arronaxe as self-sufficient as possible, but I could see that this complex had much to add.

Acknowledging the fact that this installation had at one time housed tens of thousands of people, and one couldn't just leave and go down the street to the supermarket, it was capable of meeting every human need. There were shops, gyms, restaurants, theaters, libraries, and even medical facilities.

After getting enough bearings to start off, and a general idea of where to go, I set off.

My first stop wasn't far. There was an observation room that seemed to double as a break room, which looked out onto the working area of the Tunnel Room. As I contemplated checking out the ancient vending machines for leftovers, I knew this was the perfect perspective to capture much of the action. I made a note to put a separate camera up here when the action really began.

Then I started wandering.

Walking through the empty halls made me think of the alien base in the classic science fiction movie *Forbidden Planet*. I half expected to bump into Robbie the Robot around the next corner, but I knew it was just me and God and all this solitude.

So I prayed.

"I really hope things work out with this, Lord. I'd hate to see them go through all they are, just to have it end up a failure. I know You're the master of time, space, and matter, and it'll go down just the way You want it to ... but we'd appreciate it if we'd end up with one more than we arrived with. Thanks." I paused. "Now let's see what's down in this direction ..."

I tried to imagine what it had been like with all the people moving, walking, and driving about from place to place. Where did they all go? Had they all been support for the Time Tunnel, or had there been other projects based here?

Considering how many years this place had been deserted, it struck me as odd that there weren't any bugs or other vermin. In fact, there wasn't a cobweb to be found, or hardly any dust.

Just out of curiosity, I tried calling Dot on my satellite cell. Not surprising, I couldn't get a signal. So I went back up to the first catwalk and tried again. This time I was successful.

"Hi, hon," she cheerfully replied to my voice. "How's it coming?"

"Good," I answered. "I left them to their work, and I've been playing Indiana Jones for the last couple of hours. You wouldn't believe how huge this place is ... you practically need a GPS to find your way around." I grinned. "It'd be a terrific place for a game of Extreme Hide and Seek."

"Well, I'm glad you're having so much fun without me," she said dryly. "By the way, Bonnie says hi."

"How's she doing?"

"She's okay; she's right here. Tell Clark she's missing him, and to give her a call."

"Will do."

The tone of her voice softened. "I miss you, too."

"You know, I still don't know why God wanted me to be here."

"He will," she reassured me. "Just give it time."

A few minutes later, I tracked down Clark and Johnny on one of the lower levels. "I just got off the phone with Dot," I informed him.

"Everything okay?" he answered with a hint of anxiety.

"Bonnie's okay," I addressed his concern first. "She and Dot are partying; I could hardly hear them over the music."

His eyes went wide. "You're not serious!"

I gave him a wry grin. "No, but it was worth it to see that look on your face. They're fine, they miss us, and Bonnie wants you to give her a call."

Johnny doubled over with laughter.

Clark's eyes narrowed. "Where does it say, 'antagonize man of bronze'?"

Neither of us could keep a straight face, especially not with Johnny already laughing at our antics. Then Clark headed back towards the surface, and Johnny and I wandered around together before we headed back to the Tunnel Room.

The computer specialists were starting to connect the interface between their computers and the existing Time Tunnel computers – a four-decade difference. Meanwhile, Amy assisted Sunni in making a final pass on the equipment to confirm that the electronics side was good; they talked about having Sunni make passes over the next few hours, just to make sure that nothing had happened due to stress on the systems.

Sunni giggled as she ran her hands across the panels.

I smiled, knowing that the last few years had been both good and bad for Sunni. She had been critically wounded when Amy was kidnapped back in 2001, and it was only God's intervention that had kept her alive. Far beyond that, it was the event that not only reconciled Sunni to the parents that had shunned her for being blind, but it brought her estranged brother to her side to be there when her surviving kidney suddenly failed. She recuperated with her renewed family, helping her stepfather cope with his own degenerative eye disease, and interacting with her new guide dog Chet. I was surprised we didn't run into her when we were last at CSI, since she started apprenticing as an electronics instructor under Professor Noguchi. Then Darren came into her life, Tina was born, and she had a family of her own. And now this.

I was happy that she was happy.

\* \* \*

As the afternoon blended into the evening, I saw the team making slow progress. I had no doubt that we would be successful in getting Dr. Newman back. But the troops were starting to get tired.

Earlier, the pilots had located a VIP Area – closest to the Tunnel Room – and had set it up for guests. They found mattresses in a nearby storage room and had topped them with sleeping bags.

The VIP Area consisted of a rectangular central living space/lounge/mess hall with large and small tables, couches, and chairs. Doors along the two longer walls entered into individual living quarters. Television monitors were placed along the walls at random locations.

Laura Sunday, wandering in for some water, took pity on me after she saw me struggling to connect the camcorder feed into one of the monitors; with an embarrassing ease, she finished the work and moved on.

\* \* \*

Around 9:00 we announced a dinner break.

"So where's the dust?" asked Gumball. "And the bugs?"

"And how come these 40-year mattresses smell springtime fresh?" added Alana Docket.

"I believe I may have an idea," Clark spoke up. "When you signaled for the ramp to open, Dr. Phillips, you received an odd response."

"Yes. It said 'recompression initiated'."

"Earlier, I called Mitch Drake. He found a very obscure reference to using this installation as an emergency bomb shelter."

"A bomb shelter?" repeated Dr. MacGregor.

Clark nodded. "Therefore they wanted this place to endure the years with as little difficulty as possible. Mitch speculated that, once this place was shut down, it was loaded up with supplies, sealed up, and the air sucked out."

"An 800-floor vacuum sealed canister," quipped Sunni. "That's why the air was still good when we arrived."

"When we signaled to open the door," Clark added. "It also triggered the release of an atmosphere into the installation."

"So you're saying there's a stash of supplies around here somewhere?" asked J.J. Judge.

"Very possible," answered Clark.

"Anybody up for some shopping after this is all over?"

"So," I changed the subject. "Has anybody thought about what to do with the installation after the mission's done? It sounds like the rest of the government has forgotten about this place. It might just be up for grabs."

"I agree," piped Dr. Phillips. "It would be a shame to end our research after so much has been invested in it. Perhaps Mr. Drake would consider continuing it."

"It would be interesting," commented Clark. "All we can do is ask."

"Dr. Phillips," spoke up Harvey Cable. "If you don't mind, we'd like to get back to it after dinner."

"Aren't you tired?" asked Dr. MacGregor.

"A bit," answered Bernard Matthews with a stifled yawn. "But what th' hey? We're just starting to make progress! I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm willing to go the distance if it means getting Dr. Newman home."

The others added their enthusiastic agreements.

I could see the emotion showing on Dr. MacGregor's face at the commitment of these people who'd only just met a few days earlier. She put a hand on Dr. Phillips' arm to signify her support.

"Well, it looks like we're gonna need more coffee," commented Alana. "Why don't I take one of the choppers into Phoenix and see what we can find? Anybody with me?"

\* \* \*

### **3:07 am**

I stifled a yawn and took a walk to the restroom, stretching my legs. A few minutes later, from the now-operational observation room, I watched the team prepare another probe. I checked out the recorder and filmed the test. The Tunnel flashed with explosive sound and light - *normal*, according to Dr. MacGregor - and I heard them report that the probe was gone.

There was an exchange of words between Dr. Phillips and some of the electronics wizards. I couldn't understand what they were talking about, but - by the excited tones of their voices - whatever they were doing seemed to be succeeding.

My handheld radio beeped. It was Clark. "You might want to join us. They're going to try making voice contact with Dr. Newman."

"Let me set up the camera here and I'll be right down!"

We weren't going to miss this. Besides the one in the observation room, we had one camcorder on a tripod trained on the Time Tunnel, and I was the roving reporter with a third camera.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen," alerted Dr. Phillips at the main console with Dr. MacGregor. "Let's see if we can pick up Tony. Ann?"

"We've got a lock on the time coordinates," she reported.

"Okay! Kim, activate the screen!"

On cue, curved arcs extended from somewhere in the middle of the tunnel, and an image began to form between them. I could see the image clearly through the camcorder's viewscreen, and wondered if this was some sort of early holographic technology.

The image wavered and rippled like an old television picture. Then it slowly became sharper. In the center, a man worked in a field, driving a horse-drawn plow.

At Dr. MacGregor's console, a microphone was plugged into a socket. As she held it, her hand reflexively squeezed down the button.

"Tony!" she exclaimed.

The man in the image suddenly flinched and looked around.

Dr. MacGregor looked at the microphone in her hand, and released the button. "Doug! He heard me!"

"Yes!" Dr. Phillips was thrilled. "How's the signal?"

"Signal is good!" reported Harvey Cable.

"Power?"

"One hundred percent and steady!" reported Laura Sunday.

Dr. Phillips walked over to Dr. MacGregor's console and she handed him the microphone. He looked at it for a moment, then pressed down the button and called out, "TONY! TONY! IT'S DOUG! CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

The man in the field looked around. "DOUG! WHERE ARE YOU?"

"I'm back at the Tunnel!" Dr. MacGregor reached out and squeezed Dr. Phillips' other hand. They were both smiling. "We're going to try to retrieve you!"

"I'm ready!"

He looked around at the others. "Status?"

One by one, each station called out, "GO!"

"OKAY, TONY - HERE WE GO! *SWITCH!*"

In the center of the picture, the man's clothes were suddenly replaced with a long-sleeved pea green turtleneck sweater and navy blue slacks. Then he vanished. Explosions flashed in the middle of the Tunnel, like spontaneous thunder and lightning. Through the smoke, we saw the vague figure of Dr. Newman.

Then there was another explosion, and the Tunnel filled with white smoke.

We all held our breaths as we waited for Dr. Newman to step out. But when the smoke cleared, the Tunnel was empty.

"He's gone!" exclaimed Dr. MacGregor, despondent.

Dr. Phillips barked, "Do we still have a fix on him?"

Harvey Cable replied, "Yes, sir!"

"FIND HIM!" ordered Dr. Phillips, his voice burning with frustration.

There were several seconds of uncomfortable silence. Those of us who prayed did so urgently. Then Cable practically yelled, "GOT HIM!"

"ON SCREEN!"

The image between the arcs was solid, but it was dark.

"Do we have a picture?" asked Dr. Phillips.

"Yes," reported Dr. MacGregor with a professional calmness. "Wherever he is, it's dark!"

Johnny moved closer to the Tunnel. "The walls aren't smooth. He may be in some sort of underground cavern."

"Do we have a time fix?" asked Dr. Phillips.

Dr. MacGregor consulted her instruments. "Nineteen fifty ... forty-nine ... forty-eight ... holding ... holding at 1948. Late 1948."

"Location?" barked Dr. Phillips.

A flat-screen monitor resting on one of the folding tables displayed a map of the world. As Randy Lane watched, it stopped over North America, then descended. "United States," he reported. "East Coast ... Maine ... yes, that's it. He's in Maine."

The hairs on the back of my neck suddenly stood up. I knew that place and time. So did Clark. I looked over to him; his face betrayed the surprise he was feeling.

"What's the date?" Clark exclaimed. "Can you get an exact date?"

Dr. Phillips, taken aback by Clark's outburst, personally checked the instruments. "December. Twenty-eight."

"No," Clark breathed. "It can't be possible!"

I had been moving closer to Clark as soon as I recognized the time and place. Now, standing next to him, I asked the obvious. "Your caves?"

He didn't look at me. He just nodded his head.

"Kicking in thermal imaging," said Laura Sunday.

The darkness morphed into a scene of scattered spots of red.

"Where's Tony?" asked Dr. MacGregor. "I can't see him!"

"Is that him?" asked Laura Sunday, pointing at a red image resembling a man.

The man carried a flashlight as he moved through the cavern. Its light showed orange on the image. Then the reflected light gave us enough illumination to recognize the man.

"It's ... *me*," sighed Clark.

\* \* \*

**December 28, 1948**

**Maine**

Doc Savage's gold-flecked eyes scanned the caves ahead of him as he panned the flashlight. He was trying to retrace his steps to Wail's underground entrance, but had found nothing yet.

Suddenly his ears caught a noise nearby. In his haste to reach it, he stumbled over a ripple in the rock floor, and landed on his hands and knees; his flashlight clattered just out of reach. Cursing himself for his clumsiness, he reached out for the light.

\* \* \*

Clark had moved to the central control panels of the Time Tunnel. "Is this where Dr. Newman is?"

"Yes, although we can't see him yet," replied Dr. Phillips, as the sound of the Time Tunnel grew in strength.

"We can't let him - *me* - see Dr. Newman!"

"We won't! How's our power?"

"We're good!"

Dr. Phillips turned back to Clark. "As soon as we get a fix on him, we'll switch him!"

His instructions were unnecessary. Everybody in the room was on edge, hands ready, eyes focused on controls and displays. We waited a second, then two, then Dr. MacGregor broke the silence, "**LOCKED!**"

"**NOW!**" yelled Dr. Phillips.

\* \* \*

**1948**

The beam of Doc Savage's flashlight caught the source of the movement. It was a dark-haired man in his 30's, dressed in a long-sleeved pea green turtleneck sweater and navy blue slacks.

There seemed to be something familiar about him, but it was escaping him. The man stood there for a moment with a surprised look on his face.

Then he was gone, just like that.

"What in blazes?" Doc Savage muttered.

\* \* \*

The Time Tunnel once more filled with smoke and lightning, replacing the image of the caves.

"WE'VE GOT HIM!" said Dr. MacGregor.

"HOLD HIM!" yelled Dr. Phillips. "*Hold him!* Don't let him get away!"

The white smoke seemed to hang within the Tunnel forever. Slowly, however, it began to dissipate.

And Dr. Anthony Newman, appearing somewhat shaken, stepped through the wisps and out of the Time Tunnel.

Dr. MacGregor stood and exclaimed, "TONY!"

The time traveler blinked at the sudden change of light. Then, his sight clearing, his face burst into a grand smile.

The tension passed, and we all cheered.

Dr. MacGregor left her console and ran to him, embracing him. Right behind her was Dr. Phillips.

"Ann?" Dr. Newman addressed Dr. MacGregor, shocked at the advanced age of his friend. "Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me, Tony," she laughed. "Welcome to 2005."

Dr. Newman started to open his mouth again, but Dr. Phillips intercepted him with a hug. We all moved closer now, wanting to welcome the time traveler home.

Our mission had been accomplished.

\* \* \*

## 1948

Doc Savage stood motionless, waiting to see what *else* would transpire in these unearthly caves. After a full minute without any further occurrences, he moved again.

He mentally rebuked himself for his slackness! Had that been an enemy, he would've been right in his cross-hairs! It was a painful reminder ... in his pride and bloodlust for revenge, he'd returned to these caves alone, armed only with his flashlight and nothing more. He was a fool! It would've served him right if Wail would've been the one who had appeared before him! Perhaps

he *had* been here. If these caves were indeed Wail's home, he would certainly have more demons than himself. I cannot hope to defeat him alone and unarmed.

*Wail*, he vowed to himself, this battle *will* continue – but only when *I* am ready.

He took a deep breath, resolved not to let his guard down again, and headed in the direction of the mouth of these caves.

His sensitive hearing heard the approaching footsteps several seconds before he saw their source, and he quickly slipped into the shadows and waited.

A moment later, three men with lanterns came into view; silently, Doc moved off to a place of concealment and watched.

"Where is he?" whispered one of the men.

"He's here, I tell ya, he's here," said another. "He wasn't with his buddies, either."

"What if he's packin'?"

"Armed?" The other man gave off with a quiet laugh. "He never goes armed! He'd rather use his fists!"

In his place of concealment, Doc Savage's breathing doubled as his anger rose.

"You got the gas, John?" asked the second man.

"Yeah," replied the third man. "He'll never see it comin' until he hits the mat!"

Doc shoved his flashlight into a pocket and balled up his fists like mallets of solid bronze. Staying in the shadows, he closed in on his ambushers, then let out a yell and launched himself at them with all the anger and frustration that had been bottled up within him.

Five minutes later, Doc Savage - alone and triumphant - walked into the Maine sunlight.

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

"Two thousand *five*?"

Dr. Phillips laughed. "Get used to it, Tony! And this is where we're going to stay! Nobody's going to pull us off to who-knows-when ever again!"

While I continued to record the celebration, Alana nudged me and handed me a glass of bubbling liquid. "What's this?"

"Sparkling cider for us tea-totalers. Champagne for the rest," she explained. "Got it in Phoenix while I was gettin' groceries. Figgered we'd be doin' some celebratin' - and what's celebratin' without some bubbly?"

I thanked her and she moved on with a tray of glasses.

Dr. Newman lifted a glass of champagne and toasted, "A toast - to home!"

We all lifted our glasses in the direction of the time travelers.

Dr. Newman took a sip from the plastic champagne glass. "Doug, why didn't you at least wait until daylight? Not that I'm being ungracious, mind you; it's just that - "

Dr. Phillips held up a hand to silence his partner. "Now wait a minute, Tony! When you first snuck into the Time Tunnel, it was the middle of the night. So why don't we call this 'poetic justice'?" He laughed a relaxed laugh, and we all joined in.

"Besides," added Randy Lane. "How could we sleep when we were so close!"

"Thank you, all of you." He lifted his glass to us. "I am forever in your debt."

\* \* \*

Then came sleep.

"And at the seventh hour," joked Johnny, paraphrasing Genesis. "We rested."

We tried contacting the rest of our group on the outside, but our cell phones - even the satellite cells - couldn't get through. Surmising any number of atmospheric anomalies, we agreed to try again after getting some sleep.

It was around noon when we began to stir again. We had a leisurely brunch and prepared to depart. We decided to leave all but our personal stuff in the complex; there was a lot of talk about coming back soon.

"Hey, Dr. Phillips!" grinned Gumball. "You said there were some high-speed express elevators around here, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Free-fall speed going down?"

"Yes."

"How fast when it's going up?"

He had caught on to their line of questioning. "Pretty fast."

"Good." He put an arm around Amy and announced, "We're going to take one of the high-speed elevators to the surface. Who's with us?"

Amy pulled Randy Lane and Sunni Bowman into the group. Josh Middleton gave a smile and silently followed Bernard Matthews. Alana Docket was looking for Elle Cruise; she finally had to give it up when Gumball called '*All Aboard*'.

As they headed towards the elevators, Gumball gave us a cheery, "See you at the top, slowpokes!"

Shortly after they had started up, Elle Cruise joined us. "Oh, *crap!*" she berated herself. "And I was in the Ladies' Room!"

We were too many for one elevator, so we ascended in side-by-side cars at a swift-but-leisurely pace. We all arrived at the same time, expecting to see the others pointing and laughing.

Instead, the doors opened into an eerie silence.

"You don't think they got sick going up that fast, do you?" I commented.

Dr. Phillips shrugged, "It's possible."

Suddenly Clark's arms bolted out to his sides and blocked the rest of us. "*Stop!*" he hissed sharply. "Everyone, stay here! Something's wrong! Dr. Phillips, can you keep these elevators here?"

"Of course," he replied, then gestured to Dr. Newman; the two of them went into the elevators. "Okay, they're stationary."

Clark softly but firmly addressed us, "Everyone, please stay here until I come back. Perry, come with me!"

I shot a "What's up?" look at him, but it went unanswered, and I followed him down the corridor.

Once we were out of earshot of the others, Clark commented, "I smell copper."

"Copper?" I repeated, then made the connection. "*Blood?*"

Clark nodded soberly.

We kept close to the right-hand wall, as we moved down the corridor. We'd gone maybe another hundred yards, before I caught the scent that Clark's honed sense of smell had detected farther back.

Part of my mind noted how strange the smell was. I'd smelled it on enough other occasions, and the scent was strong, now. Somewhere, up ahead, someone had lost a lot of blood!

We'd moved another hundred or so yards along the corridor, when we saw the body.

Despite the fact that it was face down, there was no mistaking the long hair; it was Bernard Matthews.

I glanced over at Clark. His expression was as hard as I'd seen it in a long time. My mouth was dry and my breathing shallow as we drew nearer.

The Jerry Garcia look-alike computer wizard was spread-eagled, face down, in the middle of the corridor. By the look of the large, bloody hole in his center of his back, I didn't have to check to see how he was. Clark, however, knelt down and put a finger to the side of Bernard's neck. He

glanced up at me with a sober look on his face and shook his head. Then he stood and silently motioned for us to continue.

I took a couple of steps past Bernard, and looked back; I had never seen a dead body before, and I didn't know what to feel.

Suddenly my memory recalled a scene from the old movie 'Plan Nine From Outer Space'. As two policemen stood at the gravesite where their superior had been killed, one commented to the other, "One thing's sure. Inspector Clay's *dead ... murdered ... and somebody's* responsible."

At the time, it was a really stupid line from a really inane movie. Now, it became a reality check. I had to accept the fact that *somebody* had killed Bernard. And that *somebody* might still be out there.

It still wasn't enough to prepare me for what came next: more bodies, around the express elevators.

Methodically and professionally, Clark went from person to person, checking for any signs of life as he scanned the area for any signs of the source of this nightmare.

I saw Gumball lying on his back, a look of surprise across his face. His wife Amy was sprawled across his body; the right side of her head had been opened like a melon, exposed and bloody.

It's not like I hadn't seen this sort of thing, before; I have. I've seen more than enough carnage to last me a lifetime. Caroline Island – that time we'd invaded it to rescue Pat and the others – was not your average Sunday school picnic. But, these were my *friends* – people I'd laughed and joked with, shared good times and bad with, people I'd come to love – whose bodies had been stitched with bullet-holes, whose blood now gave off the foul stench of death.

I started to get sick, and had to turn away before I lost it and added my own contribution to the stench. As I did, I saw Alana Docket, Randy Lane, and Josh Middleton, lying in crumpled heaps on the ground in spreading pools of blood.

I closed my eyes to shut it all away from me. My brain sent a silent scream, born of my anguish and outrage at the injustice I'd seen, streaming skyward to the Almighty.

As I was about to lose it, I heard a faint, muffled groan. Opening my eyes, I looked around and saw Sunni. She was alive! *Thank you, God!* Adrenalin pumped into my bloodstream and my own ill feeling faded rapidly. I ran to her side and dropped to my knees, repeating her name and identifying myself.

I finally got through. Her arms reached out to me, and she hugged me in desperation. All I could say was that everything was all right.

*"Oh my God!"*

I looked back. Drs. Phillips and Newman had disregarded Clark's instructions to stay put and had come close enough to see what we had seen. Their exclamations of horror drew over the rest of the group.

This wasn't going to be good.

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

It was unthinkable!

As Clark headed towards the ramp, the entrance to the Time Tunnel complex, he tried to make sense of it all. Had they been followed? Or had they simply stumbled onto the exposed ramp and ... but what in God's name could compel *anyone* to cold-blooded murder?

Just the thought of senseless deaths stirred the savage within him.

Why he moved away from the others, headed towards the ramp ... was it to close off the only way out, to keep out any associates on the surface ... or was it to keep the murderers trapped in the complex until he could hunt them down and bring them to justice?

Considering they had been ambushed right outside of the elevators, the murders had been recent. There was a good chance that the murderers were still within these walls. But in a complex of this size, they were a fatal 'needle' in the haystack. He had wanted to check out the surface for the source of their intruders, but something held him back. Instead, he found a control box in the middle of the tunnel that operated the manual controls to close the door above the ramp. It took only a minute, and didn't seem to attract attention.

If they were still here, they would be trapped. And he would find them.

Clark didn't know how soon that would be realized.

As he stepped around the corner and onto the catwalk, with the others at the opposite end, he suddenly stopped. A strange man stood near the others, his back to Clark. He was dressed in a business suit that didn't quite fit with the environment.

And he had an automatic pistol leveled at Perry and the others.

He took a few quiet steps closer to the stranger, then shouted in a clear and commanding voice, "FEDERAL AGENT! DROP YOUR WEAPON NOW!"

The stranger spun and fired two shots in his direction. His aim, however, was poor; both bullets missed him by a wide margin. But now Clark and the stranger were facing each other, and both had frozen in their steps.

The face of the stranger with the pistol – the murderer he had trapped within the Time Tunnel complex – was his *own*!

"What in blazes?" the stranger exclaimed in Clark's own voice. "What sort of deception is this?"

"Sir," Clark replied, trying to keep his voice even. "I assure you, this is *not* a deception. I am Clark Savage, Jr."

"NO!" the other man yelled back, his voice tinged with madness. "*I* am Clark Savage, Jr.! You are an *imposter*!"

The other Doc Savage fired his pistol again. It took only a slight movement from Clark to make the poorly-aimed shot miss him. He squeezed the trigger again, but nothing happened. Frustrated, he threw the empty weapon at Clark, then let out a feral growl and charged him.

"DON'T LET HIM TOUCH YOU, CLARK!" yelled Dr. Newman, standing with the others at the sidelines. "DON'T LET HIM TOUCH YOU!"

Not understanding why, Clark complied. He backpedaled like a prizefighter, away from the other Doc Savage's reach, evading lunges as expertly as a matador would avoid a rampaging bull. As he did, he sized up his opponent. Not much difference physically, he noted, but he fights like I did many years ago.

His fighting skills appeared to be motivated by rage and not skill. He suspected the other man had sorely neglected daily exercise.

He is like a doppelganger, a reflection and not a carbon copy. He wanted to know where the man came from, but now was not the time.

He needed to subdue him, but how?

\* \* \*

*Two Clarks?*

That's how this guy got the upper hand on the others. When he appeared before us, we were all still in shock to question why he wore different clothing.

"Stand and fight like a man, you coward!" the other Doc Savage bellowed, charging Clark again.

Running to the side of the catwalk, Clark rested his hand on the top of the wall, then used it to push away when his doppelganger charged him again.

I understood the other man's rage. But I also knew that it would burn itself out, and soon. There was no strategy in the other man's attacks, no conscious thought. There was just reflex.

Clark looked in our direction. I tried to understand his strategy to capture this other guy. Then I saw the intent - he was leading him in our direction, where he wouldn't need to make physical contact with him.

"We need something to use as a club," I said to the others around me. "We've got to knock him out!"

"Get him close, and I'll knock him out," promised J.J. Judge.

Seeing his anger, I thought, *yeah, I'll bet you would.*

"Let's mob him," suggested Judge. "We'll take that @\$%#!# down!"

Judge started moving onto the bridge, with Elle Cruise and Dr. Newman closely behind.

Standing at the edge of the bridge, Clark looked in our direction and saw what we were going to do. In doing that, however, he took his eyes off of his opponent. In that moment, the other Doc Savage seized upon the opportunity and - with all the speed he could muster - he charged Clark.

We yelled a warning to Clark, and he turned his head in time to see the other man closing in. Jumping away from the wall, he went into a tuck-and-roll and was out of the way.

The other Doc Savage followed the movement with his head, but was going too fast for him to stop in time. He hit the wall and flipped over it. With a roar that sounded like the final act of defiance, he vanished from sight.

We quickly rushed to the wall, but all we saw was a tiny figure trailing in the distance; the roaring continued to trail off until it ended in a sudden silence.

"Oh, wow," muttered Kim Soong Ha.

\* \* \*

"They'd reached this level in the express elevators," Dr. MacGregor summarized what she found out from Sunni Bowman. "Then the other man surprised them. They thought it was you, Clark, and they began asking how you had gotten here before they had. Then the other man started to ask questions about this place. They thought he was having fun with them, so they were laughing along with him.

"Then the imposter started talking to Josh Middleton using all sorts of racial slurs. Josh got angry and confronted the man. That's when the imposter pulled the gun and shot him. That set things off with the rest of them. Sunni didn't know what happened. She just heard voices and gunshots and then silence. At one point, the imposter grabbed Sunni and pulled her off to where we found her. The rest must've been dead by then. Sunni was so afraid he was going to kill her, next, but the imposter didn't do it. Then they heard the elevators - the ones we were in - and he released her and ran away."

I picked up the narrative from there. "You had taken off, and the rest of us were pretty much in shock. Then all of a sudden the other you appeared. The clothes were different, and he had a gun. He commanded us to identify ourselves and this place. Dr. Phillips and Dr. Newman stepped up and started to tell him the truth, but he wasn't buying it. So they shifted stories, explaining that this place was some sort of high-tech hotel. They were very convincing." I paused. "It was you, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "Yes, although I'm at a loss to know how."

I continued with my explanation. "We've dealt with whackos before. And a whacko with a weapon is cause for moving *verrry* carefully. So we played along until you showed up."

J.J. Judge looked back from the edge of the catwalk and commented, "Nobody could've survived that fall. Serves the bastard right!"

Clark and I looked at him. Considering all, we couldn't deny him his anger. It was surprising any of us weren't still in shock. Dr. MacGregor had returned to Sunni, at the side of Amy's body, and Elle Cruise went back to sitting on the ground next to the body of Alana Docket.

"Was he alone?" I asked Clark.

"I feel that he was. If there had been others with him, he would've called for backup. It's also possible that the pistol wasn't his, since he didn't carry additional clips for it, and he threw his weapon at me when he discovered he was out of bullets."

"He was also a bad shot," I added. "At a distance."

"Fortunately," Clark agreed.

Johnny joined us. "Clark, he was *you*! How?"

"I think we might be able to answer that," interrupted Dr. Phillips. He and Dr. Newman took us off to the side.

"You cautioned me not to make physical contact with him. Why?"

Dr. Phillips answered by turning to Dr. Newman. "Tony, when we retrieved you, you made a very brief detour to December 28, 1948."

"Yes, I remember that," he nodded.

Clark spoke up, "At that exact time and date, I was in those caves. I was subdued shortly after and spent the next fifty years in suspended animation."

Dr. Newman was starting to catch on. "I changed the timeline."

Dr. Phillips nodded. "We thought we switched you before you were noticed. We were wrong."

I raised my hand for attention. "Let me get this straight. History has been *changed*?"

The two Time Tunnel veterans nodded.

"Then why weren't we affected?" I asked.

"This base is encompassed in a temporal entropy field," answered Dr. Newman. "It keeps us from being affected by any outside changes to the timeline."

"You mean you've changed time before?" I asked, astounded.

"What's going on here?" interrupted Harvey Cable. "I can't call out on my cell phone. Have you had any luck getting out?"

"No," answered Clark. "Even our satellite cells aren't getting out."

"Okay. I'm going to go outside and try."

"Not yet," cautioned Dr. Phillips. "There's no telling what could happen to us if we leave this place."

We all turned at Kim Soong Ha's sudden cry. "Can't we do something about these bodies? We just can't let them lie here!"

Dr. Newman glanced over at Dr. Phillips, then stated, "We've got a place for them. Over the years, we've had need for it. It has body bags."

A few of us went with Dr. Newman, returning a few minutes later with an electric vehicle towing a flat-bed trailer stacked with black body bags. Slowly and in total silence, we placed the bodies in the bags and gently placed them on the trailer. At one point, Becky Speed suddenly pivoted and rushed away; we heard gagging and retching as she got sick. The rest of us could feel for her; this was more than many of us had ever witnessed.

Once the bodies were on the trailer, we formed a procession behind it, following the vehicle to a cold storage room. The cold had been turned on earlier when getting the body bags. We moved the entire trailer inside, where the cold would keep the bodies preserved until we could transport them away from here. When we returned to the elevators, a couple of people were finishing cleaning up the blood from the floor.

The question on everybody's minds - *what now?* - was answered by Dr. Phillips. "Follow me."

\* \* \*

In a nearby monitor room, there was a control console for two people, and one wall was covered with twenty circa-1960's black-and-white video monitors. The rest of us gave the remaining electronics people room as they quickly got the monitors up and running. We watched in silence as the screens were activated, producing dark image after dark image, until one produced a live picture ... then another one, and another. After a few minutes, and all the monitors were up, twelve out of twenty produced live images from the surface.

"Where are the choppers?" asked J.J. Judge.

"Never mind that," I commented, pointing at the image on #5. "Is that a *flying saucer*?"

"Sure looks like one," commented Kim Soong Ha. "Laura, can you adjust so we can see the writing on the side?"

"Sorry," answered Laura Sunday at the controls. "All the cameras for that side are out."

"It looks like there's a *U* and an *N* written there," offered Dr. MacGregor.

"I wish these cameras were in color," J.J. Judge muttered. "That pattern looks familiar."

"It's big, though," added Laura.

"Somebody's standing next to the loading ramp," Dr. Newman pointed to something on another monitor. "Laura?"

"Zooming in," she replied. As the image grew larger, it angled down towards the people standing at the base of the saucer's ramp.

"It's Monk," identified Johnny. "And the other one is ... *oh my God!*"

"It can't be!" I added.

After a couple of seconds, Clark said evenly, "It *is*. It's Long Tom."

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER NINE**

"That's *impossible!*" I blurted. "He died five years ago! I performed his funeral!"

"Johnny?" asked Clark.

"Don't ask me how," replied the archaeologist. "But it's him. Intact."

"There's no doubt about it," concluded Clark. "Dr. Newman's appearance in 1948 somehow altered the timeline from that point forward."

Dr. Phillips added, "That was the reason why we cautioned you against making physical contact with your other self. No two objects can occupy the same space. We didn't know what would happen, so we cautioned you just to be on the safe side."

I stepped out of the monitor room and took out my satellite cell phone. I pressed the speed dial for Dot and held it to my ear, praying silently. A moment later I got a signal indicating a network failure. I thought about trying other numbers, but inside I knew I would get the same result.

The only thing I knew of time travel came from television, movies, and books. Until arriving here, I thought time travel was just a neat way of learning history. But this was now reality, and I was frightened. I knew Dot wouldn't be at the other end of the line – she didn't exist anymore.

For a moment, I panicked. My breathing became rapid, and I closed my eyes, praying that this whole thing would be just a horrible dream.

But when I opened my eyes, nothing had changed.

I heard Sunni's voice, pleading, "Clark? What are we going to do?"

Everyone was now looking to Clark for answers; he'd always been tagged as a leader, whether he wanted the responsibility or not.

"Those people on the surface are waiting for my doppelganger to emerge," he stated calmly and confidently. "If this doesn't happen, they will likely attempt to come down to find him."

"But he's dead," spoke up J.J. Judge.

Clark nodded. "They will be expecting *a* Doc Savage to emerge from this base. Therefore, the most logical thing is for me to go to the surface in his stead."

"But you're not wearing the same clothes as he had," commented Kim Soong Ha. "They'll spot you in a heartbeat."

"Probably," he agreed dryly. "If I don't, the more likely the odds will be that they'll come down here and discover us."

"I'll go with you," I volunteered. "One man in coveralls might stand out, but two might appear as if we're working together. You can explain that you changed into the coveralls in order to fit in with whatever-you-came-down-here-to-see."

"Yes," he nodded. "I like it."

"But he didn't know *what* this place was," said Dr. MacGregor.

"So much the better," I replied. "They'll believe whatever we tell them. We'll go with that hotel story of yours."

"You better get a move on," alerted Laura Sunday. "Those guys are starting to look a lot in our direction."

"Let's go!" Clark said.

He started out, but stopped and turned. He removed the cross from around his neck and handed it to Johnny, along with his wedding ring.

"I'll keep them safe," the archaeologist said with a smile. "Be careful."

I handed Johnny my cell phone, then quick-stepped after Clark.

We reached the motor pool. Since we'd activated the reactor, we had discovered that the electric golf carts had been receiving a trickle charge. So we found one with a decent charge and moved around to climb in.

"I better drive," I suggested. "You – *he* – looked like the kind of person that was used to being chauffeured."

"Agreed. If anybody asks, I'll say that you had been here earlier, and I was coming to see you. I changed into the same type of coverall because it was standard operating procedure."

"Sounds good. Ready?"

"Let's pray."

"Thanks," I sighed.

We joined hands and Clark led. "Lord, You know one end of time to the other. Nothing surprises You. There is no unknown to You. As for us, You know where we're at. Please go before us and guide us along the way. We trust You and Your infinite wisdom to get us through this. Give us Your strength and Your wisdom in this matter, and prepare us for what is to come. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

"Amen," I agreed, and pressed on the accelerator. "Here we go!"

The electric golf cart hummed down the tunnel as we headed towards the manual controls for the ramp door.

A minute later, we drove up the ramp and into the direct Arizona sun. After my eyes became accustomed to the glare, the first thing that I saw was the flying saucer. Now seeing it in color, it was white with blue striping.

We could also see what had been out of sight of the cameras.

It was an American flag and the words UNITED STATES OF AMERICA and AIR FORCE ONE.

"Is that supposed to be *yours*?" I asked softly. "Who *are* you in this timeline?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," he stage-whispered in return.

We steered towards the base of the saucer, where Monk and Long Tom stood. We also noticed several men standing about, all wearing black suits and reminding me of Secret Service agents. As we got closer, however, their attention amplified.

And their guns came out.

Seconds later, several well-armed Marines in combat gear ran down the ramp from the saucer. I began to slow down. Monk followed them, carrying a weapon of his own, and they formed a wall before us. In the next instant, I was looking down the barrels of a lot of really angry people.

"All right, scuzzball, stop the cart!" Monk yelled at me. "Twitch the wrong way and you're a dead man!" Then he looked at Clark. "Mr. President, are you all right? Has this piece of *Southern Fried Trash* hurt'cha?"

I did as I was told, stopping the cart and slowly raising my hands, stage-whispering to Clark, "*Mr. President?*"

The Marines surrounded the cart, still covering us – actually, just me – with their weapons. Then two black-suited agents roughly grabbed my wrists and brought them around behind me, binding them together with heavy-duty plastic restraints. I didn't dare speak for fear that it would worsen matters. Clark also remained silent, waiting to see what would happen next.

"You won't get away from us this time, you @\$%#!#!" Monk sneered with a curse that surprised me more than the sight of the guns. Then he addressed Clark. "I knew you had a reason for comin' to this godforsaken place, Mr. President! You caught that terrorist Liston!"

*Terrorist?* I thought.

\* \* \*

"What's happening, Dr. MacGregor?" asked Sunni excitedly. "What's happening?"

"Just a moment, dear," the scientist said calmly. "Perry and Clark have just come in range of the cameras ... they're on the surface and heading towards the saucer. Okay, the others have seen them and – *what?*" She hesitated. "The others ... they're drawing guns!"

"Laura? Can you get audio?" pleaded Sunni.

"I'm sorry," Laura Sunday shook her head. "It's not equipped for audio!"

"They're arresting Perry!" exclaimed J.J. Judge.

"He's not fighting them," answered Dr. MacGregor. "He's got his hands up ... he's surrendering."

"What about Clark?" asked Sunni.

"They're ... they're not arresting him. They've taken him out of the cart, and they're ... "

"It looks as if they're protecting him *from* Perry," observed Dr. Phillips.

"Look at their faces," observed Dr. MacGregor. "They're treating Perry like Public Enemy Number One!"

"*Hold it!*" J.J. Judge pointed at another monitor. "What's *that*?"

\* \* \*

"*INCOMING! INCOMING!*"

A klaxon accompanied the booming alert, coming a moment before the first missile struck.

Everybody scattered as the ground erupted, sending agents sprawling to the ground. A second explosion came from my right, spraying sand and dirt into the air. I went face-first into the ground, momentarily blinding me. I could feel my escorts up and communicating with each other, then suddenly heard the familiar sound of bullets smacking into flesh. With a little difficulty I rolled over and looked around me. My two escorts were laying nearby; neither of them were moving, and their chests were bloodied by lines of bullet wounds.

"*Medic!*" I yelled out, out of sheer reflex.

I was awkwardly on my back, more-or-less facing the sky. I saw two men wearing black jumpsuits and black helmets, and rocket packs, descending swiftly into the *mêlée*. I turned my face away from the wash from their exhausts and spat sand. By the look of their sidearms, I figured they were the ones who had killed my escorts. I was afraid I would be next. Instead, however, they walked on either side of me and lifted me into a standing position.

"We've got you, sir!" one of them announced as the other cut off my restraints. "Hold tight!"

The two of them tightly gripped my arms. Then there was a *whoosh* and I was propelled into the air away from the area.

\* \* \*

As soon as the first alert came, Clark was rushed into the saucer by a human wall of dedicated Secret Service agents.

He heard Perry's voice yelling for a medic, and glanced back. He saw the two black-garbed commandos in rocket packs gun down Perry's escort, then spirited him into the air and away. The Marines on the ground fired after them, but the rocket packs were too fast and too maneuverable to hit.

Standing just inside the doorway of the saucer, one of the Secret Service agents - a tall man with a head of closely-cropped red hair - stayed close to him; his sidearm looked like an updated version of his Superfirer.

"You're safe now, Mr. President!" he stated. "Are you injured?"

"No, no, I'm fine," Clark answered quickly.

"Would you allow me to check you out for injuries, Mr. President?"

He nodded. "Go ahead."

Quickly and discreetly, the agent holstered his sidearm and ran trained hands over Clark, looking for possible injuries. Satisfied, he confirmed that Clark was safe, he apologized.

"I understand," Clark shrugged.

Another voice came down the corridor to Clark's left. "Are you okay, Mr. President? I activated the shields as soon as the sensors picked up the missiles! Mr. President? Doc?"

Clark turned but didn't reply at first. His hesitation was understandable. After all, the last time he'd seen this man was five years ago in Lincoln City, Oregon - on the man's deathbed. "Yes, Tom, I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

"Do you want me call in air support?"

Clark thought quickly. "No ... not yet! Let's see what happens!"

Medics rushed past them into the saucer, carrying stretchers with the bodies of the wounded ... and the dead.

Monk followed in their wake, along with the rest of the Secret Service detail that had been outside. He looked at Long Tom and ordered, "That's everybody! Get us outta here, Tom!"

"Roger!" Long Tom snapped back, and disappeared down the corridor to the right of the junction,

Monk looked at the Secret Service agent. "Go get a seat, Ray. I've got it."

The red-haired agent nodded somberly, holstered his pistol and walked away; as he did, he spoke aloud - presumably into a transceiver like he himself had used - informing the rest of the agents of the situation.

Monk pressed a panel to retract the ramp and close the hatch. In public, with Clark, he was the epitome of professionalism. However, unaware that his assistant Reed had not continued down the corridor to the communications station, Monk turned to Clark and lowered his voice. "Mr.

President, forgive my impertinence, but what the *hell* were you thinking of by coming here? We lost four men out there, with another three injured! Was it 'cause of *Liston*?"

Without knowing the significance of the Perry Liston of this altered timeline, Clark put on his face of flint and prayed for a right answer.

"I can't talk about it right now," he bluffed.

Unaware of the history between the two men, Reed gently cleared his throat to speak.

"Mister President, Mister Mayfair is your Chief-of-Staff. He has a *need* to know!"

"*Reed!*" barked Monk.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," Clark apologized as sincerely as he could. "Right now I can't tell you. You have to trust me!"

There was an uncomfortable silence between them, lasting until the bronze man turned and moved off toward the 'rear' of the craft.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mayfair. What was that about, sir?" Reed asked his boss. "Why won't he answer you?"

"*Relax, Reed,*" Monk sighed wearily, placing a hand on his assistant's shoulder. "I've seen him, like this, so many times over the years that I've lost count. He's working out the pieces of a puzzle. When he's got it pieced together, he'll speak his mind, but not a moment sooner. I just hope whatever he found, here, wuz worth it."

\* \* \*

My rescuers landed us in a clearing just beyond some hills. Nearby, a VTOL jet materialized; its camouflage had been so good that it bordered on total invisibility. The side door swung open, and a black man in a military jumpsuit came to my side and saluted.

"Colonel Liston," he said to me. "We had no clue you were being held prisoner here. Are you all right?"

Dumbfounded by being addressed as *Colonel*, I just nodded.

He gestured for me to board the jet. I'd usually wait for the other person to go first, but as a *Colonel*, I would be expected to take the lead. So I did. Assuming a bold posture, I stepped into the jet and found a seat. The others were already in, and the man who followed me closed the door behind him. As he headed towards the cockpit, he said, "Strap in, sir! It won't take those Yankees long to get a fix on our position and send a counter-strike!"

As I waited for us to take off, I took account of the reality that surrounded me. The cards of time had been reshuffled while our backs were turned, and I was looking at a whole new deal of the deck. There had been another Doc Savage - one who, incredibly enough, was the President of the United States. And there was - *is* - another Perry Liston in this world. But he's a Colonel, and a terrorist! He's an *enemy* of the United States! What in God's name could've happened to *me* to

transform me into *him*? And these people - who are they, and why do they treat me with respect? Are they also terrorists, enemies of the United States?

For the moment, however, I appeared to be safe and among ... friends.

There was a rumble, and the jet went straight up at a high rate of speed; I felt the gee-forces press me into the seat. Then we stopped for only an instant before rocketing forward at twice the speed of our ascension. Through my window, the scenery became a blur.

"We're clear," announced a voice from the cockpit.

"A lucky break," said another. "Take us home, best possible speed."

We banked sharply, and headed eastward.

\* \* \*

Looking at the main viewscreen from the center seat of the saucer, Clark watched the scenery vanish below them at unimaginable speeds, without the usual limitations of inertia, then dissolve into inky blackness.

"Okay, we're orbital," announced Long Tom casually. "ETA is seven minutes and change."

"Very well," replied Clark, offering a curt nod of the head.

It took almost superhuman focus for Clark to maintain his face of flint; his astonishment at all the fantastic technology kept pounding on the door wanting to get out. But he turned things inward, offering up prayers for Perry and for the people back at the Time Tunnel complex. He hoped they were all still well.

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER TEN**

All eyes turned to Dr. Phillips and J.J. Judge as they returned.

"Yeah, the ramp's gone, all right!" sighed Judge. "Must've gotten a direct hit!"

"So we're trapped?" asked Laura Sunday.

"That way, I'm afraid so," Dr. Phillips calmly clarified. "But not to fear - that is not the *only* way in or out of this complex!"

"Has everybody left?" asked J.J.

"Yes," answered Laura Sunday. "The saucer took off like a shot - straight *up* - five minutes ago. And those guys who took off with Perry jumped the hills before then. I'm assuming they've left the area also."

"This is so *surreal*," commented Kim Soong Ha.

"If I may," Johnny spoke up. "I am a little proficient with lip reading. I didn't want to say anything until I was certain."

"What did they say?" asked Dr. MacGregor.

"They referred to Clark as the President of the United States."

"As odd as that sounds, it's the only thing makes sense," nodded J.J. "The other Doc Savage was wearing in a suit - an *expensive* suit. That says either big business or politics. And those guys in dark suits practically had 'Secret Service' written all over them."

"Are you certain?" asked Dr. MacGregor.

J.J. chuckled. "Have you ever watched *West Wing*? Trust me, they're Secret Service!"

"Clark ... *President*? How could this happen?" asked Laura Sunday. "And why were they trying to arrest Perry? Is he something else in this timeline?"

"I don't know," added Johnny. "As long as I've known him, he's been a preacher. I don't know what he did before that."

"Okay," said Dr. Phillips, pulling things together. "What do we know? Tony's appearance in 1948 kept Doc Savage from going into suspended animation."

"Or he got out sooner than he did here," speculated Johnny. "Or he simply didn't run into Perry at the Mission."

"Can we access the history computers?" asked Dr. Newman.

"We hadn't planned on it," answered Dr. Phillips apologetically. "We don't know what condition they're in."

"Besides, their information stopped at 1975," added Dr. MacGregor.

"So it looks like, for the moment, I'm the next best thing," commented Johnny.

"You were surprised to see Long Tom," asked Dr. Newman. "What happened to him?"

"When the Crime College was exposed," answered Johnny. "We all ran like scared rabbits. Tom lost his legs a few years later, and died in the year 2000."

"Did you see that saucer?" said J.J. "That's not the type of sci-fi tech you see everyday, but I could swear I saw a *Boeing* logo on the side."

"In the old days, Doc was always working on a new development or such," said Johnny. "If he was able to do so after 1950, God only knows what kind of technological breakthroughs could exist in this timeline."

"Okay," summarized J.J. "The timeline has been screwed up. Six of our people are dead. And God only knows where Clark and Perry are. How can we fix this?"

"Since it all started with Dr. Newman's detour in time," stated Kim Soong Ha. "Can we somehow take that back?"

Suggestions were made.

"What if one of us went back to the caves and distracted Doc Savage from Tony's appearance?"

"What would happen if we could go back to the Tunnel and pull Tony out ten seconds earlier?"

"What about sending Tony back to 1905 ten seconds after you pulled him? Then don't make the same mistake that got him diverted to 1948."

Dr. Phillips held up a hand to silence them. "Let's hold the suggestions for the moment. Tony and I need to talk. In the meantime, it looks like we're going to be here awhile."

"I'm going to see what they've got in the way of supplies," said Harvey Cable. "Anybody else up to shopping?"

"I'm going to stay here and keep watch," Laura Sunday informed them.

"Tony and I are going to find our old offices. Let's meet in the VIP Area in, say, two hours?"

Everybody nodded their assent and filed out of the monitor room, leaving Laura Sunday alone.

J.J. Judge turned around and stopped just inside the doorway. He gave her a concerned look. "Laura, you gonna be okay? I can stick around if you'd like."

She smiled up at him. "I appreciate the offer, but I just need to be alone at the moment. Besides, I want to see if I can pick up something from the outside world, like a news broadcast, satellite feed, something."

"Can I help?"

They turned to see Sunni Bowman standing in the doorway. "Did I hear you say something about trying to get cable on this system?" she asked.

"Yeah ... *yeah!*" grinned Laura, suddenly encouraged. "You bet you can help! C'mon, girl – have a seat!"

J.J. assisted her to the seat next to Laura, then backed away. "Looks like you got it under control. Good luck. See you in the VIP Area."

\* \* \*

In retrospect, I should've been more on guard, more suspicious. But, like Harrison Ford in the first *Indiana Jones* movie, I was making this up as I went.

I knew we were flying southeast, but didn't have a clue what part of the United States we were over. There had been activity in the cockpit, but I couldn't hear what they were saying.

I let that slide, rationalizing it by acknowledging that I was the stranger in this strange land.

But then there was something odd about the way the man who had checked me in when I first came aboard walked past me towards the rear of the jet.

My suspicions were confirmed when, as he returned to the cockpit, he suddenly stopped and pressed something against the side of my neck. Almost immediately my vision began to cloud.

My last conscious thought was gratitude – thankful to be strapped in so I wouldn't hurt my head when I fell forward ...

\* \* \*

The flying saucer named *Air Force One* landed at a secure military base near Kansas City, where the wounded and the dead were offloaded. Then they continued to Washington D.C., settling easily onto a large circular landing pad alongside the East Wing of the White House. Clark realized that his doppelganger must have eliminated the need for the Presidential helicopter, *Marine One*; since this craft was capable of vertical *and* orbital flight, and was presumably more environmentally friendly than his timeline's counterpart, parking it right outside the White House was actually quite a practical idea.

Clark forced his mind away from the marvels of this time to his own situation.

His goals were simple enough: locate and rescue Perry, return the two of them to the Time Tunnel complex, and pray like anything in the meantime that there'd be a solution to correcting the timeline by the time they got there.

Clark reflected on what he would have to do next in order to survive.

Any masquerade he would hope to pull off would require him to have a working knowledge of his environment. Thinking as his doppelganger would, Clark felt his best source of information would have to be the President's own personal computer - wherever it was. In the meantime, his ploy of feigned moodiness and silence had been sufficient to 'get him in the front door' with the people aboard the saucer, including Monk and Long Tom.

In the past, especially in the course of pursuing mysteries, Clark had taken on various disguises and assumed other identities. Often, he had played his role so well that even his five aides had not tumbled to the charade. On the surface, it would seem that playing himself would be the easiest thing in the world for him to do, not the greatest challenge of his career. But this alternate Clark had cold-bloodedly murdered six of his friends, and would have killed him and the others, if he'd been given the chance.

The most obvious conclusion was that – unlike himself – his doppelganger had *not* been a Christian.

Six years ago, Clark invited Jesus Christ into his life. It had been a long struggle, but God had given him strength to put many of his old sinful ways behind him. Now he wondered if he might have to return to those ways in order to make the masquerade believable.

The possibility nauseated him. Even as he thought about it, he recalled his momentary pleasure at the way in which the White House staff had deferred to him, sought to please him. It terrified

him to think that – if he was forced to play this charade for any significant period of time – he might begin to *like* it.

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

The ramp of *Air Force One* lowered, and Clark walked down like he owned the place; Monk and his Secret Service detail followed close behind.

A few steps out, a woman saw Clark and walked to meet him. She was in her early 40's, fairly attractive, with short black hair. Clark wondered if she was a family member or part of the staff. Her very professional stride reminded him of Pat's when she pretended to be her own younger daughter. As they drew closer, she extended a welcoming hand. *Well, she's not family*, he thought.

"Clark!" she greeted him in a throaty tone. "Are you all right? I just heard about the attack!"

"Yes, I'm fine," he assured her confidently.

"Are you certain you don't want the doctors to check you out?" she pressed.

"Madam Vice-President," intercepted Monk. "The medic on Air Force One checked him out already. He's fine, Ma'am."

*Vice-President?* Clark mentally repeated.

"Very well," she nodded. "Remember, Clark, dinner tonight ... 7:30. Katherine's doing the cooking *herself*." She smiled proudly.

"I haven't forgotten," Clark replied. "I'm looking forward to it."

They entered the White House. The woman broke off after a couple of yards. Monk moved in a little closer.

"Mr. President," he addressed Clark. "If the Vice-President knows about the attack, the Press Corps is bound to find out. What should I tell them?"

"Sit on it for the moment, Monk," Clark answered quickly. "I'll talk to you later about it."

"They're not going to take that well," he sighed.

"Just handle it, Monk," Clark persisted. "I'll talk to you later."

"Yes, Mr. President," he acquiesced. "If you'll excuse me ..."

"Certainly."

Monk moved away, leaving him and the red-haired Secret Service agent. Clark stopped and said to the agent, "I'm going to the Oval Office."

"Yes, sir!" He stopped and Clark heard him say something into his transceiver before moving away.

Clark relied on his memory of a visit to the White House long ago to help him navigate the halls to the Oval Office. He masked any hesitation to get his bearings by stopping to look at things on the walls. Overall, nobody questioned his actions. After all, he *was* the President, and the workers parted before him like the Red Sea before Moses. He actually found it a little overwhelming - and not unpleasant - to have all those people around him addressing him as 'Mr. President' with such open respect.

As Clark passed a hallway lined with portraits of past Presidents, he casually paused to look at them. The last time he'd been in the White House had been during the term of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He stopped before FDR's portrait, pleased that that detail hadn't changed.

His eyes shifted to Roosevelt's successors. There was Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and - *wait!* Something was wrong here! John Kennedy should've been next in line, followed by Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. But Kennedy and Johnson weren't even there ... it went right from Eisenhower to Nixon. Glancing at a little metal plaque below Nixon's portrait, he read that Nixon had served as President from 1961 to ... *1984?*

*Seven* terms in office? It would seem that even the Constitution had been changed as a result of this new timeline. *What more?* he wondered.

He dismissed the woman behind the Secretary's desk with a curt, "No disturbances!"

He wasn't challenged as he continued into the Oval Office.

"Welcome back, Mr. President," greeted a young woman with shoulder-length pearl white hair, standing just inside the door.

Not sure what her place was, Clark continued to his desk. She dismissed his standoffish behavior, and dutifully read from what appeared to be a very thin tablet computer. "You've got a meeting with Interior at 5, Labor at 5:30, and dinner with the Vice-President and her partner at 7:30. Should I reschedule your meetings so you can change?"

*Personal aide.* "Reschedule the meetings for tomorrow, but I'll change before dinner," Clark ordered. "Right now, though, I need to take care of some research."

"I can take care of it," she offered, apparently willing to help. "What do you need?"

"That's okay," he dismissed. "This one I need to do for myself. You can go; I'll call you when I need you."

"Very good, Mr. President," she replied without offense, and left through the door he had arrived in; she closed the door behind her.

Clark was alone in the Oval Office. Unfortunately, there wasn't a computer in sight.

Undeterred, he prayed. *God, where would my doppelganger hide a computer in this place?*

As he prayed for discernment, he suddenly looked over at one of the doors leading from the Oval Office. Walking by faith, he rose from the desk and walked over to it. Behind it was a smaller, windowless study. Clark silently praised God, but he was still stymied; there was a desk, but no computer.

*It has to be here*, he thought. He couldn't conceive that - with all the advances he'd already seen - his doppelganger would *not* possess the latest in computer technology. But he saw nothing - no monitor, no keyboard. Nothing.

Nothing *obvious*.

Clark's face cracked a thin smile.

"Computer?" he spoke aloud.

"Yes, Mr. President," replied a voice seeming to come from nowhere.

Clark grinned. I should've known, he rebuked himself. Since he himself utilized a voice-activated computer in the form of MYRNA, why couldn't his doppelganger? And it also had a female voice.

He sat down at the desk.

"Computer," he asked, energized. "How do I address you?"

"You have given me the name Eve."

*Eve?* It was interesting that his doppelganger should choose a name with such obvious Biblical connotations; he made a mental note to find out why later.

"Eve, display screen."

A huge rectangular space suddenly appeared just beyond the edge of the desk. *Holographic*, Clark mused. He wondered how much his doppelganger had to do with these advances in technology.

"Eve, can you seal this room so that no one can enter or listen in?"

"Yes," she answered. "Is this an emergency?"

"No. I just request privacy."

"I will inform your Secret Service detail." A moment later she reported, "This room is now secure."

*Okay*, he thought, now for the big question. "Do I have a wife, mistress, courtesan, or significant other?"

"No, sir," Eve replied instantly. "You have been a bachelor all your life. You have socialized with many women over the years, but you have never chosen a lifemate. Would you like a list of the women you have socialized with?"

"Not now. What about children, legitimate or illegitimate?"

"You have engaged in sexual liaisons with one hundred forty-one females. Seventy-three liaisons resulted in pregnancies, which were ended through routine termination. All involved parties have been appropriately compensated. All public records have been adjusted to avoid implication."

Clark was horrified. Casual, almost reckless, sexual encounters? Premeditated abortions? Payoffs? And then covering his tracks to keep him from the consequences! What in God's name could have happened to turn me into him? Clark didn't have time to grieve or wallow in horror; he forced his emotional reactions to the back burner, and continued his questioning.

"Please summarize the White House staff, beginning with those closest to the President."

An image of the woman he met when arriving at the White House appeared before him, gently rotating in the air. Eve identified her as Vice-President Carlie Rachel Goldsmith. She had become his running-mate with the 2004 election.

After the facts were personal details. Clark paid closer attention to these, knowing that it could mean the difference between being accepted and being exposed. But Clark flinched when Eve reported that his Vice-President was a publicly-declared lesbian. Her 'lifemate' - the one who was making dinner for them tonight - was Katherine Gibson, the daughter of British industrialist Hiram Wade Gibson. Carlie and her 'lifemate' had been 'married' for three and a half years.

Clark shuddered, and pressed on.

His assumption about the white-haired girl had been correct. She was Leigh Marks, his Personal Aide or 'body girl'. She'd been on his staff for several years, and had impressive credentials.

Christina Ingram was his Executive Secretary. Her friends addressed her as Chrissy, but his doppelganger tended to address her as 'Mrs. Ingram'.

There were others: members of his Secret Service detail, White House residential staff, close friends, etc. It was thrilling to see that all of his original team was still alive, including his cousin Pat. Many of them had remained around the East Coast, still following their chosen professions.

Others of his old team had become part of his doppelganger's administration. As he had learned earlier, Monk Mayfair was his Chief-Of-Staff. He was pleased to see that Ham Brooks was alive, but not surprised to see that he was the Attorney General.

Clark paused a moment before going on and reflected on his Vice-President's personal sexual preference.

"Eve," he pursued. "What's the current status of Gay Rights in the United States?"

Eve responded with a flood of facts and figures. In short, gays were now just another demographic in the United States population, treated no differently - or more special - than someone of a different race or national origin. As he watched clips of videos of his doppelganger speaking at Gay Month celebrations and political rallies for homosexual candidates, he realized that they didn't find it necessary to publicly flaunt their homosexuality - as was the case in his timeline. They'd achieved their goals.

"What about personal journal entries?"

Eve's response was a video journal entry made just a couple of days ago. His own face looked back at him. It looked tired; why not, since he didn't have to keep up appearances for his own journals. He made a reference to an upcoming meeting with something called the *MKC*. It seemed as if the homosexual vote had been the deciding factor in the last election, and the *MKC* now wanted something in return for it. "I suspect they'll be telling me that I'm going to step down after this term. It's no big secret that they want Carlie to be President. They've got the numbers in their favor ... they just need me out of the way." He released a tired sigh. "I may just let them. Hell, I'm over a hundred years old! I've been looking for the right time to retire to my lunar Fortress of Solitude. Condé Nast has been begging me for years to write my memoirs; I may take them up on it." He gave a thin smile. "I just need something big to exit on, something *monumental*."

The journal entry ended.

After a couple of quiet moments, Eve asked, "Will that be all, Mr. President?"

Clark blinked. "What information do you have about a Perry Elam Liston?"

Perry's head appeared in the display space and rotated. The right side was scarred, his right eye twisted into a sinister squint.

"Liston, Perry Elam," identified Eve. "A.K.A. *Chameleon*. A citizen of the *IBSA*, holding the rank of Colonel in the *Black Liberation Army*. Liston is responsible for twenty-three individual terrorist attacks within the United States and eighteen abroad. The most notable of his acts in the United States was the destruction of the Empire State Building, on January 11, 1990."

"WHAT?" Clark exclaimed.

"Clarify question," Eve replied evenly.

Clark recovered himself. "Never mind," he dismissed. "You've mentioned the term *IBSA*. What is that?"

"*IBSA* is an acronym for the *Independent Black States of America*. It is comprised of Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Florida, Kentucky, and Texas. These states seceded from the United States following the civil war of September 1971."

As Eve went on with routine details of their government, products, imports and exports, and demographics, Clark sat stunned. *All these differences happened because I was never put into suspended animation?*

He finally interrupted Eve and gave her a new inquiry. "Give me a summary of government departments and their respective heads."

"*Secretary of State*, Samantha N. Hammer; *Secretary of the Treasury*, Robert S. Thome; *Secretary of Defense*, Debra Lee Donegan; *Attorney General*, Theodore M. Brooks; *Secretary of the Interior* Patricia L. Thompson; *Secretary of Agriculture*, Sarah M. Sullivan; *Secretary of Commerce*, Darren Caston; *Secretary of Labor*, Daniel J. Keeler-Foster; *Secretary of Housing and Urban Development*, Richard R. Tran; *Secretary of Space Travel*, Matthew J. Hoover;

*Secretary of Energy*, Mark A. Whitton; *Secretary of Religious Affairs*, Pedro R.G. Castineira; *Secretary of Health and – "*

"Stop!" Clark interrupted. "Repeat last item!"

"*Secretary of Religious Affairs*, Pedro R.G. Castineira."

"Please elaborate on department."

"The *Department of Religious Affairs* was established in 1981 to regulate Judeo-Christian-based organizations within the United States of America."

Just when he thought the big shocks were over, he was hit with another one. "How?" he muttered.

"Restate question."

"What historical events led to the establishment of the *Department of Religious Affairs*?"

"The *Department of Religious Affairs* was a direct result of the 1980 attack by Evangelical Christian terrorists against the Disney World complex in Florida."

"Details."

"On May 15, 1980, seventeen Cruise missiles, with warheads containing Sentox VX nerve gas, were launched from a hijacked oil tanker sitting outside the twelve-mile limit, off the coast of central Florida. The missiles were targeted on the various parks within the Disney World complex in Orlando. The limited defense force of the IBSA was unable to track and destroy the missiles. 158,379 people were killed."

"Was there any significance to the date?" he questioned the computer.

"The date fell within the annual 'Gay Days' celebration in Orlando. The vast majority of visitors to the parks, that week, were lesbian and gay tourists."

"The attack was determined to be a religious act?"

A group calling themselves the *Avenging Angels of God* claimed responsibility for the attack." Eve provided the needed clarification.

"Show me."

An image of a bearded man appeared on the holographic screen. "The Bible says In Psalm 11: *'Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their cup. For the righteous LORD loveth righteousness; his countenance doth behold the upright.'* We have struck a blow today, in the name of Christians everywhere, against the Gay Menace that has overrun the once-great United States of America. We offer our condolences for the foreign nationals and heterosexuals who also perished, but they were no different from those in Sodom and Gomorrah who died when God rained down fire and brimstone upon them! Theirs were the sins of omission and complacency, when they chose to associate with the abominations."

Eve continued, "This incident sparked riots, marches on the White House, and demands for boycotts against Florida and the IBSA. Eventually Christianity and Judaism were banned within the United States. Surviving members of the gay community pressured President Nixon for swift justice."

"What happened to the ones who launched the attack?"

"They committed mass suicide before they could be captured."

Clark sat silently. After a few moments, Eve asked him if he wanted to continue.

"Later," he said soberly.

"Do you still wish privacy?"

"No," he responded absently.

"Privacy mode off. Will that be all, Mr. President?"

"Yes, thank you."

The display evaporated, leaving silence in the small study.

Clark sat quietly for several moments, then closed his eyes and prayed. His words were filled with emotion.

"Dear God ... how could things change so *much* from such a small a thing as *that*? And now I'm supposed to make everybody believe that I am this ... immoral *monster*! And Perry ... " His sigh was heavy with grief. "Oh, God, what he must be going through! We've got to get back to Arizona and correct this timeline. Please give Doug and Tony and the rest of them the wisdom to straighten this out!" He paused and took a deep breath; his words were slow and deliberate. "Lord Jesus, I rest in You and I depend on You. Let them see their President when they look at me. And keep us *all* protected. I trust in your hand of mercy and grace. Amen."

He took a deep breath, and felt new strength flow into him.

He looked at the time. It was getting late, and he had a dinner engagement he couldn't change.

As he left the Oval Office, he stopped before his secretary's desk.

"Mrs. Ingram," he addressed. "Please forgive me for my earlier rudeness."

"Perfectly understandable, Mr. President," she smiled back. "No need to apologize. Did you wish to postpone your dinner with the Vice-President?"

"No. I'm going to the residence now to change."

"I'll inform Mr. Hitchcock that you're on your way," she said, referring to the President's personal valet. "And I'll inform the Vice-President that you'll be on time."

"Thank you, Mrs. Ingram."

He turned to his Personal Assistant, who was now standing. "Leigh?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"You postponed the meetings?"

"Yes, Mr. President." Without looking at her notes, she gave him the new schedule.

"Very good," he nodded. "And just to let you know, I think I'm going to spend a quiet evening in the residence after dinner; I don't think I'll need you until the morning."

"Yes, Mr. President. Have a good evening," she smiled at him and walked away.

Clark passed through the Oval Office to the veranda. He heard the Secret Service agent quietly announce, "POTUS is moving." Then he fell into line a few steps behind Clark.

Inside the residence, a tall man in a butler's uniform stood patiently for him. He gave a shocked expression. "Your *clothes*, sir!"

"It's okay, Mr. Hitchcock," he explained. "I had to change into this and leave my suit behind."

"Very good, sir," he said; his tone showed his disappointment at the loss of the suit. "Your evening suit is on your bed. Do you wish to shower first?"

He shook his head as he headed for the bedroom. "Thank you, but I think I'll just have enough time to change."

"Very good, sir. Would you like those coveralls ... *disposed of*?"

"No, Mr. Hitchcock. Just cleaned."

"Very good, sir." He gave a quick pivot and left the room.

*So far so good*, thought Clark. *Thank You, Lord.*

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

Johnny Littlejohn burst through the doors of the VIP Area and propped them open. Then he stood back as a pair of electric ATVs pulling trailers stacked with supplies came through. J.J. Judge and Becky Speed drove; the others walked along either side, making certain that the cargo wouldn't become unbalanced.

At the end opposite the main doors into the area was a kitchen and a sizable walk-in pantry. Elle Cruise jogged ahead, moving chairs out of the way and throwing open the pantry doors.

They were still stocking the shelves when Drs. Phillips and Newman arrived. Dr. Phillips had a tablet PC in his hands, and both men carried stacks of papers. As they joined the others near the pantry, they noticed an elastic bandage on Dr. MacGregor's left ankle.

"Ann," said Dr. Phillips. "What happened?"

The expression on her face was a mixture of embarrassment and frustration. "It's nothing," she dismissed.

Johnny came over and explained. "She was trying to reach for something and lost her balance."

"It's only a sprain," she said in her defense. "A few hours and it'll be good as new."

"Only if you're Jack Bauer," quipped Kim Soong Ha, glancing back from the pantry.

Dr. MacGregor gave her a nasty look; she returned it with a smile and went back to work.

A few minutes later, Laura Sunday walked in with Sunni Bowman at her elbow. "Looks like we're the last ones here."

"Fashionably late," commented Sunni.

Looking at the supplies, Laura commented, "It looks like my last trip to Costco."

J.J. replied, "Hey, this place makes Costco look like a 7-11. There's enough food to last decades ... not that I'm saying that I'd want to actually *be* here that long, mind you."

Laura and Sunni dropped some items off on a table near the rest of the group. Then they set to work connecting the DVD camcorder into all the monitors.

"You guys better have strong stomachs," warned Sunni. "Or else don't eat before watching this."

"Why?" asked Becky Speed.

"You'll see," she ominously replied, grimacing. "It's ... *ugly*."

"Ugly?" repeated J.J. Judge. "How ugly?"

"Ugly," supported Laura Sunday.

"Okay, we'll check it out later," suggested Dr. Phillips.

"One thing we found out," said Laura, changing the subject. "Miami got nuked. It's totally gone."

Everybody reacted. "What?"

She nodded, then started to explain.

"I'm not really a history buff, but there was a documentary on one of their public broadcasting channels that explained what happened.

"First thing, in this timeline the U.S. never butted into the war in Vietnam, courtesy of *Presidential Advisor* Doc Savage. It was still a bloodbath, but most of the world saw it as just another civil war. Another important detail: because the Soviet Union was overthrown years

earlier than it did in our world, they never supplied weapons to the Vietcong." She paused. "However, the Chinese did. Eventually Doc Savage got sick and tired of all the loss of life, especially with the Chinese involved. So he issued an ultimatum - give up or face the consequences. They didn't listen, so Doc unleashed one of his superweapons on them, figuring they'd back down and back off."

"And?" asked Becky Speed.

"At the time, nobody knew that the Chinese had been working alongside Fidel Castro to put up missile silos in Cuba. And they retaliated against the United States by launching a missile with an atomic warhead straight at downtown Miami."

She paused as that sank in.

"Needless to say, Doc Savage was *pissed*. But rather than retaliating against the countries behind the attack, he used a weapon that targeted just Mao Tse-Tung and Fidel Castro. Fried them right where they were hiding. Their successors were far more apt to play ball with the U.S. after that. And that's what happened."

"Amazing," commented Johnny.

Harvey Cable moved near to the two time travelers. "So what did you guys come up with for a way out of this mess?"

Dr. Newman answered. "Not much, I'm afraid. We were able to pin down the error in the calculations that detoured me to 1948. But we still don't know how to repair the timeline."

Johnny inquired, "Do we know for certain that Dr. Newman's appearance before the 1948 Doc Savage is where the timeline diverges?"

"Yes," answered Dr. Phillips. "We went back to the Time Tunnel and viewed the events following Tony's mysterious appearance. From what you told me, Johnny, Clark had been ambushed by some men while his guard was down. They subdued him, placed him in suspended animation, then transported him to a site in Oregon. After fifty years, circumstances caused Clark to be able to escape his trap. After wandering around Portland, Oregon, he came upon the rescue mission where Perry was, and became a Christian."

"Correct," acknowledged Johnny.

"In the timeline we viewed, Tony's appearance strengthened Clark's alertness, and he ambushed the ambushers instead. The rest never happened."

"So," Harvey Cable concluded. "In order for things to straighten out, all we gotta do is make sure Doc goes into cold storage."

"It's not just that," said Johnny. "It is a combination of events that brought him to this point. Just making sure he was put into suspended animation is only one of the factors."

Kim Soong Ha spoke up. "If Doc had been ... lax, would things have happened as before?"

"Possibly," answered Dr. Phillips.

"So we just have to divert his attention from Tony," summarized Harvey.

"We can't just cause a diversion," interrupted Johnny. "It was the diversion of Tony's appearance in the first place that put him on his guard."

"What if we were to drug him?" offered J.J. Judge. "Say we hit him with something undetectable that would make him *fuzzy* enough not to care what happened to him."

"It would have to be something he wouldn't remember," added Johnny.

"Does this place have a pharmacy?" asked Kim.

"It's got *everything*," said J.J.

Dr. Phillips looked at Laura Sunday. "Were you able to find out what happened to Clark or Perry?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, no."

"Okay," muttered Dr. Phillips, standing and getting everyone's attention. "Why don't we put together something to eat, then check on the pharmaceuticals?"

There were affirmations around the room.

"I'm not really hungry, guys," commented J.J. "If it's okay, I'd like to check things out now. Since we're not on any sort of schedule, I can grab something to eat a little later."

"Okay," answered Dr. Phillips. "Just keep in touch."

"Will do." And he left the VIP area.

Later, as they ate, Becky Speed asked Laura Sunday, "So what was it with the stuff on cable that was so heinous?"

"I don't know how it happened, but the world topside is just so ... *immoral*."

"Well, if you haven't noticed, our own timeline's not exactly a walk in the park," commented Harvey Cable.

"Yeah, but there's always been a degree of restraint, somewhere. If it's here, we couldn't see it."

"For example?" he challenged.

"Laura," suggested Sunni. "The euthanasia commercial?"

"Yeah," she agreed. She rose and looked through a few small DVDs. "Here it is." She inserted it into the camcorder and switched it on. All the screens came alive with the image of a silver-haired veteran actor now in his 80's.

"Are you tired of this life? Do you want to make your existence count for something? Discover the peace you can find through *Kevorkian Centers*, located in hundreds of malls all across the United States. Here their staff of friendly trained paralegals will quickly assist you in settling your accounts and making sure your loved ones are cared for. Choose from any number of 'final moment' scenarios, swallow the pleasant-tasting 'black capsule', lay back and enjoy your trip into the hereafter. Your mortal coil is then recycled and your organs distributed to needy individuals all across the nation. What remains is recycled back into the environment, with no expensive burial to worry about. And your loved ones will be given a special commemorative vid of your last moments, reassuring them that you crossed over safely into the Great Beyond."

A local area map appeared on the screen, and an announcer gave the location of the *Kevorkian Center* near them. Then the actor came back on to close the commercial. He smiled comfortably.

"I know that when I'm ready to go, I'll know I'm going with the best. *Kevorkian Centers*: They're here for you." He confidently pointed out from the screen as the commercial faded to black.

"It's gotta be a joke commercial," argued Harvey. "A spoof."

"Yeah, we thought so too. But we saw it on more than one network. Besides, does *that* look funny to you?"

He silently shook his head.

"And that's just one example," said Laura soberly. "If anyone wants to see all of what we found, we'll play it. But do so at your own risk."

There was silence for several seconds, then Johnny Littlejohn asked Drs. Phillips and Newman, "Will we be able to repair the timeline?"

"We're not sure," answered Dr. Newman.

"Dr. Newman? Dr. Phillips?" Harvey Cable got their attention. "Earlier, when we were shopping, a few of us got to talking about the timeline." He paused. "I'm a comic book fan. I read 'em on my tablet PC, and I've got years' worth backed up on CDs. Now, Kim's a sci-fi nut. Between the two of us, we've probably seen every movie, book, and comic that's even hinted at time travel. And that's just the two of us - put us all together and God only knows how many examples and options we can map out." He paused. "What I'm saying is, why don't we put our heads together and see if anything can apply in this situation?"

Dr. Phillips and Dr. Newman looked at each other. "They've got a point," acknowledged Dr. Phillips.

"Besides, since we really don't dare try anything until Clark and Perry return," added Dr. Newman.

"Okay, sounds good. Where do you want to start?"

"Before we do, we gotta set down a few ground rules," said Kim Soong Ha. "We've all seen movies that have included time travel ... but *how* they do it is pretty lame."

"*Somewhere in Time*," called out Elle Cruise. "Chris Reeve, Jane Seymour. Romantic tear-jerker, loved the soundtrack. But the way they handled the time traveling was downright laughable."

"What about *The Final Countdown*?" suggested Kim.

"Hey, don't knock *Final Countdown*!" defended Becky Speed, standing. "I liked that movie!"

"It was a two-hour recruiting commercial for the Navy," declared Kim.

"Okay, gang - we get the idea," Harvey interrupted. "So the idea isn't to analyze *how* they do it, but focus on *what* they did to change time."

"Agreed," nodded Harvey.

\* \* \*

The meal was excellent, and Clark complemented Katherine on her cooking. A beautiful woman in her late 30's, she brushed her long auburn hair away from her eyes and gave him a sincere smile. With the trace of a British accent, she explained how she'd been hoping things would turn out well.

After dinner, Clark and Carlie retired to her study.

He waited, with as much patience as he could muster, while she reached into a humidor on the low table between them, extracted a cigar, and snipped off the end. He noted, in passing, that it was a Havana. That would figure, though; this timeline had had no President Kennedy, to set up the trade embargo against Cuba.

She finished the ritual of lighting the cigar, and seeing that it was burning evenly, then addressed him through the cloud of smoke.

"You know, Clark, I'm sure you're aware that you're meeting with Rick Arrington and Sergei Buttermore tomorrow."

"Yes," Clark replied nonchalantly, already aware of the meeting and the participants.

She took a puff from the cigar. "Do you know ... what they want to talk to you about?"

"Yes," Clark replied without emphasis. "They want me to step down after this term and hand you the Presidency."

His bluntness didn't surprise her. "Essentially. How do you feel about that?"

"I suppose I should ask you the same thing. After all, you'll be the one responsible after I've stepped down."

She blew a cloud of sweet smoke towards the ceiling and nodded thoughtfully. "I'd be a fool not to pass up an opportunity like this. It's not every day the White House is handed to you on a silver platter."

"You sound ... reluctant."

She smiled. "I'd be a fool to say I'm *not* reluctant. As you say, this is a great responsibility. And I hope I'll be up to the task."

"I think you will be," Clark observed. "You're a strong, determined woman. Keep a cool head and you'll have no problems."

"Thank you, Clark. I value your advice. So ... what will you do after you step down?"

"I'm not sure," he said, feigning thoughtfulness. "Retirement sounds good right about now."

"Your Fortress over on the dark side?"

Okay, so it wasn't a big secret; perhaps he had told her about it in the past. He smiled. "Yes."

"Please don't wander too far, Clark." She placed a hand on his arm and gave him a warm smile. "I'm planning on tapping into your wealth of wisdom."

"I'll be there, Carlie."

\* \* \*

### **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

Clark returned to the Presidential residence in the East Wing.

He discovered that his doppelganger had been thorough; there was a 'terminal' for Eve in the President's bedroom. He dismissed Hitchcock for the night and made sure that things were secure before he could finally relax.

As a Christian, he knew what the Bible said about the 'lifestyle' Carlie and Elizabeth had chosen. The practice of homosexuality was an abomination. He knew it, and - despite any public cries of denial - deep inside, *they* probably also knew it. That's why many homosexuals maintained a distance from most Christians. To them, Christians were narrow-minded, hate-filled, intolerant judges who disperse condemnation like a bonfire disperses hot sparks into the air.

Clark had found out the hard way that you couldn't minister against someone in sin - *any* sin - until *they* want to hear it. Any attempt otherwise just makes them dig their heels in deeper and become farther entrenched in their sin.

That's why prayer was such an *effective* weapon. God has always worked behind the scenes, with a nudge here and an inspiration there. He works outside of any system man has or ever will design. And since He knows what it'll take for a person to come around to His way, He's never wasted a single move.

He recalled a story Perry had told him about a friend whose wife had put out a restraining order against him. He could have no contact whatsoever with his wife. He became a Christian, turned his life around, but couldn't tell her. So he prayed and fasted to get through to her. And God got through. The wife called her husband and allowed him to tell her the good news. She dropped the restraining order shortly after, and they reconciled. God got through the barrier of man's laws.

God *always* prevails.

Clark had to remind himself of that fact, as he prayed for Carlie. His earlier observations had been correct. She reminded him of his cousin Pat, and her daughter Caroline. And ... Bonnie. All these powerful women - so bold, so independent, so stubborn.

As he looked out the window onto the city, he wondered, were these sorts of women attracted to him, or he to them?

He smiled, and then returned to his research.

They'd all been correct regarding Tony Newman's appearance in 1948.

"In my own zeal to recapture the elusive Wail," his doppelganger had confessed in his journal. The holographic display Eve had in this room took up one entire wall. "I nearly fell prey to an ambush. I realize now that my own actions had been made without sufficient notification, preparation, or manpower. I was a *fool!* I swear, I'll *never* make that mistake ever again!"

That was just the start.

For weeks after the incident, Clark's doppelganger brought the team together for the first time in quite a while, banding together to locate the entity known as Wail. However, they never found him, and eventually they had to abandon the chase and close the case.

Returning to New York City, he faced his second crisis point - the Murrow investigation. The famed journalist had wanted to talk to Doc Savage about some information that been brought to his attention. The information - never directly referred to as the *Crime College* - had connections to the famous Doc Savage, and Murrow wanted a statement.

Clark reflected sadly, I had been in suspended animation by that time, and couldn't be there to answer his questions. The rest of my team - who probably thought I had abandoned them - couldn't do anything but cover up the fact that I was gone.

He returned to the journal. Unlike Clark - who would've covered up the details and arranged for the information to 'mysteriously' vanish from Murrow's possession - his doppelganger chose an altogether different option: full and complete disclosure. He took the journalist into his confidence and told him all about the Crime College, right down to taking him on a tour of the facility.

And Murrow's reaction?

"This was more than I could hope for," the smiling face looked back at him. "Mr. Murrow not only understood my motives for the Crime College, but he *agreed* with them. He could see the possible pitfalls, but said he would be first to defend it. By the end of the day he had returned to me the information that had first directed him here."

Clark suddenly felt very heavy.

No exposé of the Crime College. No Senate investigation. The team never scattered. Pat never lost an eye. Ham never killed himself. Pat and Monk never had their affair. Pat never exiled herself to Caroline Island. Pat never gave birth to Caroline. Monk never married Lea. Ham never

married Dorothy. Dorothy never gave birth to Danny. Lea never gave birth to Clark, or gave him the nickname Gumball. Daniel and Caroline never married. Caroline never gave birth to Dot.

One small event, a single choice to do or not do something, and the consequences echoed through time like ripples from a stone tossed into a lake. Lives were spared, while others never existed.

"Oh ... *God*," he sighed.

\* \* \*

Once the Crime College was again secure, Doc Savage traveled to the Fortress of Solitude for some time of serious introspection. That was interrupted by the news of North Korea's invasion of South Korea. At the same time he learned that President Truman had ordered development of a weapon greater than the atomic bomb. A wave of dread coursed through his mind.

"I've visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki," he related soberly in his journal. "And I've personally witnessed the horrifying destructive capability of the atomic bomb. As much as I respect President Truman, I could picture him using one of these *hydrogen* bombs on North Korea. I *must* do something. I *will* do something."

He did do something. He appealed to the governments of the three nations involved in this technology - the United States, Russia, and China. His requests that they cease development were met with respectful denials; nobody wanted to admit they were creating bigger and more-destructive weapons to use on their fellow man.

So Doc Savage took his case to the people of the world.

He exposed the fact that the United States, Russia, and China were in the process of developing hydrogen weapons. He explained the destruction that could occur if they continued to develop - and one day, *use* - such weapons. And then he issued an ultimatum to the three governments to "stop or be stopped". To show that he wasn't bluffing, he did something he swore he'd never do ... use one of the superweapons hidden in the Fortress.

With the entire world watching, he selected an uninhabited island in the Pacific - and vaporized it.

This time the nations listened.

President Truman shut down all development on the hydrogen bomb.

The Russians and Chinese *said* they would comply, but they just continued their work in secret. In 1953, when the Russians performed an underground hydrogen bomb test, Doc Savage didn't hesitate to make good his threat. After obliterating their 'secret' facility near Siberia, he went back to the Russian people and urged them to rise up against their government.

It worked.

Within weeks, a new Soviet Republic emerged from the ashes of the old Soviet Union, decades earlier than it had in Clark's timeline.

By this time, Doc Savage had become *Special Advisor* to President Eisenhower. He was the most famous man on the planet ... and, to many, the most trusted.

He now used that trust to unify nations.

His suggestions that the United States and the Soviet Republic pool their resources in the newly-emerging field of space travel resulted in Alan Shepherd and Yuri Gagarin being the first men to set foot on the moon in July of 1961, and the construction of three permanent lunar colonies by the end of the 1960's.

Clark yawned, reminding him of the hour, and how long he'd been awake today. It had been a *long long* day.

He thought of Perry, and wondered how he was. Clark didn't want to entertain any thoughts of harm happening to his best friend.

He ordered Eve to shut down, and prepared for bed.

He took in a deep breath. "Lord, I know You're there. It's been a long day. And I fear this is far from over." He began to pray for everybody he could think of; he lost track of the time and only stopped when he felt that God was leading him to sleep.

And when he lay his head down on the pillow, he was out almost instantly.

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

Clark's first full day as President began with a wake-up call from Leigh at 5:30. He showered, shaved, and dressed in the clothes Mr. Hitchcock had laid out for him. He left the residence and was joined by Leigh; a Secret Service agent followed respectfully as they walked to the Oval Office. She read from her thin tablet computer, confirming the morning schedule Clark had prepared for the previous night.

Several people joined them in the Oval Office, along with a steward with a tray; there was a simple breakfast for the President, along with a selection of pastries.

He was briefed and updated on non-critical matters that had happened overnight. He silently thanked God that his masquerade seemed to be working. He was accepted as the President of the United States.

"Mr. President," said White House Press Secretary Nola Salton. "The Press Corps is starting to get antsy about what happened in Arizona. I don't know how long I'll be able to hold them at bay."

Clark was ready this time. "Tell them that I'm involved in some high-level negotiations, and you're not at liberty to give out details at this time."

"Yeah, and then they'll ask *who* you're negotiating with, and *why* Air Force One was attacked in the middle of the desert."

"Tell them that I'm involved in some high-level negotiations, and you're not at liberty to give out details at this time." he insisted. Then he switched to a smile. "Melt 'em with your charm, Nola."

She backed off.

The meetings began after the morning briefing. Most of them were informational, requiring his decision on where to proceed. His 'studies' had proven out, and he was able to get through them without difficulty.

\* \* \*

Clark opened the door to the Chief-of-Staff's office. "Monk. Do you have a moment?"

"Always, Mr. President!" he squeaked.

Clark asked Mrs. Ingram to hold his calls for a few minutes, and had Leigh wait outside the closed door.

Once they sat down, Clark began, "I need to apologize to you."

The simian Chief-of-Staff's expression was one of confusion. "For what?"

Clark met his eyes. "For not informing you about the meeting in Arizona. You were right about Liston."

"Howlin' calamities!" His eyes lit up. "But why?"

"He was going to defect," Clark said slowly. "I'd arranged for him to undergo plastic surgery, to repair his face. Then he would meet with me *and only me*, and I'd bring him back with us."

"You're right ... I *did* notice his face wasn't scarred when we grabbed him." He suddenly flared. "Dammit, Doc! Why couldn't you have told us about it in the first place? You didn't even tell *me*! I'm your Chief of Staff, not some *intern*! We lost men!" he grieved.

"You're absolutely right, and I'm sorry. I should've included you." Clark lowered his gaze briefly. "You've heard the rumors?"

"The MKC wants Carlie in the Center Seat ... yeah." His eyes lit up. "Now I get it. You want to go out in a blaze of glory by bringing Liston to justice."

"Not just that. Do you have any idea how much information he's got on the IBSA and the Black Liberation Army? He's got names, places, dates - stuff that would keep us busy for years!"

"Slick, Mr. President. Very slick. Okay, I see your logic. So what *was* that base?"

"To be honest, I don't even know. It looked like it had been built in the 60s - it may have been a project of my predecessor's that was never completed. Suffice it to say that it was available."

"Out in the desert? Maybe another space center," Monk theorized.

"Perhaps. Anyhow, it was remote and yet not far from IBSA territory."

"*Too* close. They must've been waitin', in order to pull him outta there as fast as they did. Could it have been a trap? Y'know, maybe Liston was playing you for a sucker ... draw you into the trap, then his men attack and take us all out."

"I don't think so. They would've come out with more than just a missile attack that they knew we had the shields for. No ... I believe Liston was on the level, and didn't know they were there. Now I don't know if he'll try establishing contact with me again. If he does, I want him located and retrieved *immediately* - don't give them a chance at him again!"

"If they haven't killed him already," added Monk. "I'll set something up that's very low-key." He grinned gleefully. "*Blazes*, what a coup! With what he knows about the IBSA, he could really put a dent in their infrastructure."

"My thoughts exactly! I've also got it on good authority that they might try to pass off a double as Liston. If his face is scarred like Liston's *was* -"

"- then you've got yourself a ringer!" Monk finished. "I'm with ya!"

"If he makes contact with me again, I'll work out a password to let you know he's the one we want." He paused. "Again, I'm sorry I didn't bring you in on it from the beginning."

"It's okay, Mr. President. We'll get him next time!"

\* \* \*

The two representatives from the MKC - the *Magic Kingdom Coalition* - were on time; Mrs. Ingram announced them. "Mr. Arrington and Mr. Buttermore."

"Thank you, Mrs. Ingram," replied Clark, standing and meeting them half-way.

The two men from the MKC represented the more-flamboyant side of the gay influence in the USA, starting with the way they sauntered into the Oval Office like supermodels on a runway.

Rick Arrington wore a suit that looked like it had been designed for Liberace; it had a lot of splashy color, a lot of glitter, and a *lot* of sequins. On his head was a wide-brimmed hat with a multicolored feather. Sergei Buttermore wore a violet colored knee-length dress and a briefcase hanging off his shoulder by a thin leather strap.

Clark was thankful for his 'face of flint' that kept him from breaking into politically-incorrect laughter at the sight. Instead, he addressed them by name and extended a courteous hand.

Rick Arrington shook the hand, but Sergei Buttermore lifted it up and kissed the back of it. "Mr. President," he said with a pronounced lisp and an affectionate smile. "It's a *pleasure* to meet with you again."

"Thank you," Clark returned. "Please, have a seat. So, gentlemen, what can I do for you?"

"Well, Mr. President," said Arrington. "We'd first like to say that we applaud you in your handling of the Virgil Robinson matter."

"It's rare," added Buttermore, "that we get a case of sexual harassment in our ranks. Your solution was unique and fair."

"You're welcome, gentlemen. But I don't think you came all this way just to pat me on the back for a judicial decision."

"No, Mr. President, we didn't." There was a brief pause, and the two men glanced at each other. "How do you see your political career in, say, the next four years?"

"Well, I was planning on running for another term, but I suspect that you two may have something to say about that. Am I correct?"

"You *know*?" asked Buttermore.

"You didn't think I would? You want me to step aside at the end of this term and hand Carlie the Presidency on a silver platter." He paused, and his eyebrow rose. "Is that correct ... *gentlemen*?"

There was a moment of silence. The two men from the MKC looked at the floor. Then Arrington looked up and calmly said, "Yes, Mr. President, that is correct."

Clark looked at them for several silent moments, then said, "Relax, gentlemen. You're getting your wish." He offered the thin smile again. "I've served in this office for quite some time. And considering my chronological age, I don't think it would be much of a stretch for me to consider retirement. You'll also be happy to know that I spoke to Carlie about this last night, and I have promised her my complete support. You can breathe now."

The relief was unmasked on their faces. "Thank you, Mr. President," they both said.

"In the meantime, I want *your* help."

"Anything!" exclaimed Arrington.

"Good. The MKC is putting pressure on Agriculture with respect to Rome. I want you to back off a bit."

"The Vatican continues to refuse the equality of gays!" defended Buttermore.

Clark replied calmly but firmly. "The Vatican is dealing with 2.5 *million* people starving to death in northern Italy because *you're* holding back the technology to make their crops grow!"

Clark had learned of the numerous technological breakthroughs in the field of agriculture and weather management. Monstrous tornadoes that had once brought death and destruction to the Midwest were now a bad dream, and 'bread basket' states such as Kansas were producing crops greater than anyone's wildest dreams.

Hunger in the USA had been virtually eliminated.

Unfortunately, the technology that stopped tornadoes and hurricanes before they could become dangerous had the opposite effect in other regions of the world. The tornadoes first began to strike the French countryside in 1984, and ravaged the landscape for two years. Vineyards were ripped asunder by massive funnel clouds. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed, and wine

production almost came to a standstill. It was only after the USA shared the weather control did life finally return to the land.

Unfortunately, there was a price for this technology, a small price from a people willing to sell their souls for relief. And in a way, they did. The MKC was a strong political force, and they had a grip of iron on the technology. Those who wanted the technology had to publicly acknowledge and defend the rights of homosexuals.

For many liberal countries that already had a high homosexual population, this was hardly a problem. However, the Roman Catholic Church, under the leadership of Pope Archibald XIV, stood firm on their religious convictions and refused to bow the knee.

Clark applauded their faith, but as a people they were in danger of extinction, as tornado after tornado swept unchallenged across their land.

Clark wanted to do something about it. And so he decided to draw a line in the sand.

"To back down now would be a sign of *weakness*," defended Arrington.

"To back down would be a sign of *mercy*," replied Clark, his hands open in pleading. "They would be in *your* debt."

"The Vatican would never believe it," added Buttermore. "They don't trust us."

"Then let me do it. I'll take Air Force One to Vatican City and *personally* put it in the hands of the Pope ... with *no* strings attached."

Arrington bolted to his feet, his eyes flaring with anger. "That would be *madness*!"

Clark continued sitting. "For *what*? For being a gracious and giving President, thinking of the needs of the world?" He slowly stood, raising himself to his full height. "Besides, if this is indeed my final term, what can you do to me - have me *impeached*? Gentlemen, I *am* Clark Savage, Jr.! And regardless of any influence you *believe* you have on them, they are *still* the people of the United States of America, and I *am* their President!" He paused. "You have seventy-two hours to give me your decision. *Leigh!*"

The door to the Oval Office opened. "Yes, Mr. President?"

"Show these men *out!*" Clark ordered, sitting behind his desk and pretending to ignore them.

Rick Arrington stood and gave an exaggerated huff. Sergei Buttermore simply picked up his briefcase and followed him.

Clark gave them ten minutes, then buzzed his secretary over the intercom. "Mrs. Ingram. Please get me the Secretary of Agriculture on the phone."

After a few moments, she buzzed back. Clark tapped the cordless receiver around his left ear. "Sarah, how are you?" he greeted cordially.

"Fine, Mr. President. What can I do for you?"

"Have you been receiving requests from Rome for famine relief in Northern Italy?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"How long would it take to compile the information they've requested to a computer and deliver it in a secure case to the White House?"

There was a pause. "Well, just off the top of my head, I'd say six hours. Probably less."

"Excellent. Please proceed. I'll be expecting it in my hands by morning."

"Mr. President, can I ask what you plan on doing with this information?"

"I *may* be delivering it to the Vatican. If I change my mind, I'll return it to you."

Clark could hear the hesitation in the Secretary's voice. "Yes, Mr. President."

"Thank you, Sarah."

\* \* \*

Monk Mayfair was crossing over from the West Wing when he heard the commotion coming from the main entrance. Rushing to see what the matter was, he saw the two reps from the MKC loudly complaining about something.

Sergei Buttermore saw Monk and rushed to meet him. His face was flushed.

"Sergei! What is it?"

"That man is mad, I tell you - *mad!*"

Rick Arrington joined them; he was calmer, but not by much.

"We have been treated most rudely by the President, Monk! We've been betrayed!"

Monk put his hands out to calm them. "Look, I don't know what this is all about, but let's go to my office and talk about it."

"No! We've been ordered out of the building," huffed Buttermore with a wave of his hand.

"It's true; the President himself instructed Ms. Marks to show us out."

Monk looked over at Leigh. She gave him an apologetic nod of the head.

"All right," Monk conceded. "Let's go outside. Leigh, I'll take it from here. If anyone asks, tell them I went for a walk."

"Yes, Mr. Mayfair," she said, and walked away.

Monk and the two from the MKC left through the front door and walked to the park across the street. Buttermore and Arrington told Monk about their meeting and the President's demands on them.

"He certainly must be aware of how *unprecedented* this is," pleaded Arrington. "To do it would be a slap in the face of the gay community. You *must* let him know, that, if he proceeds with this action of *disloyalty*, there will be repercussions."

Monk was nervous. "Rick ... Sergei ... believe me, the President has always had the MKC's interests at hand."

"He didn't sound like it," Arrington said coldly. "He gave us seventy-two hours!"

"Calm down, Rick! I'll speak to the President!"

"You do that! In the meantime, I've got to report this to the Directorate. They won't like it."

"Hold off! Just give me ... twenty-four hours. Can you do that?"

The two reps from the MKC looked at each other. Then Buttermore nodded slightly.

"Twenty-four hours. No more."

Monk appeared relieved. "Okay. Thanks. I'll get to the bottom of this."

Arrington and Buttermore said nothing, but just walked away, leaving Monk standing alone and puzzled.

"Blazes!" he muttered to himself as he returned to the White House and went straight for the Oval Office.

"Chrissy," asked Monk. "Is there anyone with the President?"

"No, sir. Shall I announce you to see if he's busy?"

"No. I'll take my chances."

He opened the door to the Oval Office. The President was sitting in one of the chairs, a stack of briefing folders on his lap. He looked up and said, "Yes, Monk?"

"Got a minute, Mr. President?"

He moved the stack to the table next to him. "Sure. What is it?"

Monk came in and took a seat across from him. "Are you planning to give our agricultural technology to the Romans?"

"News travels fast," he replied with a poker face. "I can only assume you spoke to Arrington and Buttermore on their way out."

"While they were being '*escorted*' out," he amended. "So, is it true?"

"Yes, Monk, it's true. I would rather have the blessing of the MKC, but I'm going to do this regardless."

"But *why*? You know it's policy not to share our tech with nations that won't acknowledge gay rights!"

"Yes. I'm well aware of it. And I can see how my actions are a considerable gamble. But there's method to my madness." He paused. "As I explained to Mr. Arrington and Mr. Buttermore, my intent is not one of weakness, but of mercy. The United States has always been looked up to as a source of strength in times of national crisis. The Romans are dying, Monk, and we have the means to save their lives."

"But they know all they've gotta do is acknowledge gay rights in their country and we'll support them 100%. Their stubbornness is what's letting their people starve."

"Yes," agreed Clark patiently. "But they are a proud people ... and a people of faith. And their faith keeps them from giving in. So I'm going to do something totally off-the-wall - I'm going to give them the technology without strings. I'm willing to bet that, if we do this right up front, we'll show the world that we're willing to put our own agendas aside in order to help a nation that's dying. We will benefit in the eyes of the world ... and Rome will be in our debt."

Monk picked up the thought. "So that, once their crisis is over, they might be more open to the idea of gay rights."

Clark nodded. "And if they were to reject it, it would look like they're literally biting the hand that's feeding them."

"Wouldn't look good in the eyes of the world, especially when it comes to that religion of theirs. It's a win-win solution. I like it."

"Glad you think so," Clark said dryly.

"Hey, I'm sorry, Mr. President!" apologized Monk. "But you understand my anxiousness when I first heard about this. So when are you going to Vatican City?"

"Soon. Possibly tomorrow, if I can arrange an audience with the Pope."

"I'll make the arrangements. But you said you'd give the MKC seventy-two hours to give their blessing."

"Knowing how they'd feel about this, do you really think I would give them all that time to plan their counter-attack?"

Monk laughed. "When should I clue them in on your intention?"

"Let'em stew a bit. Then leak to the press that I'm planning a trip to Rome for an 'unspecified meeting' with the Pope. I don't want a lot of fanfare, but have a statement prepared for afterward."

"What about those who say that you're on a *religious* mission?"

"Is mercy and compassion exclusive to religion? I don't think so. This is a humanitarian mission of goodwill."

"Okay, that'll work. I'll have a statement for your review before you leave."

"Thank you, Monk."

The simian Chief-of-Staff stood up and excused himself.

Inwardly, Clark exhaled with relief. His ploy had worked. He had convinced Monk that his actions were righteous without showing his true Christian motives. Ever since reading of the situation in Rome, he'd felt compelled to do something to help them. So he used the visit from the MKC to set his plans into motion,

At first he debated whether this was a good idea - after all, if they did correct the timeline, all of this might cease to exist. But the heart of God within him could not stand by apathetically and let this continue, especially when he had the means to do something about it.

And if they didn't correct the timeline ... then he'd do everything in his power to make this a better world. He apparently had a Fortress of Solitude located on the dark side of the moon. His own Fortress, in the Arctic wastes of the original timeline, had held devices both wonderful and terrible. He was willing to wager that his doppelganger's fortress came similarly equipped.

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

It was midnight in Atlanta, Georgia. But the man sitting at the desk in the office building couldn't care less.

He concentrated on the three *Shadow Microsystems eFolders* on his desk. The *eFolders* were specialized tablet computers, inexpensive to produce, limited in memory and function, electronic versions of the old paper folders of ten years earlier.

The ones he examined now contained the information on the briefing he went through this morning. He had to summarize it for his superior, General Webster.

"Continue recording," he spoke. "On August second, an underground complex was discovered during a routine microsat recon sweep of the Arizona desert. Despite the unusual electrical field surrounding the complex, there was no question that it was the size of a small city.

"Initial questions have remained unanswered as to the origin and purpose of the base, and how a structure of that size could be built without our knowledge. The possibility that the electrical field could be part of a cloaking device was discussed and dismissed for lack of information.

"Looking further into the matter, a team of forward observers was dispatched to the region, to determine if the complex was inhabited and a possible threat to us.

"On August third, the Presidential saucer arrived at the site. At that point it was decided to put the *18th Fighter Wing* out of El Paso on alert in case the team of observers was discovered or a threat was indeed determined.

"It should be noted here that no ground security precautions were taken, leading us to believe that the President was well aware of the existence and purpose of the complex. This was furthermore supported when President Savage himself ventured into the complex alone, without security support.

"Approximately ninety minutes later he emerged from the complex. He was not alone. The forward observers identified the man accompanying him as BLA Colonel Perry Liston. Upon this discovery, they concluded that this man was a prisoner in custody of the USA, and initiated an emergency extraction.

"The area was attacked and there were several casualties on the opposing side, but President Savage was unharmed. The man identified as Colonel Liston was brought aboard the extraction jet and they departed the area.

"However the crew of the aircraft soon realized that the man they were transporting was not the Colonel Liston they assumed him to be. After radioing for instructions, the subject was tranquilized and was transported to Base Blue for a full examination.

"Following a thorough examination and interrogation under our most effective truth drugs, it was concluded that ... that ... " He paused, then sharply exclaimed, "*Recording off!*"

The man slammed his fist down on the desktop and swore.

What do I say, that he claimed to be from an alternate timeline where Doc Savage spent fifty years in suspended animation and is now a *Christian*? That the man's genetic and physical makeup - including DNA, retinal eye patterns, finger-, ear-, and voiceprints - is identical to my OWN? He released a short bitter laugh, and his hand moved up to the scarred right side of his face. *Almost* identical. He isn't disfigured like I am, although it looks like somebody beat the crap out of his back not too long ago.

The man at the desk looked over the pictures again.

A woman came into the office. She wore a uniform similar to his. "You still here?" she asked.

He looked up at her. "Yeah. I've got to finish this summary for Webster. I just can't get past this guy!"

She moved around and sat in the chair next to the desk. She was a tall woman with a medium-length Afro hairstyle. She reached across and placed a hand atop his. "Still can't accept the possibility that he might actually be you."

"I've tried to think of any other possibility - a clone, or even a long-lost twin. But he's *me*."

"What did they decide to do with him?"

"They put a tracker in him and shipped him off to Laredo. They're hoping he tries to escape and leads them to whoever is behind this."

"Laredo Penitentiary? That place is a combat zone! What if they kill him?"

"Not my decision," he said coldly. "Not my responsibility."

"What about the base in Arizona?"

"We're redirecting one of our killer-sats into a geosynch orbit over it. One false move and it'll be radioactive toast."

"It's deep."

"It's armed with a Driller missile. It'll plow through there like a hot knife through butter."

"All right." She looked at him and her expression softened. "This whole thing's really scared you, baby, hasn't it?"

"Yeah." He met her eyes. "I mean, what am I supposed to think? This guy comes out of nowhere with my DNA and a story as bizarre as a Bobby Kennedy novel. I don't like it. It's just a reminder of the man I *used* to be." He paused and looked down at the desk. "What do *you* think of him?"

"He's you, all right. Doesn't have the same background, though. But that fits in with his story."

Liston nodded.

"Look, we're all tired. Come on, let's go home. The report will wait until morning."

He suddenly got a sobering expression on his face. "Do you miss him?"

"Miss who?"

He looked down at one of the *eFolders*; it alternated views of the other Perry Liston. "*Him*. The man I *used* to be."

She grabbed his jaw and turned his face sharply towards hers. "Perry Elam Liston! I *don't* know this man! I *do* know you! I did *not* marry him! I *did* marry you! I don't care if this guy looks like you! He's *not* you! Why would I ever want anyone else?"

The unscarred side of his face softened. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, baby." She pulled his face towards hers, and they kissed. "I love you."

"I love you, too," he admitted.

She released his face. "Look, let me call up and have a car take us home."

He didn't argue the point. She picked up the phone. "Motor Pool, this is Major Clayton. Colonel Liston and I will need a car in about five minutes. Yes, thank you." She disconnected and stood. She gave him a smile. "Now switch those off and let's go home."

He turned off the electronic folders, then stacked them neatly in the middle of the desk. She took his hand and they headed for the door. Before leaving, Colonel Liston turned around and commanded, "Lights off! Secure the room!"

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two days ago I would've thought that I'd lost my mind, or had somehow plunged into some drug-induced nightmare. Since then, I've had to adapt.

The last thing I remembered was being in that jet. They called me Colonel and treated me like a bigwig, then knocked me out.

The next thing I remembered was waking up here and feeling like one of those UFO abductees who claimed they'd been probed by aliens; there were parts of my body that felt like they'd gone through the third-degree.

*Here* is Laredo Penitentiary, somewhere in south Texas.

My cellmate's name is Santo Montero. Born in Mexico City, he got into trouble when he got mixed up with some drug smugglers. The others tried shooting it out with officials, and were killed for their efforts. Santo surrendered wisely, and ended up with a 5-to-7 in Laredo. I was fortunate - he wasn't the violent type. He was heavy-set, of average height, and sported a *Frito Bandito* moustache and a good sense of humor.

"We usually don't get no *Anglos* around here," he told me at one point. "They're usually killed or deported if they break the law in *Estados Negro*. So what makes you so special?"

"Beats me," I said with a shrug. "Just where am I?"

He told me. "Where'd you come from?"

"Uh ... Portland. Oregon."

"Wow. Makes sense, though, considering that ring o'yours. You got *muy grande cozones* to wear *that* in Or-ray-gon!"

What had impressed Santo had been my wedding ring.

At first I didn't understand; it was just an ordinary sterling silver band with the word JESUS formed into it. But then Santo explained that Christianity had been outlawed in most of the United States.

At first this was a surprise, but after some thought and observation - understanding that this was not the world I woke up in - it made sense. In my timeline there were constant debates involving religion. Schools battled over prayer and evolution versus creationism. Civil rights groups complained over having the Ten Commandments displayed in Federal buildings, having Nativity scenes displayed on anything other than private property, and even the use of the word *Christ* in Christmas.

My simple little ring, with the word JESUS displayed for the entire world to see, was seen by this group of prisoners as an act of direct defiance of an anti-Christian law.

To some, like Santo Montero, that made me a revolutionary, a hero. He grinned and held his hand out. "You're okay in my book, *'mano!*"

And now I *knew* had a friend.

\* \* \*

My watch had been taken during my examination, but I was supremely grateful that God had allowed me to keep my rings. And after a test after lights off, I confirmed the fact that both my uncle's ring and the countdown chip in my head still worked perfectly.

I sought out Santo for some answers. "I was in a coma for the last six years, and my memory's not all there. Can you help me fill in some of the gaps?"

"I'll give it a shot."

"Who's the President?"

"Of what - the IBSA or the USA?"

"What's the IBSA?" I asked, already confused.

"The *Estados Negro* ... the black states. I don't know all of them. Most of them are the southern states – Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Georgia – those ones." He laughed. "And, of course, Texas! The rest are part of the USA!"

"So there are *two* countries in the United States?"

"Sure. Been that way since the '70's. Elijah Morgan runs the IBSA. And Ol' Doc Savage runs the USA."

That was a confirmation. I wondered what other things now existed because of Tony Newman's intervention in 1948.

I gave him an apologetic look. "I'm really drawing a blank, Santo. Can you tell me how the United States split up?"

He didn't have all the information but helped me with what he could. In the 1970's there was a civil war, and the blacks conquered many of the southern states in an overnight coup. There was now something like the Berlin Wall separating the two territories.

"I've *gotta* get out of here," I said under my breath.

Santo laughed. "We *all* want that, *hermano*. But we don't always get what we want."

I smiled back, but said nothing. I knew I'd get out. I *had* to.

\* \* \*

From that first day it seems I was fighting for my life.

It didn't take long to find out what others thought of 'Colonel' Perry Liston. Many people knew him only through his reputation. All who had ever tussled with him referred to him in language I refuse to repeat. And those who believed I was 'Colonel' Liston had only one thing on their mind – vengeance. However, I wasn't the same person I'd been years ago. With Clark and Dot's unique combat training under my belt, I was able to hold my own against anyone who tried to come after me. I didn't like having to resort to violence again, but I knew it meant my survival.

In the meantime I stood on the old saying - 'when God closes a door, look for a window' – and looked for a window.

The next day, God opened the window.

It was about mid-morning. We were outside in the exercise yard – beneath the blistering Texan sun – when a couple of rival groups started mixing it up. A glance up told me that the guards were more interested in the rumble than in me. I started moving towards the wall; nobody paid any attention to me. Just then I heard a voice inside me yell ***NOW*** and I pressed the top of my ring.

Instantly I became invisible.

I moved carefully, making every effort to keep my footprints from showing or kicking up dust that would expose me, and moved to one side of the door leading from the guard room. Sure enough, it didn't take long for them to react. The door burst open and several guards flooded into the exercise yard to break up the fight. As the last guard moved into the yard, I slipped through the doorway – heading in the opposite direction, of course – before the door could close behind them. I knew it would only be a matter of minutes before they'd realize I was gone; then they'd hit the alarms and lock the place down.

I saw a man – one of the admin workers – heading for the employee parking lot. On the way out he told someone that he was getting off-shift, and was looking forward to getting home.

There was my ride.

I followed him out the door and into the parking lot. He walked over to his car – a four-door sedan, thank you Lord – and used a keychain remote to unlock the doors. He opened the rear passenger door and tossed his briefcase on the seat. Just as he was about to close the door, the noise-level from back in the prison surged briefly, and he turned to look. While he was distracted, I slid past him and into the rear, hugging the floorboards. No sooner had I done so, than he slammed the door shut, slid in behind the wheel, and popped the key into the ignition.

The alarms went off as we reached the gate. Two guards blocked the car.

"What's up, Henry?" asked the driver.

"That white guy came up missin' from th' exercise yard! You know th' drill, Jeff - unlock th' doors an' pop th' trunk!"

Jeff grumbled but did as he was told. The guards shone a flashlight in the back seat and the trunk. They closed the trunk.

"You're clean," announced Henry.

"Hope y'all find thy guy. Me, I'm headin' home for a cold beer and the *Rockets* game. See y'all tomorrow!"

The guard laughed as the gate opened. He waved the car through with a glancing slap to the rear fender.

I was free.

But I had only twelve minutes before becoming visible.

\* \* \*

I got my 60-second warning while we were still in the city.

I prayed that Jeff, the driver, would be distracted enough not to notice me in his back seat during that momentary interval between visibility and invisibility. We came to a stoplight as the final seconds counted down. As I became visible, the light changed. The driver started to move, then suddenly hit the brakes. He cursed and said something about a kid on a bicycle that apparently cut in front of his car. Then he continued.

And I was invisible again.

\* \* \*

A little over a half hour later we reached his home. He parked in a carport and came around to get his briefcase, locking the doors behind him. I hoped the car alarm wouldn't go off when I opened the door to get out. Still invisible, I sat up and looked out the window. There was no one about. I quickly braced myself and opened the door.

The alarm didn't sound. I breathed and checked my time: eighteen minutes and change.

As I looked out of the carport, I silently thanked God. My unknowing chauffeur lived in town and not in the suburbs. That would make it easy for me to sneak aboard some sort of mass transit. It didn't take long to confirm that I was in the town of Laredo, Texas.

As I walked around the area, I particularly noticed the racial mixture. From what I could see, blacks seemed to outnumber whites thirty to one. I wondered if this was one of the results of the civil war. Then again, Santo *had* commented about not seeing many *Anglos*, or whites, in the prison. And the guard at the gate *did* refer to me as *the* white guy and not *one of the* white guys. Either way, I knew I couldn't disguise myself as a black man.

I needed to make contact with Clark, and we needed to get back to the Time Tunnel.

Clark was the President of the United States now, but – if television was any measure – he would not be free to go wherever he wished without Secret Service coverage. Clark could search for me, but I now possessed the freedom to go to him. And God had been supplying me, piece by piece, with a plan of action.

In order to get from Texas to Washington DC, I would need supplies – food, water, and clothing. And as I arrived at the Laredo Mall, I hoped my information was correct.

I had found out that, in the IBSA, cash was a rare commodity. Credit and debit cards had been replaced with a system called *Cyclops* that used DNA recognition. Whenever a citizen would make a purchase, they'd press their thumb to an ID pad that would match them with their bank account and deduct the price accordingly. Very easy – no muss, no fuss, no mess – and it was very difficult to fool.

My problem was that I didn't have an account. But 'Colonel' Liston *did*. I smiled at the irony of it all. With his reputation, I didn't feel bad about having *him* pay for my supplies. After all, we were the same person, so it wouldn't even be identity theft.

I reconnoitered the Laredo Mall. I had a general idea of what I would need, so I looked for the stores that could provide them. I watched customers using the *Cyclops* system, and figured how to use it 'quietly' after-hours. I observed their security, and their weaknesses. There was a First Aid station in the admin wing of the mall – conveniently out of range of the security cameras – which would serve as my 'base camp'; here is where I would assemble my purchases and catch some sleep before finding an eastbound bus.

I knew they'd eventually track the purchases back to the mall, but I still prayed for success.

I suddenly thought, *Track?* And I recalled a scene from the movie *Enemy of the State*. Deciding to play a hunch, I found a device in the Security office that looked like some kind of bug detector. I passed it over my body, right above my skin; I didn't find anything until I reached the back of my left leg - then it let out a *fwweep* sound.

"Oh, *crap*," I muttered, realizing what I'd have to do to remove it.

After the mall had closed, I methodically entered the stores, gathered my items, and smuggled them back to my base camp within my invisibility aura. Having to push the aura that far around me had been a challenge, but I was pretty sure that I hadn't been noticed.

I needed to get out of these prison clothes. I found a lightweight shirt, a pair of cargo pants, and a forager's vest to hold other items. I also got a thin black ski mask that I hoped would make me look like a black man from a distance.

At an electronics store I found a top-of-the-line PDA-slash-Entertainment Center-slash-Communications Terminal that had more bells and whistles than Sousa's Band. Hopefully, it would provide me with information on this new world.

I was fortunate that they had a pharmacy in the mall. I was able to get antibiotics, bandages, latex gloves, and pain meds to help me once I'd extracted the bug in my leg.

When I got hungry, I sampled from the Food Court – before they packed everything up for the night. For the long haul I acquired some beef jerky, nutrition bars, bottled water, and other stuff from a small convenience store within the mall.

Because I figured I'd need it on the outside, I tapped one of the ATMs for \$2,000 in cash from Colonel Liston's bank account. I gave the machine a guilty little smirk, imaging the look on my doppelganger's face when he got wind of this.

In the First Aid station, as I lay recovering from my impromptu surgery, I squirmed into a comfortable seating position and held my final purchase. I knew my pursuers would soon know everything about my purchases, and it probably wouldn't be a stretch of the imagination for them to deduce my intentions.

But *this* purchase would surely blow their minds.

It was a teddy bear.

Back towards the end of 1999, Dot had chosen to accompany me and Clark on our search for the rest of his team. While we were doing some library research in Vermont – having found Johnny Littlejohn – Dot and I found an article questioning the accuracy of Renny Renwick's death in the 1986 *Loma Prieta* earthquake. Deciding to give Clark and Johnny some time together, Dot and I flew to San Francisco to speak to the article's author.

One evening while we were walking about enjoying the famous City by the Bay, I spotted some teenage gang members with malicious intent stalking an innocent couple. I talked Dot into playing vigilante, and we successfully rescued the couple and defeated the gang. However, Dot sustained an injury to the head during the altercation, and I spent the next few days nursing her back to health.

One day I surprised her with some roses and a little purple teddy bear that I'd named *Grape Juice*. After that, he went where we went.

When I saw the same teddy bear in this mall, all I could think was that this was a sign from God – a reminder that I wasn't alone in this alien world.

And it was something I could focus on.

Now, in the middle of the night, in a little corner of this great big mall, it was just me and the bear. I cradled him in my open hands, looked into his small, lifeless eyes, and talked to him. "You're here to assure me that God will get me back to Dot ... *whatever* it takes."

I paused, took a deep breath, and whispered with a heavy heart, "And if I'm wrong and we fail ... you'll be the only thing left of her."

\* \* \*

I tried to sleep, but couldn't. I had prayed several times for God to let me get some sleep while I could, but it just wasn't happening. I kept being directed to the telephone to try and call Clark, but I knew they'd never let me through. Finally I gave in and made the call.

To my surprise, a female voice picked up, "White House, Operator Twelve. How may I direct your call?"

I tried to sound casual. "Yes, good morning. I know the hour is late, but I was wondering if you could pass along a message to the President."

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

It was morning, and I felt like a new man.

Keeping an eye on the time, I ate something from my supplies and policed the area. I knew they'd trace me from the bug they put in my leg, so I didn't bother to wipe my fingerprints from my 'base camp'. But since I didn't want to give them a trail to follow once I left the Mall, I put on a pair of latex gloves. I dumped all my garbage and old clothes in a large trash masher near the parking area, then affixed their bug to the underside of one of the security carts with a piece of chewing gum. Then I just waited for security's shift change, and walked out with them.

I found the terminal for their local version of Greyhound, and the right bus to take me closest to Washington D.C. I sat at the very back of the bus, in the aisle next to the restroom, where I could duck into during my transition from visibility back to invisibility. The bus was still being prepped for the trip, and I counted on people not wanting to sit this far back, especially since there was no window.

Ten minutes later, people started getting on board. My instincts were good: people steered away from taking the back seat; I'd figured that most of the people would prefer to sit towards the front of the bus where they could see out the windows, especially during a cross-country ride.

My instincts tanked when I saw the last person board the bus and head towards the back.

I started to sweat until I realized that he was blind; a white cane swung lazily back and forth in the aisle as he headed for me. I held my breath.

His cane tapped the back of the bus and he stopped. "This seat saved?"

Was he talking to me? I thought. I looked ahead of me; nobody else seemed to take notice. "Uh ... no," I replied.

"Thanks," he responded, sitting down in the aisle seat. He folded up his cane, laying it next to him in the seat, and reached a hand in my direction. "Name's Greg. Greg Berg."

I hesitated; if anyone else had heard us, it didn't matter to them. I shook his hand. "Silas Poteet."

He smiled, and I realized for the first time that he was a white man. He looked to be about my age, with balding brown hair.

He tried to start up a conversation. "Goin' to Florida?"

"Uh huh," I mumbled, looking forward again.

"Hey, Silas, it's cool," he said reassuringly. "Nobody's going to notice us back here. It'll be just as if we were *invisible*."

My eyes opened wider.

"So chill, my brother." He leaned in a little towards me and the tone of his voice softened. "You read your Bible?"

"Yeah."

"You familiar with Exodus 23:20?" he asked. "How about Psalm 34:7? Matthew 18:10-12? Hebrews 13:2?"

I had to admit, without my Bible I really couldn't remember those specific verses. "I'm kinda tired," I made up an excuse. "It was a long night. What do they say?"

Without hesitation, he recited them. "Exodus 23:20 says, '*See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.*' Psalm 34:7 says, '*The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.*' Matthew 18:10-12 says, '*See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?*' And Hebrews 13:2 says, '*Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.*'" He paused. "Pop quiz: what's the common denominator?"

"That's easy. Angels."

"Very good." He smiled and nodded. "God's people found comfort in those verses. And so can you ... *Perry.*"

My eyes went even wider. In that simple statement, even *this* distorted sense of reality went out the window. "I'm sorry, Mister, but you're mistaken," I tried to cover up. "My name's *Silas ... Silas Poteet.* And I don't know where you came from, but - "

"I told you," he replied without flinching. "You just haven't heard it yet. I'm friend, not foe. And I'm an *associate* of Angelo's."

Angelo? Who's Angelo? I thought. I tried to make the connection. Then I suddenly remembered something Mark and Karen Eidemiller had told me after we'd rescued Amy back in 2001. They told me how someone named Angelo had been covertly instrumental in Sunni's survival and reconciliation. But the clincher had been what all the evidence had pointed to, that Angelo had indeed been an ...

"*Angel?*" I whispered.

Greg grinned. "I prefer the term *heavenly host*, but I'll answer to angel if you insist!"

"You ... you *can't* be," I stammered.

"And why not? You think that angel encounters are for the other guy and not you? You feel you're not *worthy* to get this kind of special attention? You're surprised when you find out that God is in this timeline just like He is in yours? Listen my friend ... we serve an *unlimited* God, and he said he'd never abandon those who are his." He paused a heartbeat. "Even ... *here.*"

I was ashamed; he was right. I'd heard the accounts, but there was a part of that said it couldn't happen to me.

"I'm sorry," I muttered. "But why are you here?"

"Exodus 23:20," he answered. "*I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.*"

I started to open my mouth, but the words couldn't come out.

He sighed. "You still want me to prove to you that I'm an angel, right?"

Despite the facts that I was invisible, and he was apparently blind, I nodded.

"What would prove it to you? A few parlor tricks, maybe read your mind? Tell you what you had for breakfast?" He grinned and wiggled his fingers before his face in a dramatic magical gesture.

"Now you're making fun of me," I said soberly.

"Hey, at least I'm an angel who knows how to entertain as well as be entertained," he replied with a grin. He rested his hands in his lap. "Okay, time to be serious. Test me."

I thought a moment.

"*Berry Blue*," Greg calmly said, without hesitation. "He's got a *Parlor Bears* tee-shirt just like Grape."

"You're right," I said. "On all counts. But I thought that angels couldn't read minds."

He chuckled. "Who said that *I* was the one who read your mind?"

I understood. "Good point. So you're here to keep me company?"

"Yes," he affirmed. "Look, Perry. You gotta be pooped. Despite how you felt this morning, you only got a couple hours of sleep. Also, you've only got seven minutes until you become visible." I triggered the timer; he was dead-on. "You're never going to be ready for what's coming by livin' on one-hour cat naps. So I've been sent here to cover your butt while you get some serious sleep. Hey, did you think the Shadow was the only one who could cloud men's' minds?"

"Who?"

"You ran into a reference to him when you were prepping yourself to become an invisible man, remember? It was on the data Dot had downloaded from the internet."

"Oh, yeah – now I remember. He was a crime-fighter back in the 30's, wasn't he?"

"Uh huh. Some people said he had the ability 'to cloud men's' minds.' It was actually something he learned in the Far East." He returned to the subject. "Anyhow, as long as I'm on duty, neither of us will be seen. Anybody who looks at this seat will see something else ... another person, some cargo, whatever."

"Cool," I reflected. "You know, when my uncle had this ring, he could only use it once every 24 hours. But I can use it over and over again. I worry that I'm going to wear it out, that it'll stop working just when I need it most."

"It's served you well."

"Can you tell me how it works?"

"Afraid not," he replied. "And just to let you know, don't assume I'm a heavenly version of *Google*. I live by the same rules as your 'white place.'"

"In other words, don't ask, don't tell," I said, disappointed.

"*Correctamundo*."

"What about some information on *this* timeline? Is that outside of your boundaries?"

"No. That's okay. Where do you want to start?"

That was an easy one. "The *other* Perry Liston. Who is he, and how could I become *him*?"

"Your history and his were much the same until you moved to Oregon and met your wife Barbara. In both timelines you had an anger problem that manifested itself in domestic abuse. In *your* timeline you sought help from a Christian counselor who eventually led you to the Lord." He paused. "In *his* timeline, however, because there were no 'Christian counselors', the other Perry Liston tried to resolve the problem on his own ... and failed. In 1986, he killed Barbara."

I was shocked. "Oh, God - *no!*"

Greg nodded. "He fled to the IBSA for sanctuary. Eventually he met up with this timeline's Bonnie Clayton. Since she was already part of the *Black Liberation Army*, she helped him get into their ranks. He participated in acts of terrorism as one of the team. Unfortunately, with his temper, he was good at it ... maybe a little too good."

I thought back on my younger years. I was not pleasant to be around, and in some ways I was a bully. I could imagine what I could've become - what Colonel Liston did become - just because religion had been outlawed in the USA. It was horrible.

"The bigwigs in the Black Liberation Army looked at him as just another angry white boy. So he wanted to do something bold that would prove himself to them – one for the history books, as he put it. The plan was to enter the USA with Clayton, posing as just another white couple. Then they'd hijack a jet airliner, kill the passengers and crew, put the plane on auto-pilot, and bail out before it slammed into the Empire State Building."

My jaw dropped, but I didn't interrupt him.

"Most of the plan went off without a hitch. They hijacked the jet and had killed the passengers and crew. Clayton bailed out, and Liston was about to when he saw an alive-but-wounded passenger heading for the cockpit. Liston killed the passenger and bailed out mere seconds before the crash. The explosion missed him, but some of the flaming jet fuel splashed on him - that's what caused the scarring on his face. Clayton rescued him, and got them both to the escape mini-sub waiting for them at the Hudson River."

"No wonder they wanted to splatter me all over the desert," I commented, shaking my head.

"What does he look like now?"

Greg held out a hand. A photo appeared in it. I groaned at the mirror image with the disfigured half. After a moment it vanished, and I continued. "I've heard a lot about the IBSA, and I think I've got the gist of it, but it's not complete. What's the *full* story? Was there *really* a civil war between the blacks and whites?"

Greg sighed. "Yeah. But in order to understand it all, I'm going to have to give you some background. In the late 1950's, J. Edgar Hoover was jealous of the CIA, and finally persuaded President Truman to shut it down and expand 'his' FBI. Hoover also had a personal agenda, including picking apart some of the public figures of that day.

"He exposed John F. Kennedy's extramarital affairs - including the one with Marilyn Monroe - and got Kennedy blackballed from politics. Jackie divorced him, and he ended up going back into the Navy. He eventually retired and lives on Midway. Bobby Kennedy left politics and retreated to the family home; he became a successful science fiction writer. Thirty books, including five that were made into movies. An intoxicated Teddy Kennedy died in his car with his mistress at the bottom of Lake Chappaquiddick in June of 1969." He paused. "And Martin Luther King, Jr. took his own life in 1964 after it was revealed that he was a womanizer with several mistresses."

I was stunned. One man single-handedly changed the course of the entire Kennedy clan, and forced a great man like King to commit suicide.

"What happened next?" I asked, reluctantly.

"Without Martin Luther King, Jr. to decry the atrocities of civil rights, black oppression continued unchecked into the 1970's. The rest of the world turned a blind eye to it because of an unprecedented period of affluence and prosperity. Since Doc Savage *personally* stopped the development of the hydrogen bomb and redirected the USA and the Soviets into a time of global cooperation, people were turning their attention towards improving the human condition and eliminating problems of poverty and hunger. Technological breakthroughs in the field of weather control and agriculture caused the Mid-West to become the hub of food production for the nation, drawing millions of people to new job opportunities. Deserts were turned into oases. The end result was a boom in the economy, a major drop in the jobless rate, and enough food to feed the entire nation whether they could afford it or not. The Americans, good guys that they were, didn't hesitate in sending megatons of grain overseas, and shared their technology with the emerging Soviet Republic, where they used it to help their neighbors."

"Fantastic! *Wait!* If Kennedy didn't get to be President, who did?"

"Richard Nixon. With Doc Savage staying on as Special Advisor, the USA was unstoppable. Nixon was reelected for seven terms."

"What about civil rights? Did someone pick up the cause, or did they just look the other way?"

"No. Someone stepped in to fill in the gap." He grinned. "Albert Einstein."

"Einstein? The *physicist* Einstein? The  $E = mc^2$  Einstein?"

"Yep. While convalescing from surgery in Tennessee, he was an eyewitness to the public lynching of two black men. Both the act and the apathy on the part of the other whites who witnessed it infuriated Einstein, and prompted him to speak out for civil rights. Put your headset on."

I put on the glasses that came with my entertainment center, and fitted the buds into my ears. Before I could ask what to do next, a picture appeared before me, and I heard the sound as clearly as if I had actually been there.

And there was Einstein.

"I vas not born in America, like many uff you," he spoke with a heavy German accent. "But America became mine home, and I became a proud citizen. But after vat I saw mit mine own two eyes in Tennessee, as two young men vere murdered simply because uff the color uff zair skin, und the others looked on as if it vere a baseball game – it made me *ashamed* to be an American citizen!

"Ze Constitution uff zis great nation – parts uff vich I haff committed to memory – speaks uff the right uff all men to life, liberty, und ze pursuit uff happiness! But vat liberty iss given for ze Negro? How can dey pursue happiness ven zair vay iss blocked by signs saying "for vites only"? Und how can zey haff life ven narrow-minded, bigoted men und vimmen seek to rob zem uff the lives Gott gave dem? How can ze Negro aspire to any degree uff greatness ven he iss held down by vites mit less sense zan Gott gave a dog?"

I started to remove the headset, but Greg put a hand on my arm. "Keep watching."

As I did, I saw scenes from his public appearances displayed. If taken out of context, it would've been comical to see this old white man walking side-by-side and arm-in-arm with hundreds of blacks in civil rights marches. Instead, I found it encouraging.

But then things became tragic.

In August of 1971, during a march in Birmingham, Alabama, a lone gunman with an assault rifle opened fire on the marchers. Eighteen people – including Doctor Einstein – died. The gunman was found and arrested, but he was found hanged in his jail cell two days later.

The picture went dark, and Greg instructed me to remove the glasses.

"Now, the Black Panthers in this timeline had a *lot* more people and were a *lot* more organized than those in your timeline. They believed in Einstein, but they also knew he would eventually be martyred. And when that happened, they had a plan.

"One week after Einstein's assassination, Huey Newton, a member of the Panthers, walked into the police station in Selma, Alabama and detonated a small-but-dirty atomic device. It vaporized everything in a five-mile radius, and killed thousands of people.

"Spurred on by fear and suspicion, whites took out their anger on innocent blacks, and blacks rioted in the streets. President Nixon called for order, but it was too late. By the end of August, martial law had been declared in many of the cities hardest hit by racial violence. Curfews were imposed, and the National Guard was sent in to quell rioting and enforce the law.

"Then, overnight, on the Sunday before Labor Day, the Black Liberation Army launched a coordinated and bloody strike across the southern United States. They called it the *Night of the Black Adder*. In a matter of hours, many of the states were in the hands of the organized militants. Thousands of white politicians and leaders were dead. Every strategic position - National Guard

armories, military bases, radio and television stations, airports, train stations, and docks - had been taken over. By the time the rest of the United States woke up on Labor Day morning, eleven states were in the hands of the Black Panthers.

"President Nixon tried sending in troops to take the states back. However, by this time, there were now several million people as potential hostages, as well as several crucial installations, including Space Centers in Texas and Florida, and the entire gold reserve of Fort Knox, Kentucky. Nixon made the mistake of trying to call their bluff. As a result, twelve hundred people were killed overnight in a small town located on the Oklahoma-Arkansas border, using biological weapons traced back to the *Center for Disease Control* in Atlanta.

"Through their spokesman, Elijah Morgan, they declared their cessation from the United States, and announced that they were now the *Independent Black States of America*, or IBSA. And – if you'll forgive me the pun – the rest is history. In the 80's they put up a wall to separate the two countries, complete with checkpoints. The USA annexed parts of Canada, while the IBSA incorporated Cuba and parts of Mexico."

"Sounds wonderful," I muttered sarcastically. "How well do they get along now?"

"Like you'd suspect. There's communication between the two territories, but there's also a good deal of propaganda. Bottom line, North America is a powder keg just waiting for somebody to light the fuse."

I sat there for a few minutes, thinking about what I had just heard. "Is all this because Tony appeared to Clark in 1948?"

"Some directly, some indirectly. But yes."

I took a deep breath. "Will you help me cross into the USA?"

"At the proper time."

I suddenly realized that I'd become visible while he was talking. Nobody noticed me. I relaxed.

"Greg?"

"Yeah?"

"What does God make of all this? I mean, which is the real timeline to God?"

"They *all* are," he answered with a smile. "Remember, God is unlimited."

"So, am I in a parallel timeline like *Back to the Future II*?"

"It's not the type of thing I can really explain."

"Then let me ask you this." I worded my next question carefully. "Does *my* timeline exist anymore? And ... if we get back to the *Time Tunnel* and can correct things, will *this* timeline cease to exist?"

"I wish I could answer your question, Perry. I really do. But I can't. The answer could influence the way things are supposed to happen."

"I was afraid you'd say that." I sighed. "It's okay. I appreciate the fact that you're here. And we'll just see how things turn out."

"Exactly."

"So ... are you *really* blind?"

He laughed. "What do *you* think?"

"Well, since you're an angel, and angels are perfect created beings, then blindness would make you *imperfect*. But on the other hand, the Word says that we're to 'walk by faith and not by sight,' so that would mean that you're 'flying on instruments', so to speak."

"And your conclusion?"

I lowered my eyes. "I don't know."

"Good answer," he said with a grin. "Anything else you want to know?"

"Is Clark okay?"

"Yes."

"Did he get my message?"

"He will. Soon."

I sat back in my seat and closed my eyes. "Good."

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

"Dr. Phillips! Dr. Newman!"

Dr. Newman tapped his friend's leg with his foot, "Doug."

Dr. Phillips slid out from under a control panel like a mechanic from under a car. "What is it, Tony?"

They heard their names called again, and saw Kim Soong Ha jogging towards them. Dr. Phillips got to his feet as she reached them.

"Clark's on TV!" she informed them, slightly out of breath. "Come quick!"

In the VIP Lounge, everyone was drifting away from the television. Laura Sunday brought them up to speed, "They had some news about Clark. I recorded it. Have a seat."

The news channel was this timeline's version of CNN or FOX. A woman looked out at the camera. "It was announced today that President Savage will be making an unprecedented visit to Rome for the purposes of sharing United States agricultural technology. This news was met with harsh criticism by Taylor Garfield, Director of the *Magic Kingdom Coalition*."

The scene switched to an angry flamboyantly-dressed man standing before reporters. "President Savage is betraying the trust of *all* Americans! He is giving away our agricultural technology to this group of religious *fanatics* - despite the fact that they have *repeatedly refused* to acknowledge the rights of homosexuals in their own country." He paused. "This is nothing less than an act of *betrayal* on the part of President Savage by *thoughtlessly* giving away American technology."

The newscaster continued, "White House Press Secretary Nola Salton responded ..."

The scene switched to the White House Press Room. "The death toll in Italy has been estimated at over fifty-three hundred due to the recent famine. President Savage has chosen to put aside national policy in order to help the *people* during this crisis by personally delivering the technology to the Roman authorities. He will be giving a statement once he's concluded his business."

The newscaster continued. "Demonstrations have erupted across the country in protest of the President's trip. We'll be following this story throughout the day."

The next story began, and Laura Sunday stopped the recording.

"I don't know about the rest of you," commented J.J. Judge as he sat down at one of the tables. "But it looks to me like Clark's really getting into his part."

"Not necessarily," countered Johnny Littlejohn. "This could've been on the President's agenda for some time. Clark might not have had a choice in the matter."

"Perhaps," he shrugged. "Still, it doesn't look like he's making any moves to get back here." He paused. "Can't say I blame him. It's like *The Prince and the Pauper* in real life. It would be quite tempting just to stay."

Johnny scoffed. "I could never believe that! Clark and I go back before most of you were born. He'd never turn his back on us that quickly! Besides, he just got married - how could he *not* want to return to that?"

"What if he can't?" offered Kim Soong Ha.

"What do you mean?" probed Johnny.

"What if there are others controlling him? You know, some kind of shadow government?"

Harvey Cable laughed from the kitchen area. "Kim, you gotta stop browsing those conspiracy websites!"

She flashed him an angry look.

"What if J.J.'s right?" asked Becky Speed, stepping into the discussion. "And what's happened to Perry? The last thing we saw was him being taken away into the mountains. How do we know he's even ... alive?"

"This speculation is pointless," declared Dr. Phillips, gesturing for order. "Our information is very limited. Laura, are you still trying to track down Perry?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "We've been trying to tap into their version of the Internet without it being traced back to here, but it's not easy. And there's been nothing about Perry on television."

"If Perry *were* being held captive," Johnny observed. "It would be nearly impossible for him to get a message back to us."

J.J. stood. "Look ... *everybody*. We've got a way to correct the timeline. What's stopping us from going back *now* and setting things right?"

"Clark and Perry," Johnny declared soberly.

"With all due respect, Professor," pleaded J.J. "We can only *assume* that Perry is still alive; we have no actual proof either way. And as far as Clark goes ... well, he's on his own. I say we do what we can for the rest of us."

"No," Dr. Phillips said resolutely. "We'll wait."

"*Wait?* For *what?*" J.J. suddenly exploded, throwing his hands into the air.

"You know, you're a lot like me."

Everyone turned to Dr. Newman as he casually went over to the young black man. "You and I are both headstrong. Sometimes that can make a difference in a tough situation. But more often than not it leads to trouble. I can't begin to count how many times Doug and Ann had to pull my butt out of one of my messes." He glanced at everyone in the room. "I appreciate what you - all of you - have done in order to bring me back to the present. And nobody's more eager than I am to go home. You didn't leave me behind ... and I can't see leaving Clark and Perry behind. What's say we give it just a little more time?"

J.J. sighed. "Everybody. I'll admit something. I ... don't like being cooped up in here. Now, don't get me wrong - I'm not claustrophobic. But I *am* a pilot ... I'm used to the open skies. That's what I want to get back to."

"Tell me about it, J.J.," agreed Elle Cruise. "I'm a pilot, too. And we've both flown assignments for Drake that called for us to be *infinitely* patient - and we did our job accordingly. Treat this in the same way."

They made eye contact. Then he nodded. "You got a point. But what about the rest of you? How do you feel? Should we try and correct the timeline now - *without* Clark and Perry - or should we wait and see if they turn up?"

"Has anyone thought of getting a message to Clark?" asked Becky Speed. "Let him know we've come up with a way of correcting the timeline, and we're just waiting for him and Perry. If he says no, or doesn't respond, we've confirmed our suspicions."

"Good point," commented Johnny.

"Yes," agreed Dr. Newman. "Laura, Sunni?"

Laura Sunday turned to Sunni Bowman; she placed a hand on the blind woman's arm. "What do you think?"

"I don't know," she said dubiously. "From what I know of White House protocol, nothing gets to the President without going through all kinds of filters. That probably applies to email as well as phone communication. And even if we got to him, what could we say that wouldn't be suspicious?"

"That one I can answer," said Johnny. "There's maybe a handful of people living outside of the Valley of the Vanished who are fluent in the Mayan language. I'm willing to bet it's the same way here." He paused. "Clark knows Mayan. Perry knows a bit of it. And *I* know it. You find me a way of communicating it and I'll get the message across."

Laura smiled. "Deal."

"So, what do you think?" Dr. Newman asked J.J. Judge. "We hold tight until we're able to get a message to *and* from Clark. That'll tell us if he's with us or on his own."

"And Perry?" inquired J.J.

"I don't want to give up on him, either. We'll keep trying to find him. And if we can, we'll give him the same message and see what he says. Acceptable?"

"Under *one* condition," replied J.J. "Assuming we get through to them, we wait twenty-four hours after confirming that they received the message. If we don't hear anything by then, we assume they're happy where they are and we move to correct the timeline."

"Twenty-four hours?" repeated Dr. Newman.

J.J. nodded, his lips tight.

"Then we better get started," declared Laura Sunday. "To the Batcave, Sunni!"

"Holy cliffhangers, Laura!" she exclaimed, taking her friend's hand as they rushed from the VIP Lounge.

Everybody else, including J.J. Judge, laughed at the impromptu comic relief. It helped relieve the tension.

\* \* \*

### **Laredo, Texas**

"*Where is he?*" barked Colonel Liston as he burst into the room.

In a high-tech monitoring room, the two technicians knocked over their console chairs leaping to attention. They both saluted and stood motionless.

"At ease!" Liston growled.

The lower-ranked of the two straightened their chairs while his superior answered. "Laredo Mall, sir! He's been there all night!"

"Show me!"

The technicians quickly pulled up the floor plan of the Laredo Mall on the main screen. In one area a small dot blinked.

"Starting from Laredo Penitentiary, show me his movement!"

The floor plan of Laredo Mall shifted to a smaller secondary screen. A view of the state zoomed swiftly into one of the city. It then moved to the Laredo Penitentiary where one red dot turned into two, then more, as a line formed away from the prison and towards the downtown of the city. It continued to the mall, where the trail continued on the secondary screen. It showed him moving around the mall, periodically stopping.

"As you can see, sir," narrated the technician. "He hid himself until closing, then moved to this place ... that's the First Aid Station in the mall; there are no surveillance cameras there."

"Show me the surveillance videos when he was in the mall!"

The lieutenant paused uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, Colonel, but we've been unable to see him on any of the surveillance cameras!"

"None?" he glared. "How could he *not* be seen by the cameras? He's not *invisible*!"

"No, sir!" the technician agreed, but didn't offer an explanation.

Liston looked back to the floor plan. "All ... right. Continue."

"He moved around the mall after hours, presumably stealing things he would need."

"Get me a list of the stores and the items that were stolen!"

"Working on that now, sir. Should be ready shortly."

They continued following the movement. "Stop! What's that area?"

"The parking area for the Security runabouts."

"Continue."

The signal moved into the mall, returning to the parking area after a few minutes.

Major Clayton touched Colonel Liston on the shoulder, and whispered something to him. He nodded, and she asked, "What time did he appear in the Security parking?"

"Oh-eight-fifty-seven, ma'am!"

"Bring up the video."

The picture of the area at that time appeared on another screen. They saw the Security carts, but no people.

"So where *is* he?" Liston asked, impatient.

"He's ... not there," replied the lieutenant.

"He *should* be there," said the other tech.

Major Clayton interrupted the uneasiness. "What time did the signal move?"

"Oh-nine-hundred, ma'am!"

"And it returned to that point when?"

"Oh-nine-fifteen."

She paused, her eyes meeting Colonel Liston's. "What time did Security make its morning rounds?" she asked.

The lieutenant checked a list. Reluctantly he answered, "Oh-nine-hundred, ma'am!"

"And what time did they return?"

"Oh-nine-fifteen."

She turned to Colonel Liston, who had already come to the same conclusion.

The technicians waited for Colonel Liston to unload his wrath on them. But instead he and Major Clayton left the room and went down a hall to a small conference room. She closed the door behind them, an instant before Colonel Liston exploded into a stream of profanities, "The oldest trick in the book and *we* fell for it! He planted the bug on the Security cart and led us on a wild goose chase! God knows *how* far he could be by now!"

"Okay, this isn't good," said Major Clayton calmly. "But, realize, he's a white man out in a black world. He won't get far without being noticed."

"We don't dare put out an APB on him – they'd be picking *me* up!"

"You're right." She paused thoughtfully. "We'll need professional trackers."

Colonel Liston froze in place. "Professional trackers?" he repeated. Then he smiled, the scarred side of his face twisting. "Yes. And I know just *who*."

\* \* \*

"Mr. President," announced Long Tom Roberts. "We've achieved flight orbit, and the zero gee light is lit. ETA with Vatican City is ten minutes."

"Thank you, Tom," Clark replied.

Since their entire trip would be over in a matter of minutes, the luxurious padded command chair was more formality than necessity.

Despite the controversy over his actions, Clark was doing very well today.

For one, now he knew Perry was alive.

As He'd done many times in the past, God had communicated to Clark in a dream. This time he had been 'inspired' to check out the phone calls that had been received by the White House operators overnight.

Standard Operating Procedures determined that all communications coming into the White House - especially after normal working hours - had to pass through several levels of scrutiny.

One filter was through Secret Service, as they looked for potential threats. Then there were filters which separated legitimate calls from prank calls made by kids seeing if they could pull one over on the White House; these calls would be traced, and parents would be contacted. Whatever remained ended up at Mrs. Ingram's computer, where she would personally go through them before handing them over to the President.

Feigning curiosity, Clark had listened to the messages, and - despite Perry's adopted accent - immediately recognized his friend's voice.

It took all the willpower Clark could muster to keep from booming out praises to God at the news of his friend's survival. But held it in he did, and pretended that the call was just another prank.

The call itself had, of course, been bogus - as Mrs. Ingram had informed him - but the spontaneous 'coughing fit' Perry experienced was a stroke of genius. Like an invisible second message written between the lines of a letter, Perry spoke in Mayan to convey his situation.

He was alive and well, and was en route to Washington DC. He also communicated the fact that his ring - the one that allowed him to become invisible - was still with him and still working.

His final words were ones of Christian encouragement.

Now, as the earth passed silently below Air Force One, Clark planned.

\* \* \*

### **Laredo, Texas**

There were only three of them.

When they were present, the temperature seemed to drop at least ten degrees. Despite the heat, they wore long coats of heavily treated leather.

Colonel Liston knew the various legends surrounding this trio. Some claimed that they had been part of an elite military corps created before the Night of the Black Adder, sharply trained, but then never put into battle. Others said they were outcasts from the various Indian tribes in the USA, too dangerous to be kept on the reservations. In any case, their origins were shrouded in mystery and darkness. Even their real names were cloaked in secrecy. The three men had chosen to take the names of deadly serpents – *Copperhead*, *Viper*, and *Rattlesnake* – as their operational designators, or ‘call-signs’.

Collectively, they were known simply as *The Posse*.

Colonel Liston and Major Clayton arrived at Laredo Penitentiary by helicopter around 3:00 in the afternoon. The Posse had already arrived. The three men were sitting in the middle of the deserted prison exercise yard, quiet and still. As Colonel Liston approached, the trio simultaneously rose to their feet as though they'd been marionettes connected to a single control. Colonel Liston extended his hand to the one closest to them, the one named Copperhead, but it was met with a cold impassive gaze. After a moment, Liston dropped his hand to his side and got down to business.

"Glad you could make it so quickly. We figure he's heading back to where we found him in Arizona. If he hasn't done it already, he'll probably slip aboard a boat heading up the Rio Grande and into New Mexico. Either that, or he crossed over into Mexico and is moving northwest on that side of the border.

"No," they said in one voice; it was chilling.

"Our Spirit Guides have given us his trail," answered Rattlesnake.

"He is moving east," added Viper.

"We will follow him," concluded Copperhead.

"East?" Colonel Liston repeated. Then he realized that the point was not up for discussion. "You will keep in contact with me." It was a statement, not a request.

All three men nodded as one. Then they walked to the exit. Colonel Liston and Major Clayton followed them as they mounted three jet-black motorcycles just outside the main entrance. They started their machines simultaneously, and pulled away without fanfare.

Major Clayton released a breath and uttered a profanity. "Perry, are you sure it's safe to trust those guys?"

Colonel Liston's face broke into a thin smile. "No. But they'll do the job. Let's head back to the helicopter."

On the ride back to Atlanta, Bonnie spent her time going over an *eFolder* containing a list of the things their target had gotten from Laredo Mall. At one point she let out a low chuckle, causing her husband to look up. "Something interesting?"

"Yeah." She identified it. "The odd thing is that the items didn't come up missing – as in stolen – but instead were purchased after closing hours."

"Purchased?" he said, puzzled. "How?"

She held back a smile, and just handed him the *eFolder*. He took one look at it and his jaw dropped. "He used *my* account? That little @\$%#\$& tapped into *my* bank account to pay for *his* stuff! How?"

"Sugah," she used the endearment, but her voice was deadly serious, "I know it sounds off the wall, but you have to admit that his explanation fits the facts. He looks like you – like you did, before the accident. His voice sounds like yours. We ran the tests. His DNA is a perfect match for yours! We may not like the explanation, but it is one that makes some sense!"

He handed her back the *eFolder*. "Don't give me that 'parallel timeline' crap again! What else did he purchase?"

She continued reading off items in the file. "PDA ... DVDs ... okay, that makes sense - he needs technology and information. A change of clothing ... again, that was to be expected. Here's the list of medical stuff he used when he took the tracker out of his leg." She saw the cash advance and decided to pass over it.

Then she suddenly stopped. Her expression caused her husband to inquire. She looked up from the folder and grinned. "He bought a teddy bear."

"What? Are you reading that right?"

She nodded and showed him the file. "Why a teddy bear?" he mused aloud. "It's insane. *He's* insane. Move on."

She spotted the food and bottled water. "Wherever he's heading, he's certainly prepared."

"Okay. Why would he go east?"

"If the story he gave us was true, and President Savage isn't who we think he is, he may be trying to connect with him."

Colonel Liston laughed. "He won't get far, looking like me. As soon as he shows his face in the USA, he'll have every law enforcement agent around fighting over who'll be the lucky one who gets to kill him."

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

Greg touched me on my arm, waking me. "Perry, get up!"

"Yeah!" I muttered. "I'm awake - what is it?"

"We're being followed. Three men, on motorcycles."

"Where are they? How far back?"

"Just left Laredo."

"How'd they find me?" I felt around my gear. "Do I still have a bug on me?"

"No," he replied. "It's spiritual. They're using 'spirit guides' to lead them to you."

"Oh, great," I sighed. "Demon-channeling bounty hunters."

"Close enough," he agreed.

"So what do we do?"

"That's up to you. In this situation, I can inform but not advise. Sorry."

"It's okay. Anything's better than nothing." I looked ahead and thought it through. "We've got a bit of a head start, but it won't take them long to catch up with us. Since the bus driver and the rest of the passengers don't even know we're here, it could be dicey if they were questioned. The trackers might get violent." I thought a moment, praying for guidance. "Okay, here's what we have to do. We can't involve anyone else. We've gotta get off the bus, and stand up to them. Just like *Shootout at the O.K. Corral*." I paused. "But how are we going to get off of a non-stop bus?"

We suddenly heard a sputter in the engine below us. A second later it happened again. We started slowing down, and the driver got on the PA. "Ladies and gentlemen. You're probably aware of the change in how the engine sounds. I've also gotten a warning light." He paused. "I'm going to have to pull off ahead and have a look. We apologize for the delay and inconvenience, and we'll be back on the road as quickly as possible."

I looked over at Greg. He remained impassive.

The bus pulled onto a wide shoulder, and the driver got out and walked to the back. We heard him tinker with things, accompanied by several obscenities. I considered getting off the bus here, but didn't have a peace about it. A few minutes later the tinkering stopped, and we could hear the bus driver talking on his cell phone. Then he returned to the cab and stood and addressed everyone; he looked disappointed.

"Ladies and gentlemen. It appears that the problem with the engine is far more serious than we first thought. After consulting with my supervisor, we're having a backup bus delivered here from Little Rock. We'll transfer to that bus and continue the trip to Florida. Again, we apologize for any inconvenience this may cause, and we'll get going as soon as we can. In the meantime, I think I can get us to the restaurant about a mile down the road. Order whatever you want; dinner's on us." That bit of news brought positive responses from the passengers. "It may be a little slow and rough, but let's give it a try!"

He returned to his seat. The engine turned over after the third try, and sounded like it might explode at any moment, but we got moving and slowly covered the distance to the restaurant. We stopped, and a bunch of relieved passengers disembarked. We waited until the coast was clear, then got off ourselves.

"That was quite coincidental, wouldn't you say?" I commented.

"Very," replied Greg.

"You didn't happen to have a hand in the engine's breakdown, did you?"

"Whatever do you mean?" he said innocently.

"Remember, angels don't lie."

"Let's just say that I have friends in high places."

"*Most* high," I finished, knowing I'd never get a straight answer. "Okay, let's scout around and find a place for an ambush."

Ten minutes we stood before the warehouse. The sign on the front said BELLUCI'S, and identified the business as an olive oil distributor. A handwritten sign on the warehouse door read GONE ON VACATION - BACK MONDAY.

"Now we just need to get in," I said, looking around for an open window.

"Allow me," replied Greg, and he handed me a key; it fit perfectly in the lock.

I turned around to give Greg back the key, but he wasn't there anymore. I looked around and said his name, but there was no response. "Okay," I directed to God. "'The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.' Let's get things ready for our visitors."

\* \* \*

The bus had been gone for hours. I'd moved my supplies into the office, and had stripped myself of everything that could hinder me in a fight. I didn't think I'd need weapons - after all, I didn't want to kill them, just stop them. It would be much simpler if I had some of Clark's anesthetic gas to put them out, but ... it just wasn't available to me.

I'd opened the warehouse door wide to make it easier for my pursuers to find me, then spent some time praying.

Time passed, and they were still a no-show. Ten minutes became a half hour, then an hour, then two.

I was starting to doubt Greg. All he said, the things he did, seemed to support what he claimed. But ... what if it had all been an elaborate set-up? I have no idea what all they did to me after they knocked me out. What if they had probed my mind, found out all about me, then put someone on the bus with me who could get into my confidence? What if they already knew about my invisibility? Otherwise, why would they let me keep my rings? How close are they really? Where did Greg go? Did he go back to his masters, to watch me as I go stir-crazy waiting for something that will never happen? What if this all just to stall me, keep me from getting to Clark?

"So what do I do?" I prayed aloud.

"You ... *surrender*."

I spun around to the open warehouse door. Standing there were three men of American Indian descent. They wore all black, including long coats that could hide a number of weapons. They walked into the warehouse.

I took a deep breath, and sighed. I'd been suckered. I was caught in the trap.

"So where's the rest of your gang? You know, my two-faced brother and that fake angel of his!"

And there was silence.

It woke me up.

"My God!" I yelled up to the sky. "How could I have been so wrong? There is no conspiracy! It's just these three *puppets* and their spirit guide masters!"

The Indian in the middle took a step forwards. "Enough talk, Mr. Liston. You will come with us!"

I leveled a gaze at him. "In Jesus' name - *no!*"

The three men moved back as if an unseen force shoved them. Then they straightened up and took a step closer towards me.

The man in the middle threatened, "You will come with us now or we will take you by force!"

I smiled. I knew Who was in charge, and my faith was in Him. "No, you *won't*. Listen to the Word of the Lord! Isaiah 54 promises me: Whoever attacks me will surrender to me; no weapon forged against me will prevail, and God will refute every tongue that accuses me." I stood tall and stared them down. "Not familiar? Try *this!* 'You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head! All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into MY hands!' In other words, you *puppets*, in the name of Jesus Christ, the One True God, I *command* the spirits within you to *leave* this place *NOW!*"

The three men reacted as though they had been simultaneously punched in their stomachs. Their faces registered pain and confusion, and they glanced to one another for a comfort and a reassurance that didn't exist. The *puppet* metaphor I'd used on them became an apt comparison, because they staggered and wobbled, suddenly weak in the knees, as though the strings guiding their movements had all been cut.

The leader began chanting aloud, and the other two kicked in a heartbeat later. I rolled my eyes, sighing. Some people just don't know when to quit.

"Demons!" I cried. "In the name of Jesus Christ, before whom *every* knee will bow, I command you: be silent, and come out of them NOW!"

Their chants were cut off in mid-syllable, and they grabbed for their throats. Their eyes were glazed, for a few moments, and then they slowly began to come out of their daze. Still gasping for breath, the leader started cursing me, calling me all sorts of filthy names. The others joined in a few seconds later. They were cruel and unyielding with their verbal abuse.

I can't remember exactly what they said, that finally triggered my fuse. All I remember was my blood pumping and my adrenaline surging.

Then I released a feral growl and attacked.

\* \* \*

My leg was still sore where they'd kicked me, but it was nothing compared to the guilt I felt.

I hated myself for what I was capable of doing. I thought I'd put it *far* behind me - especially after I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior - but *this* just proved that I was no farther from where I had been than a 'recovering' alcoholic can ever be safe with 'just a taste'.

Those three men may have taunted and pushed me, but *I* was the one who made the decision to turn from God's love, joy, and peace, and attack them the way that I did. And even though there were several ways I could've justify it as self-defense, it was an empty victory.

I found a first-aid kit, and patched up the Indians' wounds the best I could. I praised God that I hadn't seriously injured any of them; they'd be hurting when they woke up, but at least they'd wake up. I incapacitated them by stripping them down to their shorts, then tied and gagged them with the roll of *Super-Tape* I'd picked up at the Laredo Mall; it looked like duct tape, but seemed to have the strength of steel cable. Then I left a note on each of them, hoping they'd take the hint: *GO HOME*.

I located their bikes around the block, and disabled them by chopping up some of the wires and hoses. When I checked out their saddlebags, I didn't find a radio, but I did find a tranquilizer gun and some darts. I added it to my other stuff, loaded aboard the company van; I smiled when I found the keys 'hidden' behind the sun visor.

As I went about my business, I talked to God. I repented for screwing up, and I begged for His forgiveness. And I was silent as I waited for the voice of God to tell me what to do next.

\* \* \*

I locked up the warehouse.

I felt that, *if* the bounty hunters managed to free themselves, and *if* they were able to follow me, they might assume I'd continue towards Florida.

They'd be wrong.

\* \* \*

"Colonel Liston, Line Three!" announced the orderly. "They refuse to identify themselves."

Liston looked up from his desk and grunted. He picked up the phone and identified himself. A moment later he asked, "What? Who is this? *Who is this?*" He hung up the phone, then picked it up again. "This is Colonel Liston! Trace the last call that came through! *Now!*"

Bonnie was drawn in by her husband's mysterious call. She watched as he waited on the line for a minute. Then he said into the receiver, "All right. Thank you."

As he hung up the phone, Bonnie asked, "What was that, hon?"

"I'm not sure. It was a man. He said that the Posse has been defeated; we can find them in a place called *Bellucci's*, in a town called Asgaard. Arkansas. And ... *he* ... is en route to some place on the coast of North Carolina."

"Could they trace it?"

He shook his head slowly. "No."

"You going to do anything about it?"

He didn't speak at first. But then his eyes narrowed. "I'm going to check it out."

He picked up the desk phone and issued instructions.

"You want me to come along – back you up?" asked Bonnie.

He thought about it for a moment. Then he shook his head. "No. Something tells me I've got to do this alone."

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

It was mid-morning when I crossed over into Hyde County in North Carolina, and entered the little fishing village named Bogie. A sign near the city line explained that, in the early 1940's, the village of *Carbon Cove* became a favored hangout of Humphrey Bogart. Between movies, the actor would come here to sail from their modest marina, and had come to find a family, of sorts, in the friendly villagers. Following the actor's death, the village council voted unanimously to change the name of the village to *Bogie* in his honor.

My vest was in the back of the van. A few items, like food and water, were sitting on the console between the seats. I wore a jacket and cap I found back at *Bellucci's*, in an attempt to disguise my features.

"Okay," I said under my breath in prayer. "Where do you want me to go from here?"

I was compelled to check out a delightful little park in the center of the village. As I cruised in that direction, I suddenly beheld a man in a trench coat and hat with his back to me. For a strange moment I saw Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon*, and I was drawn to him.

I parked the van in the lot at the edge of the park and looked out to see who was around me; there were a few villagers, all consumed in their own activities. Then I climbed out of the truck. The man in the trench coat didn't move as I drew nearer, so I figured he was the one God wanted me to meet.

"Excuse me?" I said in a hesitant voice.

At that, the man turned around, and my eyes saw the automatic pistol he held at waist height. With a sinking feeling, I looked up and saw my own scarred face under the other man's hat.

"Good afternoon, Mister ... *Liston*?" he said. "Now, if you would be so kind, carefully hand over your weapons."

"I'm not armed," I replied, not wanting to tell him about the tranquilizer gun back in the van.

"I find that hard to believe."

"Not if you were me, you wouldn't."

"Then you won't mind me checking you," he suggested.

He took a step forward, reaching out a hand toward me. I hesitated, remembering what Doug Phillips and Tony Newman had conjectured, about temporal paradoxes. I wasn't particularly anxious to test their theories on the 'same' matter coexisting in the same place at the same time, so I took a cautious step backward, raising my hands.

"Don't move!" he commanded, advancing.

"Look," I told him, in a somewhat exasperated tone, "I told you, before: I'm you – an alternate time-line version of you. There are a lot of theories, about the 'same' piece of matter trying to be in exactly the same place at the same time, back where – or when – I come from. Most of those theories have a rather nasty bottom line: those two pieces of matter touch, and go 'boom'. I'm not ready to test those theories, so how about I empty out my pockets, right here, and you can see for yourself that I'm not armed?"

"Then do it." He stopped his advance. "But carefully. One trick and I'll kill you right here and now."

"You'd love that, wouldn't ya," I commented sarcastically. "Okay. No tricks."

Slowly and deliberately I removed my hat and jacket and set them on the grass. Then I emptied the rest of my pockets and added them to the pile. I finally patted each pocket to assure him they were indeed empty.

"See? Told you - no weapons."

"You purchased quite a lot back at the Laredo Mall."

"Oh, you found out about that, did you?" I gave him a smile. "It's all fun and games until it starts coming out of *your* piggy bank, doesn't it? Well, *Colonel*, all that's back at the van. Happy now?"

He looked at me dubiously, but didn't comment. "All right. Back to the van. You drive – I'll show you where to go."

"Can I get my stuff back?" I asked, gesturing to the items at my feet. "Unless you want somebody to get suspicious."

"Go ahead. Again, very carefully."

I gathered the ends of the jacket together into an awkward bundle that needed both hands to hold, and led the way back to the van.

It gave me time to think.

I couldn't stay here; just being this close to *him* made me uneasy. I needed to get to Clark, straighten out this whole big mess, and *get home*. But *he* had the gun, and so he had the advantage.

So, for now I'd have to play along, and trust that God would get me back on track.

Reaching the van, I walked around to the back and put a hand on the door handle.

"Hold it!" Colonel Liston stopped me. "Open the door ... *carefully*. I want to see what you have back there!"

I complied. He kept the gun on me as he picked through the items. He picked up the teddy bear and smiled; with the one side of his face scarred, it was a lopsided grin that made me uneasy. I saw his reaction and explained, "I got it because it reminded me of my wife. She was never born in this timeline."

He chuckled and dropped the teddy bear. "Drive. I'll tell you where to go."

A few minutes later we ended up at a warehouse. He unlocked the door and guided me towards a sparsely furnished office in the back.

"Okay, Colonel," I commented, sitting on a straight-backed wooden chair in the middle of the room. "You got me. Now what?"

He paced the room. "You know, I'm surprised you didn't try to run. I rather hoped you would."

"What, so you could shoot me in the back?" I laughed. "Get real! You're gonna have to face me when you kill me - *if* you can."

"*If* I can?" he repeated.

"That's what I said, Colonel. If your master will let you."

"My *master*? I have no *master*!"

"Yeah," I smiled calmly. "He'd like nothing better than for you to believe that."

"If you know so much, then tell me – *who* is my master?"

"He goes by many names. Some have called him the *Prince of the Power of the Air*. Others have referred to him as *Lucifer*, the *Light-bringer*. Or maybe you've heard the names *Deceiver* or *Accuser*. Do any of these names sound the least bit familiar to you, *Colonel*?" His confused expression answered my question. "They're all references to Satan ... the *Devil*."

"You're insane!" he shot back. "There is no such thing as the Devil!"

I maintained eye contact with him as I slowly shook my head. "Y'know, for someone who has so much collective intelligence at his fingertips, you are sure *stupid*."

He took the insult and fired back. "If you are who you say you are, then why are we so different?"

I gave him an intense glare. "Because, in this timeline, *you ... killed ... Barbara!*"

My statement hit him like a sledgehammer. "*Nobody* knows about that," he hissed.

"*We both* abused her! But, in my timeline, I got help before it got out of control! I went to a Christian pastor for counseling, and he introduced me to Jesus Christ! In my timeline, Barbara divorced me! But I didn't kill her! And I didn't run like a coward to the IBSA like *you* did!"

"*Shut up!*" he yelled at me. "*Shut up!*"

I stood up and our eyes met. "If you think you can stop me, give it your best shot."

He pointed the pistol at my face and pulled the trigger.

*Click.*

Colonel Liston was surprised. With his eyes still on me, he quickly checked the sidearm. The safety was off, and there had been a bullet in the chamber. While I stood unmoving, he chambered another round, leveled the gun at me and pulled the trigger.

*Click.*

I held back my urge to laugh with relief.

Colonel Liston checked his weapon again and aimed it at the ceiling.

*BLAM!*

An evil smile on his face, he lowered the weapon at me.

*Click.*

"Looks like your shooter doesn't want to shoot that fella," said another voice, causing us both to look at the speaker.

He was a black man in his late 30's. His hair was long beneath a blue security cap. He wore a faded blue uniform. He stood several feet from both of us and eyed us calmly. He held a flashlight, but wasn't armed.

"Who are *you*?" asked Colonel Liston.

"I'm Dan, the night watchman. Couldn't help but hear you two talkin', and it looks like you're tryin' to shoot your twin, mister. Now why would you want to do a thing like that?"

Colonel Liston stood and identified himself. "This is official Black Liberation Army business! You will say *nothing* of this to anyone!"

"Why would I want to?" he asked casually.

"Good. Now - get out of here!"

"I can't do that either, Colonel," he replied. "If I did, then I'd be guilty of lettin' you kill a man. That'd make me just as guilty as you. Besides, it looks like that gun o' yours has a mind of its own – and it doesn't want to shoot him any more than I do."

"I said ... *leave*," repeated Colonel Liston. "*Now*."

The stranger shrugged and shook his head.

"I may not be able to use this gun against *you*," Colonel Liston told me, the muzzle of the automatic shifting. "But I can use it on *him*."

Dan didn't budge. I was getting concerned. I didn't want to be the cause of anyone's death. And right now, my double had a lot of anger that needed to be vented – even if it was in killing another man.

"Colonel," I cautioned. "This man is innocent! Leave him alone!"

I realized that was the wrong thing to say as soon as it left my mouth.

"You actually *care* for this man?" he said with a twisted smile. "Then his death will be on your conscience."

He steered the automatic towards the stranger. I had only an instant to react, and I chose to position my body between Colonel Liston's gun and the black security guard.

"Get out of the way!" he yelled.

"No. I'm not going to let you hurt anyone else. That's not the answer to your problem."

Liston lowered his gun and holstered it. "Maybe you've got a point," he muttered, turning away from us.

I lowered my guard for a moment to look back at Dan; his eyes met mine, then suddenly grew large. "Look out!"

I turned back in time to see Colonel Liston swinging a wooden chair at my head. I didn't have time to duck, so I just put my arms out in an attempt to protect myself.

The chair broke apart as it crashed against me, and didn't hurt as bad as I had expected it to. More importantly, I was still standing.

Colonel Liston grabbed one of the pieces of the broken chair and tried to brain me with it. Again I put up my arms to block, and again I felt its impact. But, it still wasn't as bad as I had imagined it would be.

I was confused. So was he.

He started to come at me with his bare hands. I wanted to step out of the way, avoid his touch, but for some reason my feet wouldn't move. In that instant before he made contact I felt an odd peace that rooted me to the spot and told me that everything would be okay.

Colonel Liston never touched me.

There was a sudden feeling of electricity in the room. No, not just in the room, but around *me*! It felt like I was surrounded by an aura of static electricity – all the hairs on my body were standing on end!

The effect on Colonel Liston was something far more dramatic. He was literally repulsed, thrown backwards several feet into some ratty old wooden furniture.

I'm sure we were all confused. Was this part of the temporal paradox that Newman and Phillips spoke of? Or – as I suspected – was it God's *unique* way of keeping me protected from harm?

His face red with anger and frustration, Colonel Liston cursed and yelled at me, "*I hate you! I hate you!*"

"*Why?*" I asked. "Why would *you* hate *me*?"

"Because you're the person I *never* was!" he sputtered. "And I *hate* you because of that!"

My arms lowered. "You hate me because you could never forgive yourself! That's why your life is one big Hell-on-earth for you! But you're not in the USA again, are you? You're *here*. Christianity has been here all this time! But you've continued to ignore it! Jesus Christ has been knocking on your door for years, and you've ignored Him time after time after *time*! When are you gonna *give up* and answer the door?"

"Preach it, brother," encouraged the black watchman, nodding.

I was energized. "You can *still* be saved, Colonel! You can *still* know love, peace, and joy!"

"*NO, I can't,*" he admitted. His arms were still poised to fight, but there seemed to be no strength behind them. "I'm a *killer*. That's what I *am*."

"That's *bull!* *What* you've done doesn't dictate *who* you are! Regardless of what you've done ... what *we've* done ... Jesus Christ can save your soul just like He saved *mine*! All you gotta do is *let Him!*"

Colonel Liston scoffed.

"*Look!* Jesus Christ is in the business of changing hearts, of changing lives! He's best at giving second chances ... and *third* chances ... and *fourth* chances! If you've ever read any of those Bibles, you've seen thieves, murderers, whores, liars, and *worse* - *all* who've been transformed into saints just because they gave it up to God!"

Colonel Liston's eyes were practically pleading. "Why should God want to save *me*?"

"Because *He loves you*," I looked at him with compassion. "He died on the cross for the sins of all mankind – including anything you've *ever* done!" My breathing was heavy. "It's a free gift for anyone who will say yes to it!"

"Why should I listen to *you*?"

"Then don't listen to him, son," spoke up our long-haired observer. "Look, before today, I never even heard o'you. I'm just a humble watchman. But I know that everything this boy's been talkin' about has been the truth - the *Gospel* truth!"

"Who *are* you?" asked Colonel Liston.

"Like I said ... I'm just the watchman for this here building." He smiled. "Now I'd say God's been trying to get your attention. Why don't you shut up and listen to Him?"

"Colonel Liston," I said softly. "*Perry*. What are you gonna do?"

\* \* \*

Clark answered the phone. "How good of you to call, Johnny!"

"Thank you for taking my call, Mr. President. I wasn't sure if you'd be available, but Dr. Phillips assured me that you'd have the time."

Clark hesitated. Could it be possible, he thought. "Dr. Phillips?"

Johnny chuckled. "You remember Doug Phillips, don't you? He's in temporal mechanics."

"I think I do. He had a partner ... *Newman*, wasn't it?"

"I knew you'd remember."

"How are they?"

"Fine ... everyone's fine. They've been working on an experiment in temporal displacement, and they'd really like to you to see it."

Inwardly, Clark was thrilled. They'd found a way to correct the timeline. "How soon?"

"As soon as you can get here."

"I'll see what I can do."

"By the way, have you heard from Dr. Griffin?"

Clark smiled at the sideways reference to Perry. "As a matter of fact, I have. He's on his way to Washington. Tell you what, Johnny, why don't I wait for him, then we'll both come?"

"Excellent, Mr. President!"

"Do you have Dr. Phillips' number?"

"Yes." Johnny gave him the number to one of their cell phones. "They'll enjoy seeing you both. Anyhow, I better let you go."

"All right. Thanks for calling, Johnny."

Clark fought the urge to shout for joy. They had a plan to correct the timeline. All they needed was he and Perry to make it complete.

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Colonel Liston spoke into his cell phone and identified himself. "Who is this?" he asked.

"Stansfield, sir!" came the reply. "Captain Stansfield!"

"Stansfield," he repeated. "I'm sending a man to you for transport across the border and into DC. His name's Poteet, and he's on a secret mission *for me*." His emphasis came across. "Are we clear?"

"Completely, sir!" the man on the other end of the phone answered.

"Good. He'll be there within the hour. He'll be arriving in a commercial vehicle."

"Round trip, sir?"

"One way. He'll give you details when he arrives."

"Understood. I'll be waiting for him."

Colonel Liston disconnected the cell phone. "Okay, it's done. I hope it works."

"I do too," I answered.

"One question. If what you say is true, and you can 'correct' the timeline, what will happen to us – will we cease to exist?"

I shrugged. "I honestly don't know. I wish I did. Maybe this is a parallel timeline, and Clark and I somehow crossed over into it from ours. If that's so, we'll just cross back into ours, and we'll both live on."

"I hope you're right," he said.

Colonel Liston took a step forward, his arms outstretched for a hug. I took a step forward, too, but then both of us caught ourselves at the last instant. I took a step straight back.

"Don't take it personally, Perry," I grinned, sheepishly. "It's just -"

"- that nasty 'boom' thing, I know," he nodded, lowering his arms.

"Settle for a virtual hug?" I asked enigmatically.

"Yeah," he laughed. "Dan, c'mon over here!"

The black watchman came over to Colonel Liston. They hugged. "Pass it on."

He looked over at me with confusion. "Right."

Then he came over and hugged me.

"Don't worry about it, Dan," I offered. "It would take too long to explain."

"Oh-kay," he agreed.

"Y'know, Dan, I've been meaning to ask you something. You look *awfully* familiar, but I can't put my finger on it. What's your last name?"

"Franklin," he answered.

My jaw dropped.

"You okay?" asked Colonel Liston.

"Yeah," I composed myself. I looked over at Franklin with a thin smile. "It's nice to know one of you did good."

"You mean the 'me' in your timeline ..."

I shook my head. "You don't want to know."

"Praise the Lord," Franklin whispered. "Y'better get movin'."

I looked over Colonel Liston. "Do right to all, and wrong no man."

"Doc Savage's Code," he recognized. "*Vaya Con Dios* ... brother."

I walked to the van, leaving Dan Franklin and Colonel Perry Liston to get better acquainted.

I thought there could be very little in this timeline that could surprise me now. But having the dead come back to life again ... okay, that shut me up.

The last time I met Dan Franklin - *Daniel* in my timeline - he and I had fought, and I had knocked him out before his lady Deuce blindsided me. Then the two of them whipped me until I was near death. I looked around, wondering if I'd run into Deuce before this was all over. In my timeline, they'd both died on Caroline Island.

As I drove away, I praised God for second chances.

\* \* \*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### Washington, D.C.

"This is as close as I can get to the White House, sir," announced the pilot with an apology.

"This is good," I said, and thanked the pilot. "Take us down."

We touched down atop a high-rise a couple of miles from the White House. Still, I had no room for complaint; it was a far sight better than I would've expected a few hours ago.

Wearing my packed forager vest under the jacket, I unbuckled my seat belt and climbed out of the helicopter. I thanked the pilot again and quick-walked towards the roof access door, triggering my ring as soon as I was inside. Then I headed towards street level.

The street was busy with cars and pedestrians going every which-way. I did my best to avoid all the obstacles in my way as I headed toward my destination. Suddenly a taxicab pulled up to the curb and stopped. I started walking past it when a familiar voice called my name.

"Get a move on, man!" called Greg. "Time's a'wastin'!"

I ignored him and kept walking.

"Perry! *Perry!*" he called after me, following me with the taxi. "C'mon - *get in!*"

"So you're not really blind after all," I sneered under my breath.

"Is *that* what this is all about?"

I spun and faced him. "No, it's *not!* It's about whose side you're really on!"

"Aw, c'mon!" he pleaded. "Don't doubt now! You're almost there!"

"Give me *one* reason why I should go with you! As far as I know, *you* were the one who tipped off Colonel Liston to where I was!"

"And you'd be right!"

My jaw dropped. "You *what?*"

"Let me ask you a question. If I'd told you, on the bus heading here, what would happen over the next 24 hours, would you do the same things *exactly* as you would've if I hadn't told you?"

I knew the answer to that one, but hesitated in answering.

"Well?" Greg insisted.

"No," I admitted. "I suppose not."

"God knew exactly what it would take to bring Colonel Liston to Him. And that was *you* - exactly the way you did it."

I didn't say anything; I knew he was speaking the truth.

"By the way, Perry," he added. "Has it occurred to you that we've been talking for the last few minutes on a busy Washington street, and *nobody's* noticed us? I mean, you're still invisible!"

I looked around. He was right. With all the people and cars about, *nobody* paid us the least bit of attention. If this was truly a conspiracy, then it was the most extensive one I've ever seen. And if it had been masterminded by Colonel Liston, then it was obvious they hadn't gotten the news.

"They're probably all in on the act," I lamely argued.

"Act?" he scoffed. "Look around, pal! You don't *really* believe that, do you?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Then what are you still doing standing out there? Get your butt in the car!"

I approached the taxi. The car door opened all by itself, and I climbed into the back. The door closed again and Greg pulled away from the curb.

"I'm sorry, Greg."

He shrugged it off. "It's okay, Perry. I'm just sorry I couldn't give you the full story. But ... you know."

"Yeah," I said, humbled. "I do."

\* \* \*

"White House," announced Greg. "All ashore that's going ashore!"

I smiled in spite of myself. The door opened before I could touch the handle. I shook Greg's hand.

"Thanks for the help, Greg."

"Just doin' my job, *amigo!*" He smiled. "You'll find him in the Oval Office."

He pulled away and I walked right through the gates. I still had about ten minutes of invisibility, so I needed to find Clark quickly. As I entered the secretary's office, I heard Clark's voice in the next room; it brought a lump to my throat, and I had to make a conscious effort to keep my aura under control. I moved closer to the door and looked inside. He was definitely dressed for the part, in a suit and tie that - in this context - didn't look out of place on him. Three people were finishing up their meeting with him.

I slipped just inside the door as they left the room.

I wanted a way of alerting him without involving others, so I had written a note on a small piece of paper in the taxi, and now moved to the far side of his desk. I placed my hand flat on the table near his, and quickly touched the top of his hand. When he looked down reflexively, I lifted my hand and the piece of paper became visible. His hand quickly covered the paper, then picked it up with another paper beneath it. He looked at the note, then grabbed a report, and headed for the

rest room. He hesitated a moment at the door to allow me to pass inside, then came in and closed the door.

"Perry?" he whispered.

"No, it's Claude Raines," I whispered back.

His sharp hearing pinpointed my location immediately, and he wrapped me up in a massive bear hug. I returned it, with equal joy, though nowhere near his strength. We'd been separated far too long in this strange land, and our emotions kicked in and brought us both to tears of joy at finally being reunited.

"Thank God you're okay," he breathed.

"You, too. I'm glad you got my message. I'll tell you, it was the long shot of long shots."

"But it worked!"

"Hey, you're the one who taught me Mayan. Have you heard from the Time Tunnel?"

"Yes! They've found a way of correcting the timeline!"

I grinned. As I did, I became visible. "*Voila!*"

"Good timing," Clark commented. "Ever since I got your message, I've been planning our return to Arizona. Now that you're here, I'll put that into motion. Do you know who your other self is in this timeline?"

"*Quite* well," I grinned. "Would you believe I led him to the Lord a few hours ago ... with the help of this timeline's Daniel Franklin?"

Clark looked at me with a stunned expression. I just smiled and nodded.

"So what's your plan?" I finally prompted.

"I'll tell you later. If I stay in the restroom for very much longer, they'll start to wonder."

"Good point. Where to next?"

"I'm going back into the Oval Office. After a few minutes I'll make an excuse and go back to the Presidential residence. Follow me - you'll be safe there."

"Okay. Ready?"

Clark took the piece of paper and flushed it down the toilet, then washed his hands. "Now."

I stood well away from the door and became invisible, then left the rest room behind Clark.

\* \* \*

I never thought I'd ever see the inside of the White House, let alone stay in one of the rooms in the President's own residence. Clark had arranged it so that nobody would accidentally barge in on me if I decided to take a nap - which I did. It felt good. It also offered me some serious quiet time for prayer.

That night, Clark and I had a chance to compare notes and stories.

"An *angel*?"

"Yeah," I chuckled. "Just like the one when Sunni got shot."

"This is all so ... *amazing*." Clark walked over to a wet bar and poured a couple of glasses of ice water; he brought one to me. "One slight change in the course of things, and nothing's the same. There was a renaissance in space travel, electronics, and agriculture."

"But the human element *didn't* change," I expressed my observation. "Greed, envy, lust, hate ... they didn't change, but just adapted to their environment. The same old prejudices took a new direction ... and ended up with the IBSA."

"Not just that. Did you learn about how Christianity became outlawed?"

I shook my head. "No. I just knew that it had."

"After the seceding of the IBSA, morale in the USA was at an all-time low. So the entertainment industry - already infiltrated by homosexuals - stepped in and filled in the gap with 'feel-good' shows in the movies and on television. Their influence was gradual at first, with gay characters in minor but memorable roles. As people accepted this, more was added. Gay figures in the entertainment industry started coming out, publicly admitting their homosexuality. They never pushed it, just acknowledged that they were there. And the people accepted them. Any resistance by the religious community was treated as 'intolerant' by a liberal news media."

"The frog in the frying pan," I sighed, remembered the analogy. "Put a frog in a frying pan and turn up the heat all at once, and the frog will jump out. Put the same frog in the same pan and turn up the heat one degree at a time, and the frog will never notice it until it's dead. So how did this lead to the outlawing of Christianity?"

"Like I said, any Christians who spoke out against homosexuality were themselves put down. It was the usual responses: 'Judge not, lest you be judged', 'take the log out of your own eye before you try to take the speck out of ours', and 'let he who is without sin cast the first stone.' Any talk of homosexuality omitted the sexual side of it, and emphasized the cliché of 'it's all about the relationship between two people who love each other'."

"It's all about love," I muttered, thinking about what was happening in our own timeline with regards to gay marriage.

"There were a few assaults on homosexuals. The perpetrators turned out to be Christians."

"No surprise there. Make the Christians out to be the bad guys, and the gays to be the innocent victims."

"Exactly. Then a new 'politically correct' translation of the Bible emerged. The Gay Lobby removed all 'hate language', the Feminists removed verses referring to male dominance, and Animal Rights activists removed references to animal sacrifices. In the end, their Bible was about as far from the Holy Scriptures as a phone book. In conjunction with that, the 'hate-crimes' statutes made the use of any anti-gay speech a criminal act.

"Two events spelled the beginning of the end. First, Billy Graham quoted Leviticus 18:22 during one of his crusades - and was arrested. He was tried under the hate-crimes statutes, and was sentenced to 25 years in a Federal pen. As a direct result, Congress passed a bill that removed the tax-exempt status from any church that didn't replace their Bibles with politically correct ones.

"The second event was the Disney World disaster - perpetrated by Christians. Unchecked hate crimes against Christians became so great that many denominations simply left the U.S., taking their people - and their money - with them. Billions of Christians left the country. Finally the Supreme Court decided that Christianity was an 'intolerant' practice, and the President declared that the practice of evangelical Christianity was a crime."

"Oh, my God," I breathed.

"All remaining Christians were given the choice to publicly renounce their faith, leave the United States, or face arrest and mandatory 'reeducation'. They established the Department of Religion. It was like a page out of Revelation. Persecution hit an all-time high. Parents turned in children, and children turned in parents. Christians were tagged with biochips so their movements could be tracked like caribou."

"Are *any* of the faithful left?"

"There's still a few true believers in the United States. Some dare to continue preaching the truth, but run the risk of being caught by government-sponsored lynch mobs. The others are scattered in armed compounds; they believe they're safe, but they're under the constant watch of satellites."

"What's left of religion?" I asked.

"Mostly non-Christian religions: anything that keeps Jesus Christ out of it. Religious practice in the United States could now be summed up as 'anybody's god will do.'"

I took in a deep breath and slowly blew it out. "Lovely. Can't wait to get out. You sure they found a way to correct this mess?"

"Yes. They didn't give me any details, however."

"So what's your plan for getting us out of here?"

"I already established a cover story with Monk to explain why the two of us were in Arizona. I told him that you - Colonel Liston - had made contact with me with the intent to defect to the USA. One of the stipulations of the defection was meeting there to repair the scarred side of his face. I also told him you might be contacting me again for another *secret* meeting. That's what I'll tell Monk, that you made contact with me, and that I'm returning to Arizona for another meeting at the same place."

"How will we get there?"

He grinned. "*Air Force One*, parked right outside."

"Devious. I'm impressed."

"Thanks. Let's get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a big day."

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

Morning.

Clark ordered a large breakfast to be delivered to the residence, explaining that he woke up with a 'big appetite'. It felt good to eat something that wasn't a result of scrounging.

I stayed in the room while Clark tended to the President's morning briefing.

At one point, Clark came up and informed me that Air Force One was going through a period of routine maintenance, and wouldn't be available until the afternoon. I concealed my vest and stuff in the room and wandered invisibly through the White House, especially visiting the kitchen for some impromptu lunch.

Finally, Clark came up to the residence. "Okay, things are ready! Let's go!"

I had been ready for most of the day anyhow. I put on the forager vest and the jacket, and followed Clark downstairs. But before we could reach Air Force One, we were intercepted by Monk's urgent summons: "Mr. President! Mr. President!"

"Yes, Monk?" Clark inquired.

"Mr. President, a situation has just arisen that requires your immediate attention!"

Clark leaned in and whispered, "Monk, can't it wait? I'm late for a meeting with *you-know-who!*"

"I assure you, Mr. President, this situation is *most urgent!*"

"All right!" Clark conceded. "Lead on."

We followed Monk down some stairs and a corridor before we reached a set of double doors guarded by two alert Marines. The doors swung open at our presence, and I had to duck low to slip inside without being discovered.

When I straightened, I noticed that the people at the table weren't whom I would've expected. In the seats reserved for the National Security Advisor, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other high-ranking officials was Clark's old team - all of them. The collective expressions on their faces was unsettling.

I was getting a *bad* feeling about this.

Clark also shared my sentiment. "What is this?"

The doors opened again, and Vice-President Goldsmith entered the room; unlike us, she was not surprised at the gathered assemblage. She took a seat at the table.

Clark repeated his inquiry. "What's going on here? Monk? Carlie?"

Monk gestured to a chair at the head of the table. "Please have a seat, Mr. President."

Clark paused a moment, glancing to the various faces and shifting his jaw. Then he took the chair.

I checked my time, and then moved to a potential hiding place while I waited. And watched.

Monk stood at the head of the room, a few feet from where Clark sat.

"Mr. President," he began. "Several things have come to our attention over the last few days, and our conclusions have been most disturbing."

I was surprised. As educated as Monk was, he never considered himself much of a public speaker - at least in our timeline. Here, it seems, things took a different turn.

Monk gestured to another man. I put my hand over my mouth to hide my gasp.

"This is FBI Agent Douglas Martin," Monk introduced. "He'll be presenting the physical evidence today."

"Is this a *trial*?" asked Clark defiantly, shooting to his feet.

"No, Mr. President. It's an *inquiry*," he said soberly.

Clark sat back down, feigning some of the arrogance we had seen in the other Doc Savage.

"Three days ago, our satellites detected a structure beneath the Arizona desert that had previously been unnoticed. Without explaining your reasoning behind it, you ordered Air Force One to fly to the site. Now we're all aware that, as the President of the United States, you aren't under any obligation to explain yourself, but we're hoping you can shed some light on the questions we have."

Clark continued to sit with his arms folded before him, defiantly silent.

Monk continued. "Air Force One arrived at the site in Arizona. For the record, you waived the standard perimeter scan. You then borrowed a pistol from Secret Service Agent David Stephens and left the craft *alone*."

On cue, all of the monitors in the room came to life with the image of President Savage - the other Doc Savage, dressed in suit and tie - walking purposefully down the ramp from the saucer and over to the opening leading down into the Operation Tic-Toc installation.

"Later that same day, President Savage explained to me that Colonel Perry Liston of the Black Liberation Army had communicated his desire to defect to the USA. Conditional to his defection had been plastic surgery to repair the scarring of his face. The President explained to me that the

surgery had been completed in this installation." He paused, looking at Clark. "It does not explain, however, why you went in *armed*."

The screens glowed with a scene showing Clark and me coming up out of the installation.

"Approximately ninety minutes later, you emerged from the underground site. Please note the following details: his clothes were different, he no longer possessed the pistol he borrowed, and he was accompanied by the unscarred Colonel Perry Liston."

The image of the two of us froze, and it zoomed in on my face.

"Upon recognizing Colonel Liston - having *not* been previously alerted to his presence - the rest of us aboard Air Force One assumed the President was in danger, and responded accordingly."

The video continued. We were surrounded and removed from the cart. It was oddly surreal seeing things from this perspective.

"As we were arresting Liston, the area was suddenly and violently attacked."

I grimaced as I watched the attack from the IBSA strike team, missiles tearing into desert floor and human bodies alike. I saw the two men around me suddenly gunned down, and I was flown into the air.

"The President was rushed into the protection of Air Force One, while Secret Service agents attempted to defend against the men who had presumably been sent to rescue Liston."

The video suddenly froze in the midst of the attack.

"If we would have had the *slightest* notice that the President would be coming up with another man - especially *this* man - we would've been able to transport the two of you into Air Force One quickly and quietly. None of this would've happened." He turned to Clark. "Mr. President, why did you take a gun with you into the installation?"

Clark's face softened, became almost apologetic. "I trusted Liston to be there, but I wanted to have something to defend myself with just in case he wasn't alone."

"So why didn't you let us know? We would've made sure things were safe."

"I chose to do it this way."

Monk didn't cross-examine. "When you came out of the installation, why didn't you have the gun with you?"

"It was left inside."

"It was borrowed from one of your Secret Service agents. Weren't you concerned that you had disarmed one of your own detail?"

"No. There were other things on my mind."

"Why had you changed clothes?"

"I'd spilled something on my suit. I borrowed one of their jumpsuits."

"Why didn't you let us know you wouldn't be coming up alone?"

"I hadn't expected an attack," Clark answered, his face sincere. "Up to this point, no one else knew of our arrangements but those involved. Everything had been done in complete security. Neither of us suspected the IBSA would be watching."

Monk didn't comment. "I bring your attention back to the video." The picture reversed to before the attack, when they surrounded the cart and separated the pair. "Mr. President, if you knew how we would react to Liston's appearance, then why is the expression on your face one of *surprise*? Why didn't you say *one* word to stop us when we surrounded you?"

Clark released a chuckle, and put on a smile. "You got me, Monk. To be honest, my mind was on other things. And then we were attacked before I could say something."

Monk glanced around at the others in the room. Nobody commented.

It wasn't good.

"Let's move on," continued Monk. "After taking our dead and wounded to Ross Air Force Base, we returned to the White House. You disappeared into your private study for two hours. Normally this wouldn't be out of the ordinary, but you activated the Privacy Shield. That's rather extreme, don't you think?"

"Is it a crime to want to work with one's computer with complete security?" Clark posed.

"No, Mr. President, it's not. But since the Oval Office is one of the most secure rooms in the White House, and your private study is within that sphere of security, nobody in their right mind would disturb you anyway."

As Monk continued presenting his case, I assessed the security of the room - just in case. There were the two Marines outside the door, and three men who looked to be some sort of Federal Marshal. I had just under a half hour of invisibility remaining.

And I didn't have the slightest idea how God was going to pull us out of this one.

\* \* \*

"Then came the mission to Rome, defying national policy and the Magic Kingdom Coalition - an organization we've worked closely with for decades."

"I explained my reasoning for that," defended Clark.

"Yes you did. And it sounded pretty darn convincing at the time. But ... I don't really know ... the more I went over the explanation, the less I believed it. I know that sounds lame, going on a feeling like that, but it's the truth. I mean, I kept getting the feeling that this wasn't the same person I knew three days ago. All the physical evidence supports you being President Clark Savage, Jr. And for all intents and purposes, I acknowledged you as such." He paused. "But

something was nagging at me from the back of my brain. You were familiar, yet unfamiliar. *More* than unfamiliar. It was like you were somehow a complete stranger to me."

He paused and turned to his team members; his stance was relaxed. "You all know me. And you know when I've flown off the handle at the slightest suspicion. So I set about to prove that *my* suspicions were dead wrong, satisfy myself that there was nothing different with the President and that I was the one seeing bad guys in the shadows." There was assorted laughter from around the table. "So I started looking at everything that had happened since we went to Arizona. Unfortunately, the more I looked at things, the more things I saw that didn't make sense - things that President Savage wouldn't have done.

"That's how I came to listen to the phone call." He paused. "Sometime early yesterday morning, a phone call came in to one of the White House operators. It was routinely recorded and screened. It was a crank call. It should've never gotten past the screens. But it did. It reached Mrs. Ingram's desk. She listened to it, and would've erased it - but the President himself inquired into overnight calls. According to Mrs. Ingram, he's never done this before. Never." He gestured to Martin. "So I recovered the recording and listened to it myself."

On cue, the recording played back. It was eerie, hearing my own words repeated through dozens of small speakers throughout the room.

"The name is Poteet ... Silas Poteet. Could you let the President know that I won't be able to make our luncheon due to a family tragedy? You see, my twin brother passed away this morning."

The operator offered her condolences, 'Oh, I'm so sorry. Yes, of course, Mr. Poteet. I'll see that the President gets the message."

"Thank you. Let him know I'll call him as soon as I can to reschedule."

Then came the coughing. To the untrained ear it simply sounded like a coughing fit. However, it had a different reaction from several of Doc's old team.

Monk commented, "To those of you who heard it, you recognized the 'coughing' as *Mayan* - a language very few people understand, and even fewer outside of this assemblage. The 'coughing' was actually a secret message concealed within the phone call, intended for the President. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I heard the words, 'Clark, I'm okay. Coming your way. Accept no substitutes. Ring still working.'" He hesitated, then said in a monotone, "'Jesus is Lord.'" He looked at his fellow teammates. "Do you concur?"

The ones who had understood it gave their affirmations.

"Agent Martin and I ran a voiceprint on the call. It was identified as that of Colonel Perry Liston." He paused to let that in. "Now I find it very ... *coincidental* .... that the President should take an interest in overnight calls on the *very* day that a covert message is sent by Colonel Liston. More than that, with all their sophisticated methods of screening telephone calls, why didn't the Secret Service spot this one? Could there be someone within the Secret Service who *allowed* it to get through?"

"Did you ask them, Monk?" inquired Clark, interrupting.

"I did," he answered. "They reported that their voiceprint software didn't match it to Liston's. Again, the possibility of someone within their organization who allowed the message to pass through to the President. If you concur, I would like an official investigation to be conducted into this matter."

Inside, I groaned. I knew the real reason why the call had gotten through - *God* had blinded their eyes and deafened their ears to it. But they saw it as something far more sinister.

"As to the message itself, my interpretation is that Colonel Liston is on his way to Washington - he may even be here as we speak."

I held my breath and tried not to panic. Did he know I was here? Had he somehow detected me, even invisible? Was I in danger of being discovered? I had only a few minutes before becoming visible; I looked about for a way to hide while making the transition back to invisibility.

"'Accept no substitutes' might be instructions to trust only those who are part of the conspiracy. I suggest *conspiracy* because of the possible connection to the Secret Service.

"'Ring still working' could also refer to a conspiracy - a gang or group of conspirators. It could mean that there are others within the government that are part of this 'ring', and that whatever plans they have are still in motion.

"And, finally, the last phrase ... the most *sinister* element of this message: 'Jesus is Lord'. Could this be a *password*, indicating that the ones in the White House could very well be part of a religious extremist group?" He paused. "Also, could there have been more to the President's unprecedented trip to Rome than meets the eye?"

There was assorted murmuring around the room. Monk's point was coming across, and it wasn't looking good for Clark.

"The final piece of evidence," continued Monk. "A phone call received by the President only a few hours ago."

Over the speakers we heard Clark say, "How good of you to call, Johnny!"

Johnny's voice replied, "Thank you for receiving me, Mr. President. I wasn't sure if you'd be available, but Dr. Phillips assured me that you'd have the time."

"Dr. Phillips?"

"You remember Doug Phillips, don't you? His field was temporal mechanics."

"He had a partner ... Newman, wasn't it?"

"I knew you'd remember."

"How are they?"

"They're just fine. Everyone's fine. They've been working on an experiment in temporal displacement, and they'd really like to you to see their results."

"How soon?"

"As soon as you can get there."

"Well, in that case, I'll see what I can do to swing by."

"By the way, have you heard from Dr. Griffin?"

He's referring to me, I thought.

"As a matter of fact, I have. He's on his way to Washington. I tell you what, why don't I wait for him, then we can both come?"

"That would be ideal!"

"Do you have Dr. Phillips' number?"

"Yes." Johnny gave him a phone number. "They'll enjoy that. Anyhow, I better let you go."

"All right. Thanks for calling, Johnny."

A dial tone signaled the end of the conversation.

After a few moments of silence, Monk asked Johnny, "Is that you?"

"Inequitably not!" Johnny insisted. "At the time that call was being made, I was in a conference with several of my associates. Since being informed of this alleged conversation, I have signed statements verifying my whereabouts."

"Thank you, Johnny," said Monk. "I also believe you didn't make the call. However, someone masquerading as you - someone whose voiceprint *exactly* matches yours - *did*."

I started to get a warning from my timer; I had to find someplace to hide, and fast. Praying for grace, I quickly and quietly crawled under the large conference table. Hoping that everyone in the room would be too focused on this inquisition so as not to notice me. I made it with barely a second to spare. I pressed the ring and - thank God - it worked; I dreaded the possibility that some day it would stop working, and I'd be exposed.

But for the moment, as I crawled back out from under the table, I was safe.

"Mr. Mayfair," asked Vice President Goldsmith. "What are your conclusions?"

Monk paused before answering. "I know I've offered a lot of conjecture based on the evidence, and a lot of speculation on my part. But there are too many things that have happened in the last three days that doesn't make sense. I would say that, probably at that place in Arizona, President Savage was *replaced* by a genetically-accurate *duplicate*. I say *duplicate* because of that last phone call. If there's a duplicate of Johnny out there, could the real Johnny be in danger of being replaced? Indeed, what if this is merely the *beginning* of a greater plan to replace *all* of us in this room with duplicates?" He paused to let that sink in. "As far as who is the ring leader of all this, I bring again to your attention the *secret* meeting between President Savage and the Pope. What if

the *Roman Catholic Church* is behind this, intending on launching a *jihad* - a holy war - to retake the USA in the name of their *intolerant* religion? The possibilities ... are frightening."

Vice President Goldsmith gave Clark a cold stare. Then she turned back to Monk. "What do you recommend, Mr. Mayfair?"

Monk was ready. "I recommend that President Savage be *temporarily* removed from office, then transported to a facility where he can be thoroughly examined to determine if something has been done to him."

"And if you find nothing?" probed Goldsmith.

"Then I recommend he be returned to office, of course. And I will immediately resign as Chief-of-Staff."

"Very well." She looked at the people around the table. "Do you all concur?"

Slowly, each person voiced their affirmations, tinged with regret and sadness.

"Mr. President," Monk explained coldly. "In accordance with the 25th Amendment of the Constitution, you are hereby relieved of your duties as President of the United States, effective immediately. You will be escorted from here via tram to an airfield where you'll be put aboard a jet for Wyoming." His features softened. "Please don't fight this, sir."

Clark said nothing as Monk gestured to the Federal Marshals in the room; they silently surrounded Clark. They apologized as they put his wrists behind him and bound them together with handcuffs. One withdrew his weapons from its holster in a preparatory move. Clark offered no resistance.

The doors opened and the Marshals escorted Clark out and to the left.

"I'm goin' with him," said the big-fisted Renny, jumping from his seat around the table.

"Me, too," added Pat, following.

Part of me had wanted to see what Monk's next move would be. But I knew my place was with Clark, to find a way to escape this trap. I slid outside in Pat's wake.

\* \* \*

"How could it have happened?" asked Carlie, sighing.

"It could only have happened in Arizona," mused Long Tom. "Still don't know why he went there in the first place. Are you planning on sending a rescue mission to Arizona to check out that installation?"

"I haven't decided," she answered. "We'll keep it under satellite surveillance and see if there's any movement."

"Madam Vice-President," announced Ham Brooks, standing. "You must assume the President's duties under the 25th Amendment. Mr. Chief Justice?"

A man in a dark suit approached. "If you would raise your right hand," he began. "And repeat after me ..."

A few minutes later, the only ones left in the room were Monk Mayfair and the now-President Carlie Goldsmith.

"Tragic," she reflected. "What will you tell the press?"

"I've been considering that." He smiled. "Why don't we blame it on the Catholics? We'll announce to the press that the President had a sudden seizure shortly after returning from his trip to Rome, and was taken to a special medical facility in Wyoming. Before lapsing into unconsciousness, the President directed the Vice-President to take the reins of command. We'll say that an investigation will be instigated to determine if the seizure had anything to do with the President's recent visit to Vatican City. We'll finish with something about our hearts and thoughts go out to President Savage and acting-President Goldsmith during this crisis."

"That's good," approved Carlie. "Monk?"

"Yes, Madame President?"

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "I just want to thank you. Knowing how many years you and Clark have had together, this must've been very difficult for you. You're a true patriot, and your country owes you a great debt of gratitude."

"It's nothing, Madame President."

"On a personal note, since I already have my own Chief of Staff, I'd like you to consider becoming my Vice President."

Monk beamed. "It would be an honor, Madame President. Thank you."

\* \* \*

### **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

A short corridor led to a private subway car. I was barely able to slip aboard and hold onto something before it took off at a considerable velocity. I put my hand on Clark's arm just to let him know that I was still with him.

This subway seemed to be quite extensive; we made several turns before emerging into an underground hangar. An executive jet was waiting for us.

The Federal Marshals transferred Clark into the jet and strapped him into a forward seat. Renny and Pat took seats nearby, watching him with scrutiny. With only seconds remaining, I slipped back to the restroom and waited there until we had taken off. Once more invisible, I sat towards the back of the plane.

"Where in Wyoming am I being taken?" Clark inquired.

"If you were truly the President," sneered Renny. "You'd know."

"*Devil's Tower*," answered Pat. "At this speed, we'll be there in about three hours."

Devil's Tower. The final act of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Did that movie exist in this timeline, or was it some bizarre coincidence that an actual secret base existed within the mesa? If it was anything like its fictional counterpart, it would be nigh-unto-impossible to escape from.

There was no way to talk to Clark without being discovered. And he couldn't do anything without alerting the Marshals. So it was up to me to get us out and get us back to Arizona.

I prayed.

\* \* \*

Monk Mayfair left the Press Room. Nora Salton had reported the story exactly as he had directed, and the reactions had been predictable.

He didn't like doing this; but for the sake of the nation, it had to be done. If he was proved wrong ... well, he'd answer for it when the time came.

\* \* \*

In a darkened office in the West Wing of the White House, a figure took out a cell phone. Then he removed his shoe and twisted the heel off, revealing a small plastic datacard. He inserted the datacard into the back of the phone. Then, knowing his conversation would now be secure, he pressed three numbers and Send. After several seconds, a single beep answered him.

"The Bear has been caged," he recited. "Now is the time to wake the Tiger!"

\* \* \*

I praised God for the fact that this was primarily a military jet. Behind a door at the back were several parachutes - one for each seat - and a convenient weapons locker.

I didn't know exactly what I was going to do. But I knew it had to be done quickly. Checking the time remaining of my invisibility, I had slightly under two minutes.

Just then I was inspired with a plan. It was a crazy plan, but it just might work. Moving quickly, I slipped one of the submachine guns, a grenade, and a pistol out of the weapons locker and enveloped them in my invisibility aura. Then I quietly moved to the front of the cabin, standing only a few feet from everyone else, but not in front of the cockpit door.

I heard the countdown timer click towards zero. But this time I was going to take advantage of my imminent visibility. Just before the timer hit zero, I yelled, "*All right! Nobody move!*"

As all eyes turned to see who had made the sound, I became visible. Standing at the front of the cabin with a submachine gun pointed at them, everyone but Clark gasped in surprise.

"*Liston!*" exclaimed Renny.

"That's *Colonel Liston* to you, Renwick!" I tried to match my double's attitude.

One of the guards closest to me started reaching for his sidearm. I swung the submachine gun at him and growled, "*Don't!* At this distance, I *can't* miss! Now, slowly, everybody remove your weapons and slide them along the floor to me!"

The guards were wiser than I would've given them credit for. They carefully unholstered their sidearms with two fingers and slid them towards the front of the aircraft.

Next, I rapped on the cockpit door. "Open up!"

It didn't move. I aimed down the aisle and fired from the hip. In the confined space, the shots were deafening. The door at the back of the plane - where I was aiming - absorbed the shots.

The display was sufficient. The door opened and the co-pilot poked his head out with a pistol leading the way. Cradling the submachine gun with one arm, and covering the others, I showed him the grenade. "You know what this can do if I let it go, don't you?"

The co-pilot gritted his teeth. "Yes."

"You know who I am and you know what I'm capable of doing. I have no problem taking you all with me if I have to." I paused. "Don't give me a reason to have to. Do you understand?"

He nodded, "Yes."

"Good. Now, take us down to a safe altitude, put the plane on auto-pilot, and come back here."

The co-pilot returned to his seat, the door open. As the nose tipped down and we descended, I turned to Renny. "Could you please take those things off him?"

His response was predictably unprintable and strongly negative.

"Or not," I muttered. "Ms. Savage, do *you* have any objections?"

She shook her head, then carefully released her seat belt and went to her cousin's side. Once he was free, she returned to her seat.

"Thank you. Now, lady and gentlemen, I have no reason for harming any of you unless you push me - do you understand?"

There were assorted nods of acknowledgement.

"There are parachutes in the back. Please put them on and leave the plane. Stay together, and you'll be fine. Clark. Can you fly this thing?"

He looked into the cockpit and answered, "Yes."

"Would you mind handing out the chutes?"

Clark went along with things without question.

"Are we over someplace relatively safe?" I asked the pilot.

He nodded and gave me our approximate location.

"Good. Now, starting with you two -" I indicated the Marines. "- please put the parachutes on and jump. Like I said, I have no intent in hurting anyone.

They started to get up and head towards the parachutes. Suddenly one of them lunged towards me. I lowered the barrel of the submachine gun and fired a single shot into the man's upper leg; he pitched over in the small compartment and rolled over in pain.

"You, find something to wrap that with!" I ordered the other Marine.

Clark had grabbed the first aid kit on the wall next to him; he tossed the Marine a roll of gauze.

I continued holding the gun on everyone, looking for any sign of another attack. "Despite what you think of me, I truly don't want anyone hurt. Renny, help them on with their parachutes."

"Do it yourself, *creep!*" he sneered back.

Lord, I thought, it's a wonder how You got through to him at all.

"Clark?"

Clark helped the Marines with their parachutes and cracked open the jet's side door. The wind swept through for a moment until the air pressure equalized. Giving one last nasty look back at us, they tumbled forward and out of the jet.

"All right. Now you two." I indicated the pilot and co-pilot. They followed instructions without resistance, to which I thanked them.

Now, with only Pat and Renny, I instructed to Renny to put on a parachute. "Be a good boy, Renwick. Don't make me shoot," I threatened. He put the parachute on and headed for the door. Before he jumped he gave me a withering stare, cursed, and promised he'd kill me the next time he saw me. I just nodded.

"You're not Colonel Liston," Pat suddenly said.

"What makes you think so?"

"You didn't remember me."

I lowered the gun. "You're right. I'm not the Colonel Liston you've encountered. But I am Perry Liston."

She turned to Clark. "And you're not the Clark Savage I know. Monk was right - there's something different about you."

"You need to go," Clark said.

"Not until I get some answers."

"You'd think I was insane if I told you the true story."

"Try me."

"Very well. I'm from another timeline. So is he. The base in Arizona was a secret Government installation called the *Time Tunnel*. In retrieving one of their people trapped in the early 1900's, the past was changed, creating this timeline. We were unchanged because we were in a temporal entropy field. When we tried to leave, we were ambushed by the Doc Savage of this timeline - the real President Savage. I took his place, and we've just been trying to get back in order to set things straight." He paused. "Now will you please put this parachute on and jump?"

She smiled. "Can't. We've gone too far; I'd never be able to find the rest of the group. So you're heading back to this Time Tunnel place in Arizona?"

"Yes."

"Then you better take this jet off auto-pilot and get on course."

"You *have* to leave," insisted Clark.

"I'm *not* leaving."

"Clark, close the door," I sighed.

He agreed. "Take the co-pilot's seat," he ordered her as he closed the door.

She moved forward. I took the first seat in the cabin. Clark climbed into the pilot's seat; he turned off the auto-pilot.

"What happened to the other Doc Savage, the one who went into the installation and attacked you?"

Clark turned to her. "He fell to his death," he said solemnly. "It was an accident. I'm sorry."

"He was always headstrong ... so *impulsive*." She sat looking ahead for several moments. "You're not that way. You're like he *used* to be, a long time ago, before the power started getting to him. I don't see that in you. You say you're trying to restore time?"

"It's hard to believe, but, yes."

Clark got us on course for Arizona; we made an easy bank to the left and climbed to a higher altitude.

Pat nodded. "I kinda wish you would've stayed. It was gutsy to do what you did with the Romans, but I applaud you. Too bad, though." She looked at both of us. "You wouldn't have shot us, would you?"

"Of course not," I replied.

"You bluff well. How'd you pull off the vanishing act?"

I held up my hand. "The ring. It was from my uncle. It worked on him, it works on me."

"Nice." She paused. "What about me? Is there another *me* in your timeline?"

"Yes," answered Clark. "She has her own island near Greece."

"Greece? I think I know the one. Big mesa in the middle?"

He nodded. "You - she - built a house there. There used to be a health spa on the island, but now it's a refuge for unwanted children from all over the world."

Her eyes brightened. "Children? How many?"

"Thousands," I supplied. "All ages and nationalities. Everybody calls her Aunt Patty."

Pat got real quiet then. She turned and stared out the windshield; there was sadness in her eyes.

\* \* \*

The news reached Monk Mayfair within the hour.

"They should've arrived at Devil's Tower seven minutes ago, sir!" reported a technician in Communications. "There's been no sign of them!"

Monk cursed. Then he turned and headed for the Oval Office.

\* \* \*

"He must've gotten free," Carlie concluded. "We can only assume the others aboard the jet are either hostages ... or are dead."

Thinking that Pat and Renny might be dead made Monk's blood boil, but he put a grip on it.

"He's gotta be headin' for Arizona," offered Monk. "I suggest we head him off at the pass – send interceptors to see if they can make contact and assess the situation. And shoot the bastard down if necessary!"

Carlie looked at him decisively. "Do it."

\* \* \*

This other Pat Savage was truly amazing. She'd accepted our story from the beginning. And she continued to ask detailed questions about the differences in the two timelines.

"So what happened in your timeline that made it so different from this one?"

"Do you remember when I went back - alone and unarmed - to the caves in Maine after Wail?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "That was the stupidest thing you'd ever done. You didn't even let *us* know."

"Remember how I ran into some men who had followed me in to ambush me?"

"You beat the crap out of them."

"Well, in *my* timeline, they *succeeded* in ambushing me. They knocked me out, then put me into suspended animation. I woke up in 1998."

Pat was stunned.

"In my timeline, nobody knew I had gone to the caves, so they didn't know where to find me. Then, on top of that, Edward R. Murrow exposed the Crime College." He paused to let that sink in. "It gets worse from there."

"The College was *exposed*?" she gasped.

"Clark wasn't around to defend himself," I added. "And, considering the circumstances, you all did the best you could. Unfortunately, the media labeled Clark a war criminal ... compared him to Josef Mengele. Then there were the Senate hearings and ... well, it got ugly."

Pat stared ahead, her mouth agape. "You said it went downhill from there. How bad *did* it get?"

"You sure you want to hear it? It might be a little *too* shocking."

"You got me curious," she gave me a grin. "Shoot."

Clark continued evenly. "Except for you, Monk, and Ham, the team scattered. Ham was disbarred. You lost your left eye in a fight. While you were recovering, you and Monk had an affair, resulting in an illegitimate daughter."

"My mother-in-law, by the way," I piped in. "In our timeline, your granddaughter is my wife."

Clark continued. "Depression and drinking overcame Ham, and he eventually committed suicide."

Pat gasped.

"Do you want me to continue?"

She slowly nodded her head.

"Not knowing that I had been in suspended animation during most of this time, you hated me for not being there. You blamed all your problems on me."

Pat swore. "I can see how that would happen."

"You wanted to remain young, so you began taking silphium in ever-increasing doses. You invented an alter ego - a daughter named Penelope - to cover the fact that you weren't aging, and you - Pat - became a recluse on your own island."

"The island was named after your illegitimate daughter - Caroline," I added.

"Caroline's a nice name," muttered Pat absently.

"Do you want me to stop?" Clark asked sympathetically.

She was silent for a few seconds. "You said I - *she* - takes care of kids now. Does it get much worse before that?"

Clark put a hand on her arm. "There were a few *incidents* between us before you finally saw the truth. There's no animosity between us since."

"Thank goodness," she sighed.

We flew for a few minutes without saying anything. I walked back to check on the damage I had done when I shot the submachine gun into the cargo hold. God was good; there was no damage. I went forward and reported my observation.

"Thank God," Clark said.

Pat turned to him and blinked. "What did you say?"

"I said 'thank God'," he repeated.

"You're probably not used to hearing that," I commented. "You said you saw something different in Clark, right?"

She nodded.

"That's the part of the story that came *after* he came out of hibernation. He had been transported from Maine to Portland, Oregon. As he wandered about, he stepped into a rescue mission where I was preaching. You see, I'm a Christian. And after Clark heard the Gospel he also became a Christian."

The expression on her face was distaste. "Now I know I'm dreaming! You're both Jesus Freaks?"

"Yep," acknowledged Clark. "And, in our timeline, so are you."

She stood and paced the passenger cabin. "No! I'm a thinking person! You'd never catch me falling for some mythological clap-trap!"

"Your other self was the same way," explained Clark. "And it took quite a lot to bring her to that realization. But now she is, and she's much better off for it."

"You're *joking*," she blurted.

We didn't respond.

"You're *not* joking."

"If you think that's something, over the last few years the rest of the team have become Christians as well. Johnny was the last one, a few months ago."

She laughed. "Johnny? He's the biggest critic of religion in the USA. He's even got his own cable show."

"Like I said," concluded Clark. "There are a lot of differences in our two timelines."

Pat sat back down in the co-pilot's seat. She seemed to be in deep thought. We'd given her a lot to think about, and I hoped she believed us.

I went back to the passenger compartment and sat down, but I was up a second later when I heard a squawking alarm coming from the cockpit. I rushed back in.

"What is it?" I asked.

"They found us," Clark assessed calmly.

"*Bravo Alpha One Niner Five*, you are commanded to respond or you will be fired upon!" came the voice over the speakers.

"Let me talk to 'em!" barked Pat.

Clark handed her the radio. "This is Bravo Alpha One Niner Five, Patricia Savage speaking. What is the meaning of these threats?"

"We have been instructed to have your craft land at the nearest airfield. If you do not comply, we have orders to fire upon you and force you down."

"How maneuverable is this jet?" I asked Clark.

"Not as maneuverable as his," he responded. "*Strap in!*"

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

On the other side of the world, in the People's Republic of China, a meeting was taking place in a safe room far below ground. A door slid open, and a uniformed man entered. Without hesitation, everyone else in the room stood and saluted. He gestured for them to stand down, then walked over to another uniformed man a single rank below him.

"Major?"

"Everything is proceeding as scheduled, Colonel!"

"Excellent! Our revenge is at hand! The accursed United States will pay for the death of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung. What is the status of *Sleeping Tiger*?"

"The missile is ready to launch, Colonel!"

The Colonel smiled. "Then *launch!*"

\* \* \*

On the island of Cuba, twenty-seven year old Pepito Juarez was taking his dog Benito for a walk when he felt the ground vibrate beneath his feet. Benito felt it, too, and he strained nervously against his leash. Pepito knelt down to calm him when the earth suddenly lurched and sent him landing on his backside.

Frightened, he held tightly to his dog and prayed.

People came out of their houses, looking around and talking concernedly about what was happening.

Just then, all hell broke loose.

Several homes were suddenly thrown violently into the air. Pepito heard screams, but he was busy covering his and Benito's heads from the fall of debris. As he tried getting to his feet to run away, the air was filled with a deep rumble like that of a volcano.

Emerging from a secret silo that had lain dormant for decades, a powerful missile rose into the Cuban sky. The flame from its powerful rockets blossomed out, incinerating everything it engulfed - including the quiet little neighborhood, Pepito Juarez, and his dog Benito.

\* \* \*

Within seconds, both the USA and the IBSA knew of the launch.

Elijah Morgan ordered IBSA interceptors deployed from orbital platforms. However, due to the low altitude and highly populated areas where the missile flew, the interceptors were painfully ineffective.

By the time it had been decided that the cities were worth the risk, it was too late.

The missile had entered into USA airspace.

\* \* \*

Carlie Goldsmith had not formally moved into the Presidential bedroom in the East Wing yet, but she and her lifemate had claimed a guest suite and were sharing a celebratory drink.

Suddenly Secret Service agents burst in on them and rushed them out of the room. As they did, she was informed of the missile's launch and intended target.

A special elevator took them to a bunker deep below the White House. Katherine was taken aside while Carlie was escorted into a command center. Monk Mayfair was already there waiting for her. She was briefed on the unsuccessful attempts by the IBSA to intercept the missile.

Then she contacted Elijah Morgan.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" she yelled.

"We didn't launch the missile!" he defended, equally in shock.

"It came from Cuba - *your* territory!"

"We don't have any land-based missiles on Cuba! We're as much in the dark as you are! Can you intercept?"

"We're trying, but it's too damned evasive!" She stared with hatred in her eyes. "Listen, Morgan! In thirty seconds, Washington D.C. is going to be destroyed! Unless you stop that missile, I'm going to send everything we've got *right down your throat!*"

\* \* \*

We had been trying to stall the pursuit jets by having Pat repeat that we weren't hostile, but they weren't listening.

Suddenly, though, we were alone.

"The pursuit planes!" Clark suddenly announced. "They're moving *away!*"

"Are they going to shoot?" I asked.

"Let's not find out!" replied Pat. "May I?"

"Be my guest," nodded Clark.

Pat took the co-pilot's wheel and shoved the throttles with a vengeance. We leaped forward and into a corkscrew roll. My hands gripped the armrests as I was strained against my seat belt.

\* \* \*

It was too late for Washington D.C.

Most of the city was mercifully asleep when the sun appeared in the night sky. A moment later the fireball incinerated everything within a twenty-mile radius.

\* \* \*

"Something's happened," I said.

"Yes," agreed Clark.

Pat had stopped her evasive maneuvers, but we were still going at top speed. She glanced over at Clark and asked, "I didn't see anything! What happened?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "But we've got to get to Arizona as soon as possible."

"Pat, do you have a cell phone?" I asked.

"Yes! It's in my pocket!"

"I'll take the wheel!" ordered Clark. "Get your cell out!"

They briefly switched roles, and Pat fished the cell phone out of her pocket. She handed it to Clark and took the wheel back.

"Who are you calling?"

"Hopefully someone close enough to the surface to receive the signal."

A few moments later, Clark reported his failure; he had been unable to get through to the Time Tunnel." I hope they're watching for us," I commented.

"We'll be there in just a few more minutes," Pat informed us.

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE**

The attack on *Disney World* had made men aware of the need for defenses beyond short-range non-atomic missiles. However it was cheaper and more practical on both sides to build orbiting space stations and defensive satellites than costly land-based missile silos.

Therefore, when the USA responded to the missile launched from IBSA territory, it was a simple matter to initiate pre-programmed changes in orbital flight paths to direct these satellites around the globe and deploy their payloads over their selected targets.

The IBSA, cognizant of the USA's actions, responded in kind.

Within minutes of Washington D.C.'s annihilation, hundreds of atomic missiles and plasma charges rained radioactive destruction down upon both sides. Microwave collectors silently swept across the land, turning lush forests and lakes into burnt kindling and boiling water, and turning valuable agricultural crops into acre after acre of nothing but scorched earth.

Because the only time atomic weapons had ever been seen on American soil was the destruction of Miami, very few people born since then knew what an atomic blast was. Fewer still knew what to do about it.

And even if they had known to take cover, they couldn't because the Civil Defense program had eroded over the last fifteen years; any shelters not converted to storage rooms were in no shape to take refugees.

So in the end, there was nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide. And the gods of the USA were impotent.

\* \* \*

## **Arizona**

I stood at the edge of the pit and looked down into the darkness.

*"He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God:*

*many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the LORD. Blessed is that man that maketh the LORD his trust, and respecteth not the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies."*

I had tossed a lightstick into the pit a little while ago. I followed the light as it went deeper and deeper, until at last the darkness consumed it.

I turned away from the pit and walked towards the lean-to with the campfire next to it.

"It's me, Pat," I announced.

"Okay," she acknowledged. There was a bandage around her eyes.

"Where's Clark?"

"He went to check out the wreckage again, see if he could salvage any more."

I looked towards the wreckage of our jet. After the EMP had fried our controls and forced us to bail out, Clark manually dumped the remaining fuel. It was the only thing that kept the jet from burning after the crash.

I thought about walking over to join him, but I felt a sudden wave of weakness wash over me. So I sat down next to Pat.

"What did you see?" she asked. "Is there anything left of that Time Tunnel place?"

"Not a chance," I said with a slow shake of my head. "Enough debris got thrown out to prove that the missile just didn't smack into the sand. It went down like a hot knife through butter before it exploded."

"Could anyone have survived?"

"No." I didn't want to talk about it. The evidence was clear. That was no ordinary missile that took out the Time Tunnel. There was just too much destruction for conventional explosives. That, and there was the way I felt. There were sores already breaking out on our arms.

No. This had been atomic. And this would be our last stand.

\* \* \*

I had emptied my vest and set the items around me. There were the electronics which were now no more than a few ounces of fused metal. I had split up the foodstuffs and water; Pat was sipping from one of the small bottles of water.

Clark walked towards us. I noticed that his stride wasn't as strong as it used to be. I suspected the radiation was taking its toll on him also. He beckoned for me to join him. "Be right back," I dismissed myself.

Clark and I walked together, out of earshot of Pat.

"Anything salvageable from the jet?"

"No. Not really. Crash pretty much tore it apart. I was able to find one thing though." He pulled the object out and showed me. "It's still got a full clip."

"Not for self-defense, I take it?"

"I don't like the idea of suicide, Perry. I feel that it's wrong in the eyes of God. But I know enough about the effects radiation has on the human body to ..." He paused. "It might be the most merciful option open to us."

"Maybe," I muttered. "You know, the Bible said things would end this way - you know, the elements melting with fervent heat, all that stuff. And Dot and I were talking about it. We decided that - if we were still both alive when the end came and the bombs were dropping - we wouldn't run from it. We pictured this scene, with both of us walking hand-in-hand towards Ground Zero. Go out in a blaze of glory, ministering the Gospel right unto the end." I chuckled bitterly. "We didn't want to die separated from one another. What a joke!"

Clark knew better than to answer.

After a few minutes I asked, "Does Pat know?"

"Yes."

We returned to where Pat was. I gave Clark some of the water and his share of the energy bars - not that it would help us; it was more like a last meal.

As I shifted my weight, I felt the teddy bear in the cargo pocket of the pants. I took him out and held him in front of me.

And I started to cry.

"Perry?" inquired Pat. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

"No," she insisted. "C'mon, what is it?"

I handed her the teddy bear. "He's just like one I got my ... wife a few years ago. Dot ... that's my wife ... she is ... would've been ... your granddaughter ... the daughter of your daughter Caroline."

"We can't give up, Perry," Pat encouraged.

"And why *not*?" I exploded. "We're out of options! And unless Clark's been keeping a time machine hidden for just this type of emergency, I think this is the end of the trail." I held the purple teddy bear in my lap and tears flooded my eyes. "I'm sorry, Dot! I'm so sorry!"

Pat reached out and placed a hand on my shoulder. "It's okay, Perry - we'll get through!"

I looked up angrily at her. "No, Pat, it's *not* okay, and we *won't* get through it! This is the *end*! We've all taken a lethal dose of radiation! We're dead already!"

I looked down at the teddy bear, and started crying again. "You know what the hardest thing about this is? Since Dot didn't even exist in this timeline, I don't know if I'll see her in Heaven!"

I suddenly felt both Pat's and Clark's arms around my shoulders, and I leaned against them, weeping, "I don't know if I could spend eternity in Heaven without her."

After a few moments they lost the strength to hold on, and went back to sitting.

Clark thought about Bonnie.

Pat thought about other things.

\* \* \*

In a bunker thirty miles below Atlanta, Georgia, Colonel Liston and Major Clayton found a private place. He had been sharing his newfound joy ever since returning from North Carolina. And now the two of them sat, hands joined, heads bowed, as she prayed to become a Christian as he was. She raised her head and released a sigh; there was a change in her expression that hadn't existed before.

"So now what?" she asked.

"I don't know. We just see what happens."

They embraced and kissed.

Six miles above Georgia, a USA satellite had been making its rounds with mechanical precision. As it reached Atlanta, it locked onto several targets, and then discharged its microwave collector.

Everyone within the bunker – including Perry and Bonnie Liston – was quickly and quietly vaporized.

\* \* \*

Time passed. It was still dark.

I didn't put much hope in seeing the sunrise. I had apologized for my earlier outburst of emotions. Clark and Pat both understood. I wasn't surprised that I broke as easily as I had - especially looking back over the events of the last 48 hours.

But I was back on track, thinking of God's promise of life with Him after death.

All three of us had already thrown up what we'd munched on earlier, but I still felt nauseous and fatigued.

"A toast," Clark said suddenly, lifting his bottle of water. His face was pale, and a blister had broken out on his cheek.

We raised our bottles; mine had a few drops left on the bottom, but felt like it weighed ten pounds.

"Here's to what could have been."

Pat weakly added, "Here's to what *was*."

I managed a smile. "And here's to what will come."

We touched bottles. I took a sip of mine, but my stomach rejected it; I turned and threw up on the ground again.

Pat also doubled over. "Clark," she struggled to speak. "What ... comes ... next?"

He held her, and she relaxed in his arms. "What did you say?" he whispered, finding it hard to concentrate.

"What ... do I ... have to look ... forward to?"

"It *can* be Heaven," he softly told her. "If ... you're saved."

"How?" she sighed. "What ... do I do ... to be saved?"

He smiled and told her.

\* \* \*

Clark lowered Pat's still form to the ground and crawled over to my side.

"Perry?" his voice penetrated the fog. "Still ... with me?"

I opened my eyes. "Not ... long."

"Pat ... is home." I knew what he was talking about.

I managed a smile. "Wadda ya know ... she ... beat us ... to it. How 'bout ... one last prayer ... before we ... join her?"

"Sure," he replied weakly. "God, You know ... we did our best ... but it wasn't enough. We're ready ... to come home now. Into ... Your hands ... do we commend ... our spirits."

"Amen," I added.

I rolled onto my back; small rocks dug into my skin, but I didn't care anymore. I was tired. I just wanted to go to sleep, knowing that I would wake up in the presence of God. I suddenly felt light-headed, and the world began to swirl around me in colors.

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

The swirling dance of colors gradually faded into an impenetrable blackness, and I thought for certain that this was the end. Anytime, now, I expected the darkness to recede, driven back by the brilliance of Heaven and accompanied by the sound of the angels as they stood before the Throne, their voices raised in never-ending praise.

Instead, I heard - or at least I thought I heard, the sound of beeping, like the monitoring equipment surrounding Sunni when we first were able to visit her after surgery. I moaned. At least, I thought I moaned. I wasn't exactly sure. I felt my left wrist being lifted up, and the delicate press of fingers against it.

"He's starting to come out of it," said a male voice, sounding somewhat tinny in my ears, as if it were being filtered through layers of cotton batting.

I was twelve, and just coming out of the anesthetic after having my tonsils removed. *No! That was ages ago!* Where was I?

"Good," another voice - this one, female - replied. "That was cutting it *too* close."

"Yeah," sighed the male voice. "*Way* too close!"

Footsteps moving away; it was a light tread, probably a woman. A click. The woman's voice again. "Jason. Uncle Perry's starting to regain consciousness."

"Dad's still unconscious, but his vitals are improving rapidly!"

"Rad levels?"

"Well within the safe zone. Should be clean within the hour."

"Thank God!"

The woman walked back to where I lay. I started to open my eyes, and looked up into her smiling face. For a moment she reminded me of Carrie, Dot's mother. There was a similarity in their faces, the color of their hair.

"Where ... am I?"

"You're safe, Mr. Liston," she informed me.

"Clark. Is he okay?"

"Yes. You both are. We were able to purge all the radiation from your bodies."

"Pat ..."

"I'm sorry. We were unable to retrieve her body."

"How ... what ...?"

Her smile was trusting. "It's a long story, and I'll let my brother tell you both. Soon. In the meantime, though, rest."

I opened my mouth, but decided against it. I drifted back to sleep until Clark's voice woke me. We were dressed in white coveralls, and were escorted by a man to what looked like a consultation room. The walls were a gentle pastel color, and there were a couple of couches

against the walls in a comfortable setting. As we headed there, there seemed to be an odd familiarity to the halls, until Clark finally said, "Perry. This is the Time Tunnel complex."

"But how? It was destroyed!"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "But I'm sure we'll find out soon."

We didn't have to wait long. The woman I had seen earlier and another man of approximately the same age came in and sat across from us. They both wore coveralls similar to ours, but with a uniform-style cut to them.

"We know you've been through a lot, and you probably have a lot of questions," the man said. "They will all be answered soon. First, though, how are you feeling?"

"Grateful," answered Clark, and I nodded agreement.

"Well, we were blessed to be able to retrieve you when we did. A few more minutes and it would've been too late."

My eyebrow rose at her casual use of the word 'blessed'.

The young man looked down at the floor for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts.

"Who are you?" asked Clark.

"My name is Jason. This is my sister, Jennifer. We're scientists here." He paused. "First, I must repent to both of you. This whole *nightmare* ... is my fault."

Clark and I started to respond to that, but Jason held up a hand. "Let me explain. Then I'll answer your questions. There are many things that won't make sense. First, you may have surmised that this is the Time Tunnel complex. This is the year 2085. We were trying to transport Doug Phillips and Tony Newman back through time to their proper era when something went wrong." He paused. "I miscalculated, and Doug Phillips alone was transported to your cruise ship in 2005." He paused. "I should've retrieved him as soon as I knew he was off-course, but I didn't. By that time, there were so many witnesses present that pulling him out would've been disastrous. So we allowed things to play out. When you tried retrieving Tony Newman, you made the same miscalculation as I did, resulting in Newman's brief - but significant - appearance in 1948, and creating the alternate timeline you found yourselves in." He took a deep breath. "Now we're able to straighten things out and return everyone to their proper time period. But I felt I owed you both an explanation and an apology." He paused, and looked at us with pleading eyes. "Can you forgive me?"

We were quiet for several moments. This was all so ... fantastic. I didn't know what to say. But we forgave him, and were able to say so.

"What will you do with Newman and Phillips?" asked Clark.

"It will be as if none of this other ever happened," explained Jennifer. "They will be transported from 1905 to 1975, as we originally intended."

"Anyhow, back to what I was saying," said Jason. "Now that we've brought you here, we'll straighten the rest out. We'll pull Doug and Tony from 1905 – just before our earlier attempt – and bring them back to their proper time. There won't be any surprise appearance that'll end up with an alternate timeline. Then we can send you two back to 2005."

"Not just yet." I suddenly said.

Everyone looked at me with surprised expressions.

"What?" replied Jason.

"You've got the capability of sending Clark and I back and forth in time, right?"

"Yes," he said reluctantly.

"And I assume you have the capability of viewing the past?"

"Well, sure."

"Good. Can you show me July 17, 1953?"

"That's the date Ham committed suicide," Clark said soberly. "Why do you want to see that?"

"When I was hanging on the cross back on Caroline Island, and God gave me my little time-out with Long Tom, he also passed on a message. He said, 'Ham says thanks; your words were in the nick of time.' Then factor in the dream both of us had before I asked to come along."

"With the two of us in the same room as Ham," added Clark.

"At the time I didn't understand it, since he died before I was born. All this time we've assumed Ham committed suicide, and died without Christ. But his message to me was as one who did not die without Christ, but as a Christian!"

"Could his death have been something *other* than a suicide?"

"That's what I want to find out. Jason?"

"Yeah, I catch on! Follow me!"

We went into the room where the Time Tunnel itself was. It was the only thing that looked familiar; the rest of the equipment looked like some futuristic science-fiction show. *Well why not*, I corrected myself; after all, it *was* the future.

Jason brought up a picture between the concentric rings of the Time Tunnel. The resolution was far clearer, and the sound was better. "Okay, here we are! He's just sent off his wife and son."

\* \* \*

Little Donny waved back from the window as his wife Dorothy turned the car down the drive and out of sight. Ham closed the front door of his house and locked it.

The house was quiet. Good. He hated to do things this way, but it had to be done.

A glass of amber liquid in his hand, he walked over to the door leading from his study to the back yard. He stepped outside and looked around. He downed half of the glass and took a deep breath, releasing it in a tired sigh. He slowly walked back into the study, pushing the door into a partially open position. He didn't bother to lock it.

He walked to his favorite chair. On the table to his left was a freshly-opened bottle of alcohol and a 9mm Beretta automatic. On the table to his right was a law book and a tray with an envelope, a key, and a sheet of stationary. More law books were stacked on the floor around him. He picked up the personalized stationary and read the letter to Douglas Martin one more time.

*My good friend Douglas:*

*I've sent Dorothy and Donny away for the weekend. Enclosed is a key to the front door. Please bring the police before Monday morning. I know things have gone dreadfully bad for me these past few years. I know there can be no way I can fully answer for my deeds, but I hope this act will redeem me in some small way. Take care of my family, and the package I have entrusted to your safekeeping.*

*T. M. Brooks*

He folded the stationary around the key and put it into the prepared envelope. Checking his watch, he put the envelope into the mailbox. Within the hour, a mailman delivered the mail, taking the envelope with him. Ham watched from the second floor window, and smiled to himself. He slowly walked down the stairs and stepped into the study.

A man with a revolver stood just inside the back yard door, the weapon leveled at him.

"Who ... who are you?" Ham asked, his voice slurred and his eyes sleepy.

"I am James Detrich," the man answered proudly. "That name shouldn't mean anything to you, but -"

"You work at the Crime College," he identified, then amended it. "*Worked.*"

"Even intoxicated, you are very perceptive. Now, where is the information?"

Ham didn't seem to hear him. He took another sip from his glass, slipping the other hand into the pocket of his smoking jacket. "What information is that, Bentley?"

"Detrich!" he corrected, annoyed. "And you know what information I'm talking about. The information connecting me to Sloan."

"Sloan who, Mr. Petrovich?"

"That's Detrich, you drunken sot! 'Sweet Tooth' Sloan - the one who captured your boss Savage and put him into suspended animation!"

"He did *what?*" Ham said, surprised - and suddenly cold sober.

"Wait a minute!" Detrich exclaimed. "You're not drunk!"

"No!" There was no slur in his voice as Ham's hand came out of the jacket pocket clenching the Beretta. "And you have fallen into my trap!"

"What?" Detrich gawked.

"And now, dear fellow, you will take me to *Mister 'Sweet Tooth' Sloan*."

He smiled and waved the pistol at Ham. "Not if I shoot you first."

Ham's laugh confused Detrich. "That'll be a good trick. You see, when you came in through that door, you passed under a device invented by one of my colleagues. It burned off the firing pin of your gun." He paused. "Oh, please, don't take *my* word for it ... *shoot!*"

Detrich pointed the revolver and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

"Skeptic," quipped Ham dryly. "Take me to Sloan. *Now*."

It started to look like Detrich was going to drop the gun to the floor. Instead, however, he suddenly threw the weapon at Ham, causing him to step aside. Then, while Ham's aim was off, Detrich rushed the lawyer and knocked him down. His hand then found the small automatic. The two men wrestled with the pistol between them.

Suddenly there was a single muffled gunshot. Both men froze, then slumped to the floor as one.

A moment passed. Then one of them got to his feet - Detrich. He looked down on the still form of Ham Brooks; blood spread swiftly from the hole in his chest, then looked around to see if anyone had been attracted by the shot. Then he quickly pulled Ham's corpse and dropped it in the chair. He sniffed at the glass and bottle he had been drinking from, smelling not alcohol but ordinary colored water. He dumped the water onto the grass outside the door, and found another similar bottle with real alcohol. He half-filled the glass and poured some of the liquor into the lawyer's mouth, letting it dribble onto his front. Finally, he placed the discharged automatic in Ham's hand and curled the fingers around the grip and trigger, letting it hang loosely in his lap.

He finally wiped his fingerprints from anything he may have touched, grabbed his useless revolver and departed the room as he had left it. He locked the door behind him and wiped the knob clean.

\* \* \*

"My God!" sighed Clark. "It wasn't a suicide after all! He was murdered!"

"Considering all the physical evidence, no wonder they concluded it was a suicide," commented Jason.

"Another thing," I added. "That was the study I saw in my dreams."

"Yes, it was," agreed Clark.

"And now I understand!" I exclaimed, excited. "We know we can't change Ham's physical future. We've already seen what can happen from one small change in history. But we *can* change Ham's *spiritual* future."

"His *spiritual* future?" asked Clark.

I nodded. "God wants us to go back in time and minister the Gospel to him!"

"Is that possible?" asked Jason.

"It *has* to be!" I was now grinning. "Otherwise why would God put us here at *this* time and *this* place, with the ability of accomplishing it?"

"Makes sense," nodded Jason.

"But what if it doesn't work?" asked Jennifer. "What if there's another change in the timeline?"

"All they have to do is make sure the situation doesn't change," explained Jason. "Ham Brooks must still die."

I was jubilant. "It *will* work! It *does* work! Ham himself verified it to me from Heaven! I'm absolutely sure of this!"

"Yes!" agreed Clark, enthusiastically. "It's practically screaming at us from Scripture! 'How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? *And how shall they preach except they be sent?*'"

"Okay, I'm convinced!" nodded Jason. "Jennifer?"

She grinned. "Let's make it happen!"

\* \* \*

Jason made the settings while Clark and I prayed.

"Okay!" Jason called. "Go!"

We took one last glance at each other, then ran into the Time Tunnel together. Thunder boomed around us, and lightning transitioned into a kaleidoscope universe.

We tumbled over and over again in the zero-gravitational void of time, landing awkwardly in Ham's study.

"We made it!" I whispered as Clark helped me to my feet. "We're here!"

We heard the departing voices of Ham's wife and son, and heard Ham head into the study. His eyes opened wide with shock at seeing us. He looked over at his automatic on the side table and started to move for it.

"Wait!" Clark said, then shifted into Mayan. "It's me, Ham! Don't be afraid!"

The lawyer froze in mid-step.

"Doc! By Jove, it *is* you! Where have you been? What happened to you?"

"As strange as this sounds, I've come from the future. I got your package, Ham, the one with the *Silas Poteet* codeword." He placed his hands on the lawyer's shoulders. His voice cracked with emotion. "You have done well, brother. I am proud of you."

Both Ham's and Clark's eyes had misted over. "Now I know that's you, Doc. What happened?"

"I was placed into suspended animation for fifty years. But we don't have much time, brother. I know what you're planning on doing, and I don't want you to change a thing. Everything will be all right. But first I need you to talk with this man. Ham Brooks, Perry Liston."

I shook Ham's hand. I was awestruck. "Are you a scientist?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "Actually, I'm a preacher. And I have something important to tell you ..."

\* \* \*

Ten minutes later, the three of us rose from our knees. Clark hugged Ham with tears in his eyes. "I can't say I understand it all, Doc! But I ... I *believe*."

He turned to me and hugged me. "Thank you, Perry! I'll never forget this!"

I smiled. "I know."

"Doc, I have to admit something. I was planning on luring the thief who betrayed the College to this place."

"And you will."

"But there's more. I was planning on forcing him to the person who was behind it."

"Yes. I know."

He held up his hand. There was grief in his face. "I was going ... to kill them."

I didn't know what to say.

Clark did.

"Ham." He put his hands on his friend's shoulders and their eyes met; he spoke firmly, but with compassion. "I know your plans. And I know this is going to sound strange, but I want you to continue with your plans just as if we were never here. You will *not* kill them; something else will happen. It'll be okay." He smiled, and Ham's fears melted.

"I trust you, Doc."

I looked at the device on my wrist. "I'm sorry, but we've got to go."

Each of us embraced Ham one last time, then Clark signaled Jason for retrieval, and we disappeared from 1953.

In the empty room, Ham Brooks blinked. "Fascinating." Then he looked upward; the corners of his lips curled up. "And thanks."

\* \* \*

Clark and I stepped out of the smoke of the Time Tunnel, back in 2085.

"Mission accomplished," I said.

"How can you tell?" asked Jennifer.

"By faith." I looked over at Clark. "I know it was hard for you to hold back."

Our eyes met and he nodded.

We handed Jason our signaling devices. "I'm afraid I have to send you two back to 2005 now. You'll return the night before Phillips appeared, while you two are asleep."

"Can you do that?"

He nodded. "It's tricky, but I can do it. No mistakes this time."

I suddenly asked, "Clark, wouldn't you like to see this new-generation Time Tunnel? Jason, forgive the pun, but do you have the time to take him on a quick tour?"

He brightened. "Sure! You want to?"

Clark smiled. "Please. Perry?"

"Thanks, I'll pass. All this high tech might cause my head to explode. I'll just stay here and talk to Jennifer."

"Okay." And they moved off.

As soon as they were out of even Clark's sensitive hearing, I turned to Jennifer. "When you retrieved me, were there any ... *personal* items with me?"

"Yes. They were decontaminated. Is there anything in particular?"

I met her eyes. "The bear."

She smiled. "Yes. I'm afraid you won't be able to take it back with you."

"I didn't think so. Actually, I have a question - and please, answer me honestly. Are you and Jason Clark's children?"

The shocked look on her face gave me my answer. "How did you ...?"

"When I started coming to, I heard you talk to Jason about my condition. Then Jason referred to Clark as *Dad*. Don't worry. I figured if you had wanted him to know, you would have told him yourself."

She gave a relieved smile. "It might change things. Thank you for keeping it to yourself."

"My pleasure. Nice to know you two will turn out fine. Now as for the teddy bear ... " I explained about Dot's teddy bear, and why I got this one. "I want you to have him. Go ahead and call him *Grape Juice*. Call him a present from your ... *Uncle Perry*." I gave her a grin.

"Thank you. I'm honored." She gave a hug, and I gave her a kiss on the cheek. "And thanks for helping us set things straight with Ham."

"Glad we could help."

"I'd ask about *my* future, but ..." I shook my head. "I'd rather not. Why spoil the fun?"

"Are you *sure* you don't want to know what's just 'around the corner', relatively speaking?" she asked. The expression on her face was what finally made me ask why.

"I can't really give *specifics*, but ... let's just say that this next adventure is going to be absolutely *super*."

She flashed me a mischievous smile - which now reminded me of Bonnie - and left it at that.

\* \* \*

In another chamber near the Tunnel, we stood together for final hugs and a prayer from Clark.

Then we stepped into a metal tube and lights came on.

\* \* \*

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

**July 17, 2005**

Clark fell out of bed.

"You okay, hon?" asked Bonnie, rolling over to look down at him.

Clark sat up, still on the floor. "Yes ... fine," he answered, a bit dazed.

"You have a habit of falling out of beds that I should be aware of?"

"*Ha ha*," he chuckled dryly, getting to his feet as Bonnie pulled the covers aside for him.

He climbed into bed and kissed her; she hummed appreciatively. "I like that ... *husband*."

"I like that, too ... *wife*," he smiled back. Then, almost as an afterthought, he placed his hand lightly on her belly and asked, "What do you think about *Jason* if it's a boy, and *Jennifer* if it's a girl?"

"I like it," she smiled. "What made you think of those two?"

"It just came to me."

"They're good names, sugah. But it's late; let's get some sleep. Good night."

"Good night. I love you."

"I love you, too."

\* \* \*

Dot looked over the edge of the bed. "You okay?"

I looked into her face. My eyes welled up with emotion. "*I'm back*," I said in a choked whisper.

"I didn't know you were gone." she replied with a half-grin.

I got to my feet and sat on the edge of the bed. As I looked at Dot, my eyes caught a small purple teddy bear sitting in its usual place on her bedside table. At that moment, everything caught up to me, and I started weeping. Dot immediately moved close and wrapped me up in her arms. After a few moments I was able to compose myself.

"Are you okay?" Dot asked cautiously.

"Yeah," I replied softly. "I've gotta talk to Clark!"

"You must've had a bad dream, hon," Dot soothed. "Come to bed. You can talk to Clark in the morning."

A dream? I repeated in my mind. Now I was confused. Everything had been so ... so *vivid*. Was she right? Had all of this just been a bad dream?

Dot again encouraged me to come to bed. This time I gave in, and slid under the covers with her.

"You okay now?" she asked, concerned.

"Yeah," I smiled. "Thanks. I love you."

"I love you, too. Sleep well."

Dot leaned in and kissed me. It felt *wonderful*, as if we hadn't kissed in months. I put my arms around her and our eyes met. Then we kissed again. I told her again that I loved her, and she said the same. My eyes focused on her for a moment, then on the teddy bear.

Then I smiled and thanked God, and settled into a peaceful night's sleep.

\* \* \*

## **EPILOGUE** **Arizona 1975**

Ann MacGregor had never seen the place this deserted before. It scared her.

There had rarely been a time she hadn't heard the sound of people scurrying about, or maneuvering in electric golf carts. She unconsciously put her hands in the pockets of a familiar lab coat she wasn't wearing anymore; she recovered herself and was glad that Dr. Swain hadn't seen her *faux pas*. The two of them were surrounded by miles of metal and plastic, as far as the eye could see. But without all the people, it was just an empty tomb. They passed through a series of electric doors, finally arriving at the focus of the facility; like an oval target, metal arcs spread back in concentric circles into what still seemed like eternity.

They paused to reflect ... or was it to mourn?

"Dr. Swain?" the woman asked, the echo of her own voice startling her.

"Yes, Ann?" softly replied the man.

"Who came up with the name *Time Tunnel*?"

Dr. Swain blinked a couple of times. "You know," he said after a thoughtful pause. "I don't think I ever knew. It just was."

The answer was sufficient. They stood in silence for a few long minutes, each remembering the adventures they had seen, and had even been a part of, in this very room. The machines around them were cold, their flickering lights now as dead as the project they served.

"Blasted cutbacks!" Dr. Swain exploded. "They could've at least given us enough to keep it active!"

"Well, at least they're together," she commented enigmatically, releasing an emotional sigh.

Dr. Swain nodded.

The sound of an electric golf cart grew louder. The driver, a security guard, called out their names.

"Sorry Dr. Swain, Dr. MacGregor, but they're getting ready to shut it all down." The tone of his voice said he sympathized with their melancholy. "We have to go."

Dr. Swain looked into the Tunnel. "Goodbye, Tony. Goodbye, Doug. God watch over you, wherever you are."

The woman started weeping. Dr. Swain wrapped her up in his arms while the guard waited patiently. Then she composed herself, thanked Dr. Swain, and walked around to sit on the bench seat next to the driver. Dr. Swain sat on the rear-facing back seat, grabbed the handholds, and said, "Okay, Jiggs. Let's go."

As Lieutenant Jiggs started the cart moving, there was a sudden burst of energy, and the air behind them was filled with claps of thunder. The cart jerked to a halt. Dr. Swain jumped off the back and ran to the control console, with the others right behind him.

"WHAT'S GOING ON?" Dr. MacGregor yelled above the thunder.

"I DON'T KNOW," Dr. Swain called back. "EVERYTHING HAD BEEN SHUT DOWN! THIS SHOULDN'T BE HAPPENING!"

"BUT IT IS!" Dr. MacGregor pointed and exclaimed, "*LOOK!*"

The Time Tunnel had filled with smoke and flashes of light. Then two figures slowly shuffled out of the mist. One wore a long-sleeved pea green turtleneck sweater and navy blue slacks. The other wore a gray suit and matching cap, circa 1912. Laughing with joy, Ann MacGregor rushed to embrace them. Dr. Swain smiled, threw up his hands, and said under his breath, "Thank you."

Tony Newman and Doug Phillips were finally home.

**THE END**

\* \* \*

### **DEDICATIONS AND THANKS**

To **Jeff and Cheryl Cash**, who continues to serve the people of Fort Portal, Uganda, and **Tom Bonner** – the man who plunged me beneath the waters of baptism – who is a candle to Lushnja, Albania. May your passion for evangelizing the world never diminish.

To **Barry**, my third set of eyes. Welcome to the sandbox.

And, of course, **to our readers**, who wait patiently for the next installment. May God touch your hearts with these stories, and may you never be disappointed.

\* \* \*

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