

The background of the entire image is a blue-tinted close-up of a person's face, focusing on the eyes. A white target symbol, consisting of a circle with a vertical and horizontal crosshair, is overlaid on the eyes. To the right of the target, there are several splatters of bright red paint or blood. The overall mood is somber and intense.

# Edge of Dark Light

by JIM CLEVELAND

# EXPLORING THE SPIRITUAL UNIVERSE

other works by *JIM CLEVELAND*



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Expressions in  
Dark and Light



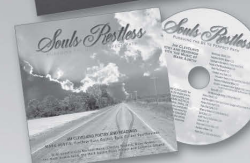
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**Souls Stories**  
Tales of the  
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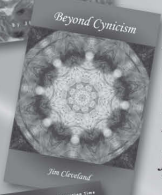


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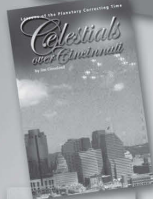
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Jim Cleveland lives in Mississippi. He is a writer, poet, photographer, editor and spiritual activist whose projects and interests are reflected in the "Exploration of the Spiritual Universe" at [www.lightandlife.com](http://www.lightandlife.com). He is active with Humanity's Team, and the Urantia Fellowship's Orvonton Society.

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**THE EDGE OF DARK LIGHT**

**By Jim Cleveland**



## CHAPTER 1

The sky had always seemed massive above Netherland, and ominous on days like this, when dark clouds surged and rolled overhead. The cold rocks of the mountainside afforded the village little protection from the relentless wind that heralded hard winter.

Jason Weathers stood inside the glass doorway of his deck, holding his coffee and surveying the leaden sky. Snow was said to be blowing in, a lot of it.

Returning to his desk, he shuffled through his papers, organizing the meager few pages of fiction that had come through his fingers over the past five days of his workweek. Jason's strict regimen made Saturday a day of disciplined pleasures. There were things other than work to which he knew he should devote a measure of his time. He intended to enjoy them. But for the weather, he'd surely be hiking.

He put the pages away neatly in a file folder and covered the computer keyboard in its plastic sheath. He made a notation on the calendar pad that he had run to the fourth checkpoint this morning, which was the service station down the highway. Eventually, he would make them all, and return to his front door running. It was the latest challenge he had given himself, a 4.7-mile run as established by his Volkswagen odometer.

After a shower and breakfast, he read fiction for an hour. When ten o'clock arrived, he marked his page and inserted the book carefully into the short row of volumes that comprised his current fare. The reading of books also required a prescribed amount of his time each organized day.

He pulled on his fur coat and planted his leather hat, and soon stood outside his A-frame cottage. The street was bare dirt and empty up the hill in front of him. His house was a little peculiar, he knew, on this street of rustic board houses and log cabins. Some thought that he was peculiar as well, but of course it didn't matter.

Up the street he walked, blown by the chill wind. It had been this way last year, he remembered, each house of mostly nameless summer dwellers emptying in turn, deserted and battened down one-by-one as winter loomed down around them. He didn't care. The winds and snows of winter would bring thoughts to his mind. They would be his companions.

The tiny bells jingled in familiar, friendly tones as he pushed open the grocery door. Mom was totaling up the several charges of a lady with a black purse. No one called her Mrs. Prescott, just "Mom," and no one really knew why.

Over the years the old couple had become an institution in the town. The plaited gray bun on her head was impeccably neat, as usual.

Jason walked back to select some yogurt and bread, fruit juice and carrots. He returned to stack it neatly by the register.

"Is the bottom gonna drop out this time, Mom?"

"Leo says it is." She punched the keys of her ancient adding machine. "And I wouldn't be surprised."

Pop, in his familiar brown sweater, slowly shuffled his way in from the back, his face a cluster of crevices and a scowl that Mom said could stop the hands of an eight-day clock. He hobbled past with a shaky walking stick of rounded hickory.

"What about it, Pop?"

"What's 'at son?"

"Is it gonna snow?"

"Yeah, gonna get it. Ain't no doubt this time." He nudged himself on past.

Jason walked outside to look again at the gray sky. Let it rip! He had already installed a new battery in his pickup, and the snow blade would earn him a few bucks moving snow.

“Let’s have some snow!” he thought. “Load me down with that white fluff! Bring it on down!” Jason blew mist in the cold air, adjusted the grocery bag and walked back down the hill toward his house.

Soon he would really be somebody – a published author. But what a schedule these publishers were on, another seven months before publication. Still, it didn’t matter. Getting published, ironically, didn’t matter that much either any more.

There was still somebody on the street, he noticed, a small body, wrapped up in a parka, walking toward him, her breath misting in the cold air. He would look closely. She appeared to be pretty. Soon, he could see that she was young and very pretty. Very much so! For an instant, she looked so very familiar, and in the next, suddenly, he realized that it was her, or it looked like her – Roci! – but so young! He realized that he had stopped dead still on the side of the bare hard street. She was trying to hurry on by.

“Miss.” She turned to scowl at him.

“Miss, I’m sure I know you from somewhere.”

She stood a few steps beyond him, frowning. “I don’t think so,” she said with a soft tartness. Her eyes were a deep brown, exuding the lively spirit of youth, suspicious of him but confident. Her small lips and nose completed a softly fair face, beautifully framed by her parka hood. She pulled down the hood to show a flowing of light brown hair.

“You’re very beautiful,” said Jason. “Maybe ... I just think I know you because I want to know you.”

“Maybe that’s not what you really want to do,” she said with a cool edge. “You got any matches?” She shuffled in her parka pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

“I’m always prepared,” he replied, holding out a matchbook. “Take these matches with you. And why don’t you stop back by my house for a cup of coffee?”

“I don’t think so. I got to be going actually. I don’t have time to smoke this shit.” She took the matches, quickly stuffed them and cigarettes back into her parka and turned to walk away. How peculiar, he thought.



“I’m not trying to take advantage of you. I just want you for a friend.”

She spun around and stopped, amused, smiling sardonically. She was petite, only a little over five feet. He wondered how young she could be.

“A friend?” she asked suspiciously.

“I like friends. I need friends,” he said. She did indeed seem curious about him. That was a start.

“I have friends on my own. We moved in down the street.” She nodded her suddenly hard little face down the street in the direction of Jason’s house.

“I live in the A-frame. When did you come?”

“Last night.”

“With your husband? Your folks?”

“No,” she chuckled, “not really. I’m Carol. Who are you?”

“Jason Weathers.”

“And I’ve got to go.”

“I’m not trying to go to bed with you. I just thought you’d be nice to talk to. There’s not too many people around here these days – fewer all the time.”

“Suits me, though. Don’t it you?”

“You’re with some friends?”

“Yeah. Two couples, from Denver. Just some retards I hooked up with.”

“Getting away for a few days?”

“I’m home wherever I throw down a sleeping bag,” she shrugged. “I’ve got to go. I really don’t have time for coffee, and now that I’ve got some matches, I don’t need to go to the store for a lighter. Thanks.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

“No. Let’s just call it off for right now, okay?”

“Can I call you?”

She looked hard into his eyes. How strong hers were, piercing through his confident demeanor.

“Check me later,” she said smugly.

“What’s your number?”

“We don’t have a phone. Just come by. We’ll be there. You can meet the sorry ass acquaintances I call my friends.”

“Are you related to ... a woman named Roci – R.O.C.I. Roci?” Her brow seemed to furrow quickly, or it might’ve been his imagination, vivid as it was.

“Don’t know her.”

“She was a friend of mine, very close, and very beautiful.”

The girl looked at him earnestly for a moment, laughed, smiled and turned quickly to walk away, shaking her head at the curiosity of him. Jason followed her with his eyes. The resemblance to Roci was uncanny, but apparently it was only chance. Let her be gone, up the street toward the store after all. There was something suspicious about her.

As he picked up a slow step down the street, he thought back to Roci, and all of his intimate dreams about her, the euphoric imagination of her that had filled many of his lonely hours. Gone now were the memories; they seemed to have left with the manuscript, and Jason was finding it difficult to write another. Maybe she had been all of it ... all of his inspiration.

The cold wind chilled his face. Winter was indeed upon them. How pleasant to remember that remarkable summertime when he had actually talked with alien explorers, visitors from a beautiful world of benevolence and love, and the basis for his book. Sometimes Jason wondered if he had imagined it all; at other times he knew that he hadn’t.

Many nights he had relished those remarkable dreams of friendship and ecstasy with the beautiful alien woman from that vaguely remembered or vividly imagined time. Though he wouldn’t expect anyone to believe he had made love to an alien, or talked to and learned from others, he believed it was somehow true, in one state of consciousness or another. He guessed it didn’t matter if it were memory or imagination. The reality of it, the experiencing of it in his mind was all that mattered or needed to matter. There was no safe way he could speak of it as either truth or fiction.

*Jim Cleveland*

Sadly, after he finished his manuscript, the dreams of her grew shorter and more imaginary and finally had faded away almost completely. It was such a pity, such a loss, but the pain of loss was dulled finally by the continuing work at his keyboard, in his mind, plodding along systematically.

He visited the drug store and soon he was home again. He took off his boots and left them at the front door. The phone was ringing. He reached it at the start of the third ring. "Hello. This is Jason."

"I know." The voice was gruff, raspy. "You'll be dead soon. I'll kill you."

Before he could answer, the phone clicked, and a dial tone assaulted his ear with its relentless drone. He frowned, holding the receiver, thoughts racing through his mind of all the people he knew and who would do that. It came down to nobody. What the hell was it all about then? Anybody he knew wouldn't think it was funny. And it sounded like someone totally strange to him, whom he'd never met. He could imagine a large, unkempt truck driver behind that strong, threatening voice.

Jason heard a knock on the door. He turned and made his way back to the front, wondering who it could be, thinking to open back the curtains and look outside before opening the door. Long, angular

Johnny Bannister stood by the bell; slovenly and ill-dressed as usual, with a wispy thin beard and dirty hair hanging down his shoulders over his patched woolen coat.

He opened the door without smiling. "Hey Johnny, what's goin' on?"

"Aw, nothin' much." Johnny sauntered his lean frame over to a soft chair. "You need some weed or speed?" he asked, sinking himself into the cushion.

"I'm all right." Jason seated himself across the room.

"Coke? Good stuff. Goin' for fifty."

"Don't need it."

“M-m-m-m,” Johnny observed to himself, his ruffled body collapsed in Jason’s chair. “Shit. I ‘m gonna have to make a sale. I got a bad case of the shorts. How much can you loan me ‘til the end of the week?”

“None.”

“None,” Johnny confirmed to himself. He nodded his oily head forward and back in disgust, pursing his lips in obvious distaste at Jason’s refusal.

“I told you before what the deal was,” said Jason. “I had to wait six weeks for the last loan to get back to me. I needed the money. I need it now—don’t have much coming in. I said I’d buy dope from you and that’s it.”

Johnny got up from the chair a little quickly. He leaned over toward Jason. “Would you help your dear old Mother, Jason? You damn sure ain’t gonna help a friend, are you?”

“Yeah,” he replied, unmoving in the chair. “I’d help a friend. But I’m not helping you again. You’re not reliable. I can’t trust you to do what you say you’ll do – about anything. I know you.”

“I know you, too,” said Johnny, angrily, walking to the door, whirling suddenly to raise his fist and thrust it upward, obscenely. Jason was up from his chair to confront him.

“Move your ass out of my house. If you come back, you’re in trouble.” The door closed hard and Johnny stomped off up the street. Jason stood in the window and watched. It was a sudden misfire he didn’t foresee. The situation was getting a little rough all of a sudden – the phone call and now this.

Jason knew he wouldn’t buy any more grass from Johnny. He’d have to get a new source—way down in Denver, no doubt. Fine. Fine. Good riddance to the disorganized, lazy bum. He’d be ready to use his fists next time, if necessary, and that would be fine, too. It could be both opportunity and challenge, but it probably wouldn’t come to pass. Probably Johnny, sneering Johnny, would just stay at arm’s length, with a vulgar pomposity that cried out to be deflated. But that was okay, too.

Jason walked to the glass door that led out to the deck. The wind whipped through the firs in the valley below. It was already snowing on the higher elevations, all across the mountain range, shrouding the forbidding alpine heights with heavy clouds and swirling snow or sleet. Soon all of this town

he had escaped to would be white with snow as well – the first assault of winter, hopefully a friendly one, a gentle one, but perhaps a show of force, a powerful blast of blizzard that would bury his small house and hole him up here, helplessly in its grip.

He needed to be ready – and he would be. He checked out his Volkswagen, the pickup with the snowplow, his shovels and foul-weather gear. Let it come. Let there be snow. Let there be winter. The day was still young. Already he had met a strangely familiar young face – just a coincidence he believed more firmly now – and had received a crank call – still nagging his thoughts. Then he had argued with his dope dealer. It was a rare occasion that he argued with anyone, but it had been absolutely necessary, just like the coming of the winter. Let there be winter.

## CHAPTER 2

The phone rang and broke through Jason's meditation. He looked at the clock, 4:30, and rose from his cross-legged position on the floor. Maybe it was the crank caller.

"Hello. This is Jason." There was no sound on the other end. His brow furrowed. He waited.

"When I get there," said the deep voice, "you'll die. And I'm closer now. I'll be there tomorrow night."

"What time? Can I expect you for dinner?"

The click and the dial tone gave it all a note of seriousness that he didn't want to accept. Maybe he'd have to. It didn't seem to be a joke. He didn't own a gun. Maybe he should. But it all seemed ridiculous. Who would want to kill him? He didn't have many friends here, but he had no enemies anywhere, not that he knew about. Maybe he'd call the marshal. Or maybe he should clear out before tomorrow night, go to Denver before the weather came down on him here.

There was no reason for anybody to want to kill him. He had always treated everyone fairly, maybe a little abruptly sometimes, but fairly, honestly, with friendship. He hadn't bothered anyone's wife. Maybe somebody had him mixed up, confused with someone else. But he didn't think he wanted to risk reasoning with the man behind the voice on the phone if he showed up. Damn! It wasn't even Johnny Bannister. He was at the door when the first call came.

He wondered if this had anything to do with all the ET's in his mind, his imagination, on the pages of his sci-fi fantasy, still swirling through his brain while he increasingly wondered if any of these events actually happened. Sometimes he thought that they really had. Sometimes he doubted it.

The phone rang again. If it was him, he had to get his attention this time—say something positive enough to get the guy to talk to him. It rang again.

*Jim Cleveland*

“Hello. This is Jason.”

“Jason Weathers?”

That’s right.” It was a female voice.

“Mr. Weathers. I’m Joni Madden. I work for Head West magazine. Do you remember me calling you?”

“Right.”

“Well, I’m in town. I just got in on the bus. I’m here at the bus station. At the Texaco service station.”

“I thought you were coming Tuesday.”

“No...well... When this bad weather started coming in, I thought I’d come up here today, from Denver, and hope you could visit with me for a little while. I tried to call you twice this morning. It wouldn’t take long just to talk a little bit about your book and all ... if you had the time ... or I could come tomorrow. I’m gonna have to stay someplace around here tonight anyway.”

“There’s no motel. This isn’t a tourist town. You can stay over here, though. How much time do you need?”

“I’d just be happy with a couple of hours if you could spare it. I’d be happy to buy your dinner somewhere.”

“We’d better just plan to eat here,” he said. “The weather’s gonna get worse before it gets better.”

“Well ... I don’t wanna put you out.”

“It won’t put me out. I’ll stay inside, too,” he teased, wondering if she was attractive.

“Oh, well -- That’s not what I meant.”

“Why don’t you cross the intersection there and walk straight down that street – down the hill. I’m leaving right now to meet you. “I’m just a few blocks away.”

“Oh! Well, that’s handy. I don’t want to be any trouble. Maybe I can just find it.” She sounded young too.

“A gentleman always goes out to meet a lady.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll be looking for you.”

“Oh. Well, that’ll be fine.” He grinned to himself. She’d think he was making fun of her talk. It wasn’t so. “I’ll be looking for you too, okay? I’ll bet you wear glasses.”

“Well, that’s right.”

“Then the day is not completely full of surprises.”

“Well, it’s not over,” she said. Good, he grinned. She had wit.

When their connection clicked off, he walked to the mirror to peruse his hair and beard, flecked, he knew, with just a little premature gray. No one else noticed it, he reasoned, not that it mattered really. It didn’t matter. He ran the brush through his hair, washed his face and pulled on his heavy fur coat and leather hat again. Out, he said to himself, to meet Goldilocks.

Flecks of snow danced down around him. The soft roar of the wet wind filled the air as he walked up the hill again.

Soon he could see her, bundled in a long wool coat and scarf, weighted down with a suitcase in one hand, a heavy leather camera bag and knit purse hanging off her shoulder. Her straight black hair hung almost to her waist and her large, round glasses framed a narrow, unmade face that bordered, to Jason, on homeliness. She might be beautiful anyway.

When she looked up to see him, she stared and walked on, slowing a little, inquisitive.

“Do you think you brought enough gear?” he asked. “Or can you go back and pick up an anvil or two?”

“This stuff here will have to do. You’re Mr. Weathers?”

“True. Give me this bag. And this one.” She absently worked to help him get the camera bag dislodged from her shoulder and purse, before reconsidering.



*Jim Cleveland*

“Oh, no! What am I doing? I’ll take this one. This is my camera gear, but you could help with that one.”

“So you’re a photographer too! More than singularly talented.”

“Well, sometimes I have to get a picture to go with the story.”

“Of course. Maybe you can get a few blizzard shots while you’re here. You may not be able to get out of here, you know.” She was following him down the street.

“There’s a bus at 11:30. I can catch that.”

“Yeah. It’ll probably run. It may not.”

“Is it going to get that bad?”

“Probably. There’s a lot of stuff blowin’ down in Central City already. But nobody knows, really. Weather can change pretty drastically and pretty quick around here.”

“Well, what’s the forecast?”

“Snow. But only in those places where the wind goes.”

“So which way is the wind blowing?”

“It blows south for a while, then it blows east or either west.”

“Well, does it ever blow north?”

“Sometimes.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“A little over a year. I was in Dade Creek for a year or so. Got too touristy over there, if you know what I mean. Before that, I was in Texas. Where are you from?”

“Me? Oh . . . I’m from Pueblo. But I’ve been in Denver for about . . . nine months.”

“Head West is in Berkeley, isn’t it?”

“San Francisco. I do free-lance work here and there ... you know. I had a piece in *Western Trails* magazine ... and one a few weeks ago in *Arizona Highways*, about armadillos.”

“Did you go home with the armadillo?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“Oh. Yeah.” she laughed half-heartedly.

“So you’re just trying to sell this piece. You aren’t on the staff.”

“Well, no. But they’ll use it. It’ll be with the book reviews. They got your advance copies from the publisher and I read it and ... well, they thought it’d be nice for about a thousand words or so on your theories ... like ... your personality and where you’re from and all like that ... and where you get your inspiration, your ideas.”

“We’re home.” He opened the door and motioned her in before him. “Make yourself at home. Freshen up if you’d like. The bathroom’s there. You’re just liable to have to stay, and if so, your bedroom is up these stairs and right in front of you. I’ll stash this on your tentative bed, the one reserved for snowbound buddies, and then fix you something hot to drink.”

“My!” She looked around. “How nice. Thank you.”

Jason began to make tea and reflected on the possibilities for intimacy with her. She was essentially unattractive physically, but she was smart enough to be a free-lancer and to read books. He was very curious as to what she thought about his. He could ask her what it was all about. He smiled to himself and decided on Jasmine tea.

Joni sat on Jason’s toilet and wondered how to fit the man, his mind and personality with the words that he had written. They were either beautifully sensitive and profound, or they were simplistic and naive, depending on one’s state of mind. What a stir they had caused in the Head West offices when the advance copies – all seventy-four of them – appeared from Omega Books. What a hustle to get this one reviewed. Send it to all the editors – get lots of attention. Sure enough it did, with controversy – arguments about meaning and merit, and so an opportunity for her to, at least, do a short piece for them. Maybe she’d get a full feature next time, maybe an

interview with a rock star. In the meantime, this dude was pretty interesting. Was he too smug, she wondered? Or did he just seem that way? He seemed to be nice, to be ... gentlemanly. Got a good wit. Maybe he'll want to go to bed or ... maybe he won't. She decided she wouldn't mind, and maybe she needed to let him know that somehow.

Jason set down the steaming cups of tea and she very soon asked if he felt like talking about the book. She fumbled with the tape cassette as if she were somewhat unfamiliar with the technology to use it. But after a moment she mastered it, Jason waiting patiently with a wryly-hidden smile at her innocent apprenticeship. He remembered similar assignments from years ago – struggling to make some sense out of a courtroom hearing, running down streets toward burning buildings, trying desperately to interview a weary-eyed public official who wanted, grouchily, to be on his way. It was a profession he had abandoned; all the hassle had been a good reason. Then he worked for a boring floor tile company, in an exceedingly boring public relations job ... before his life was changed.

“Well...” she said. “First question. Jason Weathers.” She spoke into the small microphone and he noticed that the tape was running. “What is your background? Where are you from and what have you done?”

“I’ve worked for a daily newspaper in Texas ... after getting a journalism degree. Then I worked for a couple of companies, including Southwest Utilities – information and publications work – and then quit to try to write fiction. Crazy, huh?” He conveniently omitted the floor tile company.

“How do you feel about having it accepted for publication?”

“Like it’ll be nice to hold a copy. And the money. It’ll be nice to have whatever it might bring in to pay for groceries. They’re high. They have to be trucked up into the mountains, you know,” he deadpanned.

“Some say it has the makings of a contemporary classic – at least an underground classic. Do you think that could happen?”

“No.”

“Why not? You must think it’s good.”

“Yes. But I didn’t provide enough answers for it to be a classic. It isn’t written well enough. I’m trying to develop more proficiency ... and more passion.”

“So you’re working hard to be a writer – a good writer. Is that what you’ve always wanted to do?”

“No. Most of my life I didn’t think I had anything to say and wouldn’t have had the temerity to try to say it anyway. I didn’t consider a lot of questions, and I didn’t have many answers. I didn’t have the necessary experiences and hadn’t learned enough from the ones I had. Generally speaking, I was confused and indecisive. I’ve worked hard to put discipline and will into my life. That’s what I run on.”

“Has it made you happy?”

“Reasonably so.”

“No more than that?”

“No.”

“So what’s missing?”

“Someone to love.”

“Well, I got that from your book-- that love is all-powerful. Some said that was old-fashioned and trite and some others said you cut right through all the BS and ... made sense.”

Jason didn’t answer.

“Well?” she asked.

“Well what?”

“Do you think that’s an accurate appraisal?”

“I think trite is usually true. But it’s not for me to say. It’s being published for the public. It’ll be offered indiscriminately to all of them. What is more important is how it affects the reader. Did it affect you?”

“I felt ... that you didn’t present anything I could argue with.”

“Good. I didn’t want to start arguments.”

“Well, I mean, the philosophy’s good. Love is at the root of all ... good things. It’s just that ... there’s not much way to get there.”

“You didn’t understand the book. You think that’s going to make a big difference in this interview?”

“You don’t think I understood it?”

“Not the way I wrote it. I don’t think so. But maybe it wasn’t too clear.”

“Look. I like the book. I want you to know that. I like it. I think it shows a lot of sensitivity and feeling, especially for a man. I’m not going to knock your book. That’s not what I’m here for.”

“It doesn’t matter. I want you to do your job, though I wouldn’t want you to say I said something that I didn’t, either today or in the book.”

“I won’t do that, “ she said earnestly, brow furrowed as if she wanted him to believe it. “I just want you to talk to me. I’ll put down what you say. I’ll have it accurate, right here.” She motioned to the recorder. “You’re not paranoid about me, are you?”

Jason laughed. “That reminds me. Would you like to smoke a joint?” he looked at his watch. It was 5:30.

“Well, yeah, that’d be fine.” She punched off the tape recorder.

“Then we’ll get some food together. You can give me a hand.”

“Sure.” She seemed to like him. That would be a factor in deciding if he wanted to try to sleep with her. He was lonely. He was a loner in a lot of ways, but he did get lonely.

She looked at him curiously – he noticed it – as he lit the joint. Might as well be high, Jason figured, and see what was going to happen.

SANTOS KNEW he could be in Netherland, Colorado, by late tomorrow afternoon – and at a controlled pace. He could take care of business here within the next hour. The dusky late Saturday settled on the desert landscape around him as his black pickup truck droned on.

Maybe Santos would have been bored, except for his memories of past triumphs, and the companionship of his fierce and handsomely masculine countenance in the rear view mirror. It was a pleasure to look at himself – the right side of his black-bearded, tough-skinned face, his eyes that settled

darkly, dangerously into a glint at all persons, and the wiry texture of his dark hair. Although he was not, Santos might as well have been Master of all this darkening desert surrounding him as he moved on. In truth, he thought he was.

To relieve the boredom of the drive, he indulged his fancies, his passion for the sports. The facts piled into his head of all the formal games that people played for challenge and business, each in its season, baseball and basketball, football, soccer, tennis, bowling. The games kept him interested, his mind alert, and it carried him through the in-between-times, in between the jobs he was charged to do. And the games that he would see as he traveled across the length and breadth of the country in his work, made it all worthwhile. He was positive of that, and he was positive about everything else, too. Zenithians are very positive.

It was baseball season and Santos, in his vivid imagination, brought one of his hundreds of mind games to life. The billboard said “Stuckey’s” and he would start with that to make a roster. Then he might even play the season as he navigated the road.

From the word “Stuckey’s” he would use letters to draft a team, having to use the first letter in names to move forward. He chose:

Sean Casey, 1b ...Curt Schilling, p ... Shawn Green, of ... Scott Williamson, relief pitcher and closer ... and the roster came together as Santos seriously engaged his analytical mind with his imagination. The pickup rolled on.

By the time Santos reached the Sundown Truck Stop, the team had successfully opened the season with an 11-4 record and a home stand coming up against dangerous Houston, followed by Atlanta and Chicago. He pulled his shining black pickup truck up to the coffee shop curb, filed away all of the game information in his empowered Zenithian mind, got out and walked confidently inside. He would attract attention with his faded and scarred jeans, tight-fitting over his square-toed boots, and the faded blue denim jacket wrapped tightly over his rippling muscles. The dull, plain atmosphere of the long coffee shop, every corner of it, attracted Santos’ eye. He had the responsibility to be observant.

After supper, he sat quietly in the clutter of the table with a cup of black coffee. He looked at his watch: 6:30. His prey should be here, any time now, and he truly was, just then, leaving the trucker’s motel across the way. Santos could sense it. He pulled out the paper again from his shirt pocket.

“Thomas Crutchfield, belligerence/humility.” He laid the small folded paper by his plate and drank his coffee.

In a few minutes, the man came in, filling the room with his threatening, loud hulk. “How you, Mary Ann! What you been up to, woman?” He lumbered in by the counter, broad gut hanging over his sculptured silver cowboy belt, which held up khakis resting on pointed-toe boots. The plaid western shirt was besmirched with the grease from his huge rig, and his gray western hat caked with the yellowed dust of miles.

Two of the waitresses knew him, and bantered with him until he seated himself jovially with three other drivers down at the other end of the restaurant. Perhaps I should let him order, Santos thought to himself. He was doing it now and he listened carefully to hear the words across the room.

“I want the biggest hamburger steak you can find honey, thousand island dressing on my salad and a cup ‘a coffee soon as you can get it heah.” The bony red-haired woman had quit chewing, she’d surely screw it all up, thought Santos. He struck a match and held up the small square of paper to it. It burst into flames as he tossed it into his plate. He could hear the redhead say quietly: “Hey, what’s ‘at man over there doin’?” He had their attention. He waited.

“Hey! I wish you wouldn’t set fires here at the table.” He looked up at the wry, rouge-caked face and suddenly had a great dislike for her smirky reproach.

“I had to destroy the evidence,” he said coolly.

“What?”

“My check. I had to destroy the proof that I ate in this shithouse, so no one would ever know.” Santos put a calming, whispering finger upon his lips, as if to signal total silence.

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about. I didn’t give you no check yet. Don’t start no more fires, okay?” He despised her phony, shallow, stupid life. She was writing a check and also chewing gum, this time. “Uh, what was that you had ... huh?” She seemed weary of living.

“Well, I didn’t get to eat your pussy,” he said calmly. “How do you suppose that would be? You all sweaty down there?”

“Go-o-o-owh! You better shut ‘yo mouth.”

“I wouldn’t eat it here, you understand, but I might get a doggie bag. You’re really a dog, did you know that?”

“Well, you’ve got a lot ‘a Goddamn nerve!”

It struck a responsive chord. Crutchfield should be seconds away. Santos heard chairs scrape across the bare floor. The more the merrier, he thought, finishing his coffee. “Hey! Lou Ellen!” The burly behemoth had the despicable trait of being a redneck macho protector of silly and vulgar female flesh, insensitive inside but outwardly sensitive about all those clichés that his feeble mind had accepted without the benefit of thought and reason. He could grow very weary, if he let himself, of the primitive, unconscious rites of these inferiors. Why, it was amazing that he had become an exaggerated extension of them in order to excel, and to do what he was charged to do. Of course, his work was exactly what he wanted to do.

“Hey! What’d you say to the little lady? You a firebug or sumpin’?”

“I was just trying to attract your attention,” said Santos without rising. “I heard that you’d be here. I heard that you were tough. I heard that you treat people very cruelly sometimes, and that you should experience the humility of my beating your ass all over this parking lot.”

“Well, you sure as hell got a big mouth, don’t ‘ya? I may stomp your ass before my supper gets here.”

“It’s 6:40,” said Santos, checking his watch. “We’d better get busy. I think she’s already turned in your order.”

The small knot of men took long strides out the coffee shop door. Santos, behind them, threw a ten-dollar bill on the counter and followed the quartet of taciturn, sour-faced men.

“Ya’ll get on back outta here now, “ hollered the skinny old man behind the register. “Ya’ll get on outta sight, out behind the motel. Them troopers ‘er comin’ in here all time.”

When they reached a prescribed space of concrete in the back of the lot, agreed upon with gruff insistence by his protagonists, Santos was still quietly calm, a fact that may have perturbed the men with a suspicion that all here didn’t meet the eye.



“All right now, you ain’t no karate, are you?” asked Crutchfield.

“This is your place,” said Santos, standing calmly, flat-footed, rubbing his fists, removing a large gold ring from his finger. “We’ll use your style. I’ll give you a head start.”

“You’ll get it soon enough,” growled Crutchfield, tearing himself loose from the last sleeve of his cowboy shirt and thrusting it into the arms of a backer. Santos felt a twinge of hatred for the man’s pasty-white, fat-ridden, absurdly hairy bulk. It was necessary to do this job, to discipline this misshapen blot, but it would not be necessary for him to remove his coat.

“You’ll need to excuse me for just a moment,” he said, facing their menacing stares. He pulled two large, round rings of shiny gold from his jacket pocket and began to pierce one into his ear.

“Earrings?” laughed Crutchfield gruffly. “What the hell are you?” The first one dangled from his left ear and as Santos was putting in the other, they were laughing, saying, “He must be one ‘a them funny fellers. He wants you to beat him up, don’t he, Thomas?”

“He must be kinda queer, don’t you reckon?” crooned another sarcastically. Santos, working calmly, wondered for a moment if all of them would suddenly want a piece of him, or whether they could be patient for just another few seconds. It didn’t matter.

“I want to see if you can rip these out,” he said, looking up and stepping back two steps to face off against his hulking protagonist.

“Goddam, fella?. I’m sure gonna oblige ‘ye. Whatever you want, that’s what you gonna get.” He began making a slow circle around Santos, a hairy bulk, fists ready. Santos stood unmoving, waiting.

Suddenly, Crutchfield lunged; swinging a punch with all the speed and power he could muster into his huge arm. Santos stopped it with a dull thud to his open hand.

Crutchfield swung a hard left and Santos darted quickly to the side, leaving him helplessly off-balance. Santos’ quick, solid punch thudded flush into his face, cracking the bridge of his nose and sending him reeling backwards on his buttocks. Dizzily, he groped to get up, blood coming from his battered nose.

“I get two also,” Santos told the others calmly, sending another quick fist to Crutchfield’s jaw. The fat man crumpled to the concrete.

The three remaining men circled around him, wide-eyed, dumb-founded. He had seen the look before and it pleased him.

“Who the hell are you?” one of them rasped. “A fighter! Hell, you must be a professional fighter! We’ll have the law here on you!”

“Why don’t ya’ll stay around? I’m not tired yet. It’s too early to go home.”

“You’re crazy!” They were backing away. “You better get your ass gone! I’m gonna call the law on you!”

“You uncivilized assholes are just spoiled. You just haven’t learned to take your medicine,” said Santos. “This can do you good,” he smiled at them.

“We’re callin’ the law!” The one who spoke tried to break into a run, but Santos dashed quickly to grab him by his hair. The other two ran frantically back to the truck stop. Santos enjoyed hearing the man’s bellows, as he pulled him around and around by his hair and an arm, dragging him, screaming, until he fell free, leaving Santos’ grip filled with oily brown hair. He grabbed him again, deflecting his wild, flailing arms, spinning him around quickly to send a hard fist slamming into his jaw, cracking it with a violent wrench.

He walked purposefully back to the truck stop and his truck. He could see the harried old man talking hurriedly into the telephone. Well, he supposed, walking on, the law would go against him. What a hassle he was going to avoid, listening to all these dumb people try to reason through their fog of recriminations and laws. Right or wrong is one thing, but they even had to hire other people to tell them what might be – and then nobody could really be sure. What a circus, Santos sneered, striding into the coffee shop to confront the wide-eyed old man and a few curious diners. The waitresses watched him from near the tea and coffee refills.

“That’s right! You’re on the way?” the old man rasped into the phone, staring nervously at Santos as he walked calmly behind the counter, reached and ripped the phone from the wall with a powerful yank.

“I’ve got a gun here,” the old man blurted, scrambling to get it from a drawer under the register. Santos was quicker, ramming the drawer shut and crushing the old man’s wrist, muffling his yell of pain with a sure open-

handed grip, tearing into the drawer himself. He wrenched the man's body around and locked his neck in a paralyzing hold. It was a small gun, a .22 caliber. He looked at it disgustedly, plucked off a glass lid with his fingers and dropped it gently into a large jar of pickled eggs.

The old man was on his knees, still choking, when Santos stepped outside. The law could be here any minute, so he walked fast, climbed into the pickup cab and revved the engine. He pulled out and forward to the middle of the lot, to face the incoming driveway, motor idling, headlights bright, waiting. He could hear the siren faintly. Futile efforts of helpless barbarians, he thought to himself. He looked into the rear view mirror at the cluster of disoriented people in the coffee shop, a prominent spectacle here in the parking lot in his shiny black machine, waiting for a new altercation.

He would start Shawn Chacon in the first game against Houston and would need to have rested relievers since he throws a lot of pitches. The siren grew louder and Santos readied himself for his strategy. It would be exciting. It would also work. He had never lost an encounter during all his days in service on the planet.

He could hear the police car careening around a corner across the Interstate bridge and Santos started moving his machine forward slowly, getting ready. Here it came, all in blue. The siren wailed stupidly; the light whirled blue in the dark night. He glanced again in the mirror at the small group of people, now standing in front of that drab, lifeless coffee shop. He slammed the accelerator as the police car reached the driveway, the pickup leaping forward in a dash, and flush toward the other vehicle. He could see the policemen's startled white eyes in the glare of his headlights.

The police car swerved, plopping its front end hard into the deep ditch bordering the drive, hurling the two officers against the dashboard. Santos spun the pickup expertly to the right, missing the car by inches and surging past, into the street. He hesitated only to see a door to the lopsided squad car swing open, chuckling to himself as he guided the pickup on down the highway. He glanced at his watch; saw that it was almost 7:30. He would need to make a call.

In the meantime, he arranged the alphabet into types of base hits, only H and M for homers and sent his first batter to the plate to face Houston's ace, Roy Oswalt. He has a good move to first, so we'll have to be cautious on the base paths, but daring enough to steal if the lead is right. His

second baseman, Luis Castillo, dug in. The assortment of letters on the billboard began the game by prescribing a scorching double down the left field line. Then Larry Walker stepped in.

## CHAPTER 3

Netherland sat dark against the side of the mountains, speckled with occasional white lights from the scattering of houses, warm cocoons for a hardy populace.

The wind blew the snow into Netherland. Jason watched the soft flakes swirl down onto his deck. The crystals shined brilliantly back from the light of his den, clustering airily onto the deck or disappearing quickly into the blackness below.

It was all a silent mystery tonight, what was happening to their alpine landscape. But tomorrow's light would bring the vision of a spectacular white world, locked into the brightness of the day.

It was eight o'clock. She was on the phone with the bus company, and he was waiting, listening, tidying up the last crumbs from their supper and admiring the neatness of his dining alcove and den.

She hung up and sighed. "Well ... can you believe that? They guess it's going to run, but can't say for sure." Her plain face was searching his for a reaction.

"Why leave?" he asked.

"Well ... I don't like to barge in on somebody. Heck, I've already done that, I guess."

"Why would you hesitate staying here? It's free and it's warm," said Jason. "I've told you to stay. I want you to stay."

"Well," she shrugged, as if something was nagging in her mind. "I guess under the circumstances ... but I'm on expenses ..."

Jason just glared at her, watching her avoid his eyes, wondering what was in her head, under that long black hair and plain, pensive face, biting on a thumbnail with the intensity of a daydream. She was suddenly aware of his stare, and she looked flush into his eyes, showing a hint of a grin.

“Well, you sure can stare a hole through somebody,” she protested good-humoredly.

“Trying to figure out what makes you tick.”

“Is that a writer working?” She had confidence in her news nose, her craft, he could tell, and it helped make up for her lack of beauty. He wondered how deeply she felt things.

“Writers are always working,” he agreed, with a friendly smile that seemed to warm her.

“You can be so intense one minute,” she said, “and then break everything away with that smile. Why are you so intense?”

“Is that a professional question?”

“Hm-m-m. I just want to know.”

“I try to live purposefully – give it my best shot.”

“That applies to everything?”

“Of course.”

“Were you always like that?”

“No. I told you I wasn’t.”

“Why did you change? How?”

“I learned some things, realized some things ... put some things in perspective.”

“How old are you?”

“Forty.”

“Forty,” she repeated. “Not even 39.”

“No,” he said. “I’m 40. But that’s only a record, a measurement. How important can it be?”

“I don’t know. What’s important to you?”

*Jim Cleveland*

“Life...knowledge...love...maybe even lust.” He studied her eyes.

“My,” she said, amused. “All those nice things. That’s kind of broad. I wonder what you’re really saying.”

“Go ahead.”

“Go ahead and what?”

“Wonder about it if you want to. That’s what I do about everything I think and say myself.”

“Well, you must know what you want to say ... in your work. You have to have a point of view to write a book.”

“Is that something you felt you needed to tell me?”

“Well, no. I just wonder what it is.”

“After spending most of two years writing all of what I’ve written,” Jason said, “you want me to relegate it all to a few sentences in a journalistic interview. You want me to come over to your turf and do it your way? I can’t do that. I wrote a novel. That’s what it is. I can’t convert it into a brief oral essay and do it justice. I can go through it and underline some essential parts, but you could do that just as well if you really have an interest in it ... beyond the assignment.”

He guessed he had been too brusque with her in that lengthy dissertation. She looked at him dumbly, with a mixture, it seemed, of hurt and distaste. “Well,” she said with a sigh. “I guess I really haven’t read what you wrote as seriously as I should. I was in a hurry to get here and ... I went over most of it, but I need to read it again.”

Surprisingly he had her wedged into a corner, but he wanted her to go free. He had no right to badger her. “Well, I’d be curious then as to how you feel about it – and what you think about it. I’ll be waiting to see.”

“Oh no! I won’t be reviewing the book. We’re just doing a profile like ... kind of a preview.”

“So I understood. Then you’ll have to write me and tell me – or come back and visit.”

“Oh. Well, could I?”

“If you’ll tell me what you’re doing in Netherland.”

“What?” She acted surprised. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve never published a thing. It’s far-fetched to think you’d do a personality profile on me, or a book preview or review, or anything else. Besides, we’re six months from publication.”

She frowned into his face. “Maybe it is, but they told me to come. They’re paying me, for God’s sake. What am I supposed to do?”

“Do it,” he said, getting up. “Do what you’re paid to do. That’s what people do, whatever brings in the money.”

“Well ... it’s more than that.” She looked up at him with innocent green eyes. Somebody was very interested in him, Jason surmised, and it really didn’t seem to be her. But she had to fit in some way or another.

“I’ve got something I have to do ... right now,” he said. “I’ll probably be back in an hour or so. Relax and make yourself at home.”

“Can I help?” Her voice followed him back to his bedroom.

“No. Just a little business to take care of.” He pulled his fur coat out of the closet.

“Surely you can’t be mad.” She was calling at him from the den.

“Not at all.” He had found the number and was dialing. “And by the way,” he called to her, “there’s no need for self-conscious doubts and suspicions here. Everything’s written on the lines.”

“Are you sure about that?” she called. It was ringing.

“I’m planning on being straight with you,” he said.

“You aren’t.”

“Wait and see.”

“I don’t have to wait. You’re not telling me what’s going on – what’s in your head. You’re playing games with me.”



Jason shook his head. Wasn't someone going to answer? There he went – putting people off again with his manner, his mind. Games, he guessed, but whose games?

“Hel-l-lo!” The voice was tired, impatient. Probably a favorite TV show was on.

“Mr. Reedy,” he said in a low voice. “This is Jason Weathers. I have to buy a gun. I’m being threatened.”

“Have you called the law?”

“I have,” he lied. “They’re watching out over here, but they said I should at least get a gun. I know you can see that – but I need it right now. I’ll pay you retail if you’ll come down to the store.”

She was listening at the door, eyes wide behind her oversized eyeglasses. But she had to get away, not get caught here. “All right, twenty minutes,” he was saying. She tiptoed back into the den, quietly, quickly. My God, she thought, who could be threatening him? He even thought she was part of it.

Jason was dialing again. “San Francisco.” He waited. “Yes, I’d like the residence of Darrell Wymer in San Francisco ... I don’t know, operator. Maybe you’ll have to check everywhere. I do need the number.” He eyed the masthead on page three, beside the contents of Head West magazine. He was the managing editor. He should have an insight or two. The number was probably unlisted, he guessed, but it wasn’t.

“Yes. This is Darrell Wymer.” The voice he finally reached was polished and smooth.

“I’m Jason Weathers, in Netherland, Colorado. I understand I’m to be the subject of an article – for my upcoming book.” Jason opened the door slightly and saw that the hall was empty.

“Yes. I believe that’s true.”

“I can’t imagine why you’d be interested,” said Jason.

“I beg your pardon ... well I assure you that we are. So our writer has been in touch with you?”

“Yes. But I’ve never published anything.”

“Well,” Wymer laughed, “sometimes that may not be necessary.”

“How did you decide on it?”

“Why are you so suspicious? I assure you we are a very reputable magazine. You have nothing to fear from us. We’re not out to do a hatchet job or anything.”

“Did my publisher send you a release?”

Wymer laughed. “Are you kidding? Everyone here got a copy of the manuscript, in brown paper bags ... great gimmick – even the custodial staff, the people at the janitor service. They all got a manuscript, individually addressed. Great gimmick. We’ll have to work that into the story, you know. I just don’t understand how your people got the names and home addresses of the whole staff here.”

“Everybody got copies? ... the janitors?”

“That’s right. You don’t really know what they’re up to in promoting your book?”

“So... Well, it was a good gimmick. Is that why you’re doing the story then?”

“Partly. It raised a little controversy, too, between those that read it. And then we got a call to suggest it from the Omega folks, uptown. They own the publishing company.”

“So you had various kinds of stimuli.”

“I would think you’d be very pleased with the publicity. It’ll be a good piece. You know it’s the kind of thing that can make you in the publishing business. You’ll get a lot of exposure in Head West.”

Jason wondered how to fit the pieces. “I’m not sure more exposure is what I really need right now, Darrell.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“But go ahead and lay it on me,” sighed Jason. “At this point, who’s to say?”

He couldn’t keep Mr. Reedy waiting. He pulled on his coat and broad-brimmed, battered leather hat. Off he’d go into the freezing air, the swirling snow, and it would clear his head. He stepped back into the den, pulling on wool gloves. She stood by the fireplace, watching. She seemed a bit anxious.

“You may need to throw another log on before I get back,” he told her.

“Why do you try to play with my head? I’m not part of anything that’s trying to hurt you,” she said with concern. “I want you to believe that. You’ve got to believe that.”

He looked at her hard. He really had no time now. He smiled and winked at her, then was quickly gone.

She was thoughtful for a few quiet minutes. She got up and latched the door and began searching the house. When she found the partly written manuscript, she set it aside until she had investigated all of the premises. She found only marijuana in his stash and no unusual literature. When she had finished, she sat down to read what he was now writing, poring hastily over the rough pages in the puddle of lamplight at his desk. It seemed to be instructive.

Jason stepped out of the hardware store into the cold night. Snow was beginning to pile up in the usual places, where the ground might not be seen again for many weeks. He hitched the long package under his arm, tucked his hands into the fur and listened to his boots crunch on the soft, clean drapery that was covering the street. Now, hard to believe, he was the owner of two guns. He never thought he would buy one. But maybe it was a link back to reality for him, to the way things really were outside his cocoon: dangerous, devious, demanding of strength. That wasn’t the way he was trying to live here, with peace and order and idealistic creations that came down through his fingers. He thought he had fit nicely into the laid-back lifestyle of Netherland and would be happy here all of the year. But now something he didn’t understand seemed to threaten, and the words “Mega” and “Omega” kept hammering into his thoughts.

Mega seemed so long ago, so far away, that his mind tended to disregard the memory. His visit with alien personalities who were powerful, yet who epitomized the finest virtues of love and compassion, had been the foundation for much of what he had written so far. Mega had been the patriarch of all that he had known of them. But as the months passed, the trickery of his mind seemed to be pushing it all away, like a vagarious wind. Faded, too, were the ecstasies, real or imagined, with the alien woman, blowing free across the canyons of his beloved mountains, the place where he remembered her most. He knew that he had to believe it had been real. And if he did, then he had to believe that it could happen again. He had to find out about Omega Enterprises, and there just might be someone in Netherland who could tell him.

His front door was bolted from inside. He stomped the snow off his boots while waiting for her to come.

There she was, wide-eyed, in those large wire glasses. Her innocent eyes were her prettiest feature and he couldn't help smiling at the sensitive vulnerability he seemed to see there as she let him in. She was plain but she cared about things.

"So you locked yourself in? The prowlers really don't get out in weather like this."

"Well ... so you just bolt it in fair weather?"

He pushed past her with the package, walking to the bedroom. "I don't hardly bolt it at all. That's a nice thing about living in Netherland."

"But I notice you have it on the door."

"It came with the house," he called from the bedroom.

"Maybe you'd better start."

He stepped back into the den, without the package. "Why?"

She just shrugged her shoulders, sitting on the sofa. The fire had died to a smolder. It was obvious she hadn't given it much thought.

"I'd like to know why you suggested it." He walked to the fireplace and removed the screen.

"You just seem like you're apprehensive about something. Aren't you?"

"I don't seem to be. I'm always like this." He tossed a small log onto the fire and began stoking up the hot ashes with a poker.

"Well ... I wouldn't know, I guess." She did know something though. Her voice betrayed it.

"What have you been doing?"

"Just ... making myself comfortable. Doing a little reading. Are we going to be able to talk again?"

"Let's play that by ear. I still have one more visit to make. It's just down the street about a block."

*Jim Cleveland*

“Oh? You sure picked a bad night to handle all your business. Is it anything serious?”

“I don’t know,” he said quickly, then hesitating. “What do you know about Omega Books? Anything?”

“No.”

“Or Omega Enterprises?”

“I don’t know. Do they own it?”

“Right.” He was putting on his coat again. “What do you think about alien visits to Earth? Is that likely?”

“Well ... in your first book ... I thought you just used that as a ... device.”

He started toward the door. “I’ll see you shortly.”

“What do you think?” she called after him, still on the sofa.

He stopped at the door. “It was a means. You’re right.”

“Is that all it was?”

“I can’t tell you all my trade secrets.” He smiled, closing the door gently behind him. He liked this kind of verbal sparring. Sure, it was all bullshit.

Snowflakes swirled and rolled and the cold wind cut across Jason’s face. The temperature was dropping rapidly. It was 9:45 and his face was numb and red when he reached the small, white board house at the end of the street. The battered van in front was already shrouded in snow. He knocked on the door. Momentarily, it opened.

The scraggly long hair and beard spoke quickly to Jason of dope and rock and roll. The latter was playing in the background and was decidedly electric.

“Hey,” the young man said gruffly. “How ‘ya doin’?”

“Is Carol here?”

“Yeah,” he said, betraying more than a hint of curiosity. “Hey! Carol? Somebody to see ‘ya.”

“He can come in,” he heard faintly. “Ask him on in.” The living room was dark and cluttered with boxes. He followed his scruffy host back to the adjoining one, where he quickly surveyed their domestic scene.

Carol was lying on one of the several bare mattresses that filled the lamp-lit room, along with two dark-haired girls and another slender young man, with a bushy mustache and shoulder-length hair. What a disappointment it was to him, to find her in this environment, a flotsam of mental and physical poverty left in the wake of the 60’s. Someone had turned down the music, a welcome reprieve.

“Well,” said Carol with a sleepy gesture, “pull up a piece ‘a the floor and sit down.” Her small breasts were visibly bare under her sheer gown; her bare legs were youthfully small. Jason seated himself on crossed legs and tried not to take rude notice of her bareness, illuminated in the amber glow of the gas heater nearby.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” she said with a hint of humor. “I’m kinda dressed for bed. This is Jason ... somebody or other, and this is Sid and Danny ... and Barbara and Joann. I met him today on the way to the grocery.” She seemed to take delight in a tough, cool demeanor.

“I see you got moved in okay,” he said, looking around at his hosts. “I wanted to stop by and see if I could help you get settled.”

“I don’t think so. What about it, Sid?”

“I don’t reckon,” said the bearded sloth. “Looks like everything’s squared away. Might need a little more smoke one of these days ... if we stay long enough.”

“No problem. Let me know.”

“All right, “ said the other one. “We’ll take you up on that.” His tattered white t-shirt had “69” stenciled roughly on the front.

“In fact,” smirked Joann, “we were just doin’ a little weed. You wanna toke?”

Jason looked back at Carol. “How about you? Do you want a few hits?”

She seemed cleverly alert, using her eyes to batter against his senses, hiding her teasing questions that he knew he’d have to get answers for if he was to understand this beautiful wastrel. Her face was too much like Roci’s – too much.

“I’ll do a little more,” she said finally. “Might as well get completely shit-faced, huh?” She laughed like the youngster she was, with sudden, bright-eyed exuberance, cut away quickly by a long drag from a short cigarette. She blew smoke into an already-crowded room and snuffed it out. Sid was lighting a joint and Jason knew that he was going to waste valuable time he didn’t have. He needed to be with her alone, but – he reached for the joint from one of the women – he might as well hang in here and see what happens. And he might as well be turned on while doing it.

He took a full toke and passed it on to Carol, who took it wordlessly and seemed to stare at him with playful interest while she puckered to suck in cooling air with a long, long hit. If she was interested, then he was interested. But was she? And was she, could she, be related in any way to the face that was fused in his mind? He had a peculiar feeling about her that he couldn’t describe – an attraction, but also something that made him want to pull away.

“Three counts of assault,” squeaked the radio in Santos’ pickup. “Suspect in black GMC pickup, late model, should be considered dangerous.”

“All right,” came the answer. “This is one-two control, I read ‘ya. Local PD reports seeing black pickup on Highway 43 West of Pearlsdale and headed west toward Glenwood Springs.”

Santos clicked it off. He didn’t want to take unfair advantage. He’d just rely on his eyes and ears, and his wits. He was passing the incorporation sign for Glenwood Springs and the dark canyon walls behind him were disappearing to reveal a bright night sky, cold and windy, clear here but reportedly dropping heavy snow in the mountains around Netherland, his ultimate destination. It was nearly nine o’clock. At ten he needed to make his call.

The main highway through town would be dangerous with local police discussing him on the radio, so Santos turned the pickup smartly onto a side street through a darker district. He’d have to go shopping for a new vehicle. He might as well make it enjoyable, and he could, with a game plan.

Four blocks further up the highway and in the middle of the business district, patrolmen James Wilson and Durwood Lunsford sat looking and listening.

“An’ ever since I knew you were the re-e-e-ason,” the radio whined through the dark. “Then I knew that I could never let you go-o-o-o-o.”

Durwood's gum chewing didn't bother James when he was dozing.

"But I know I feel the changin' uv the season."

It had been quiet all evening, but maybe they ought to check the radio again.

"An' I'm waitin' for the winter winds to blo-o-o-ow."

He turned off the music and clicked on the police frequency.

"Uh ... this is car two. Is everything all right? Over."

"Where the hell have you been?" asked Santos angrily through the static.

"Who is this?" frowned James, awakening from his doldrums. Durwood was wide-eyed too.

"I can't believe you haven't had your radio on ... you fuckin' morons."

"Well! Who is this?! Who ... is this?! This ain't headquarters! I never heard your voice!"

"How could you, prick ... without your radio on?"

"It's against the law to talk on police frequency. You're about to get in a helluva lotta trouble!"

"Then why don't you turn around and do something about it?"

The officers scrambled to turn in time to see a blinding duo of headlights explode in their eyes. The truck engine roared and they were jarred suddenly, thrown off-balance and crashing into the dashboard as the truck smashed into their rear end, crumpling the car in a noisy jangle of metal and shattering glass.

"Oh ... God Damn!" he moaned "...o-o-o-oh!" James pulled himself off the floorboard and stumbled outside, forehead bleeding. He saw Durwood running down the street toward two disappearing tail lights.

"What ... what?" Deliriously, he ran after Durwood, gasping up to him on the dark highway, out of breath, still heady, dizzy from the blow against the dashboard.



“Damn ‘em! Damn ‘em!” rasped Durwood, holding the pistol futilely, trembling. James was already running back to the battered squad car, back fender mashed against a tire, which had collapsed flat on the glass-strewn concrete.

“Car one ... come in ... car three ... come in ... emergency!” he implored into the microphone.

“In case you can’t keep up,” said Santos clearly over the static, “I’ll be at the Cotton Club having a drink.”

James couldn’t answer. He was livid in his angry confusion. Dear God, he trembled, what’s happening? ... what’s happening? I’ll never turn my radio off again. No sir! He put the revolver back into the holster, looked at his sweaty palm, then at Durwood.

“That son-of-a-bitch means business,” said Durwood. “How we gonna get to the Cotton Club?”

“Sh-h-h-h,” James said, blotting at his bloody forehead with cautious fingers. “What’s the rush?”

The radio rasped to life again. “This is Eagle. Car two, do you read me?” Durwood grabbed the microphone and started talking fast.

The Cotton Club sat on a small hill next to the Lonesome Pines Motel, just a few blocks from downtown, with a gravel parking lot filled with cars and pickup trucks. Hard-hitting country rock muffled through the walls with hints of the smoke-filled, noisy revelry inside. Santos could hear the police siren approaching in his mind. “Keep the change.” He shoved a five-dollar bill at the bartender to pay for his double whisky on ice.

“Yeah ... thanks,” came the gruff reply. He was rounded fat with ludicrous red hair and mustache, a curled lip and ruddy complexion.

“Hey! Who’s the toughest, meanest son-of-a-bitch in this whole bar here, bartender?” he asked.

“Up against the wall, redneck Mother!” the band wailed raucously and a smoky den of cowboys and worn women laughed and grinned.

“You don’ wanna know him. I tell ‘ye that,” said the bartender. “At least, I don’t think you do.”

“I’m doing a research paper,” said Santos, hard eyes fixing on the fat man.

“Up there,” motioned the bartender. “That fella in the middle of that table, with that leather hat on ... with the bushy red beard. That’s Sonny Donovan. They say he can bite the rattles off a sidewinder.”

“Impressive cuisine,” said Santos. He poured down the whiskey in one large gulp, rattling the ice, and set the glass back on the bar. The Bartender stared after him as he walked down the crowded bar and out into the clean, cold air of the parking lot. He could hear the police car rounding a corner nearby.

The game would be nice tomorrow, no matter the weather – Denver’s rock-hard defense against the pass-minded Buffalo Bills, who might beat the line and maybe even win the game with a good passing day from Joe Ferguson and good running from Terry Miller. A 4-2 start was a little disappointing for Denver, while 3-3 was encouraging for the Bills. It was time to get his own season underway. Sonny Donovan, let’s see, start with D – Dan Dierdorf, offensive tackle, all-pro from the Cardinals, D, Dan Pastorini at quarterback, an interesting choice; P for Walter Payton, a great running back, from the Bears and P, Pete Johnson, go for some youth here, from

Cincinnati, at fullback. A J opened up all kinds of possibilities – continued later – the police car rolled into view.

Santos leaned against a Chevy sedan, rubbing his jaw, as the officers hurried, crunching across the gravel. “That’s it, all right?” one of them pulled open the door of the shiny black pickup truck with the bashed grill and looked over the lot, eyeing Santos. “Hey you! What you doing?” Durwood thought the man looked hurt. He had to be some kind of dude, with those gold earrings.

Santos rubbed his jaw. “That son-of-a-bitch in that truck there. Sonny Donovan. Him and his buddy went outside. He busted me in the jaw and I ain’t done nothin’ to him. He’s had a few snorts and he’s actin’ crazy.”

“Come on! Follow us inside.” the officer said gruffly, nervously fingering the release snap on his holster. “You show us. He’s already in a mess of trouble down the street.”

Santos led the way to the front door. The senior officer motioned the other one around to the back door, and he made his way there, brushing through a dark patch of weeds, hand on holster.

*Jim Cleveland*

A siren continued to wail, louder. “Wait a minute!” said the policeman in front, stopping Santos at the door. He turned to meet another patrol car, sliding to a noisy halt on the dusty gravel.

The new officers got out of the car quickly to join them, the first cop hollering at them: “He’s in the club here, like he said he was, man named Sonny Donovan, an’ this fellow’s done been hit by him and ... Let’s just ease in there and see if we can’t get him out without a mess.”

“I know who you talkin’ about, Donovan,” said another cop. “But that ain’t his truck there, I don’t reckon.”

“Well, let’s ask him. Come on. You can point him out.”

They walked resolutely inside. “Wait at the bar,” Santos was ordered.

So he stood auspiciously at the gap in the bar, from where busy waitresses in denim shorts and halters came and went, delivering foamy pitchers of beer, fondling wrinkled bills and with bulging apron pockets sagging with silver. The storm was gathering.

“I could get laid, “ he told a particularly harried brunette with kinky hair, a big nose and heavy breasts.

“Tell the truth,” she sneered at him.

“If you had twenty bucks, I could be talked into it.”

“You’re crazy,” she said.

“You don’t think I’d do it for nothing, do you?” he asked, astounded.

“You need help,” she sighed disgustedly, not looking at him, trying in vain to count some money.

“I do. I do. I need that twenty bucks.”

“Hey, beat it...” She looked up to see two of the policemen bearing down on them and another stationed at the door.

“Third-rate romance,” twanged the band, “Low-rent rawn—de—vous!”

The waitress turned again. The stranger who was bugging her had disappeared. The officers pushed past her with their nightsticks ready. A suspicious crowd eased aside.

“Hey bartender. Do you own this place?”

“No.”

“I want that band to keep playing.”

“Sure.”

“Do you know Sonny Donovan?”

“No sir, I don’t.”

“He’s in here. But it’s too dark to pick him out. You better find him for me, and do it if fast, or all these lights are coming on and you’re out of business for the night.”

“I don’t know him, Sir. Look around. I don’t know all these people! How the hell can I know all these people?” he hollered above the music.

“I said..” the policeman leaned over the bar, holding up his stick in a tight grip, “you’d better find him or we’re gonna lighten up the whole place. All right?”

The bartender was sweating on his fat. “He’s over yonder, with that leather hat on ... yonder,” he motioned quickly with his eyes, hoping he wasn’t being seen by anybody that mattered. “He’s over there, all right, but he’s mean as hell. We don’ want no trouble here now. They’s too many people in here could get hurt.”

“There ain’t gonna be any trouble,” said the grim-faced officer. “Don’t worry about that. You just keep the music going.”

“She said...gimme the ke-e-e-ey! An’ I’ll unlock the do-o-o-ot!” The band droned on through the noisy conversation that seemed to have toned down from raucous abandon to gossipy buzz.

The officers walked steadily toward Donovan’s table. Santos let them stop there at his table for a few seconds before moving quickly, slipping through the portal to the bright kitchen, finding the master switch he had spotted before, pulling open the latched cover to open up the main controls for the lights.

“Hey ... What you doin’ heah? You ain’t suppose t’ be heah!” A fat black woman waved a greasy ladle at Santos, who could imagine the tense confrontation brewing in the other room.

*Jim Cleveland*

“I don’t know what in the hell you’re talkin’ about!”

The light turned suddenly to blackness, swooning the band in the middle of a lyric.

“Lor-rdy mercy!” said the cook. Masked in darkness, Santos pushed aside the bulk of the black woman.

The gruff din of noises in the darkness, jumbled voices of men and scraping chairs, were accented by a playful scream, laughter, scuffling, curses, then the jangling crash of glass, a table, more curses, a scream.

“All right now! Don’t nobody move!” A shot split through the melee, a woman screamed, and then another. In the blackness Santos made his way with a wry smile. He reached the cash register just before the fat bartender, who tried to pull him away with a pudgy grip.

“Who the hell are you?” he growled, snatching for the wad of bills already clutched in Santos’ hand.

“I didn’t think you’d miss an opportunity like this to rip off the company till, lard ass,” said Santos, driving a hard fist to the fat man’s forehead. He tucked the fat roll of bills in his jeans pocket, stepped over the fat crumpled body, and slipped out of the noisy scramble.

When he was safely outside, carefully removing the shiny gold earrings, he thought again how truly amazing it all was. He could lead these primitive people in whatever direction he chose.

He walked to the end of the parking lot and into the next one, toward the motel office. In one hand, he carried a bulky leather satchel from the pickup, under the other arm his valuable box. A humped old man in suspenders scowled at the noisy confusion that had now spilled into the Cotton Club’s crowded lot. The red light on the police car circled resolutely in the middle of the hubbub of accusing voices, a crying woman, threats and denials that couldn’t be heard, except in tone, from this distance.

“They musta had a helluva mess over at the club,” said the old man disdainfully, holding an unfolded section of the newspaper.

“No doubt,” said Santos, turning to eye the discordant scene. The ambulance was wailing in ridiculously dissonant, meandering tones, as it wheeled into the lot. He could make out the call of “Over here! ... Here!”

“What do you think gets in people’s heads these days?” asked Santos.

“Lord! I don’t know. Devilment!” said the old man in disgust. “Too busy servin’ the devil ... and never darkenin’ the church door on Sunday.”

“Amen! Church doors should be darkened,” said Santos. “Do you have a room here with a door and a lock on it?”

When he was inside, he set down the satchel and placed the box carefully on the table under the hanging lamp. It was 9:45. He would call at ten.

AT 11:50 IN THE EAST, Mega Smith looked out over the New York skyline from the company’s penthouse window. Nightfall greatly enhanced this testament to technology. Compartments of bright light, tiny squares rising up irregularly against the dark sky filled his vision from the jungle of what they called “skyscrapers.”

He hadn’t regretted leasing the top seven stories of the Apple Tower and, indeed, the money from Omega Enterprises had helped finance this highest structure in all the land. At first, the location had given the company a great deal of insulation; finally, it had lent an aura of grandeur and excellence, much like the panorama of the civilization below.

Mega was aware of the vulnerability. An errant airplane or well-placed missile could destroy the entire company should it reach the power that Mega intended it to reach, with resultant enemies. Perhaps they would move to a country estate, or an alpine village later. Mega was certain that he would have a plan for that challenge when the Omega image required a change.

It would be nice to see his chairmen after this busy and successful week. He had planned very carefully for them to have an enjoyable and rewarding Sunday. After their dinner and business discussions, the time would be free to relax the mind and body and prepare for the week ahead.

He could see the helicopter spinning in across the dark skyscape – four small lights moving in unison, the occasional glisten of the shiny gold bird itself as it whirred through the night. It disappeared overhead and Mega watched it on the screen as it settled silently onto the pad just above him.

*Jim Cleveland*

In a moment, handsome, dark-haired Jay Jones stepped lightly down the spiral staircase, tanned and muscular from the sunshine of Miami Beach, casually chic in a pale brown sport coat and open necked shirt.

Right behind him, Cezanne Brown gave Mega her warmest smile, illuminating her beautiful, fair face and long curls of blonde hair. Al Johnson shook his hand finally, affectionately, smiling with perfect white teeth against his tough, handsome face and tight curls of yellow hair.

The bell of the shiny Grandfather's clock soon chimed midnight again and again.

"To a successful week," said Mega with a smile, holding a large glass of vegetable juice aloft. They drank in their leisure comfort in their penthouse in the sky, the brain trust of Omega Enterprises on weekend retreat.

The phone rang as Mega expected it would.

"That will be Santos," he said, walking to the telephone, "being his usual dramatic self." They laughed.

"Hello. This is Mega."

"This is Santos. I'm in Glenwood Springs." Mega drew a quick mental picture of the location from his study of Santos' movement. "I had a nice visit with that dude," said Santos, "and I've been scratching with the law ever since."

"You're entitled to some fun after all the dull assignments you've had lately."

"It's been nice," said Santos. "I'm going to a ball game tomorrow. I'll be in Netherland by dark."

"Let's make it a clean job," said Mega. "Will the weather slow you down?"

"No. It'll be clean," said Santos. "I'm changing vehicles now."

"Good. Call me before you act."

"Yes."

"And Santos ... good luck to your favorite team."

“I don’t have one,” said Santos. “I don’t need one.”

“Don’t you care who wins?”

“Playing is the important thing,” said Santos, hanging up.

Mega rejoined the chairmen nearby. “That was Santos, one of my most reliable soldiers. He works a lot with bullies. He’ll contact Jason Weathers tomorrow night, one of our writers.”

“Then he’s finished with the book, and into the plan?” asked Cezanne.

“Yes, and very successfully so. Since we’re publishing it ourselves, I feel that we can give it a great market impact, with your help, of course, Jay.”

“You can count on Los Angeles,” said Jay. “The agency will push your sales right out the proverbial top.”

“We’ll be counting on it. But it will be best if Jason Weathers isn’t around,” said Mega evenly.

IN GLENWOOD SPRINGS, Santos retired for a calm, restful night, lying on his back in perfect, naked repose. The box of dynamite sat on the floor beside the bed.



## CHAPTER 4

Curls of smoke hung lazily around Jason's head as he tried to center his racing thoughts. Somehow the thoughts had to settle and concentrate in their crowded room. He felt both elated and relaxed. He tried to care about the intrigue that was gripping his life but it was difficult to overcome his euphoric feeling of well-being. He was hardly comfortable though, cramped and upright as he was, in the midst of these slothful and simple companions.

The music seemed enough to pacify them; it could have been for him in a younger day perhaps, and, except for what he needed to do. He had to think of a way to get a few minutes alone with Carol. There must be a way to do it, he reasoned, but it hadn't yet come to his mind. If he could attract her eyes, maybe he'd just ask her, whereupon she might just laugh at him and tell him to leave.

She seemed little interested in him, really. He guessed it must be foolish, him being here trying to figure out this light-headed ingénue. Everybody looks like somebody else, after all, and somebody somewhere was certain to look like Roci. This one was probably, all done and said, just a selfish little hedonist and not worth his time, which could be better spent, he decided, and it had been rude of him to leave Joni. He guessed he'd make an excuse or two and get away from this place and she would probably not even get up to see him go.

"Thanks for the dope, guys and girls," said Jason, pulling himself off the floor. "I've got to get home, I've got a guest there."

Carol's hard, teasing eyes were on him, playing with him with sudden attention now that he was leaving. "Who is she?"

"Nobody serious," said Jason, staring into her eyes. "A house guest. I appreciate your hospitality."

She didn't reply, taking a long hit from her cigarette, eyeing him closely instead. He pulled on his coat.

“You take it easy, man,” said Sid. The others mumbled good-byes without moving either. Jason looked in her eyes once more before turning to go, then stepped out into the front room.

“Hey.” She was calling him. He turned from the front door to face her as she got up lithely and walked up to him in the darkness. She searched his hard face. “What’d you come down for? Did you wanna see me?”

“That’s right ... alone.”

“You said you wanted to be friends with me?”

“Right again.”

“You aren’t just trying to get in my pants?”

“Not really ... it’d be all right though.”

“You’re not married?”

“Divorced.”

“What happened?”

“We grew apart.”

“What are you lookin’ for now?”

“Somebody to love and take care of,” he said.

“How old are you?”

“Forty. You’re asking all the questions. Where are you from?”

“Here and there. I’m kind of between things right now. You know what I mean?”

“Not really.”

“Like jobs and men friends, and things I usually do. I’m kinda takin’ a break.”

“Who are these folks?”

She shrugged. “People I ran into in Denver, friends of a friend, you know. I don’t know ‘em that well. And I don’t know how long I’ll be around.”

*Jim Cleveland*

“So where will you go?”

“You’re full of questions too,” she said, unsmiling.

“Stay with me if you get tired of this place.”

She didn’t seem enamored by the suggestion. “Back to the panties, huh? What happened to all that friendship stuff?”

“What do you expect? That’s about all you’ve got on. You’re beautiful, I’m hooked.”

She seemed to be sorting out what he was telling her, standing there in the dark room, unabashedly showing her naked little legs and her small breasts through the sheer smock. “I’m not tryin’ to be a prude, Jason.” He was surprised that she called him by name. “But I’m not advertising, either. I’m not goin’ to bed with you.”

Jason stared. “I just want you for a friend. There’s plenty of time to decide about anything else. We might find that we can mean something to one another.”

“Something,” she mused with the hint of a smile. “Surely something.”

“How old are you?” he asked, afraid of the answer.

“Nineteen,” she said, eyes searching his. Maybe she noticed his spirits sag. It was hard for his mind to bridge their age gap.

“When I’m eighty, you’ll be fifty-nine,” he said wryly.

“I was beginning to wonder if you had a sense of humor,” she laughed.

“I’d have to ... to believe in this situation.”

“You’re not old,” she said, “until you think you are.”

“I’ve been around twenty-one years longer than you. We’re probably a lot different. We should be.”

“It’s all done the same way,” she said with an impish smile. “I like older men.”

“Why?”

“Maturity. I can’t relate to these young kids a lotta times.”

“What are you after?”

“I told you ... maturity.”

The thought was encouraging to Jason, but he needed time to think, knew it was time to leave – for now. “Then maybe it makes sense after all,” he reasoned quietly. “Maybe I’ll come see you tomorrow if we’re not all buried in snow by then.”

“If you want to,” she said, not smiling, her soft eyes piercing his, almost challenging him to come to her, relate to her world. He didn’t know what he wanted but he’d think. He reached to hold her, but quickly she shied away, leaving his open hands with nothing.

“I don’t want you to think I’m like these people, either,” she said softly. “I’m only here because I have something to do.”

“What?”

“Maybe you’ll find out,” she said crisply, stepping forward quickly to kiss him on the cheek, on tiptoes, and then turning away. She stopped at the door to the other room, light shining through the sheer garment to accent the shadowy lines of her well-crafted body.

“Goodnight,” she said. Now he would really have to do some serious thinking.

“Goodnight,” he said firmly. He pulled on his leather hat and was gone, into the dark, snowy night.

His boots crunched through the fresh, new snow. The wind had calmed, leaving the heavy, unseen clouds overhead to cover their mountainside. Softly it was all disappearing under nature’s pale shroud.

So she liked him a little, it seemed, and she had some mysterious job to do here, or so she said. And she felt somewhat apart from the two couples in the house. She’s probably a runaway from home, or from somewhere, he guessed, and would probably spell nothing but trouble for him should he decide to pursue her affection. But he knew that he would. He was attracted to her in a strange kind of way that he couldn’t define. He realized that he had gotten no information on Omega Enterprises from her, but in retrospect he doubted that she was related to his mystery at all.

Maybe, just maybe, he thought, her mysterious job was part of a plot to kill him, and her friends sure looked capable. But surely he was being overdramatic. It's not my imagination that will get me through this, he reasoned. It has to be logical deduction, keen observation, alertness, courage, bravery. He wondered if he had those things.

He looked at his watch as he approached the house. It was 11:20. True enough he had wasted a lot of time with his new neighbors, and he expected that Miss...what was her last name? ... had gone to bed.

The den was empty, only a lamplight burning. He found the note wedged into his bedroom door: *Jason, I can't stay with you. I was looking for someone else. I won't write the article and am sorry I can't explain. Joni*

The handwriting appeared to be hurried, maybe in order to catch the bus. Jason wondered. Surely he hadn't done anything to put her off that bad. Surely she didn't expect him to stay home and not take care of business just to be with her. But he guessed he had acted too smugly – just his way of joking, of being sociable. He must've hurt her feelings in some way or other. At any rate, he had to decide whether to go after her or not, whether he wanted her here or wanted her out on his way. Let her go, he decided. His life had been threatened, seriously or not, and he seemed on the verge of something fascinating down the street, two reasons of two kinds to wish her gone from here, with or without any other answer as to why she came. Maybe she was really just a reporter, and it was only his paranoia that had implicated her in the first place. But the mass mailings to Head West seemed totally bizarre.

Then he knew suddenly that he wanted her back. He didn't want her gone like this, with the realization that he had hurt her. Besides, he wanted to know why and how he had turned her off, and he wanted to know some more about her as well. Maybe she was part of the puzzle, so he had better hang on. She was too witty not to be good companionship and there would be time later to ensure her safety if somebody was really out to kill him.

Besides, he needed the publicity for his book. It's best she be here, he reasoned, moving to the door again with his hat in hand. He had to hurry, only minutes to spare if the bus was on time and was actually running, so he'd take the car. The Volkswagen paused uncertainly, then cranked smoothly.

He followed her footprints in the snow. It brightened and glistened in the rays of his headlights. The prints were slowly filling again with shining crystals as if to make her disappear. He drove cautiously up the white field of snow to the intersection and onto the highway. He could see her dark huddled figure on the side of the road, eyes sparkling for an instant in his headlights before turning away. He pulled up beside her, but she was already walking away. He pulled the car smartly off the highway and turned it under the service station canopy. But she had turned again and was walking back to the highway, weighted down with suitcase and camera bag. It was obvious he would have to do some talking. He cut the engine and got out of the car. She was only a dark bundle again, out on the cold roadside in the falling snow. Jason walked out beside her, hands in his pockets.

“I don’t want you to go,” he said gently. “I’m sorry if I’ve offended you.”

“You don’t owe me an apology. I just couldn’t get into it, you know?” her dark expression was strained, blowing smoke in the cold air.

“What are you running away from? I haven’t treated you bad.”

“You don’t want to be interviewed. That’s plain to see.”

“I don’t much care, one way or the other. I was going to cooperate with you, but some personal business had to be handled. I wasn’t expecting you until Tuesday, remember?”

“I understand that,” she scowled. “Believe me. That’s no problem...no problem.”

“Well ... did I just turn you off that bad?”

“Look ... Jason. I know you’re in some kind of trouble. I don’t know what it is and I don’t think you do, but I don’t think you want me around.”

“To tell the truth, I do.”

“You don’t act like it.”

“I shouldn’t act like it. I should want you to go. I don’t know what the trouble is but I can’t afford to take it lightly. Maybe you can come back when the trouble blows over and I promise I’ll be very nice to you. I hope you’ll let me do that, okay?”

He saw her nervously wipe at a tear, then her reddened face was falling apart, breaking into muffled sobs, painful tears that tore her emotions out for him to see. He reached to comfort her but she shoved him away, clutching at her suitcase and stumbling, crying, up the highway. As if to realize her helpless folly she stopped a few paces away and slowly brought her tears under control.

“Joni ... I’m sorry. Please let me help.”

“I thought I knew who you were,” she sobbed. “You could have been so beautiful. I thought you could be beautiful and peaceful because of all you wrote. But you’re not...” She let the sentence hang. “You’re like the rest of us, all of us, with your defenses and shields and suspicions. I thought you knew so much I thought I had to see you and ... know you. Now I realize I just put you up somewhere you’ll never be. You’re just like the rest of us. You can write about beautiful thoughts and things, but you can’t be those things. You’re just airing out your frustrations like the rest of us, with dream pictures.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong with it?” she sniffled. “There’s nothing wrong with it. I was just expecting somebody a lot different, a lot more laid-back.”

“I’ve got my life in order.”

“Being in order Jason is not what it’s all about. Do you really care about anybody?”

“Roci.”

She stared into his eyes. “You fell in love with a dream, Jason, a fictional character you created. That’s what you did. I don’t know if you could love anything real.”

It seemed for a long time as if he wouldn’t speak.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Whatever she saw in his eyes must have changed her mind. She turned abruptly and went to the Volkswagen, climbing in with the camera bag in her lap. He picked up the suitcase and made his way to the car. The “pop” he heard was her releasing the baggage compartment from inside the car. He placed the bag inside.

MEGA LIFTED HIS GLASS for a toast. The candle glow reflected his handsome image across the dinner table.

“To power and peace,” he said. Their wine glasses tinkled in the dim light of the penthouse suite. The beautiful people drank their dessert wine amid the remains of dinner, then fruit and cheese.

They talked of events and decisions of the week from their separate positions of responsibility within the Omega hierarchy. The wine level ebbed. It was 1:30 when Mega pressed a button to lower the food table into the floor they stood on.

“I was wondering,” said Mega, “if there is other business of which you’re curious. If so, we’ll deal with it before we begin to fully experience the pleasures of the weekend.”

“Santos,” said Jay. They faced each other in the small round space left by the table.

Mega laughed, leaning back into his padded swivel chair. “Of course. You want to know what makes him tick. He’s indeed interesting.”

“I remember his picture,” said Cezanne, “but I don’t know much about him.”

“I’ve known Santos since 1980,” said Mega. “It was in the spring and we were organizing the corporation.”

IN LATE MAY of 1980 in the Catskills, green fresh leaves of spring covered the slopes. Mega stood in front of the lodge and waited, watching the jeep dip and sway through the holes in the bare dirt road.

Santos stepped out and stretched his lean, muscular frame. The driver deposited his bag on the ground and began to leave, to return to the heavy wooden gate that was the only official entrance to the 70-acre compound.

Mega came forward and shook his hand. “Equal Santos. I’ll tell you about being a soldier,” he said. Santos smiled and they walked inside.

When he had been shown his room, a modest square with a double bed and small adjoining bath, he unpacked his unusual Earth instruments and



garments and placed them where he knew they should belong. Soon he joined Mega in the dining room, which had seven rectangular tables with straw-bottomed chairs, all empty, and a slow-burning fire in the hearth. It gave the afternoon a peaceful glow. They sat over steaming, black coffee.

“This will take some getting used to,” said Santos.

“You seem to be doing well,” Mega replied, smiling. “I’d like to know what your needs and desires are before we assign you. Are you sure you want to be a soldier? Do you understand what it requires?”

“Action,” said Santos. “Challenge ... dexterity ... wit.”

“Yes,” said Mega. “Small jobs essentially, usually to effect small changes.”

“I can do them.”

“Tell me your credentials.”

“You know them.”

“I want you to tell me.”

“I have been an explorer for ... four Earth years. My greatest successes have been physical exertions. I’ve rescued four lives. I’ve destroyed eleven aliens.”

“You’ve killed them?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever harmed a brother or sister?”

“No.”

“What is your judgment of this alien life, Santos?”

“It’s confusing.”

“How would you treat them?”

“With compassion if the genes are desirable. I can destroy them with efficiency if they aren’t.”

“And your Equals,” asked Mega. “You’ve said you have never harmed one.”

“I very well know the difference,” said Santos.

“I see that you do. I will be your brain and you will be my personal instrument, for all the great variety of clandestine jobs that will need doing for the corporation. I believe that you’re very reliable. But I want to know your motivations too. On Earth, they would ask, what makes you tick?”

Santos smiled. “I was bored. I want to get ... immersed in their culture. I might call it a new frontier for me, and as exciting as the World Series.”

“Baseball? Do you like it?”

“Yes. I like their games – all of them. I like the thrills of challenge and victory. I like the helpless futility of grudging defeat. I like the feel of the elements that produce both. I like the passions of their battles here, all of the different kinds. Unlike anything I’ve experienced in the Light and Life worlds.

“It’s important to like conflict and challenge here since it’s abundant.”

“I do,” said Santos. “It provides great opportunity.”

“We’ll build a corporation together then,” said Mega. “I want you to help me as a personal ... emissary. There will be several hundred of us at first, then more. We have knowledge that will provide us power here. Their money can buy us many kinds of power.”

“To what end?”

“As you said,” Mega replied. “It’s much the game, the same with us as it is with them.”

“Isn’t it ironic that we’ve come back to this?”

“What else to do when one runs out of challenges,” asked Mega, “except to broaden the territory?”

They walked in the woods and talked. By weekend, the lodge and cabins would all be filled with the Equals whom Mission Control would send to Mega to help build the corporation.

JASON LOOKED OUT into the darkness and the silent snowfall. Unseen, it was covering his mountains, preparing all as a surprise for the light of tomorrow. He didn't really want to talk, but Joni would be back soon and the coffee was ready. He turned and walked back into the kitchen to get the cups. She wanted to talk, no doubt about it, but what was there to say that hadn't been said, or at least thought? He was a subject that seemed to have been drained dry, and that, he realized, was why he had been stubbornly stumped lately in his writing. The book was going nowhere, he admitted to himself, and he guessed it was because he wasn't feeling anything too deeply these days; his passion was burned out, maybe from lack of use.

“Deep in thought?”

He turned at the soft voice and saw that she had quietly returned. She looked refreshed, and relaxed, and he realized that, despite her emotional nature, she could really take control; she had strength.

He shook his head and began pouring the coffee. “It's typical, I guess.”

“You're thinking of something to write?”

“It's hard to say what you might write about in the future. It could be anything from your experience.”

“Anything at all?”

“Whatever inspires you to write. You can't be sure what it'll be later on.”

“Are you inspired right now?”

“I don't know what you mean. You want sugar?... cream?”

“No, I mean ... are you feeling something intensely? So intensely you can write about it?”

“Perhaps. I don't know. It's melancholy. That's what you'd call it, and it's always good for some passion.”

“Is that what it takes to write well? Passion?”

“I think so, but it's a craft as well. You're a writer. What do you think?”

“I guess so. I don't know. I think I'm too young to write a book. I'd like to, but I don't think I have anything to say yet.”

“I wonder about that too, lately.”

“You do seem a bit depressed. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I’ve just got a bad habit of blurting out what’s on my mind.”

“You’re honest. That’s nice.”

“Why? Because most people aren’t? Is that what you think?”

“Right.”

“Well ...who are you to say that? Who are you to judge?”

“A judge. We all have to be judges. That’s why it’s important to care about justice.”

“Hey,” she said suddenly, smiling at him as if pleased. “That’s right.” She seemed to be waiting for it to dawn on him.

“What are you doing? Baiting me?” asked Jason with a glint.

“No,” she said positively. “No. Just seeing how you think. That’s my job.”

“Somehow I keep forgetting this is all business,” said Jason. “Let’s go sit down.” He walked past her and led the way into the den with his coffee. She walked behind him.

“Well,... Damn! I’m sorry. I guess I’m always just hurting your feelings.”

“Bullshit!” said Jason. “I’m not that fragile. I only meant that it all seemed like just a personal conversation, not a means of eliciting information to fill a page.”

They looked into each other’s eyes, his resolute, hers trying to penetrate his logic. She spoke evenly.

“I know you’re a little up tight about whatever this ... threat happens to be. I overheard the call, okay? Look ... it’s probably just a crank call. That’s not uncommon.”

“First of all,” said Jason. “I’m not up tight. Secondly, this is a very small town. We don’t have many crank callers here.”

“Surely you don’t have many enemies ... an enemy who’d want to harm you. Or do you?”

*Jim Cleveland*

“I think it’s wise to assume that I may – for the time being anyway. Especially since I got two calls, not one.”

“I guess,” she said. “Do you have a gun? I think you brought one in.”

“Two.”

“Damn. The weather is sure bad for somebody to be coming after you.”

“He said he’d be here tomorrow night. Maybe it’ll be clear. Maybe the moon will be out by then. Who the hell knows?”

She reached out to touch his hand. Her thin, cool fingers felt strange to his touch, and then felt ... like a woman. He looked into her eyes.

“Let’s don’t talk tonight,” she said. “Let’s talk tomorrow.”

“That’ll be better,” he said. “I’ll surely have better things to say.” He wanted to smile at her and almost did, perhaps a trace.

“Are you lonely?” she asked.

“Does it show?”

“Sometimes.”

“I’ve been married to other things ... myself really.”

“It shows.”

“How?”

“You’re not comfortable with people. You’re ill at ease.”

He looked down at the floor, scanning the carpet, seeing nothing. “I have that problem. I admit it.”

“And you’re defensive about it, sensitive really.”

“You’re gonna put that in your story?” he asked with an impish smile.

“And you try to avoid facing things sometimes too. I think you may be avoiding something in yourself.”

“I’m not trying to avoid myself,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ve been facing myself for a long time. Some of it’s okay; some of it may not be. But it’s all the same with everybody else. I may not have my shit completely together, but it’s still a lot more together than most people I know.”

“I agree with that. You see a lot of things other people don’t see, but I’m not sure you’ve got your energy moving in the right direction.”

“I’m at a standstill right now. That’s the truth about it. I’m not getting much done. And I’m on edge a little, especially when you add up the phone calls. I’ve got too many irons in the fire right now.” His eyes wanted to capture her face. “I wanted you to stay tonight but you’re definitely going to go tomorrow. We could have a mess here, who knows? Then ... you can come back later and it won’t be so ... tense.”

She looked into his eyes and he saw in hers, fully for the first time, her sensitivity, the feeling that he knew she had. There had never been any reason to play games with her, to hold himself outside her aura. There had never been any need for him to be the distrustful, insulated person that he helplessly was. If he could no longer feel, and feel deeply, then what could he possibly do well?

She had gotten up suddenly, left the coffee on the table and was moving to the stairs to her room, wiping her eye hurriedly as she went. “I’m sorry,” she said, still moving away, “I’d better get some sleep. Goodnight. “ She was moving quickly up the stairs.

“Sorry for what?” His words went unanswered.

He got up and, wordlessly, watched her disappear into the darkness of the balcony above. Neither had there been any need for him to think beyond the conversation, to cultivate thoughts of being close to this homely, sensitive innocent. She plainly wanted to get the hell out of town. Maybe he should be a resolved loner. Maybe he couldn’t be anything else. Maybe it was best.

Jason’s attempts to sleep were futile. He thrashed in the bedcovers and concocted imaginings of the events that were coming, the threat on his life, leaving his bed finally to take and fondle the weapons he had bought.

The .38 revolver felt good in his hand, as good as such an alien tool could feel to his grip. All of his yesteryears with the violent heroes of countless films spilled out over him. Maybe he could hit something with it ... maybe.

The rifle had a different feel, alien too, but full of memories of how movie heroes used them to strike for good. The idea of a desperate confrontation felt very disconcerting to him, but he would change himself to meet this need. He wouldn't run; he knew that. This was his refuge here to begin with; he couldn't run.

In his mind, and down the sights of his weapons that he really couldn't afford to buy, he adjusted his mind to the challenge. Be awake. He would be. And strive for the advantage. And make sure that she was gone from here. In no way could he justify anything happening to her. He couldn't live with that. He took dead aim at the objects in his bedroom, hard metal edge of the barrel against the bottom of his lamp (it would shatter), or the bulb itself, the bricks in his makeshift bookcase, the books themselves (fiction, philosophy, essays, blow the bottom off Vonnegut), and up to eye level, imagining a man, to blow a hole in his chest or to be calm enough to make up for an errant first shot, hold his shit together for whatever it would take.

Suddenly, the phone rang, splitting shrilly through the silence, sending his heart racing. He gritted his teeth, it must be the voice again, the threat, calling to stir his mind anew. He picked it up quickly, before it could ring again, not speaking, wondering what the voice would say – Hello? He could play games too. He would be silent.

“Hello. Hello, Mr. Weathers.”

“Yes.”

“This is Marshall Turkin. Are you all right?”

“Sure.”

“I hated to bother you this late but Mr. Reedy, with the hardware store, called me. He said you were down buying some guns, said you'd had some bad phone calls. He got to thinkin' about it and decided he ought to get up and call me.”

“Somebody says they're comin' to kill me.”

“Don't have no idea who it is?”

“No. I didn't know I had any enemies.”

“Maybe they think it’s somebody else. Do you think they know you?”

“I don’t think I know him.”

‘Man’s voice?’

“That’s right. Look ...I don’t know who it could be. Believe me, I’ve racked my brain. But I don’t want to get people aroused if it’s nothing ... you know.”

“Well, if you don’t know what it could be all about, I don’t know how I could do any checking around. I think you ought to keep some lights on around there, and keep an eye out, and I’ll be ready to come down there on a minute’s notice if you’ll call me.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“I been out a couple of days, kinda sick with the flu,” said the marshal, “or I’d be out checkin’ the road tonight. But this damn stuff ’ll sure take the strength outta ‘ya.”

“You’re right. Don’t worry. I’ll call if I need you.”

“Well, now don’t hesitate to do that. Now, if you think of anything we ought to investigate, you call me, all right?”

“I think it’s somebody’s idea of a joke,” said Jason, “but I got the guns because I don’t like to take chances. Do you know what I mean?”

“I sure do. Now you call me, now,” urged the marshal.

“I’ll do it,” Jason agreed. “Hope you get to feelin’ better.”

“Aw-w-w! I’m goin’ to.”

“Drink a lot of juices. Eat honey and take a lot of vitamin C, about 5000 milligrams a day. And rest.”

“Aw-w-w. Yeah?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I’m sorry to disturb you this late. But I just wanted you to know I was here to help.”



*Jim Cleveland*

“That’s what I like about living in Netherland, Mr. Turkin. I appreciate your reliability.”

“You got good locks on your doors?”

“Yes.” Mr. Turkin had really forgotten to ask that. He could do as much on his own as he could with a sick marshal who’d want to call all the shots.

“Well, I’ll check by there in the morning then.”

“Fine. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Jason sat quietly by the receiver for a moment. That hadn’t really amounted to much at all. He was still responsible for his own defense. He didn’t tell the marshal the threat was for tomorrow night. What did it matter? There wasn’t much they could do. Hell, the Denver Police Department couldn’t do anything, either. Institutions never did have to take the responsibilities that individuals had to shoulder. There was never any way to protect a man from his devils; he had to destroy them himself.

He walked, bare-skinned, across the dark den to look onto the bluish snow outside. The wind had calmed. The silvery flakes continued to cover his world. What if it never stopped, until they were submerged and buried, never to be heard from again? Perhaps a plot his publisher would like. The publisher? Suddenly Jason remembered an article, a picture. It flashed together in his mind. He had to find it.

A light would awaken her, supposedly asleep in the open balcony bedroom so he bundled all of the magazines in his arms and made his way to the bedroom with them. A little over five minutes later, he found it in the business section of a news magazine, with a small color picture of a handsome, white-haired executive, seated on the corner of a large desk, a forceful-looking man perhaps in his late forties. Another picture showed the pinnacle of the Omega Corporation headquarters, the top seven stories of the huge Apple Tower in New York City. The article read:

### ***Of Corporations and Kings***

*Some say the Omega Corporation’s head is right where it should be, in the clouds, developing ambitious utopian ideas that sometimes boggle the mind and usually shake up the traditional theories of business and human behavior.*

*Others in the world of business and government seem alternately bewildered, suspicious or self-consciously embarrassed by the three-year old company's unorthodox philosophies and humanistic activities.*

*Take for instance:*

*The corporation takes all its employees into the fold for democratic policy-making decisions, a means, said a corporation spokesman, to prevent decisions that could inadvertently "hurt" someone.*

*If you think this could stifle progressive decision-making, you might be right – ordinarily. But to indoctrinate employee voters, Omega relies on a sophisticated bank of computers such as the business or government world had never seen. The marketing of Omega's computer marvels has been the financial backbone of the firm's meteoric rise of the past three years. The logic formulated by these computers, and disseminated to Omega employees apparently has been too persuasive to argue with. It has invariably led to smart decisions, judging by the company's rapid growth and success. The involvement of the nearly 4,000 Omega employees seems to spark the most efficient work force in America.*

*Once you've accepted the reality of this electronic democracy, the next shattering thing you're told is that the employee votes will no longer be necessary in another year. By that time said one of the corporation's frequent news releases, all of the logic that would insure the common good of Omega and the people of "the Earth" would have been indelibly stored in their central computer and all decisions could be made efficiently from there, provided regular information inputs were maintained. Workers supposedly will have more free time for pleasurable pursuits.*

*If "helping the people of the Earth" seems a somewhat lofty aspiration, you could never draw a disparaging remark from any of the Omega work force. Our news correspondents found an atmosphere of cordial relaxation and friendliness with all the eleven families we visited (see related article). They professed to believe deeply in the corporation's goals and its sincerity in establishing humanitarian principles.*

*Neither does the head of the corporation, Mega Smith, 47, hesitate to discuss its principles or its objectives. Though an audience with Smith is rare, he was personable and friendly in the 117<sup>th</sup> floor penthouse-office atop the Apple Towers. He talked candidly about Omega's growing influence.*

*"You talk about our seeking power over people's lives with the corporation," he admonished us. "We're actually trying to help people take charge of their own lives, providing for all of their human needs through total cooperation, and the guidance of their life forces through a superior intelligence of their own creation. It's a totally unselfish approach to improving everyone's condition, and that's essentially why few people have begun to understand it yet, or to grasp its significance in the light of current history. They will, though, and either they'll come along, or they'll try to destroy us."*

Jim Cleveland

*Mega talks as if that could actually be a possibility, as if his words might be a barrier itself to protect Omega's humanism against such an outrageous act.*

*"We're conspicuous here," he said, "because we want to be. If the investigations and harassments from some aspects of government, business, and the labor unions continue to grow, we will focus ever-harder on the idealism that propels us, and our good record."*

*The record, over a period of some two years, has indeed been impressive. Here's how the U.S. has been introduced to its most unique corporation.*

*The business world was first to buzz, with the mysterious appearance of a corporation with significant monetary assets, and, of course, major borrowing power. It was a closed corporation; no shares were sold. Rumors abounded but nothing of substance seemed to shed light on the reclusive executives of Omega, which rapidly began to build its assets with major product innovations, and public support, with generous contributions to worthy causes. It seemed that all well-known charitable endeavors, and some others besides, were supported with substantial contributions from this new, kind-hearted corporation.*

*In its Lens Product Division, which is serviced by re-vamped facilities once owned by Nikon and Minolta, technology has been hurled forward to give bright new potentials for the photographer, including computer technology that has revolutionized the photographic industry. It is a revolution worth billions to Omega.*

*The corporation has brought television technology along almost as fast, again using facilities purchased from other major companies, who chose to cooperate and buy into the new technology that they knew would be difficult or impossible to rival in the marketplace. An application is before the FCC for the corporation to be granted a special network license so that so-called "new wave" entertainment and "the teaching of humanities and other subjects can be brought into all American homes."*

*The newspaper chain is already getting there. Under the leadership of an aggressive young editor from Australia, the corporation has purchased 17 daily newspapers at prices that have been called anywhere from good to generous. Their syndicated columnists consistently produce well-written, thought-provoking copy, very benevolent and utopian in tone, all espousing the corporation's central theme of loving communion for the masses.*

*The corporation is also nearing completion of its so-called Love Center in the Smoky Mountains, from where modestly-priced study courses of varying duration will expose the interested public, and especially the growing family of employees, to Omega ideals and goals. Smith explains the philosophy: "It's accepting the responsibility that goes with the freedom we've all created for one another," he said. "First, the person is helped to realize his realistic place and potential, which gives him the peace of mind we seek. Then we help the person focus his four energy centers, altogether, toward the goals that he or she can achieve. But the choice always remains with the individual, to either follow the deduction, or*

*formulate one's own. We provide inspiration and guidance, but the individual exercises leadership."*

*In this way, Smith says Omega's philosophy is to blend with its large force of workers, all the way from important decision-making directors to technicians who do specific jobs to further the corporation's goals, to brawny company drivers who constantly move Omega's truck fleet with its distinctive olive branch and dove signs*

Sentence after sentence the story unfolded to Jason. Why hadn't he read it the first time, noticed the face that Mega Smith looked so compellingly like the elder alien in his manuscript, read about the idealistic ideas that seemed very much like those he had written? While Jason saw himself as being sound of mind, maybe he had been hypnotized by them – and still was – into putting his or their thoughts on paper. He strained to know from where his thoughts had come, whether they were still influencing him and would seal his fate to their choosing.

The book division, he read, was very new, organized at about the same time that his agent sold his manuscript. They influenced it; they wanted it. They had sent Joni here, he realized, for some purpose, probably to see what he was all about now, or even to kill him. No. How could that be? Why would they publish his book and then kill him? -- not such a benevolent company, with its free missions now being built for the poor, and a biological research institute opening next month in Omaha. But why were they appearing in his life now, at the precise time his life was being threatened? What was the connection? What was it with Carol? She said she had a purpose here. She was part of it, too; that seemed likely, part of whatever was going to happen to him.

He had to go see her tomorrow and get some answers. It didn't seem that Joni had any. But why had she gotten so upset at him? And then, why had she decided to stay?

Jason tried to sleep. Finally he did, after growing in resolve to cooperate with Joni, see her to the bus, then to go see Carol and her loutish friends, ask some questions, and get himself ready, mentally and physically, for whatever tomorrow would bring. Most of all he had to think; he had to figure it out. And he was nowhere close to that.

## CHAPTER 5

Glenwood Springs Police Sergeant Carlson shuffled his stooped shoulders and steaming coffee back to the day desk, where he would light a cigarette and wait for the day's first disturbance. Sometimes they had a wreck when most people were going to work. The phone rang as he found his squeaking chair, in front of a desk full of paper and paraphernalia.

"City police," he said tiredly, though it was the first call of the day. "Good morning, Sergeant. Are you having a nice day?"

"So-so. What can we do for you?"

"Since you fellows took my black pickup, I'm going to need some new transportation out of town."

The pickup! The Cotton Club! It all clicked in his mind. "Hey! Are you ready to give yourself up?"

"Of course not, stupid!"

"Why are you calling?"

"I just wanted to tell you that I need a car or truck or something, so I'm going to steal one. I thought you'd like to come down and watch."

"No! You're not going to steal one!"

"Either that or you're going to have to bring me something to drive over here."

Carlson knew he was dealing with a maniac now. Before, there had been some doubt. "You-- Why don't you just stay there and we'll bring you ... your pickup. Okay? We'll bring you your pickup. How's that! Where are you?"

“No. I’m tired of the pickup. I kind of messed it up anyway. Hey! Did I tell you that I ran into a couple of the guys in your department last night? I was downtown and just bumped into ‘em.”

“Yeah, yeah!” Carlson had never talked to a real maniac before. My God! Any other time, one of the cars would be here for something or other. But they were not, nobody here but him. Be agreeable with him, that’s the right strategy, he decided. “You just stay there and we’ll bring you a car ... a new car, okay?”

“Well,” said Santos. “Don’t tell me what kind. Let it be a surprise?”

“Yeah! Yes! We will. Where are you?”

“I’ve just finished breakfast at the Lonesome Pines Motel. You can just bring it over here to the coffee shop. I’ll be finishing my coffee.”

“Yes! Yes! Do that. We’ll be right down. There’s not gonna be any trouble. You just relax and enjoy your coffee. They’re nice folks down there, aren’t they?” Holy shit! Thought Carlson. At the Lonesome Pines Motel a few doors down – all night! Holy shit! That son of a bitch got a room and stayed there all night, and nobody thought to check. What damn gall! Of course he was crazy. Lord, I hope he hasn’t hurt anybody!

“I’m gonna stay on this line now and --.” A click and dial tone cut Carlson’s mind back to his solitude here behind the day desk. Even the secretary was in the john. Holy shit! The Lonesome Pines Motel! He’d better get both cars down there. Son-of-a-bitch, he’s already wrecked one since he hit town!

Santos returned to his coffee and the end barstool. Business was brisk this early morning, with a curious blend of work clothes and office attire: job-hardened men on the stools, dew fresh secretarial faces hoping to impress the day. They were all uninterested, alienated really, from one another. It was strange, thought Santos, all locked into their own conversation or lonely thoughts, with never the idea of sharing anything with any of these other people. Still, they had set up this society that allows people a lot of freedom. The freedom to be alienated from one another.

He reached into his jacket pocket for the dynamite stick. The old man with the gray mustache sitting two stools down was preparing to light his pipe, fumbling for a match as he eyed the front page of his newspaper. Maybe

that's why they're alienated, thought Santos. They persist in annoying each other.

"Could I borrow a match please?"

The man glared at Santos, especially noting the large gold earrings shining through the black beard and shaggy dark hair. "Well, hold on there a minute, buddy boy. Let me get this here pipe lit first." He puffed a small fog around him as he lit the bowl.

"You sure are fucking up the atmosphere." Santos' gaze was hard.

"So what's it to you, buddy boy?" said the old man, glancing at him wryly and reaching to put the matches back into his coat pocket.

"My..." said Santos. "You're a feisty old fart. If you don't give me a match, I'm going to shove that pipe up your ass." He was pleasant, purposeful.

The old man was suddenly indignant, jerking himself off the stool and throwing the matches on the counter. "Here, take 'em. Take 'em all. If you wanna hit an old man, go ahead. Go ahead and hit me!" Many heads had turned.

"Dad..." Santos was consoling. "Dad. We'll be at the hospital soon and it'll be all right. Doctor Brady will be there. Everything will be all right." Santos reached to embrace the old man, but was fought off successfully by his cane. "You just need to calm down now. Here ...I've got something here you can take. Some heavy pharmaceuticals."

The old man was aghast. "What do you mean? I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Doctor Brady left some pills ..."

The man had reached the door and was outside, hurrying away. Sirens were wailing, getting nearer. Every eye seemed to be on Santos, though some continued to half-heartedly chew or sip at their coffee. A man with heavy jowls behind the counter looked at the scene, holding a coffeepot, wondering whether to interfere.

Santos turned from the door and faced his audience. "I don't know," he said loudly with a shrug, walking back to the end of the bar and pulling the dynamite stick from his jacket. "My father and I haven't seen eye to eye since I

asked him for that match.” The motley congregation was stilled now, and attentive as Santos struck a match and placed it to the long fuse.

Some of them started clamoring noisily for the door as the first sparks sputtered from the dynamite. No one had mistaken the red cylinder. They’d seen too many movies for that. Santos climbed on top of the bar. “Sometimes I think the apocalypse is almost near,” he shouted, ”and then sometimes I’m impressed by the amount of positive energy around.” He gazed at the spewing fuse. The sirens were very loud now. Two cars, thought Santos. All the more interesting. The mad scramble to the street had left the grill in disarray.

“No! No! Put that out!” The only other person left inside was the man behind the bar, wide-eyed and hanging onto the half-opened door at the back of the kitchen. Santos only stared at him, and tilted his head menacingly. The jowled cook thought better of his valor and tried to slip away. To no avail.

A police car was pulling to a halt outside, across the street, where the buzz of many voices could have told Santos that the ring was tightening around him. But he had already moved very quickly and had overtaken the man in the back parking lot as he neared his car, grabbing his pants from behind and wrenching his back in a powerful forearm grip. The car keys fell to the concrete. With a blow to the stomach, the man fell , groaning loudly.

In the front, the four policemen took control of the situation, herding the noisy crowd back from the scene, huddling behind two squad cars, pistols pointed, radio squawking loudly.

“Stay back! Stand back now! Everybody get back!”

“There it is! Get down! It’s gonna go off!”

“Get down!”

They could see the sizzling fuse from the wide gravel parking lot - spraying sparks and smoke onto the restaurant counter. But they couldn’t see anyone else inside. A car suddenly wheeled quickly out of the back lot, a drab sedan. A woman hollered, “Mr. Beasley! That’s Mr. Beasley, the manager’s car!”

“Hurry!” hollered another. They could see his familiar red smock and red and white striped cap behind the wheel as the car sped away down the street.



*Jim Cleveland*

“Hurry! All right!”

“Get out of there!”

“Is anybody else trapped in there?” a policeman hollered.

The crowd cheered the getaway.

“All right,” called an officer. “Get down! It’s gonna go!” The fuse had almost stopped sparking. Officers huddled behind the shrubbery and their patrol cars.

Then the sparking fuse just quit, leaving only wisps of smoke. Santos had removed it from the dynamite stick and stuck it into a lemon icebox pie.

Santos fled rapidly in the stolen car. There would be no other police cars to impede his flight out of town. He glanced in the back seat to affirm that his bag and the small wooden box of explosives were still there where he stashed them this morning after the coffee shop day manager left his car. He was always ahead of these primitives.

The gas tank was nearly half-full. He was lucky. He would probably have another twenty minutes, maybe more, before he might expect another encounter. He only needed a slight direction change. At the stoplight, he took a right turn onto Highway 61 – to Denver. From there, it was a short trek up to Netherland

He believed the Cavaliers could clinch the division in this final week of the season. He would open with Woody Williams against the Giants in the crucial four-game series at Candlestick Park.

SUNSET SPLIT through the clouds and poured brilliant on the snow. Jason looked down into the valley, where the fir trees pushed out from the whiteness in panoramic profusion, dark shapes that wouldn’t be denied their access to the sun. He sipped the black coffee, feeling good after the exercises, which were intended to replace his running on such snowy days as these. He thought he heard muffled noises up in her bedroom, so he would go and pour her coffee in a minute.

He set his cup on the table and picked up the rifle. At 30 calibers, it was enough to stop an assailant, but it would be bulky in close quarters. He

sighted out over the beautiful landscape, imagining that he was plucking snow-laden limbs with his fire. It was an animal in his sights ... a bear ... a man.

It was strange how it all came back to him, those young years when he doted on the heroism of cowboys with hard-jawed, weathered faces ... detectives with hardened, world-weary expressions of ultimate grit, handsome enough for the box office, rigid enough for the entertainment of young, macho under-achievers in the front rows. It seemed he had marveled over a thousand melodramas in his day, and had finally refined them to his present tastes. He had been drained of violence long ago, now disdained it thoroughly, put it from his mind. But now he had better be ready to return to it – for it must be real this time – for the first time.

He had climbed precipitous rock walls; that was different. The mountain isn't an antagonist with a gun or ... knife. He almost wished for a confrontation, for the experience. But he might die, not survive gloriously like those heroic, ever-surviving cowboys and cops. He might die instead in keeping with his more current and knowledgeable view of reality, the way things often happened. What might likely happen is that he would be outsmarted and killed because he wasn't adequately prepared for a violent altercation. Maybe he couldn't prepare himself, even though he realized it was all up to him. He could do it, or he could fail, and let the fear, apathy and cynicism he had grown to despise reach out and pull him under. He could simply get the hell out of town. He asked himself: Isn't that what anyone would do?

The phone rang.

He stepped over to pick it up. "Hello. This is Jason."

"You deserve to die," said the soft, guttural voice. "And you will."

"Why? I don't know you."

"You will."

"Let's talk about it."

"It isn't necessary to talk, only to act." The voice could reason.

The receiver clicked and the infernal tone returned. Jason held it deliberately, away from his ear, staring, knowing now that it was real, and

a real threat. He would have to call the marshal now. He would have to. He needed to leave, to run. That was the only way. He sat down on the edge of the sofa. Several minutes passed, his mind struggling in vain to put a face with the voice.

He turned. She was coming down the stairs, looking at him with a modest smile. "Good morning."

"Good morning." He could be pleasant.

"What's it doin' outside?"

"Everything's white 'n bright."

"Oh-h-h! My! It's beautiful." She walked to the huge window overlooking the valley. "It's ... unreal."

"It's a beautiful day," he said. "I'm gonna let it match my mood."

She turned to look at him again, saw that he was smiling at her. "Well, that's a deal," she said cheerily, "for both of us." For the first time, she saw the rifle he had propped against the wall.

"Is this all for real?" she asked softly, frowning.

"I'm afraid so. I just got another call. Did you hear the phone?"

"No... But then, you have to leave. Nothing else makes sense. You can go with me."

"I can't start running from something I don't even know. It doesn't make sense. I'll stay here and kill the son-of-a-bitch."

"I can't believe that's you talking."

"It's another side ... necessity."

"Jason, you are who you are. You can't be just what you want to be. You can't just say you're going to kill somebody. That's not you talking. It would be ... different when the time came. You're not a violent person ... are you?"

"Look, Joni. I don't have to be a violent person by nature. That's not the way it works. You have to do what's necessary to survive and to protect yourself. If you don't think I can do it, you're wrong."

“You don’t know if you can do it. You never have.”

“If I believe it’s vital – and I know it is, or must be – then I can do it.”

She didn’t reply.

“I can do it.” He was even calmer.

She wouldn’t reply immediately, and that meant, he reasoned, that she didn’t believe him.

“Let’s have a nice day,” he offered. “I’ll check the bus schedule, and you’ll be out of here by middle of the afternoon. Then, if you want to come back later ... next week maybe ... I want you to.”

“Well,” she said uncertainly. “Let’s just see how it goes. We’re going to have to be very honest with one another.”

“That would be nice, wouldn’t it?” he replied. “It would be special. It’s not done every day.”

“It depends on where you are,” she said. “You have to figure out where you are.”

“In the middle of everything,” said Jason. “Maybe. Or maybe on the edge.”

MEGA REPLACED the telephone receiver and walked easily back to the lavish breakfast buffet the others were enjoying, brought up by conveyor from the kitchen.

“That was our agent from Netherland, Colorado. The situation is growing a little unstable there, but we should be able to handle it. Santos should be there by dark.”

“After a ball game, no doubt,” said Jay. “He wouldn’t want to miss an NFL game.”

“Not by any means,” said Mega, picking up his plate again. “I’m a little concerned about delays. He has the police stirred up. And the weather ... it’s going to get a bit rough tonight.”

“I heard that,” said Cezanne. “Hard winds and more snow from the North.”

“All the more challenge for Santos to enjoy,” said Al. “He can surely handle whatever comes up.”

“It’s an important job,” said Mega. “It has to be done precisely. Timing is very important.”

“Santos is the best, isn’t he?” said Al, as if assured himself that the answer was yes.

“Even the best isn’t perfect,” said Mega. “Perhaps we’ve been lucky with Santos. In this place, there is such a thing as luck, you know. Good luck and bad luck. Perhaps we’ve had our share of the good.”

THE BRIGHT SUNSHINE made Santos feel good. He looked through the windshield at the panorama of mountains to his left, and the flat, brown plains of the east, to his right. The sky was clear and the air quite chilly, just right for a football game. Buffalo’s wide-open passing game coming to call on the respected Orange Crush defense, anchored by perhaps the toughest set of linebackers and cornerbacks in the league. Could the pass rush beat Ferguson’s passing game? Could they establish a running game for Terry Miller? Can the Bills put together enough rush to nail the immobile Craig Morton? Can the Broncos wear down the inexperienced Buffalo front?

Santos decided he would move the baseball season forward again. After splitting four with the Giants, the Cavaliers needed only one win in their last four games to take the division title, all of them against the San Diego Padres. He quickly put together his line-up and chose Seaver to pitch the opener. Within minutes, Santos’ fleeting mind had the score tied 2-2, in the top of the ninth, and Bill Almon coming to bat against his top reliever, Dave LaRoche. The symbolic letters that spelled Ramada Inn just ahead gave Almon a single down the third base line, upon which Carney Lansford made a great play.

Santos saw the state trooper slow rapidly in the opposing lane of the Interstate. The blue dome light came on as the patrol car turned, dipping and lurching across the uneven grass median. Santos didn’t bother to accelerate. He was too relaxed for a chase right now. He began to get ready for a confrontation.

Soon it was right behind him, siren wailing, and light whirring in blue streaks through his car. “Assholes,” thought Santos, that they would subject themselves to such harassment. How many billions of dollars, how many untold human resources are devoted to the necessary human vocation of law enforcement? He chose not to pull over.

On they dashed, the speeding twosome, the blue locked to the rear of the other. Like a housefly in heat, thought Santos with a wry chuckle. In the top of the ninth, with one away, a sudden shower postponed the game in San Diego. In case LaRoche’s arm was to tighten up during the wait, he decided to have Steve Mingori warm up. Their next batter was the pitcher. He could expect a pinch hitter, of course, so he would have to call up their roster and determine who it might be. But first ...

A noise squawked through the space between them. “Pull over!” came through in a sharp, crackling tone. “Pull over! This is the police.” After another few seconds, the patrol car pulled smartly into the left lane, to pull up beside him, his speedometer at 80. The officer was lowering his window. He would get his revolver adjusted into a firing position. This was a time to strike first – the exact proper timing that was somehow the key to all his success. He couldn’t miss, either.

Swiftly, he laid the .44 magnum across his arm that rested on the open window. It boomed in a flash of force and smoke and the patrol car’s front tire exploded. It swerved into a spin as they dashed across a concrete bridge, screaming tires heralding a loud crash of metal.

Santos pressed the brake, eyeing in the rear mirror the burst of flames that engulfed the bridge. His car squalled to a sliding, spinning stop on the Interstate from where he whirled it back toward the crash, slamming the accelerator to squeal rubber. The car was on fire. He slammed down on the brakes again, grinding onto the shoulder, spewing dust.

The smashed car sat bottom up surrounded by shattered glass, twisted metal and the softly roaring flames that were gradually devouring it.

One of them lay bloodied, legs crushed under the weight of the car. He saw a second form inside; an uncertain arm trying to climb though the window, flames near his head.

Santos ran swiftly. He tore open the shattered door with a jerk and grabbed the man’s arms, feeling the scorching heat against his face, dragging him free and through the rubble to the shoulder. He rushed back to the fiery

wreck. There was no time to see if the trooper was dead. His jacket was already smoking from the closeness of the flames. Santos lunged against the heavy wreck, trying to force it off the pinioned body, struggling, straining, against the hot metal. He felt his cheek blistering, the acrid smell of his hair burning, lowering his body stubbornly, almost atop the still body, pushing hard in a desperate effort to dislodge the wreck. He felt his jacket burst into fire as he pulled away, flailing furiously at the flames, struggling to tear them from his body, rolling in the dirt on the shoulder, burying himself in the smothering dust of an eroded ditch, trying to snuff out the last vestiges of the fire that had seared his skin.

The pain was hard and constant. Santos lay there for a moment getting a grip on his head, to disregard his burned hands and arms and face and shoulders and neck, all of the pain that surged through his body through the gritty dirt. All right! All right! It will be a challenge ... a challenge ... a wonderful challenge. He struggled to his feet and saw the flaming mass that had been the trooper car and the trapped body. A small clutch of noisy people hovered around the body he had dragged to safety. Perhaps he would live. My God, perhaps one would live. He was responsible. He had killed – and for no reason. It was no accident. He had caused it. He had to face it. He had to face Mega. He had to face himself. He couldn't do anything else here, so he would leave quickly and quietly to attract no attention.

Santos quietly slipped his bag and box from the rear seat of the car, placed the revolver in the box and made his way quickly down the steep embankment under the bridge. He could hear the frantic voices above him. Through the concrete, and could see the flames relentlessly consuming all of life and value from the horrible scene he was leaving. Droplets of flaming matter slipped through cracks in the bridge and fell, sizzling, into the shallow stream. He placed his bundles on the bank and lowered his seared body into the quiet flowing water, feeling the shocking cold swallow him. God have mercy on him for the thing he had done. He buried his blistered face and head under the chilling flow. Cold, flowing paralyzer of life.

Momentarily, when he was refreshed, he knew that he had to leave quickly. The sounds above him were many, of people and cars, and a siren that brought more of their accursed avengers in blue to the scene. He decided to walk and walk upstream. He doubted that he would be able to see the ball game now.

## CHAPTER 6

The morning was quiet. Jason looked out over the snowfall that glistened in the valley, a massive amount of snow that now seemed as if it truly belonged and would always belong here, much more so than he. But in the late spring, there would be grass there again.

He looked back into the room at her calm face. She sat quietly on the sofa with her tape recorder turning, endlessly turning, as she quietly waited for his words. He had finally agreed to speak, to say all and anything that was on his mind.

“It all seems so temporary sometimes,” he told her, “not important enough to last. But I want it to. I want to be something, or be represented by something that will last, and might present some kind of partial solution to all of the inhumanity and greed. I’ve cried at the realization that the Chinese, our new friends, killed nearly a hundred thousand spiritual people in Tibet, and I’ve stood mute at the funeral of my grandparents. Sorry, yes, and mournful, but lost in the confusing perspectives that seem to escape almost all of those people that fill my life, a matter of what’s important, a matter of what’s more so.

“If I die, I don’t know that it would really matter, and that’s enough to make it a tragedy, like so many others that have happened before, insignificant tragedies. In the end, I’m no better than they, the millions, no one special, not nearly as special as some, just destined to be a cold body in a grave. It’s no wonder that people won’t think about it for themselves and their loved ones, but all the while, strangely, they dote over the violence that entertains them with popcorn and cokes, or at the dinner table between commercials, watching their entertainers die to purge some inborn lust, to re-live again and again the triumph of good over evil in many ways.

Maybe by making violence and death seem so melodramatic they can deal with it better somehow.

“But how could I be somebody special? I’m just another idealistic fool advocating love over everything else, dealing seriously with the cliché of love and unpardoned sin with the critics, and certain to alienate those many who’ll resent being preached to. I think that communicating, in its ideal sense, is very difficult.”



Jason paused for a while, looking at the snow. The recorder ran on, doggedly, but it would have to be content with silence until he chose to speak again. What did it matter?

“I loved a woman once. I didn’t deserve her. I was submerged in myself, in helpless wonder at what my life should be, and she helped lead me out of it, out of the wilderness that was choking my head. I owe her more than I could ever repay, but it doesn’t matter since I’ll never see her again. It’s over, final, and it carried me into an empty room and left me there. I don’t know that I’m able to give myself now, because I don’t feel capable of giving. I don’t know that I’m able to truly share because I’ve forced myself to embrace the feeling and the strength of loneliness. In loneliness, you can achieve order, but it’s like swapping a cruel mistress for a thoughtless one.”

Jason paused for a moment, then chuckled silently. “There must be a real cliché in there somewhere. God, I know we’re sunk if we’ve become too cynical to believe in clichés. The truth can’t be manufactured any more; it’s very old and well known. If love has really become naïve, as some say, then we’re becoming too cynical to survive our follies because that’s all that’s holding things together. And all the time, people grow fat and spoiled, a common elite jaded by its indulgences, unhappy or even helpless without them, and pacifying mindless desires with meaningless games.

“That’s cynical as hell, isn’t it?” said Jason. “Sometimes I wish I didn’t feel that way.”

“You’re pretty depressed today, aren’t you?” Joni asked.

“Yeah,” chuckled Jason, “knowing that I ought to leave, and knowing that I’m not. It took me a large portion of my life to find this place. I was running from something until I got here. Even Dade Creek wasn’t the answer. It just didn’t feel like it was mine.”

“Were you alone there, too?”

Jason chuckled wryly. “No. I had a dog. He got run over by a car.”

“It wouldn’t be like running. You could come back.”

“When? And if you don’t know who’s chasing you, it’s hard to know where to run anyway.”

SANTOS STOOD IN A STAND of cottonwood trees by the stream and brushed his hair. The small mirror hung precipitously by a twig and his bag was open under the tree.

He paid little attention, for the moment, to the gray pickup truck approaching, stirring up the dusty pasture. Someone was curious about him. It should afford him an opportunity. Hopefully, the gas tank would be full.

The medication oil from his first aid kit had soothed his burned skin, and the clean jeans and heavy black shirt felt good in the cold air, cool even to his alien body. The pickup drew closer. Santos put away his brush and mirror, slipped the pistol from the dynamite box into the bag, and zipped it closed.

The pickup rolled to a stop and Santos was ready to meet his new protagonist. Through the windshield, a ruddy-faced man wore a sour expression. Santos sized him up as a typically embittered middle-aged rancher, full of the grimy necessities of life and few of the pleasures. His eyes promised dry, taciturn conversation.

“Where are you comin’ from?” The voice was rough, vaguely threatening.

“Single engine plane. Had to set down about four miles west and I walked here. I need a ride.”

“I didn’t hear about no plane crash.”

“I called in my location so they’ll be looking. I was headed to Cheyenne.”

The man was sizing him up carefully, distrustful. “You walked this far?” His pointed boots were muddy, his face stubbled with more than a day’s whiskers.

“That’s right. I didn’t have to go down too hard. Damned thing burned up though, as you can see. I got out with these things here and figured to find a road.”

“So you want to go to a phone?”

“That’d be good.”

“I ain’t got no goddammed phone, got no use for it.”

*Jim Cleveland*

“If you don’t want to talk to anybody, you don’t need one.”

“I don’t,” he affirmed. “What you got there?”

“My clothes and a box of dynamite.”

“What the hell for?”

“I work for a geology company. We use it. I was lucky to get it out.”

“I need some ‘a that.”

“For what?”

“Stumps. Blow up stumps. Best thing in the world. Blow them suckers right out ‘a there. I might swap you out of a few sticks.”

“We’ll work out something.”

“I got no cotton to long-haired hippie freaks and niggers. If you ain’t neither of them, I’ll take you to a telephone. Get your stuff and let’s go. You can put that box right on the seat in there between us.”

They were soon jostling across the pasture, the man’s gnarled and scarred hand resting firmly on the dynamite box. He had fondled the sticks and counted them before they left. Now he wanted a deal.

“How many ‘a them sticks is it worth to you? Me takin’ you to the phone?”

“How many you need?”

“Hell! They ain’t gonna miss ‘em. Tell ‘em they got stole out of the plane.”

“Tell who?”

“Your boss.”

“I’m the boss.”

“Well, hell! Then they ain’t no problem. I really need all of ‘em. I got a lot’a stumps.”

“Tell me the truth now – what is your name anyway? Fred? – Don’t you really want to just blow the shit out of somebody?”

“What the hell you talkin’ about?”

“I can’t just give out dynamite to people, especially to people that look as rundown as you do. You might blow your own ass off! Who are you anyway?”

“Chester Moss! I know how to handle dynamite as good as you do! That’s a goddam fact!”

“You probably don’t know that for a fact, do you, Chester? Have you ever seen me before?”

“Hell naw! Who are you?”

“It’s not necessary for you to know that, “ said Santos, turning to gaze out the window. “We’re not going to be friends.”

“Are you some kind of goddam crazy?” asked Moss. “I’ll put your ass out to walk.”

“That’s what I was doing before you showed up.”

Moss was incensed, visibly shaken by anger. He slammed on the brakes on the narrow dirt field road they were traveling. “Get your ass out and walk, goddammit! Find your own goddammed way back!”

“Why did you get so pissed, Chester? I’ll let you have some dynamite if it’s that important to you. How about a stick a mile? One stick for every mile you carry me?”

Moss was sullen. Obviously he had grown to dislike Santos very quickly, but then Santos figured he must dislike almost everything else anyway.

“It’ll take ‘em all to get you into town,” said Moss sourly, his ruddy jowls sagging just a bit to show Santos his rough-edged anger.

*Jim Cleveland*

Suddenly Santos' face burst into a smile and he offered his hand to shake. "Mr. Moss," he said cheerily, "I've been a perfect boor and I've offended you. It's just been one of those days, you know, plane going down in the middle of nowhere, a four-mile hike, and I've been rude to you ever since we met. How can I ever apologize?"

"Apologize?" he said gruffly, eyeing Santos' hand that remained in front of him. "What are you talking about?"

Such a dimwit, thought Santos. "I'm talking about manners. Mine have been atrocious. I certainly should be beholden to you for taking me back to organized civilization. I promise that from now on I'll be a perfect gentleman, as I've been taught to be."

Moss did manage a limp handshake, trying to sort in his mind how he had commanded so much respect all of a sudden. It had to be the strength of his presence.

"And certainly you'll get dynamite," said Santos. "All that I can spare is yours, along with my profound gratitude." They sat facing each other in the narrow ranch road. Moss frowned, didn't speak. He rammed the pickup into low and moved off again. Numbskull, thought Santos.

"Do you live far from here, Mr. Moss?"

"'Bout a mile down here."

"And what is your vocation?"

"Stayin' out of people's way," he sneered, not turning from the road. "I look out after about 2,000 acres here for Frank Tullos. You heard of the Tullos Ranch, ain't you?"

"No."

"Where you been?" Moss acted as if Santos was stupid.

"Doing odd jobs."

"You ain't from around here."

“Not exactly. Where are you from?”

“What difference does it make? I’d rather be here than anywhere else. Don’t have to put up with a bunch of shit from people. The goddamn government harassing the hell out of people. Goddam niggers and queers and hippies and people that ain’t got enough sense to pour pis out of a boot!”

“Who is that? People you know?”

“Too many of ‘em! This used to be a good country. This used to be good country right here ‘til everybody and his goddamn brother wanted to move to Colorado. They fucked this place up just like they done ever’ place else.”

“Like Hong Kong, Ohio?”

“I ain’t never been there. Like New York, Washington, all them goddamn cities. People can’t walk the streets at night. Can’t do it in Denver. Fuckin’ Mexicans steal ‘ya blind. Cut ‘ya throat.”

“Why would they want to do that to a nice man like you?”

“You bein’ a smart ass again?”

“I just can’t imagine anyone not accepting your friendship.”

“Hell, I ain’t offerin’ it. I’m damn particular about my friends.”

“How many do you have?”

“Enough! How many you got?” Moss was sardonic.

“Everyone back home. No one out here.”

Moss pulled up to a plain, unpainted house, stopping in a swirl of dust. “I got to get some things. You can come and get ‘cha a drink of water if you want to. Then I’ll run you on down ‘t the store. It’s about a couple of miles from here.” He pulled open the door and Santos opened his to step outside. A gangly hound dog barked once from the front porch, suspicious of him, then was quiet.

“Shut your goddamned mouth!” hollered Moss. “Get out ‘a that front door.” He trudged up the porch steps. “Always got your lazy ass right in

*Jim Cleveland*

the goddamned door.” The dog cowered and sidled to the end of the porch, from where he jumped off and slipped under the house. Moss jerked open the door and Santos followed him into the dark interior.

It was a shambles, with dirty dishes on the table and counter, muddy boots by a tattered sofa, and a clutter of discarded newspapers on the floor. The smell was musty, of hardware and the ashes of a cold fireplace. Moss was fumbling in a pile of dirty clothes in the corner.

“I got to find that goddamned tag receipt. I got to go into town and get a new tag for the son-of-a-bitch. It’s always somethin’. They’re always figurin’ somethin’ you got to do. You just about got to have a license these days to take a shit. I can remember when this was all free country. You could go for miles in any direction, huntin’ for your food, do pretty well. I sold pelts for a long time. Done good at it. But can’t do that no more. Got to look after these cattle ’til they go to the feedlot. People moved in. They ain’t nothin’ to trap no more. Things has got so goddamned high, you got to have a sack of money just to go to the grocery store. Here’s that son-of-a-bitch.” Moss struggled to pull a small folded paper from a wrinkled mass of shirts on the floor. He turned to see that Santos was not there.

“Hey! Where’d you go?” Moss moved to the open door, opening it wider to let in the sunshine. He wasn’t outside. He stepped out onto the porch. Something was wrong. He walked down the steps, one at a time, looking right and left, wary. The day was silent. His pickup was still there.

“Where the hell are you?”

Santos stepped from behind the pickup and drew Moss’ eye, gold earrings glistening, just as the magnum exploded in his hand. The dog yelped. The bullet tore into Moss’ chest and hurled his body back against the porch steps. The dog’s sharp yelps punctuated the sudden quietness, with tucked tail fleeing the house. Moss’ body quivered and jerked against the steps, then fell forward, leaving blood splattered on the gray wood, rolling to final rest on the bare ground. It trembled slightly, then was still, wide eyes vacant, filled with the terror of their final second.

Santos closed them with deft fingers. He pulled the pickup keys from the pocket of the limp body and made his way to the truck, placing the magnum inside his bag and zipping it up. He paused to give the desolate countryside another look before climbing in, cranking the truck and

pulling away. Not even a quarter tank of gas, he noticed, but it fit. It fit that unfortunate bastard well. Now he's out of his misery and can't cause anyone else any either, and it was mercifully clean and quick. He still had time to make the football game. Great!

And in the meantime, he might as well let his Panthers open their season in his ever-convenient mind. He was beginning to wonder if Pastorini had been a good choice as quarterback. It was the key position so ... P. The first game would be against the Packers ... and since P followed M, it would be in Green Bay. He believed his defense would shut down Terdell Middleton's running and put a lot of pressure on quarterback David Whitehurst.

For nearly a quarter hour, Moss' body lay quietly bleeding. Then the hound appeared again from around the corner of the house and sniffed his way forward, listening, staring, sniffing on. He came close enough to smell Moss' body, then cover back, over to the side of the porch to sit for a while, sometimes scratching at a flea or a tick.

The hound finally got up to yawn widely and walk over again to sniff the body. Again, he distastefully pulled away, then loped suddenly up the porch steps to the front door. He twice followed his ropey tail around his favorite place and plopped down on the hard boards to relax. He yawned again and laid down his head to doze.

“WHY'D YOU MOVE from Dade Creek?”

“Two reasons,” he answered Joni. “I couldn't afford the house any longer. I turned a profit on it and got this cheaper place so I could keep writing – and eat too. And ... I feel a lot closer to the mountains up here. Dade Creek was getting' pretty commercialized.

When the fast food places start moving in, you know you're in trouble. I had spent an hour or so here with Roci once, and we hiked near here. So I've got some memories here. I like it, and at the pace I live it's easy to do all the things a person should do – eat healthy foods, exercise, read, meditate, think, and, in my case, write and hike.”

“And think about Roci?”

“That's true.”



*Jim Cleveland*

“Then she really did exist. Who was she?”

“I don’t guess I know for sure anymore. And that’s the truth.”

“Maybe just a dream, just like in your book ... but very much etched into your imagination.”

“Sometimes I remember very vividly some good times we had together, but a lot of it’s a blur. After she had gone – I don’t remember where – the dreams started coming to me. They were full of ... intimacy ... affection. I would awaken with the ... joy of being with ... her spirit, I guess. Where she came from, I don’t know. But she was real. Wherever she came from, she was real.”

“But ... if she was real, where would she have gone? If she had no beginning or end,” asked Joni, “how could she have existed?”

“I was sick for awhile, had a helluva fever for about four days. They finally decided it was from a tick bite – Spotted Tick – but it was strange anyway, the doctor said, the way it came and went. I was delirious a couple of times from it. I think maybe it damaged my memory, but the doctor didn’t really think so.”

“Where did it happen? When?”

“In Dade Creek. I’d just moved there to try to get into my writing. That was about three years ago. My memories of her were so vivid and ... stirring that I can’t imagine why I’d ever let her go, but I guess I did.”

“No one knows her? Surely someone could tell you where she might be. Who else knew her?”

“My friends, Chuck and Sandra from Canyon Lake, and Kevin and Susan, out in California. But they only saw her once with me.”

“I’ve heard that writers have vivid imaginations, but this really takes a prize,” said Joni. “You have wonderful dreams, but you have amnesia at the same time.”

“The dreams faded away with time. I finished the manuscript, sold it, and I’m waiting patiently for the results.”

“What do you expect?”

“Modest success ... a little money. Finish the new one I’m working on and hope for better things.”

“How is it coming?” She didn’t want him to know she had read a large portion of it.

“Too structured, too regimented. Too cold. I haven’t been able to stir up the passion I need to do the best job with it. But I’m a long way from finished.”

“Well,” she said, “with your imagination, I think you’ll get there through some means or another.”

She might not even believe that Roci existed. That was likely, but it didn’t matter. He told her the truth as he knew it, and that’s all that ever really mattered. It simplified a lot of things to only deal with truth, or at least the idea of it.

## CHAPTER 7

Johnny Bannister's boots crunched through the snow. He didn't slow down in front of Jason's house, only gazed defiantly at the A-frame and thought how the son-of-a bitch considered himself so much better than everybody else. He was an asshole, an anti-social asshole. Jason had known he was in a financial bind, but he didn't give a shit. Worried about the goddamned money till he got it back while he was doin' everything he could to get back on his feet. Friends like that he could do without. He wouldn't sell him shit any more. He promised himself that.

The clouds had covered the sun. Bad weather was supposed to be coming back in tonight, this time for real. It was a heavy front. Johnny knocked on the door, checking his watch. It was nearly eleven o'clock.

Sid opened the door, eyes puffy over his black beard.

"Hey. How 'ya doin'?"

"Okay," said Johnny, slipping inside.

"You get the money?" asked Sid.

"No. I ain't got it," shrugged Johnny. "I can still take half of it. That's about it."

"Well, you messed up this time," said Sid, walking past Johnny into the principal living area, the room with the mattresses. "I ain't gonna cut it up. It's all goin'."

"I just ain't got it, Sid. Hell, I thought I would, but things just didn't work out. Two thousand dollars is a lot of money for me. I've really had to do some diggin' and, fuck, some people I need to see is just out of pocket."

"It's all right. Carol knows somebody's gonna take the rest of it. He's comin' tonight – about dark."

"Well, hell. That's all you need, ain't it. I'll take half of it and he can have the rest."

“No. He wants to see it all. That’s the only way he’ll deal. He’ll be here...and you’re gonna have to be here too. We’ll half it up. You’ll take your half and he’ll take his. That’s the way he wants to do it.”

“What the hell for? He can sample it before he buys.”

“It’s his money,” sighed Sid. “If he wants to eyeball the whole thing, fine. He may want to talk you out of some of yours, I don’t know.”

“He can get it,” said Johnny, “If the price is right. You don’t know this guy?”

“No. I ain’t talked to him. Carol knows him.”

“Who’s Carol?”

“You don’t know her. We don’t neither. A friend of ours told her we were heading this way and she wanted a ride. Said she’d never seen the mountains. And, she was able to throw in quite a bit of money for the trip.”

“What’s she look like? Where the hell is everybody?”

“Gone to get some groceries. The snow’s gonna really come in here tonight. Except Carol. She’s gone back to bed, I reckon.”

“What’s she look like?” Johnny spoke a little softer.

“Good lookin’...She’s in the back bedroom.”

“She got an old man?”

“She ain’t too interested in one. She’s kind of a smart ass in a way.”

“You don’t think I could get in her pants?”

“Well, she acts like she’ll fuck. But I ain’t seen her do it yet. Let’s put it that way.”

“Hm-m-m.”

“Like I said. She’s kind of a smart ass. And too damn young really. Just a notch above San Quentin quail...we used to call it.”

“How old?”

*Jim Cleveland*

“Nineteen.”

“Oh shit!” said Johnny. “Some ‘a that green pussy. That’d be all right.”

“We better just worry about the dope deal. I don’t know this dude and I don’t like that, but you fucked me up. I need to get rid of this stuff. I got to get out of here tomorrow, and I got to take some bills with me.”

“You don’t know this guy. He couldn’t be the law, could he?”

“Naw. She wouldn’t let the law in on us. I know that for sure. She said she knew the guy and he was all right – and he had the money.”

“Where’s he from?”

“Denver. He’s going to a ball game today...in Denver, pro game. Then he’s gonna be headed this way.”

She had appeared suddenly in the doorway, Carol, standing there bundled up in her parka. Johnny was immediately impressed with her soft beauty.

“Hey Carol,” said Sid. “This is Johnny...I told you about.”

“Hey, how you doin’?” Johnny asked. Eyes fixed on the beauty of her face.

“Can’t complain,” she said without smiling. “I’m goin’ up the street for a walk.”

“Uh...yeah,” Johnny stammered. “That sounds good. I might head back that way with you.”

“I’m gonna drop off and see that dude Jason for a little bit.”

“Jason? That guy up the street?”

“Yeah.”

“I met him yesterday. You know him?”

“Yeah, I know him,” said Johnny.

“Hang loose. All right?” she said, making her way past them, through the doorway and away from their muffled replies...out the front door.

“That guy’s a real asshole,” said Johnny when she had gone.

“He was down here for a while last night,” said Sid.

“The hell you say.”

“He’s tryin’ to get some ‘a that snatch too.”

“That son-of-a-bitch,” said Johnny.

“You wanna toot ‘a this coke?” asked Sid, “I got a few hits pulled out.”

“That son-of-a-bitch.”

When Carol was out of easy sight of the house, she pulled the small parcel of brown paper from her parka pocket. She walked on, calmly, without breaking her easy stride. She ripped it open and spread the five ounces of fine white cocaine powder by her side. It disappeared forever into the snow.

“MY WIFE?” Jason replied back to her. “I’m surprised you’d be so personal. But maybe I can sum it up for you. I can try.

“I thought she had some faults and she thought I had some. We couldn’t seem to make each other over, so we quit trying. It just turned out we weren’t such good crutches for one another, I think. Our heads finally gravitated to different places. I was looking for a certain lifestyle; she was looking for another. I was looking for a sensuous, laid-back woman who enjoyed nature, sports, reading and music; she was looking for other, no less legitimate things. I don’t know. After you look at divorce from every possible angle, you decide it can’t be blamed on anybody. It’s nobody’s fault, it’s just the circumstances. But you shouldn’t waste your time on a losing proposition. You should find someone very special. And you should look for that person everywhere.”

OMEGA Corporation’s solar dome sat glistening in the winter sun, high atop the New York skyline on the 117<sup>th</sup> floor roof of the Apple Towers. The large transparent bubble, they said, was completely temperature-controlled with a beautiful lagoon of blue water and tropical fish, small willow trees and a smooth green floor of grass for restful repose. Few had been privileged to see the dome from inside, though it sat just adjacent to the heliport that brought in business associates and representatives of other firms and government bureaus.

The dome had added to the mystique of the corporation, which soon, Mega knew, would be of much greater interest around the country. It was just a matter of a little more time, just a little, in keeping with their timetable.

Today, a little before noon on Sunday, Mega leaned back, naked in the sun, his brown skin belying the cold New York winter, his long white hair resting on his shoulders.

The sound of the helicopter didn't faze him. Only a guttural stutter, he thought, with a peaceful smile, of a spy in the sky, a swooping interloper to break their peace by ogling their bodies. Mega was endlessly fascinated with the meandering possibilities of their language, which they bound themselves to use for all of their thought and expression. Certainly it enhanced the challenge, and they were winning, ever so steadily, with the corporation.

"That's Amstar's chopper," said Jay, sunbathing nude beside him. "One of those guys has binoculars."

"This might be good for some headlines," said Mega. "I think it's time we made some more impact on their emotions. It could be a good opportunity."

"What does Control say?"

"I haven't asked," said Mega. "I think we can make that decision ourselves. That's what part of this trip is all about, isn't it? Flexing our intuitive thinking?"

"I'm always ready to do that," said Jay.

"This place is wonderful, Jay. I'm realizing that more and more every day," said Mega, basking in the sunlight. "We get the opportunity to use every power inherent to our beings, powers we had long ago lost or left behind. The prospects are limitless for experience if we have the right combination of sense and sensitivity."

"We've got it."

Mega lifted himself on an elbow and looked at Jay, still motionless in the bright sun. He chuckled at his confidence and didn't reply, rising instead to look into the clear, cold sky, through their protective bubble.

He went for a swim in the cool lagoon, then walked down the stairs into the penthouse, still nude, toweling the water from his hair. He walked past Cezanne and Al, loving each other on the furry floor, to the library, where he began selecting some reading material on Earth psychology.

The phone rang.

“This is Mega.”

“Santos. I’m on schedule.”

“Good. No trouble?”

“I had a car accident with two state troopers. At least one of them is dead. It was my fault.”

Megan’s spirits sank. “How do you feel?”

“I hurt about it. But I can do the job.”

“Do it,” said Mega softly. “I’ll talk to Control.”

“I’ll be sent home.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps not. What else?” Mega knew that Santos could feel his concern for him in his voice, that he cared about his problem, but just couldn’t do anything.

“I made a death judgment later. I know I was right.”

“Very well. Make a full report.”

“I have. I’m going to the stadium.”

“Have a good time.”

“And Mega...I’m pulling for Denver, the Broncos.”

Mega hesitated. “I hope they win.” Santos might be melting into this world. Should that be alarming?

“Well...sometime you have to lose,” said Santos, “in order to enjoy winning.”

“That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”



*Jim Cleveland*

“Help me if you can Mega,” asked the voice on the phone. “But you know I’ll understand either way.”

“Of course,” said Mega kindly.

He stood there by the cradled receiver for a moment to think. He believed that Control would re-assign Santos and it would be proper. Death of an innocent subject by negligence was a serious offense to reason. He hoped there was a logical place to send Santos where he would not have to be re-integrated for happiness. There was little he could do, except to input more of Santos’ recent record before he asked for the decision.

Mega picked up the phone again and dialed the corporation’s control tower near Houston.

“IRC. I need a 117-access line to Control now. And I also need the Denver television news in here right after it’s presented, an accident on Highway 65...Thanks.”

Mega walked back into the large living area. Al and Cezanne were resting quietly from their amorous tryst.

“Santos has killed one or two law officers, innocents, his fault.”

“Bad luck,” said Cezanne, nude on the couch, sipping from a steaming cup.

“That’s what we talked about.” Said Al, “luck.”

“I’m going to input Control up to date,” said Mega, picking up the meditative sender and pulling it over his head. “It’ll take about two minutes and we’ll ask a decision.”

“It’ll have to be re-assignment,” said Cezanne.

“Probably Space Port work,” said Al. “That’s where Braden was sent.”

When Control replied, it was terse.

“Re-Assign. Space Port near Saturn. Plans to come.”

The only other post in the system, thought Mega, for the only other intelligently inhabited locations, three of Saturn’s moons. He would likely get a new soldier from the twenty-eight others who served there. Santos would be disappointed, but it was Control’s deductions, the logical program, the only program to follow.

JASON STOOD BUNDLED in his fur coat and leather hat watching Joni focus her camera and get just the right angle, a low one, in front of his house.

“Okay,” she said. “Good, that’s good. (click), yeah, hold it...one more (click)...okay now look over there, right there, yeah, over that way, yeah, hold it (click) okay, look here...(click). Do you ever smile?”

“Wry...or pie?” he asked.

“That’s good. Hold it (click).”

Jason saw her small body, bundled in the parka, coming up the street. Maybe she’ll stop, he thought, and indeed she did, looking at his posing from several steps behind Joni.

“All right,” said Joni. “I’m going to get a little closer now...leave out the house. It’ll just be a couple more, okay?”

Joni hadn’t turned to see her, standing there with a sardonic smile, forever that expression of wry humor. “We’ll be selling enlargements,” he called to her. “You want one?”

“No thanks. We don’t have a basement,” Carol replied tartly. Joni had whirled around to face her.

“This is Joni. This is Carol,” said Jason.

“How you doin’?” Carol said to her. “You gonna be famous?” she asked him.

“I doubt it. Why don’t you stay awhile?”

“Yeah. Okay. I might stay a few minutes. See what kinda pad you got in that pointed house.”

“Sure,” Jason smiled. “We’ll be through here in just another minute.”

“Yeah. I think we’ve got enough,” said Joni.

“Sure you’re satisfied?” he asked.

“That’ll do,” she said. Jason eyed her hard. Disgruntled?

“You left early last night,” said Carol, as they started inside. “We made fudge after you left.”

*Jim Cleveland*

“Oh yeah?” Facetiously, he guessed. Now Joni knew where he had been, not that it mattered.

“You mind if I use your john?” she asked him.

“Course not. There on your right, off the hall.”

Joni began putting her camera gear away on the dining table. “I think I’ll make some tea,” he said. “Want some?”

“Yeah. That your girl friend?”

“No. Somebody I just met.”

“She’s very pretty. How old is she?”

Jason eyed her hard, but she didn’t turn from sorting in her bag. He smiled. She didn’t seem to be getting anywhere at it.

“I know she’s too young for me. She looks like Roci...in my book...it’s strange.”

Joni looked up at him, trying to read his eyes, frowning at him, it seemed. Maybe it didn’t seem rational to her.

Behind them, down the hall, the john flushed. The door opened and she came strolling out to look into their silent faces. Joni quickly resumed putting her gear away.

“Well, let’s see this place.” She said, sauntering down the hall. “This your bedroom?” She called.

Joni looked at him. “Yeah,” he said, searching her eyes, which seemed to be puzzled by him.

“I’ll fix the tea,” she said.

“Thanks,” he replied. “The maid took the day off.” He reached over to take her hand and squeeze it, looking affectionately into her surprised eyes. He turned abruptly and headed for the hallway.

She was looking around at his personal effects – the neat rows of book, black-and white photos of mountain scenes, stacks of magazines and file folders.

“Are you going to stay here for awhile – in Netherland?” he asked.

“Not long,” she said. “This where you sleep?”

“Right,” he said, walking up beside her by the bed. “Do you like it?”

“I want you to go with me late this afternoon. There’s a cabin up west toward Platte, about seven miles from here. There’s a fireplace and plenty of wood. We can stay there.”

“Tonight?”

“Right,” she said, her soft determined eyes nearly overpowering his.

“I have important work to do here. How about tomorrow...tomorrow morning?”

“No. When is she leaving?”

“This afternoon.”

“What kind of work you gotta do?”

“Someone’s coming...to make a deal.”

“Ummm,” she shrugged, toying with the ashtray by the bed. “Are they offering you what I’m offering?”

“No. It’s business. You’re much more appealing, but I’ve got to be here for this.”

“What are you tryin’ to jack me around for?”

“I have to tend to important business. You can understand that.”

Suddenly she had his hand, caressing it, looking into his eyes with her offer, holding his hand between her thighs. He felt, or imagined, her softness through the rough denim. Then she was in his arms in a passionate embrace, the energy of her body surging through her warm lips into his body, tingling his senses, sweeping his mind away on the wings of desire. She pulled free, teased him abruptly with her eyes and turned to go.

Moments later they sat with the tea, looking out at the cloudy sky. Jason’s mind was locked onto a cabin, and sensual pleasure by a fireplace, or a

*Jim Cleveland*

choice here of ...saving his own life maybe, or losing it. Wouldn't it be smart to go?

"Have you lived here long?" Joni asked Carol.

"Just moved in yesterday really, with some friends."

"I thought you two were old friends."

"Actually, I met her a few hours before I met you," said Jason. "Two nice new friends in one day. Not bad."

"What do you do?" she asked Joni.

"I work for Head West...magazine."

Carol turned to Jason coyly. "What are you getting' wrote up about?"

"I've written a novel...a manuscript that's going to be a novel in a few months."

"Good. You gonna make some money out of it?"

"I guess. That's not the main thing."

"Being famous, huh? Is that the most important thing for you right now?"

"My health," said Jason. "Staying healthy is the most important thing?"

"Is there some doubt about it?"

"You can't be sure of anything these days."

Carol turned to Joni. "And how long are you staying?"

"My bus leaves at 3:45. At least Jason tells me I should be on it."

"You'll be snowed in if you're not," he said.

"Carol, who do you think could be threatening Jason," Joni asked.

"With what?"

"Death," he said, picking up Joni's question, searching for her elusive eyes.

“Um-m-m,” she said, “how should I know? ... I’ll be damned. You don’t have any ideas about it?”

“No. But it’s for tonight, so I’ve got to stay here and see what becomes of it,” he said.

“That doesn’t make much sense, does it?”

“Someone convinced me once that being afraid didn’t make sense,” he replied.

“It makes perfectly good sense,” Joni interjected.

“Whether it does or not, I admit I’m capable of it,” said Jason, “but I know that the best way to lick it is to stand up to the challenge.”

“You don’t even know what to protect yourself against,” said Joni.

“Someone could just blow up your house,” said Carol, “just throw a bomb in your window.”

“If I don’t face him tonight, I’ll have to face him later,” said Jason.

“You should come to Denver with me on the bus, or we could drive,” said Joni, “and talk to the police there.”

“I know a cabin near here,” said Carol. “You could stay there as long as you like.” Jason looked into her eyes, was suddenly sure in his mind that Joni knew there was something between them, and could sense it. It didn’t matter. He was a happy prisoner inside her eyes, trapped by the beauty, or something more.

Then he broke away. “You’re not thinking, ladies,” he said. “Everything I have is here. If I leave it, and the threat is real, I might lose it all. Whoever it is might just burn the place down. I’ve got to stay here and keep it. It’s mine. Whatever it’s all worth, it’s all I’ve got.”

“Maybe it’s just a crank,” said Carol.

“If I left,” said Jason, “I wouldn’t know, would I? Hell, maybe it is.”

“But calling three times is a bit unusual for just a weirdo, it seems to me,” said Joni.

*Jim Cleveland*

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I’m taking it seriously, for what it’s worth. I’ll be up tonight with a pot of coffee, and two guns that will blow anything away.”

“You don’t even hunt, Jason,” said Joni. “You told me that.”

“Why the hell do we have to talk about it?” Jason asked calmly. “Let’s talk about something pleasant ... or go have a snowball fight.”

“I’ve got to get out of here,” said Carol, sliding back her chair. “You be careful, okay? It’s probably just a telephone nut, but it pays to be careful.”

They made amenities about the food and the weather and she was soon standing in the doorway, facing Jason. Joni was in the kitchen, with the dishes.

“You got her trained already?” Carol asked with a wry smile.

“What do you mean?”

“She’s more than a reporter, isn’t she?”

“No.”

“She seems awfully interested in your welfare.”

“The calls are just a bit out of the ordinary.”

“I thought you wanted us to be together. I’m leaving here tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? You just got here.”

“Yeah ... look, these people I’m with. They borrowed the key to this place. It’s all right to stay there, but we’re just here to make a dope deal. They’re gonna make it tonight and then we’re gonna split.”

“What kind of dope?”

“A little coke. That’s all.”

“So we’ve got tonight or that’s it, right?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“You can stay here ... as long as you like.”

“Sounds like better sense for us to leave together.”

“You’d do that?”

“Why not? We could go someplace it’s warm.”

Jason chuckled to himself. “No one would know where we were, because we wouldn’t know where we were going. Maybe that would be the way to do it.”

“Could be.”

“I’m going to straighten this crap out here, though. You’ll like it here.”

“Hell, no,” she laughed, “not in this place. I need to find the ocean.”

Jason just looked at her, disappointed.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “There ain’t no way I can stay here. I can’t handle this weather ... no way.”

Jason thought again before replying. “Maybe we can go. I’ll think about it. I’ll call you ... by dark.”

“No phone.”

“If I can do it, I’ll be there,” he said. “I’ll be there by dark.”

“I need to know something by four o’clock. Okay? Right after she leaves.”

She wanted to spell out the terms, Jason realized. He wondered what he was getting into. Maybe she was involved in the threat in some way; maybe she was part of it.

“All right,” he agreed. “Four o’clock. Fair enough.”

“I’ll come up here. I don’t know when this deal is goin’ down. They might get nervous about you comin’ down.”

“Is there a guy named Johnny Bannister involved?”

“Yeah. He was down there when I left. How’d you know?”

“Netherland’s a small place. He’s the only dealer I know, and he works all over the area.”

“Friend of yours?”



“No. You wouldn’t say that.”

“I’ll be here at four,” she said, “and I’ll have my things pretty much together to go. Okay?”

Jason looked in her eyes. They showed him no deep feeling, only her usual confident air, like a game she was playing, like she knew she was going to win. It made all the sense in the world to leave with this beautiful ingénue in a way. But it just depended on which way he looked at it, whether he wanted to tear his roots up again for this childlike beauty, this whimsical, rootless young girl a generation removed, or protect all that he had built for himself here. Maybe it was silly when you considered she was nineteen.

He leaned forward and she kissed him willingly. Their lips lingered softly together, quietly. She finally pulled away, smiled knowingly at him – still confident of her power it seemed – and walked away.

## CHAPTER 8

The hawkers waved pennants at his gray pickup truck as Santos maneuvered into the busy parking lot, heeding the whistle and pointed arm of the law officer standing in front of him. An attendant took his money and motioned him toward another yellow parka with the red glove.

Santos parked and followed the crowd through the discordant fanfare, dodging his way through cars filled with happy fans in sweaters and coats, hollering and flaunting their bright orange paraphernalia.

In the press box, an announcer was giving his opening pitch: “Mile High Stadium, Denver, Colorado, home of Red Miller’s Denver Broncos and the famed Orange Crush defense. Denver is 6-2 on the year, tied for the AFC West lead and boasting two shutout victories. The challenger: the rejuvenated Buffalo Bills, who have surprised everyone with a 5-3 start. Chuck Knox’ offensive-minded team seems to be getting better each week. The pass-minded Bills, riding the arm of Joe Ferguson, picked up 455 yards last week, 311 in the air in demolishing Baltimore 35-3. Denver is coming off the heels of the 10-7 squeaker over the NFC’s stumbling Detroit Lions...”

Santos bought a ticket and waited patiently for the telephone. He could hear Mega’s phone ringing...

“This is Santos. What’s the decision? ... When do I leave? ... Thank you. ... Thank you, Mega.”

He replaced the receiver quietly and left the phone to the next in line.

Saturn Ring. Such an uneventful place, he thought, with none of the excitement of this fascinating, primitive world, nor of the challenge, only the solitude for reflection much of the time, an activity for which he had never developed a sincere interest. The usual shipboard pursuits could never match the opportunity for achievement here. There was little challenge in such a lonely monitoring station that he could visualize very strongly.

*Jim Cleveland*

Suddenly he was aware that he had walked solidly into someone, knocking them to the concrete and he was helping to her feet a stocky middle-aged woman with glasses askew.

"I'm sorry," said Santos. "This is certainly my fault."

"Well, hell," said a fat middle-aged man with a bald head and a cigar, trying to help her with a hat that had fallen to the concrete. "Why don't you watch where you're going?"

"She hit her head..." Santos heard the words of an onlooker leap clearly through the jumble of sound around them. The man was feeling her scalp, sour-faced.

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

"I'm okay, Leonard," she said, holding to his wrist.

"Doesn't help," snapped the man. "You been drinkin'?"

"I'm all right," said the woman. "I'm all right."

Santos sighed and opened his billfold. He pulled out a hundred dollar bill. "Here," he said. "This is what you understand. This is for your trouble."

The man reached and took the proffered bill, holding it askance while Santos quickly walked away. An all-purpose medicine, he reasoned to himself. He knew the man wouldn't call after him, and he knew he had made true amends. Yet, even with all of his power he had gotten himself into this helpless situation. It will all be gone, he thought, as he walked up through the concrete portal into the sunshine, and saw that it bathed thousands of excited people, and gladiators limbering on a sea of painted green.

"WAS IT SANTOS?"

Mega stood in silence by the receiver. He looked at AI for a moment, seeing his concern. "I can't do anything to help. It's an adjustment from inside, made by individuals, not by such as we, not by computers, not even, as a rule, by God."

"Is he doing it?"

“He naturally won’t choose to talk about it. It’ll be his strategy to bury it deep, keep it under the control of his rationale.”

“Can he still handle the assignment?”

“I didn’t refer it to Control. Since we’ve worked together so closely, I’ll decide, and I think he will. He wouldn’t choose to do other than his best. There would be nothing to gain.”

“Would he ... disappear, in order to stay here?”

“I don’t think Santos could blend well with these humans on that basis. It might cause difficulties. I think he’ll go to Saturn – reluctantly but with confidence that Control is infallible, built in the true image of God. He will revive his spirits, knowing that our benevolent order must be maintained over all else.”

“Still,” said Al. “Too much exposure here can cause aberrations. We have Roci’s experience to attest to that. When you get inside Santos’ head you have to consider that his psyche has somehow been changed here.”

“That does complicate things, doesn’t it,” said Mega. “Certainly I should call Carol to explain about Santos.” He picked up the phone. “She should be aware for whatever develops in their work. Perhaps it wouldn’t matter, but perhaps it will.”

The phone rang twice before Sid reached it, leaving his noisy friends in the kitchen making soup.

He called for Carol in the bedroom, wondering why she had chosen to keep much to herself today. She was quieter than usual, maybe on the rag.

“Hello.”

“Hello Carol. I hope you’re doing well,” said Mega.

“Yeah, not bad. How’s it with you?” Sid sat down nearby.

“Santos is on schedule,” said Mega. “He may be depressed. There was an accident and an innocent was killed. He also made a judgment and killed another. They’re after him. Control has called him to Saturn Ring.”

“Aw-w-w, yeah? That’s too bad.”

*Jim Cleveland*

"I'm concerned about his disappointment. Perhaps you can comfort him."

Yeah. I'll do that," she said.

"Good luck. You know how important it is to get rid of Jason."

"Sure."

"See you at midnight."

"Sure." She hung up. Sid had been wondering who had called her, she knew, sitting conspicuously nearby.

"Who was that?" he grunted.

"My man with the money. He said if he was going to drive all this way it had better be good."

"That what he said?" Sid frowned.

"Yeah. He knows what he wants," she told him.

"He'll like it," said Sid confidently.

"How about giving Jason another call, okay? We need to make it good this time," she said.

"What you tryin' to do to that guy?"

"I told you. I owe him some harassment."

"That ain't the whole story. It don't make sense to call and harass and threaten the guy and then be friends with him. What you really tryin' to pull anyway?"

"I owe him. I told you. He fucked over somebody who was very close to me."

"So what you gonna do about it? You ain't scarin' him off ... it don't look like."

She smiled. "It's not over yet, Sid. It's a long way from being over."

"A fire bomb might just cook your ass," came the gruff voice. Jason's heart picked up its beat.

“This is stupid. I’ve never done anything to you.”

“Then I’ll kill you for no reason.”

“It’s crazy! I don’t even know you.”

“Most victims are strangers if you’ll think about it. It’s a lot easier than killing someone you know.”

Jason sensed that the man was amused.

“You know something, shitface?” he said calmly. “You’ve got it to do.” He slammed the receiver down hard, stood by it, his mind seething. In a minute, he turned and walked to the window, looking out over the deep, snow-capped valley below him. He knew he could get ready, because he knew the threat was real now. And more importantly, he knew that it was one of the most important things he would do in his life. Even if the son-of-a-bitch threatening him didn’t even show up, the stand he would choose to make was very important to his self-respect. He would be smart and would be brave.

He turned to see Joni coming in from the hallway, wrapped in a robe.

“I borrowed some toothpaste.”

“Sure.” He hoped she had grown to like him, but he knew he had some barriers, illogical quirks, that turned people away. He surely didn’t deserve her affection.

“Were you on the phone?”

“Yeah.”

“Did ... someone call?”

“Same guy. I’m about ready for that dude.”

Joni frowned and walked on toward the stairs. She hadn’t heard the phone but maybe she ... just didn’t hear it. She had certainly heard him slam the receiver down. He was either mixed up with some dangerous people he’s not telling about, she thought, or else his mind is getting shaky. That really didn’t seem possible in a way. How could she find out what was happening though, unless she stayed? And really ... maybe she should. It all came flooding into Joni’s searching mind. Maybe she knew the answer now. The

key was in the new manuscript because that's where Jason's mind was trapped. That was the key to the door, and she might as well stay here and open it. It was also the key to a successful breakthrough at Head West, whatever the end result, a good article. There was no way she could leave now.

She walked away from the stairs and sat down her small bag of toiletries. He watched her walk up to him by the window.

"Jason. I can't leave you here alone. I'm going to stay ... and help. I have to stay."

"You have to go. The thing is real. If something happened to you, I couldn't live with myself."

"It's my decision to stay. It wouldn't be your fault."

"I know you've got a ticket," he said, unflinching. "And I know I can force you to go – leave my house. So ... it would be my fault. I wouldn't have done everything in my power to get you out of here."

She saw she was losing. "Please ... let me stay."

"I can't," he said kindly. "I just can't."

They faced each other, feeling for each other in their faces, their eyes. Jason reached out to her and she leaned slowly into his arms where their hearts beat together for a long moment. He knew that she was beautiful, as he suspected she would be in those first moments of their meeting, and that he wanted her to come back later. On the other hand, she knew that she wasn't going to leave.

At 3:35, he stood under a cloudy day and watched her wave goodbye to him through the bus window. The rough, gutty sound of the bus disappeared around a bend in the highway and Jason walked solemnly back to his house, knowing that he was alone now.

But though the bus was out of his sight, she still was not gone. She soon called on the driver to stop – an emergency – and she got out on the highway to begin a half-mile walk back to the bus station. She walked to a nearby coffee shop to wait. She would wait until dark. Then she had an appointment with Mr. Weathers. She checked to make sure the snub-nosed pistol was still tucked into her purse.

BUT SHE did have a telephone! She lied! Jason walked through the snow. He remembered seeing it in the meagerly furnished dark room, which led into the small hallway, and the room with the mattresses. Or maybe the line was disconnected, by the former tenant? The name on the mailbox was Binswanger, he remembered, D. Binswanger, not a common name. When he reached his house he looked up the number in the directory and dialed.

“Hello.” It was a woman’s voice.

“Is Carol there?”

“Yeah, just a minute.”

So she was there, and so was the phone. “Hello.”

“This is Jason,” he said firmly. “You lied to me about the phone.”

“Hi! No, I didn’t forget. I was just fixin’ to head that way.”

“Why did you lie about it?”

“Yeah. I’ll tell you about that.”

“So you’re comin’ up here?”

“Yep,” she said, and hung up.

Jason knew his thoughts might be illogical, but he had better be ready. He opened the .38 cartridges and loaded the chambers of the pistol. Then he filled the rifle with the twenty-twos. Maybe even she was dangerous. Certainly those two guys could be. The threat must have something to do with the dope deal, Jason thought. Maybe the answer was there somewhere.

Soon there was a knock on the door. He stashed the pistol under a cushion and propped the rifle behind the curtain by the window. He would watch her – closely.

Her soft beautiful face stared into his, framed by her parka hood. “Can I come in? Or am I on your shit list?”

“Come in.” he stepped aside for her.

“Well, you got your things ready?”



*Jim Cleveland*

“I can’t go.” He followed her into the den.

“You’re crazy to stay here if somebody’s threatening you. We could be getting’ it on up in the cabin ... by the fireplace. I got some dynamite coke.”

“Sounds like my kind of evening, but I can’t make it.”

“You gonna stay here and get your ass shot off?”

“It might happen. I doubt it.”

“What are you gonna do about it?”

“I’ve got plans.”

She looked stymied, a little irritated. “How does that make sense to you?”

“I’ve told you already. I don’t want to be pushed around. If I’m the kind of person who would run like a scared dog, I wouldn’t want to live with myself anyway. I’d never be happy. Besides, I’ve got to protect the things I own here. They make me comfortable, and that makes me free. ... Listen, I’m lonely for someone like you. A lot of people could admit to that. But I’ve adapted to being lonely by channeling my thoughts into disciplined, orderly behavior, doing everything that makes sense for my mind and body.”

“So being lonely makes sense, huh?”

“No. You’re not offering anything that would keep me from being lonely. At least you haven’t yet. But you did lie to me about the telephone.”

“Sid didn’t want any calls. For God’s sake, Jason, you can understand that. He’s nervous about this deal.”

“All right. You lied for a purpose.”

“What the hell you want, a commitment of some kind?”

“Just a different vibration than I’ve been getting. Maybe you want to share your body, but everything else is a mystery. The only image you’ve given is that of a parasite – hanging out with some people you don’t know, going no place in particular, involved in a dope deal that could get you in prison, wanting me to go up to some cabin somewhere and indulge my fantasies.”

“What the hell’s wrong with having a good time? I liked you! I just wanted ‘t get to know you! And you talk to me like I’m shit!”

Jason was surprised at her indignity.

“I’m not a parasite!” she said stubbornly. “I’m not sleepin’ with neither one ‘a them guys. I’ve got more damn self-respect than anybody I know.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” said Jason. “I’m just talking about the image you’re showing ... the way you’re comin’ on but ... at the same time you’re not showing me any affection. I think I could feel it if you were. It’s just like ... you wanna go up there and fuck ourselves ... just fuckin’, that’s all. You don’t give a shit about me. You just wanna fuck.”

“Well?” she sighed, “I wanted to care about you. You’ve got to start somewhere. What’s wrong with fucking?”

Jason hesitated, searching her eyes for a clue. “Well ... it beats the hell out of me.” He laughed.

“Then you’ll come?” her face brightened. She reached a soft hand up to touch his cheek.

“I can’t,” he said, “but we can make love now.” He took her face in his hands and leaned forward to kiss her. Passion welled inside him, feeling her small, soft face, her warm breath, the gentle touch of the lips, and the euphoria that almost pulled him, weightless, through the threshold.

He felt a sudden piercing pain in his back. The throbbing numbness spread through his body, paralyzing his legs, which slipped to the floor and he, falling with them, eyes trapped on the bare ceiling.

On his back, he tried to speak but his mouth failed to form a word. He tried, his eyes open, to make a sound, he knew not what, for it escaped his helpless mind. He couldn’t move; neither could he speak, but he could see the cloud of her somewhere above him, somewhere far up there above and he was far below, suffering in some indefinable way, still and mute. Then, as the silent darkness engulfed him, he floated to sleep, peaceful sleep, his mouth ajar.

THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE moved through the gates of Mile High Stadium and spread out over the parking lot, making their way home in the cloudy late afternoon. Up above, in the press box, the television cameras returned to close-ups of its announcing team.

“Well, it was a close one all the way, Denver finally prevailing over the much-improved Buffalo Bills on a final 33-yard touchdown strike from Craig Morton to Haven Moses. Then the Broncos’ famed Orange Crush defense shut down a final air assault by Joe Ferguson, stopping them on the Bronco’s 17-yard line with less than a minute left to play. Final score: Denver 27, Buffalo 21. This is Joe Betters along with...”

Santos’ elation was beginning to wear down. It was an exciting finish to the best game he had seen since Green Bay at Chicago. And the last one he would ever see, he guessed. Saturn ring. He knew he needed the re-orientation, but it was the most disappointing decision he had experienced from Control. Actually, it was the only decision – the only one – that ever had truly disappointed him.

He looked around himself at the nearly empty stadium, got up slowly and followed the thousands.

The parking lot was noisy with laughter and loud talk, occasional horns blowing, and the scuffling of many feet. A compact car was filled with noisy young people, struggling along with the slow-moving traffic.

“Hey hairy man! Who you for?” The guy was banging on the side of the car with open palm. He wore an orange jacket and stocking cap. Santos walked on, not replying.

“Let’s Go-o-o-o! Bron-co-o-os! Hey Buddy! Have a beer for the Broncos.”

“No thanks.”

“We-eel-l-l-l! Kiss my ass,” he hollered with a wry grin.

Santos looked for a chance to cross the slow, jerking line of traffic moving out of the lot, two rows of cars deep. He made a move ahead of the Volkswagen but it lurched forward suddenly and he jumped quickly to avoid being hit.

“Hey! Look out up there.”

“Hey buddy! You liable to get run over up there.”

Santos only stared at them, blocking the traffic line, growing more disgruntled.

“How about getting’ outta the way. We tryin’ to drive here.”

“Hey! Move it!” Girls were giggling. There was one in the front, two crammed into the back with the third guy.

“What the hell’s he doin’? Puttin’ on earrings?” Laughter.

“What?”

“I’ll be damn!”

“What’s he doin’?” More laughter.

“Hey! Move it over! This is ridiculous.”

“What’d he say?”

“Just a minute. He’s comin’ aroun’.”

“Let’s get outta here.”

“Hell, no!”

“He’s comin’ on your side.”

“Hey! What you want? You blockin’ traffic ... What you doin’? Oh-h-h! Shit! What you doin’?”

“He’s pushin’ us o-o-o-oh!”

“O-w-w-w-w-w-w-w!”

“A-h-h-h-h-h!”

The car went crashing over on its side, amid screams and hollers of thrashing, jumbled bodies. Santos looked at the capsized turtle for a little more than a second, one wheel still turning lazily, noisy bodies scrambling inside. A hubbub of people were gathering on the scene as he turned to walk easily through the crowd.

“That man did it!” He heard one distinct voice in the crowd. He quickened his pace, heard the muddled voice once more and disappeared from the scene. He reached the gray pickup and soon was gone.

Santos’ mood was growing quite foul. He knew he had to fight that. He was too swept away by unauthorized actions. He knew he had to stop, had to get a firm grip of control for the mission at hand. Jason Weathers had to disappear, Carol’s deal had to be consummated, and then he was through ... finished. It would all be over.

OMEGA’S NEW WAVE of new and advanced technology was due to be marketed next spring. Today it brought Mega Smith and his top executives the evening news from Denver on a one-minute delay. The announcer had shiny black hair and a determined jaw.

“A fiery crash on a Highway 65 bridge near Tiplersville has left one state trooper dead and another seriously injured. They are apparent victims in the wide spread chase of a bizarre, lone assailant, who had this morning threatened a crowded restaurant in Glenwood Springs with an explosive device, assaulted the restaurant manager and stole the man’s car.

“That car was later found abandoned at the Highway 65 bridge over Rush Creek, where trooper James Hagen of Bolton was killed and fellow officer Doug Whitehead of Kincaid was injured. Whitehead apparently lost control of the car during a high-speed chase and crashed into the bridge. The car overturned and burst into flames.

“Police are combing the area, looking for a white male adult with dark hair and beard, last seen wearing jeans and a blue jacket. There was no evidence of how the man left the crash scene. Police have speculated that he could have abducted someone there, or possibly fled on foot over the rugged rural terrain. Police helicopters are being used in the search.

“Meanwhile in Denver, Trooper Whitehead is listed in serious, but stable condition at Parkway Hospital. Trooper Hagen, whose body was trapped by the wreckage, was a 13-year veteran of the patrol, married and the father of two children, 6 and 9.

“Earlier in the day, the elusive troublemaker had disrupted breakfast patrons in a motel restaurant in Glenwood Springs by climbing on the counter and waving what appeared to be a stick of dynamite. In the

confusion that followed as diners scurried out of the restaurant, the man overpowered the restaurant manager to take his car keys and somehow elude two police cars at the scene. What appeared to be dynamite appears to have been some kind of harmless device. Officers Whitehead and Hagen were responding to an alert for manager James Holcomb's car when the fatal accident occurred.

"Police in Glenwood Springs said the mysterious, black-bearded man had been involved last night in a scuffle between police and several men at a local nightclub. A bartender was assaulted in the scuffle, the cash register robbed of more than \$800 and a police officer suffered a bullet wound in his foot. Three men were arrested but not the daring unidentified assailant, who, at this time is still at large in central Colorado ... and now a death in the aftermath. Police will only say that their search units will be continuing at full strength into the night, despite a heavy snowfall that began early this evening."

The transmission faded quickly. Mega reached for the phone without a word.

"Mega ... I need all of the updates ... Thank you, Equal."

"How much freedom has he exercised?" asked Al, as Mega replaced the receiver.

"Too much. But Control has never indicated a dangerous psychology," Mega answered.

"But there are strong, perhaps unique, mind influences here," said Al. "We know that everything in the universe is made up of energy waves but we all know how little we understand about them. Here, it seems our situations are constantly changing. Our brains are in continual adaptation with the unforeseen energies that permeate the planet. What kind of changes will we ultimately reveal in ourselves, in our perspectives, and what will be the resulting actions?"

"I've changed," said Jay, "but my ideals and faith have remained resolute."

"Maybe we're digging too deeply," Cezanne suggested. "Maybe he was just careless, and there would be only one reason for that – he wasn't cautious enough because he doesn't care enough about the welfare of our hosts."

"He had indeed seemed to grow more resentful of their foibles," said Mega, "and he had seemed unnecessarily bored by the routine of his assignments,

almost retreating into ... an obsession with the games. He had my blessing to stir up some mischief ... with cretins, but I erred in my judgment, perhaps. I wrongly trusted that he would use more discretion, that his strong mind wouldn't be polluted with all this restless negativity that is everywhere."

"What did Control say?" asked Jay.

"There was no clue," said Mega. "Still, there should have been. His complete psychology is in store there."

"But not the changes," replied Al. "The data being added isn't keeping pace with the biological changes."

"He's been out too long," said Mega. "He despises a lot of these people. I should have seen that."

"Don't blame yourself," said Cezanne. "I think we all have to admit that we're not infallible once in a while. You're very wise, Equal Mega, and we love you."

"I had hoped," said Mega, "that I'd never have innocent blood on my hands. I could have prevented it but I failed."

"It's not right to blame yourself," said Cezanne. "Control, of course, has responsibility for the decisive logic and, so, the responsibility. Why establish its Godlike eminence without acceding the power to assuage our sins?"

"I should have consulted Control more," said Mega.

"Again, you acted with your best judgment," said Al.

"I don't have to be reminded that it isn't logical to mourn what's done. It is logical to help the survivors with currency... and to still care about all these lost children. And if Santos has lost sight of our ideals he should be replaced quickly."

"What about the ... execution?" asked Jay.

"I've no way to know if it was warranted," said Mega. "Maybe the genes were hopeless; maybe not. Jon and Audra are in Denver checking it out but we have to make a decision now about the Netherland work. We have a little time left to make a change."

“Didn’t you already made the decision that he could do it,” said Jay

“Perhaps Control should make the decision,” said Mega.

“But Control only understands the mind that Santos began with,” said Cezanne. “You’re the only person who has constantly been in contact with him. You have to judge his mental state today for his ability to do the job.”

“It depends,” said Mega, “on what he’s faced with. He’s very powerful, and if he’s distraught, he may react in dangerous ways to those around ... in human ways. Maybe he already has.”

A green light suddenly illuminated the crystal of Mega’s watch.

“Carol has prepared Jason for our dream visit,” said Mega. “Would you care to join me?”

“Cezanne and I were going out in the streets for awhile, perhaps dinner at Zino’s,” said Al. “Can we wait for you?”

“No, thank you,” said Mega. “I want to make some deductions after the visit.”

“I need to send some to the Omaha project as well,” said Jay. “Then I’m going down to the gym.”

“Maybe I’ll join you,” said Mega, rising to walk toward the library and the headphone transmitter. “About a half-hour?”

“Excellent.”

Mega closed the door and tuned in his headphones to Carol’s readings on the monitor. He relaxed in his favorite chair to renew an old acquaintance with one of their special humans, one who brought back a lot of memories for him, especially of Roci, who fell from their grace for disobeying Control logic. She had been their first investor in Jason, with sad consequence. At least Mega considered them sad. Now Mega’s concern was to insure that the investment, unnecessarily costly as it had been, would not be wasted.

JASON’S MIND whirled lightly around him, dancing a restless waltz behind his eyes, in the darkness, until he realized that he was conscious but didn’t see.



He opened his eyes slowly and saw dark, wet reflections in a world of glass in front of him. His head rested back in a firm chair and the night appeared to him as an affluent metropolitan street of broad and clean concrete, and he was in a lobby, behind a desk, and conscious that there was no sound at all. There were cars moving across the wet black streets, lights glistening and reflecting in the city night, but all in silence. A few passers-by, a young couple, three businessmen in suits, made their way toward appointed places, but everything was silent, everywhere, all of what lay before him. He lifted his head from the chair and followed the city's cars with his eyes. Either he was deaf or the building was soundproof, un-humanly so. Jason leaned forward and tapped on the desk with his finger – a tiny thump. The chair squeaked slightly. He got up and looked at the modest sign on the desk, which said simply, "Information."

The lobby was spacious, with several arrangements of plush chairs, colorful carpets, and a high ceiling of silver, reflective tiles. Spotlights, shining from discreetly hidden sources here and there over the broad expanse, accented large plants. There was a modest gold inscription on the glass doors to the street and he stepped closer to read the lettering – backwards. AGEMO ... OMEGA.

The door was locked. Jason pushed in vain against it, wanting suddenly, badly, to go out into the street, destroy the silence. He turned to look around again and the double line of elevators caught his eye. All were dark except one, in the middle of the right row. He walked toward it, hearing his footsteps echo through the silence. There was only one letter above the elevator, an illuminated "P." All of the others were assigned tiny rows of numbers, climbing to the unbelievable total of 111. All were dark.

He was being guided, of course, but felt vaguely comfortable about it. For this moment, and at this time anyway, he knew he belonged here. He pushed the button and the door opened promptly. He stepped inside; there was no button on either side. The door closed. Smoothly, he began the quiet ascension, up into the sky. Jason wondered why he felt so calmly knowledgeable of the scene, since he could hardly imagine what he would find at destination P – a penthouse, no doubt.

Finally, he felt the elevator stop. The door opened to reveal a tall handsome man with straight, shoulder-length white hair and a short, neatly trimmed white beard. His air of self-confidence seemed enhanced by his deeply tanned skin and dapper clothes – a sport coat and open-necked shirt.

“Jason, I’m Mega Smith.” He reached to grasp Jason’s hand in a firm grasp. “I’ve met you before but I’m sure you don’t remember me.”

“I know you but... No, I don’t remember anything else. Where am I? How did I get to this place?”

“It’s only a guided dream, a mindvisit, a means for us to get together. You must wonder about all the things that seem to be happening to you.”

Jason looked around at the affluent furnishings of the penthouse, rich carpet and polished wood décor, and art pieces of sculpture and canvas suggesting varying styles and cultures. “For a dream,” he said, “it all seems very real.”

“We’ve known how to measure and influence your brain vibrations for some time,” said Mega. “My associates and I are aliens, you see, from a planet outside your realm of influence. You’ve known us in the past and we’ve influenced your writing ... subconsciously you would say, but we arranged for your specific memories to be erased.”

Jason pondered a reply.

“Won’t you let me show you about?” said Mega, turning to lead them, wordlessly, through the penthouse suite, finally up the small, open staircase to a sitting room with glass walls. Jason walked to the glass and stared out over the panorama of skyline lights.

“Where are we?”

“New York City. Present time. The headquarters of Omega Enterprises.”

“You’re publishing my book, the one you influenced. But I don’t understand what else you’re doing.”

“We’re going to build an audience for it,” said Mega. “It isn’t enough to inspire your spirit, inflame your passion, and feed your intellect. If people don’t buy the book, what have you really achieved?”

“I’ve assumed it was a bit out of my hands,” said Jason.

“We can promote it, with your help. Do you trust me?”

*Jim Cleveland*

“How can I say? I still don’t understand the situation. This isn’t even real, you said, and it sure doesn’t fit together in my head.”

“But of course it does,” said Mega. “We’ve just tapped into your intuitive powers to help you create as you have. Now it’s time for marketing.”

“I could almost feel it wasn’t me, since the beginning.”

“No,” said Mega, “and you’ve just about run out of fuel. You must be having a devil of a time writing good copy.”

“You’re right. Why?”

“Essentially, you said all of those things you had learned in the freshest possible way that you could. You have nothing better to say, for the present at least.”

“But you’re doing plenty,” said Jason. “The corporation ... I read about it. What are you building?”

“An organization which will gather a massive following, a faithful and dedicated family which will practice, ever more successfully, the love and order principles that have served us so well.”

“The principles I wrote about ... unconsciously.”

“Not unconsciously, superconsciously. And remember, you believe in them as we do.”

“Yeah,” Jason nodded. “I believe in them. But maybe because you told me to.”

“No,” said Mega. “You’ve always believed as you chose. We haven’t made you into anything that you couldn’t potentially become. We’ve only helped you realize it.”

“And Roci ... I remember her most of all.”

“She’s one of you now. She’s no longer one of us.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Her encounters here and the stresses of her work had an effect on her mind. She refused to release her memories of your time together in

defiance of all that was reasonable, and continued to penetrate your mind with her affection and encouragement. You owe her most of all for being able to successfully finish your work.”

“But where is she?”

“She’s here with you. Control decided that her own choice should be binding, so her memories of being one of us were gradually receded. She’s virtually human now, one of you, and has been here almost from the day that you were separated.”

“But why? Why would you change her ... to one of us?”

“We couldn’t tolerate such rebellion to our order,” said Mega. “Mission Control is our finest creation of logical deduction. The mission plan was to forget Earth after our first visit, and move on with clear and purposeful minds to the next exploratory challenge of the galaxy, alleviate all possible confusion. She chose to violate that logic, so Control had to rectify the problem. We left her here. She influenced you for a time with her lingering powers – she was quite gifted – then, as you know, her powers faded, and she became as you.”

“Where is she?”

“You’ll find out soon enough, according to our plan.”

“Can I see her?”

“If you’re deserving. You do have some problems at home to handle.”

“Who’s trying to kill me? Surely not Carol, unless I’m already dead.”

“No,” said Mega. “She has only applied the chemistry to bring you to me by blending the vibrations of our minds.”

“Then who? I didn’t think I had any enemies.”

“Consider it a test,” said Mega. “She’ll know if you pass it.”

“Why her?”

“It’s as it should be. I’ll tell you that. You don’t know who she is, of course, and I’m obliged to let her tell you herself, when she chooses.”

*Jim Cleveland*

‘She’s ... so much like Roci.’

‘As it should be,’ said Mega, smiling.

‘What about Joni?’

‘One of you. We needed a writer and she was a logical choice. She’ll tell people about your book and about you.’

‘Does she ... know who you are?’

‘No human knows us except you. We’ve influenced some of you positively but they haven’t been aware of it. But you would have to be at least partially cognizant of our influence to fulfill your inspiration. When Roci rebelled, Control decided to more forcefully obliterate the physical actualities from your thoughts with a controlled fever. I’m sure you remember that ... viral infection. But Roci was persistent in nurturing your passions as well as she could with her mental empathy.’

‘Why didn’t she come to me? We could’ve been together.’

‘You had a job to do, and that was of the greatest importance to both of you. It would have been difficult without your loneliness. Besides, she’s doing an important job, too.’

‘If I’m deserving, you said, then I’ll see her. I’ll be with her?’

‘We’ll see what happens in Netherland first. You have to go back there. You have your own fate to deal with.’

‘My fate?’

‘As it should be,’ said Mega. ‘It’s in your hands, and you’ll decide it.’

Mega’s face seemed to be blurring. Jason felt that he was going to swoon, groping with one hand at the glass window, eyes closing heavily as his legs gave way.

When he awoke, he stirred himself uncomfortably on the hard floor. Groggily, he sat up and rubbed his stiff neck and shoulder. He was in his den again, likely alone since the lights were off and the room was dark, quite dark. It was dark. It was night, Jason realized. Night.

## CHAPTER 9

Jason faced the possibility of death much as he should have: symbolically enshrouded in darkness. The night was silent outside. There was no sign of life, only the bluish reflections from the snow on the street, its bare dirt being buried ever deeper in the quiet snowfall.

He alerted his senses to the darkness. There would be no lights, no noise, only darkness and quiet, the better to hear every sound possible. The weather was much too bad for an assailant to come; he knew that in some part of himself, but doubted it, in the fear for survival, in the other. What mattered most was not the threat, however, but his ability to respond to it.

He walked silently to the balcony window, wondering at the dexterity it would take to climb up the heavy round support poles to the deck and climb over the railing to attack him from his underside. He would be awake, he imagined, all of the night, but he would take every precaution. He looked down at the two delicately stacked vases, which would fall onto glass bowls should the door to the deck be slid, even slightly, to the side. *Every* precaution.

With every light extinguished, he traversed the house silently, stealthily, to every window for a look outside, in the bedroom perching to see through the small triangular window. He doubted he would see anyone outside, tramping through the deepening snow, but that wasn't the point, as he saw it. The point was preparing himself for any surprise, preparing his head for the gravity of his situation, and for his mind and body to click together, to interact with the instinct that might save his life. It was practice, survival training.

But it had only been dark a short while; it was quite a long, tiring while before the night would end. And then, even then, would he be safe? The mystery of this had to be solved; the root of it had to be discovered. He would be captive, pressured by fear, until the reason for it could be resolved.

The reason for it. What was the reason for anything? The hard, rasping voice riveted in Jason's mind. "Most victims are strangers..." the voice told him. "I'll kill you. ... I'll kill you."

The pistol felt good in his grip. With it, he could be a destroyer – of evil. Could it be that weapons were all used for good? He aimed and imagined that he fired. Suddenly a nagging fear stuck him. The sound of the firing would be so uncommonly loud and menacing that he could be unnerved ... from the strange and sudden violence of it. Would he panic and never get another shot off? He looked at the pistol with a frown. Maybe he should discharge it in here to get the feeling, get ready for it. But it would be so loud! So very loud. Still he had to be ready. Maybe outside, a walk in the snow would clear his senses, freshen him up, and he would fire at something in the snow. But it might be hard to defend himself out there in the winter cold. How cold it was! What would it prove?

It would prepare him. He did not want to be soft and defenseless because he hadn't felt the rigors of danger and seen fit to become self-reliant. He stuffed the pistol in his pants, being sure the safety was on, and slung the rifle over his shoulder. He pulled on a ski mask and his leather hat, looked through the window over the swirling snowscape and stepped outside.

The cold air in his nostrils invigorated his body. Streetlights, about a block in either direction, gave dim illumination to the drapery of snow. His pickup with the snow blade sat protected in the darkness of the shed to his left. The shed carried a white snowcap several inches thick. To his right, his Volkswagen sat under the opposite carport, an afterthought tacked onto the side of the house by the previous owner. Both vehicles were well serviced and should stand up well for him should he need them. He hoped and believed that he himself was as well serviced.

Carol might be surprised to see him; who could tell? But he thought he'd check her out, adjusting the pistol in his belt to afford himself a bit more comfort.

Mega had left him with a mystery and a challenge. He was as ready as he would be to deal with them. Mega said that Carol would tell him who she was. Maybe she didn't have to. She was seemingly some kind of reincarnation of Roci, and only their alien minds could tell him what that might be. He knew their powers. They had confused his mind with doubts that their visit had been real, all the while he was creating from the experiences and lessons he could remember of it, the inspiration from their

powerful brain locks with his own. They had tested him before and guided him to write a manuscript that they now intended to be successful. And they were testing him again, to see if he could discover where the true threat lay, and to overcome it. Should he do so, he believed firmly now that they had something else in store for him. But he couldn't think long about that; he had to think about the night, the long night.

His footsteps plodded on down the street, mussing through the fluffy snow.

“THIS IS A KRMS news update. The widespread manhunt for a mysterious bearded man who terrorized a Glenwood Springs restaurant, and may have been responsible for the death and serious injury of two Colorado state troopers, took another tragic turn late this afternoon. A police helicopter discovered the body of Chester Moss, 58, at his isolated house just four miles from the Highway 65 scene where one trooper, James Hagen of Bolton, was killed in the crash of his patrol car.

“Moss was an employee of the Tullos Ranch, described as a divorced loner, whose former wife and three children live in Denver. His body was found on the front steps of his small house near Tiplersville, victim of a single high caliber gunshot wound to the chest.”

After the report, Mega stood quietly looking over the New York skyline around him. His thoughts, and Al's, were no longer on handball, though they were attired to play. Al placed the ball gently on a basket of fruit.

“What's happened to him?” he asked Mega.

“He seems to be a casualty himself,” he replied without turning, becoming a victim, as they all are, of the environment. We're going to have to get some more research data in this area starting tomorrow.”

SANTOS clicked off the radio. Quite a notoriety he had developed, and it would require a change in vehicles again, another challenge to meet and conquer.

Snow was swirling all around. The last signpost on the twisting blacktop road had said: Netherland 34. The canyon walls that loomed above him



would soon be gone and he would be climbing steadily to reach the town and his anticipated encounter with Carol's friends. The highway was moderately busy with people trying to get home while the roads were still passable.

Carol had to be learning a lot from these despicable people she was with. What did he remember from the transmission? Sid Loughery grew up stealing hubcaps, had been in reform school twice and now kept himself solvent with drug deals. Danny Briggs was expelled from college after taking part in a rape. He skipped bail in Georgia and met Sid in a Denver bar. The deal they apparently closed there, with two other associates, was to bring ten ounces of cocaine to Netherland. Johnny Bannister was to meet them there with money collected for the occasion.

Barbara was billed as an "exotic dancer," mostly nude, of course. JoAnn, her roommate, waited tables and waited for the nerve and the opportunity to be on stage, too. They agreed to spend the weekend in Netherland, provided they could take along their new friend and boarder, Carol, who had delighted them by taking over the rent payment and by frequently preparing sumptuous meals that Barbara and JoAnn could only think about. Though they considered her a bit cold and peculiar at times, they seemed to admire her strength of purpose and appreciated the responsibilities she took for them.

That was basically the story Carol had given him, all that he needed to know really to see them for what they were – parasites and despoilers, without style and with too little virtue. It was gratifying to be their superior, truly so, a scintillating titillation to his senses sometimes when he thought about it. There would be few pleasing sensations on the icy moon of Saturn, or the modest station that provided transmission adjustments for several solar systems. And no matter where he would go later, there was little chance it could match the excitement and enjoyment of his work here. He might as well be home again. There was little challenge there either, but here was peace of mind.

He saw the flashing blue light first, then the cars piling up ahead of him. It was a road check and no doubt they were after him, he thought, as he swerved quickly off the road and doused his lights. Out he climbed, with the bag and box and walked past one car in the oncoming traffic. A white van, equipped with snow chains, hesitated in the road. Someone pulled the sliding door back and Santos stepped gingerly inside.

“Sit down,” said the beautiful dark-skinned woman. Her long black hair showered over the shoulders of her padded green jacket. Santos glanced at the motorcycle, upright in the back, and at the couch where she sat. The man at the wheel turned, handsome, square-jawed with short blond hair.

“I’m Alex,” he said. “This is Christie.”

“How did you know we were following you?” she asked him as he sat beside her.

“It goes with the job,” said Santos. “I also thought Mega would be getting concerned.”

“He wanted us to ask you if you want to do the jobs. We can replace you,” she offered.

“It’s enough,” said Santos, “that I’m losing my work. I don’t need interference. I’ve never failed on a project and I certainly won’t start now.”

“It appears to me you need a little help,” said Alex, moving slowly toward the flashing blue light, inching up in the short line of snow-clogged vehicles.

“I can take care of this crap,” snapped Santos. “This stuff doesn’t bother me.” He got up and reached for the door. She quickly touched his hand.

“No,” she said firmly. “It’s time to do what makes sense, Santos – perfect sense.”

He stared at her.

“Mega doesn’t want any more trouble. If you can do the jobs, very well, he’ll give them to you. But the distractions are over; the unnecessary violence is over.”

Santos looked hard at her, then at Alex, who looked back at him as if confirming the logic of it. There were only two vehicles ahead, where the state troopers were holding court. He had to do something quickly.

“I’ve been careless. It’s true,” said Santos evenly. “But I’m on schedule.”

“Yes,” she said, her hand still on his. “Mega wants you to finish if you want to.”

“Yes,” he replied. “It’s important for me to do that.”

“Climb under the tarp, behind the bike. The van is yours up the road. You’ll leave us at the Aspen Glen Guest Ranch. Here’s the number when you need to call us.”

Santos pulled the tarp over his head and lay in the darkness. He felt a little – what?– embarrassed at being taken care of like this. He could’ve gotten through alone, of course. These barbarians, none of them, were a match for his strength and prowess. He knew he was very nearly the best of the soldiers. How could they send him away – banish him, all for an accident?

He could hear Alex and the trooper. “What you got back there?” “My bike.” The flashlight played over the tarp. He had wanted to steal the trooper’s car, maybe take their pants. If he was going out, it would be with a big finish, something ... remarkable ... something fascinating. He would do his two jobs –and do them well. They were pulling away. And he would be remembered – unknown and mysterious maybe, but respected.

Soon he was in the driver’s seat. Alex and Christie stood outside with their backpacks, in the steady snow.

“If you need us, call,” said Alex. “We’ll be here until morning.”

“We have a jeep,” said Christie, “with medical supplies and whatever you might need.”

“Thank you, Equals,” said Santos. “I won’t need any more help. I didn’t need this.”

“Be smart,” said Alex.

“Be careful,” said Christie, “and carry our love.”

“Yes,” said Santos, with a hint of a smile. “Love. Thank you.” He pulled away, the chains on the tires tearing through the deepening snow.

THE COLD was beginning to gnaw deeply into Jason. His boots were buried in snow, his feet starting to feel the burning bite of chill. Nothing seemed unusual to his right eye that peered into the snowy pane. Carol and her slothful companions reading or otherwise occupied in the middle room. He could see part of the scene through the open kitchen door,

enough to see most of their bodies, including a portion of Barbara's squatting rump as she selected music for the stereo.

"I pulled in ta Nazareth!" called the music machine. "I was feelin' 'bout half-past dead. I just need to find a place, where I can lay my hea-a-ad!"

Jason's face was getting numb. No need to freeze my ass off, he thought. Everything was still cool on this end of the block. Maybe it was foolish to think these people had anything to do with the threat. Why, really, had he left his house unprotected. And if he wanted to talk to Carol, he could call her.

Inside, Sid sauntered back into the middle room from the front. He was talking to somebody – who cares? – and then somebody on the other side.

Jason reasoned to himself redundantly. He was getting very cold. There seemed to be no threat here. He could call Carol. And he needed to guard the home front. Four good reasons to split, he decided, and pulled away from the window to move steadily, easily back through the swirling snow, one cold foot after another, trampling through the fluffy, deadly white that was filling the world around him. Back to the house! He wanted to talk to Carol.

Inside, Sid had created a stir. He was holding Carol's parka in one hand, a torn wad of brown paper in the other.

"So where the hell is it?" asked Carol. "It's still in the fuckin' kitchen, right?"

"No," said Sid with a glinting eye. "I don't know what that shit is, but it ain't coke. You switched it, didn't you?"

"You found that in my parka? What the hell you doin' in my parka? That's what's suspicious to me."

"Lookin' for a cigarette. It don't matter how. Where the hell is my toot?"

Carol blew cigarette smoke disgustedly. "I wouldn't be dumb enough to...-

Sid's hand slapped the cigarette from her lips. His hand caught her flush in the cheek on his back swing. Carol struggled to get her senses, Barbara grabbing at her quickly, clutching to hold her. Sid's swinging hand again grazed her head but she grabbed it solidly with both hands and wrenched the fingers, simultaneously swinging her foot solidly into his groin. He groaned loudly and doubled up, slipping to the floor.

Carol was too much for Barbara, wrenching her around and flooring her with a short jab to the jaw just as Danny and JoAnn piled on top of her. She was now on the floor, buried under their churning, clutching bodies, her shirt torn, face punched, scratched, her arm wrenched. They overpowered her, noisily, roughly with malice and loud curses. She was helpless, listening to Sid moan and curse in a whisper, eyes closed, hearing them panting, smelling body odor mixed pungently with JoAnn's perfume. A hard hand pulled her hair back, painfully ... painfully ... and they slapped her again and again ...

JASON WAS ALERT, plodding forcefully through the snow, nearing the house, eyeing it carefully for a sign of movement. Nothing moved; nothing he could see. His hand felt for the pistol, cold steel force for violence, with no possible positive purpose. He hoped he wouldn't need to use it – No! – But strangely this whole affair, the demand it put on him, made him feel good, guardedly so but ... good ... a primitive fascination. But how long would it stay so, without changing into something else? Horror. Death. It could be fatal.

He fumbled with his keys at the door. Suddenly there was a click. His car door. Quickly he grasped the pistol, tearing back his fur coat as he slipped quietly up against the house – pistol ready!

The dark hulk of a body appeared.

“Don't move!”

“Oh-h-h!” Joni's wide eyes showed her fright. “Oh! Please, Jason, Don't shoot me!”

He kept the pistol pointed flush at her head.

“Jason ... Jason! I came back because I care about you. I'm your friend ... your friend.”

“Why are you here?” The pistol didn't waver.

“I have the answer ... to your problem.”

“You know who's threatening me? Who?”

“Not me, Jason. Not me! Please don’t point that at me ... please.”

He didn’t move the pistol. “Hand me your purse.”

She pulled it from over her shoulder and handed it to him. He pulled it away, holding the pistol aloft, warily, as he jerked it open and rumbled through the contents.

“Oh ... Jason. Don’t do this to me. It’s not me! Not me! There’s a pistol in there ... ”

Jason had it, a snub-nosed .22 caliber. “You thought you could do the job with this?”

“No!... No! I keep it for protection. That’s all. That’s all. I wouldn’t try to hurt you, Jason. I came back to help. Let me talk to you.”

“Talk.”

“Please. I’m cold. I couldn’t get in. I waited for you in the car.”

“Talk.”

“Oh ... Jason. Nobody is threatening you. It’s all in your mind. I read your manuscript. I know all the things you’re trying to imagine to get your story told, the violence, the pain. I’m a writer too. I understand. The phone calls didn’t happen. You’re fighting with yourself. You’re creating this strife inside yourself, Jason, too trapped in your imagination. There’s no threat, Jason. It’s in your mind.”

“I don’t imagine phone calls.”

“Jason ... It just doesn’t make sense. This is what’s happening to the character in your book ... your main character. Isn’t that right? This is a part of the story you’re writing, and you’ve taken it on as the real thing.”

“It’s just a fuckin’ story. Why are you here?”

“I knew you wouldn’t let me stay. Okay. You didn’t. But I had to come back to prove to you that there wasn’t a threat. Nobody is here to kill you. I care about you because you’re sensitive and you care about people and you’re tormented. But you need my help. You’re too lonely and too pulled inside yourself. You’ve got to open yourself to me and let me help you if I can. I can be your companion, your friend, if you want me.”

“I don’t imagine telephone calls.”

She stood there helplessly, her face red, teeth beginning to chatter.

“Get inside,” he said brusquely, motioning her in and then realizing that he hadn’t unlocked the door. When he did, she slipped inside in front of him. He followed her, flipping on the light, then deciding to flip it off again.

“In the den,” he said roughly. “I’m behind you.”

She felt her way into the den.

“Sit on the couch,” he said, walking to the corner of the room to turn on a dim lamplight. She sat shivering, looking helpless and lost on the couch with her wide innocent eyes. He pushed the pistol into his pants and her .22 in his pocket, throwing the purse on the couch beside her.

“I’ll build you a fire. Don’t move from there.”

“Oh ... thank you. I’m freezing,” she said. He didn’t reply. The rifle was still behind the drapery. She might remember it. He walked casually over to the window, brushed back the curtain with one hand and picked up the weapon. Her eyes followed him.

“Oh ... Jason.” She sounded disappointed, her body still shivering.

“Somebody’s trying to kill me. I guess you’re the only suspect I’ve got.”

She didn’t reply, just looking down, tiredly, still trembling from the cold. Jason propped the rifle by the fireplace next to him and pulled some kindling from the wood box. She couldn’t really care enough about him to come back like this and help. He couldn’t see that. She was after something – for sure. She has to be watched. Jason worked on the fire, snapping a splintered shaft of kindling, and she sat quietly, seemingly confused.

He didn’t care whether she felt anything for him or not – unusual for him, he realized. Though he was as lonely as he had ever been in one sense, he was stronger alone. He had developed a full share of self-reliance for the first time. But his final step was this – this awful flirtation with danger, death. This was his testing ground. Administered unto by these alien masters of his mind and body. There was no way to resist their ploy, for they knew him too well. They had for a long time. They could move him to purpose and fulfillment. His manuscript had been that. And now he

seemed to be stagnating and they were here to give him a new challenge. Self-reliance – a test of mind and body – or, he guessed, death.

The power was there only when it had been used, tested. He remembered that from a long-ago lesson, or inspiration or ... has it been just a thought? Jason fired the paper with a match.



## CHAPTER 10

The ropes burned Carol's ankles and her leg cramped. The fat strip of tape crushed into her jaw and lips. And she listened.

"Well it's got to be that son-of-a-bitch up the street," said Danny. "That's the only person she's met up with since we've been here."

"Bannister knows that guy. Let's call him up," said JoAnn.

"Yeah! Call him up," said Danny. Sid picked up the phone.

Carol was squirming in the corner, a bluish bruise on her eyebrow and a red-streaked scratch on her cheek from Sid's ring.

"Be still, bitch!" said Barbara.

"We'll make this little bitch talk," said Danny. "Fuckin' with my money!"

"Be quiet!" said Sid. "Johnny! You better come on down here. This gal's been stayin' with us, Carol, she's done ripped off the coke, man, the whole goddamn thing. She's bound to be in with that Jason guy."

"How the hell did she get her hands on it!"

"Swear to God, I don't know," said Sid. "I didn't think she knew where it was. But I found the empty package in her coat pocket. I know damn well she took it. Ain't nobody else here would do it. She's the only one wasn't in on it, for a little sumpin'."

"She been up there to Jason's?" asked Johnny.

"Damn right! And that's the only place she's been except the grocery store."

"Well that son-of-a-bitch," said Johnny. "What'd they do, switch it out on you, or what?"

“Swapped it out for some other nothin’ shit – I don’t know – powder of some kind and put it in the very same kind of package, brown paper and string and everything.”

“Ain’t that some shit?” said Johnny. “That dude’s gonna be here in a half-hour or so if the weather don’t slow him down. We got to have it by then. He won’t be nobody to mess with, so they say. ”

“That fuckin’ arrogant ass, Jaa-a-ason, her buddy!” Sid fumed. “You better get over here. We’re gonna be seeing what this gal’s got to say.”

Sid walked over to the mattress, looking into Carol’s tormented eyes. His own turned to anger – all that money and he was in financial trouble already. She had always thought she was better than him, beautiful, smarter. Now who’s smart? He ripped the tape off her mouth.

“Where the hell’s the coke?” demanded Danny.

“You better spill your guts,” said JoAnn.

“Let me handle this!” Sid hollered, his eyes focusing grimly on her face. “You’d better tell it all right now, or you’re gonna be pretty sorry,” he said with calm menace.

‘I wouldn’t be stupid enough to leave the empty bag in my pocket,’ she said evenly. “Somebody came in here and got it, and stuffed the paper in my pocket.”

“Don’t make sense,” said Sid, swinging with a flourish to slap her face back hard. Another cut welled up on her cheek from his ring. She didn’t quaver.

“Jason’s got the coke,” said Sid, a little more softly, and with assurance. “We’re gonna go up there and kill him. And ... your friend that you set us up with, to buy the coke, the one who’s coming here? We’re gonna kill him, too. We’ve got guns...and we can do it. But if you talk up a little bit, we’ll take everything you got and just leave you here. That ain’t so bad for you. Not as bad as a bullet in the brain.”

“If I had wanted it, I would’ve taken it and gone. Why the hell would I hang around here?”

“The goddamn weather,” said Barbara, “or she was waitin’ for this dude to pick her up tonight. Yeah! That’s probably it! They’re all in it. Ain’t it obvious?”

“What the hell were those phone calls for?” asked Sid, almost to himself. “Hell! It must’ve been a code of some kind.” He grabbed her shirt in his fist, pulled her up to his face, shaking her like a rag doll, tearing open her shirt to show a large portion of her small breasts to the menacing quartet. “How come you had me make them threatening calls to Jason? How fuckin’ come?”

“Maybe you ought to give JoAnn and me a few minutes alone with her,” Barbara suggested.

“Hell, naw,” said Danny. “We all got a stake in this thing.” He squatted beside her helpless body, blowing off the ash of his cigarette, leaning forward and pulling back her shirt.

“Aw, naw,” said JoAnn.

“Hell, yeah!” said Barbara. “We got to get some answers ‘fore her folks get the best of us.”

Danny sneered and pursed his lips as his cigarette burned acridly into her breast. She tried to scream, but Barbara’s bony fingers crushed her mouth; her legs were pinioned. The pain seared through her body and exploded somewhere in her head.

THE FLAMING hearth felt good to both Joni and Jason. It cast the den in a warm, reddish glow, with spears of light leaping in darting jerks over the dark walls.

He hadn’t talked to her. He seemed to himself incapable of decision.

She spoke softly. “What can I do to convince you? What can I say, or do, to let you know that I’m just caring about you?”

He didn’t reply.

“I’m not telling you these things to hurt you. I just know that you need some companionship ... and a break from your writing for a while. You need to get your mind clear, get back into a relationship with society. Maybe you’re trying too hard.”

“How can you not believe the calls are real?”

“By your nature. I understand more of it than you think from what you’re writing. I can see the turmoil inside you, the great sense of loss for Roci, the dilemma in your mind that you’re putting on paper. You just need a break, Jason. That’s all you need.”

“Maybe we should take a trip?”

“I’d like that.”

“Yes,” said Jason. “It would be nice. Instead, we have work to do. I have a threat to contend with. You have a story.”

“I didn’t come back for a story.”

He looked dubious. “But you might just happen to write one.”

“Okay,” she conceded. “I will. But I do care about you. I’m not callous to you ... Can I tell you something?”

“Please do.”

“I had, like ... a crush ... on you when I read your manuscript. I did. I said to myself. That’s silly as hell. I read it again, and forced myself to look at it objectively. Maybe I didn’t understand it like I should have. That’s why you put me off about it so bad before. But ... it impressed me.”

“My book deals with types of thinking,” said Jason. “I think you had it right the first time.”

“What?”

“Always work on the positive side. The optimistic. The confident. The determined. The loving – not the hating. All shades of it.”

“Jason, you’re not the only one obsessed with good and evil. We all are. But you’ve got to look at the reality of it. There’s always going to be shades of both everywhere.”

“Of course,” he said tiredly.

“But you’re not experiencing anything up here in this place. You’ve just run away from everything. You’re not experiencing any of it, so you don’t have anything to write about.”

*Jim Cleveland*

Jason chuckled and shook his head. "There's a lot of fuel in a newspaper, or a book or an album."

"But what's reality?"

"I'm tired as shit of talking about what's reality with you. If you don't believe the calls were real, I think you're going to have to stand back, because I do."

"I never heard the phone ring."

"You were in the shower once, and probably asleep the other time, and have it set for the softest possible ring anyway."

"Isn't it strange that you never got a call when I was around?"

"I think your interest in the whole thing is strange – damned strange!"

"I'm a journalist Jason! And ... I've told you, I wanted to be friends with you. I like you. I liked your writing. And you've just about treated me like shit sometimes. I've never had anybody stick a gun in my face. Never!"

"You're involved in something that might be pretty dangerous. You should've thought about that."

"I don't have any evidence that your life is in danger. You're just in a mental state. I can tell – for God's sake – in what you're writing, and the way you act."

"How would you act if your life was threatened? You might get in a situation where you'd stick a gun in somebody else's face too."

"You're paranoid. You're probably smoking too much dope. And your head is all locked into this book. You said yourself, more than once, that no one should have any interest in killing you."

"Have you ever had any mental illness in your family?" he asked her.

"I beg your pardon."

"I want to know how familiar you are with it."

"Well ... yes. I had an uncle once ..." She didn't tell him about her cousin.

“He must’ve imagined things, imagined being threatened. That’s why you’ve got this silly motion. You’re like everybody else. You’re overly familiar with what you’re familiar with, and dumb to a fault about things which haven’t affected you directly.”

“What?”

“Your mind is tilted,” said Jason. “But don’t worry about it.” He laughed. “Everybody is tilted one way or another.”

CAROL LAY huddled in her pain, the cigarette burns and bruises rendering her mind a wasteland of non-thought, her shirt ripped open, her jeans pulled down over her ankles, her head aching from the bruises and welts of their blows. Through the hurt, she tried to think ... tried. Santos will soon be here. And walking into a trap.

“All right,” said Sid. “We don’t need no more information anyway. So here’s what we gonna do, one more time. Danny. You and Johnny goin’ up to Jason’s. You’re gonna get him to the door, Johnny, and Danny, you gonna be waitin’ to get a shot with the rifle. All right. You gonna have the pistol, Johnny, and you gonna keep that door open. Whatever you do. Keep the door open. If you don’t get him with your shot, Danny, you can keep that door open and get the drop on him with the pistol. All right?”

“Now, you may have to turn that place upside down, but do it! And get back down here as quick as you can and keep a watch out for the guy’s car, or whatever he’s drivin’.”

“Got it covered,” said Danny.

“Now we’re gonna stay here and when that guy shows up, we gonna be ready for him. Barbara’s still got the .22 and if we have to, we can get up behind him and off him with that. All right. We gonna do this smooth, get all the money and shit we can find and get our ass outta here -- fast!” he turned to Barbara and JoAnn. “Ya’ll get all the stuff ready. Packed up and in the van – now. We’re gonna be ready to take off.”

“What you gonna do with her?” asked Barbara.

“Put ‘er in the back room ‘til we get this shit settled,” said Sid.

“They ain’t no heat back there,” said JoAnn.

“That don’t make a shit,” said Sid. “Drag her ass back there.”

“Yeah, let me do it,” said Johnny, grabbing for her breasts, rubbing her with his rough hands and picking her up under his arm, like a sack of flour. “Come on. Let’s go get cooled off awhile.”

“Goddamn! You better throw a blanket over her or sumpin’,” said JoAnn. “Pull her pants up. It’s cold as hell back there.”

“Yeah,” said Johnny, pushing his way through the kitchen with his burden. He dropped her roughly to the floor and squatted to turn her over and fondle her breast again. She gripped her eyes closed. “You may get the damnedest dickin’ you ever imagined, you little smart ass,” he whispered, laughing to himself. He looked anxiously behind him, unzipped his pants and pulled out his penis, fondling it, pulling it back, squatting again at her face to hold it there, leering eyes, pursed lips. He rubbed it against her nose, her closed eyes; zipped his pants and left her in the cold. He thought better of her freezing and went into the bedroom to get a blanket. He came back to the huddled mass in the darkness, wedged into a corner. He was in command here; at least they were. They could do what they wanted with her. A chill of anticipation welled up inside his throat and his penis trembled. He threw the blanket onto her and walked out without a word.

The women were packing clothes. Sid was fondling his switchblade. A large blade flicked up in front of him.

“When we gonna fuck her?” whispered Johnny.

Danny had overheard. “Yeah. What you say?”

“We’ll have to take her with us, for insurance,” said Sid. “We’ll wait till we drop the girls off. We’ll get them back to Denver and put ‘em out.”

“Yeah!” said Danny.

“I’m first in line though,” said Sid. “That woman done busted my nuts.”

“That’s fair enough,” said Johnny. “Let’s flip for seconds.”

THEY SAT by the fire without a word. Jason was in no mood for philosophy or her destructive doubts. It was folly to think that he imagined something in his mind that he wished would go away. It was indeed the aliens who would test him, Mega told him, and he had to prevail over it. Mega told him Joni was human, “one of you,” and that she was here to record. So be it. He guessed she wasn’t here to kill him after all. Maybe, maybe she was supposed to be here. All right. But he had to be ready. And he had to watch her.

Why couldn’t he see, she thought, the fantasies in his mind? My God, the ones he put on paper were enough. What other imagination ... conjecture would be there? If she would make love to him, perhaps it would unlock the door. Of course she would do it. He was attractive – and sensitive. He would be all right, and she could mark it down as an achievement and a pleasure. And the story, by innuendo, would be all the more provocative. It was already intriguing enough, a writer who actually believed in his alien characters, especially his lover, and who tormented himself coming to grips with his own imagination for violence.

“Jason ... I don’t want you to be lonely. I don’t.”

He didn’t reply, but captured her in his steady gaze.

“If I can comfort you, I will,” she said softly. Within seconds she realized she wasn’t getting anywhere. She was still leaving it for him to ask. “Can I sit by you?” She got up.

Jason clicked back the revolver hammer, freezing her on her feet.

“You think I’m a fanatic. You show up with a gun in your purse. Now you’re acting suspicious.”

She was dumbstruck, caught without words, staring at him in bewilderment. Finally, she broke into a kind of laughing smile, raising her face and arms to the heavens in exasperated merriment.

“I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it got this complicated,” she said laughing. “All I wanted to do was ...” Her confused eyes still looked into space. Her round glasses gave her a studiously cute look. She sat down, seemingly locked into a bemused solitude, for reasons she couldn’t put into words.

He realized, looking at her much deeper than he had before, that she was a person incapable of killing anyone. It was the profoundest of stupidities to



think she could. He had recognized her goodness before, really, but somehow hadn't accepted it fully, choosing instead to react to the false stimuli of ... all that was negative, bad, ignorant, uncertain in his mind. Really, he had learned enough over the years to analyze people. It was time that he really did. It was all right for him to judge. He needed to. All he had to do was look, see her or anyone with all of his senses to see all of theirs. Look in their eyes, if he could find them. Know what they cared about.

Why had he subjected her – hurt her – with his ignorance? He looked at her face, lowered in thought, and knew her innocence, and the mental cruelty he had inflicted on her. He owed her. He owed her his affection.

Carol's companions. They had to be the ones. He could sense the danger in them. And Johnny Bannister. He could see them. He only had to look. He felt very sure that they were the threat, even brought to him – by Carol!

Joni sighed and got up without a word. She began to unbutton her blouse. My God, what was she doing? Her white bra was plainly constructed. Now she was unbuttoning the sleeves.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm no threat to you Jason. This is the only way I know to make you know that.”

“It's not necessary.” She was pulling off the blouse.

“Everything I say makes it worse.”

“I know you're ... my friend,” said Jason. “I'm sorry I've treated you as rough as I have. You've shown me your sincerity.”

She looked at him with a furrowed brow, sliding her bra around and unhooking it, letting it fall away. Her bare breasts sent a tinge of desire through his lonely body. She sat back on the couch to take off her shoes.

“We have to wait,” said Jason. “It has to be later.” He laid the pistol on the wood box.

“No,” she said gently. “You have to find peace with yourself. That's where you have to look.”

“You don’t understand what I have to do.”

“You have to free yourself. Surrender your loneliness. I’ll help you. I’ve always been strong.”

“I have to be strong,” said Jason. “There’s evil nearby. I’m sensing it more. There’s danger ... for both of us.” She was standing again, barefoot, long black hair flowing over her naked breasts, riveting a sinking sensation in his body, which almost shuddered in the loneliness he had known for so long. She unsnapped her jeans. A new chill fluttered his insides.

“Why don’t you believe me?” he asked evenly. “Why are you doing this?”

She pulled down her jeans, tiny silk panties hanging askew as she struggled with the tight denim, showing a modest peek of black hair.

He could ... say no more.

She lay down naked on the rug, her firm body flattered by the brown flickering light of the fire. He felt the desire well up inside him and a hardness that tightened his pants, the choked-back desire for a deeper breath of air or else ... a surge of passion.

“You can see I can’t hurt you now,” she said calmly. “I’m open ... and free with you.” She lay there, confounding his mind, swelling his body with indecision. He remembered that Carol had fooled him, swept him away. It was different now. But Joni hadn’t realized that he no longer doubted her, that he was sorry for his follies, saw her as ... beautiful. Maybe this was a test. Maybe he had a challenge now that he had to meet – to love her as he needed to do, to quell his loneliness, give of himself as he had never seemed able to do, to give her the love she richly deserved. Maybe the other threat was over now that he had stood up to it. Had that been the key? His will? But if they caused him trouble now – simple – he would fight.

Jason pulled her pistol from his pocket and she watched as he picked up her purse and put it inside. He kneeled beside her body that was beautiful in his eyes.

“Joni,” he whispered. “I don’t know a lot about giving or receiving. But you’re very beautiful, and I’ve been blind.”

His eyes melted into darkness as she reached up to meet his anxious embrace. Maybe he should learn about life before dealing with death.

*Jim Cleveland*

Though he felt a clear danger, it only swelled the passion inside him. Their lips clasped in the warm breath of their bodies. It wouldn't be safe here by the fire. He picked her up easily, turned and carried her up the stairs.

## CHAPTER 11

Johnny and Danny huffed up the snow-covered street, past the vacant, battened-down houses of summertime dwellers, toward the A-frame.

“Now! ... now listen,” Johnny reasoned. “I ain’t goin’ up to that door.”

“What the hell else we gonna do?”

“Listen ... you give me a few minutes to get around back ... five minutes ... then you ring the doorbell and take some cover. We’ll have him front and back. One of us bound to get a shot at him.”

“Hell naw,” Danny objected. “We’ll be shootin’ our own selves. We got to stick together. You ring the doorbell and we’ll both set up and ambush him.”

“We’ll have to get him or he’ll be locked in,” said Johnny.

“If he comes to the door, I’ll get him,” said Danny. “Just don’t shoot ‘less you get a good shot.” He hitched at the strap on the .30 caliber, bottom side up on his shoulder.

“Here comes a car!”

They scurried to hide as two bright lights loomed out of the night, emerging, finally as a white van, its tires grinding through the snow.

“That’s ‘at fella! Reckon we oughta not go back?”

“Naw,” said Danny. “Sid said they’d handle it. Let’s go get this other fucker.”

THE SOUND of the vehicle interrupted Jason’s thoughts. He slipped out of the bed, still naked from their rapid but satisfying lovemaking. He reached the window in time to see a white van sloughing down the street. Where could it be going except to the house with Carol and her friends? Maybe it carried his intended assassin.

*Jim Cleveland*

He began to shiver in the cold air. He slipped back to the floor by the bed to get his pants. She seemed to be asleep, but he could no longer enjoy their peaceful slumber. If she were awake, she still wouldn't understand, but he himself knew there was danger and that's all that mattered. He knew by his newly found powers of observance that she wasn't part of it; he believed the house down the street was the source of it all. He knew Johnny Bannister and he had met the others, ... barely, but enough to know the kind of people they were. He sensed it, and that was part of the realization. But it perplexed him that Carol would be part of it.

Fully dressed, he slipped quietly down the stairs, with only a glance at Joni's huddled form in the bed. Their passion had been intense and satisfying to him and, he felt with pleasure, to her as well. He took the pistol from the wood box, affixed the safety and stuffed it into his pants. He picked up the rifle and walked to the front window for a look. The outside light was on, so he flipped it off, thinking to himself that the action would be noticed by someone outside, if indeed someone could be outside watching the house in such weather as this. It had almost stopped snowing; only a few flurries swirled, barely seen in the streetlights against the dark sky. There was no one in the street. He walked to the glass door leading to his deck, looking at the undisturbed drapery of snow.

He whirled around at the sound. She was coming down the stairs, wrapped in a blanket, barefooted, stepping quietly down into the dark den.

"What are you doing?" She asked him as if she genuinely wondered, genuinely cared.

He pondered before answering. "The threats are real, Joni. My imagination isn't as vivid as you think it is. Sometimes I wish it were." He spoke softly; wanting to reason with her, wanting her to understand, though he knew he couldn't adequately explain.

"Why don't you come back to Denver with me for a few days. You can help me write the story about you. Okay?"

He knew he couldn't think ahead to that. "I care about you Joni. I want you to believe that. But I can't think beyond tonight right now. Maybe tomorrow. We'll decide."

“Are you afraid of something ... outside?”

“I’d like to think I’m not afraid.”

“But aren’t you ... really?” She pulled the blanket around her tightly and sat down on the sofa. She began pulling on a boot.

“Maybe.”

“Like the characters you write about.” She pulled on the other boot.

“I keep my fictional characters separated from reality. My life is orderly. It’s arranged as well as it’s ever been. That may be part of my problem – but an overactive imagination certainly isn’t.”

“Then isn’t it strange that your character is facing the very same thing you’re faced with – right now – wondering who’s threatening him and why?”

“The circumstances are all different. I told you it’s just a story, and a cold one. I don’t feel part of it.”

“But it’s basically the same, isn’t it? The circumstances are different, but the issues are the same.”

“It’s a common theme.”

“Not for you. You’re trying to write it to be anything but common, and you’re struggling with it.”

“Through *lack* of imagination. Not *too much* imagination.”

“I wouldn’t underestimate the power of imagination. You imagine that someone is outside, waiting for you, even in this snowstorm. Your imagination tells you someone is outside when it’s far from likely.”

“I’d like to explain some things to you,” Jason started, “some things you don’t know.” He wondered if it was possible, probably not, but she was listening, naked and wrapped in a blanket, with her boots on, waiting and listening. He could never convince her that extraterrestrials were involved, and she would, even more, blame it all on his wild imagination. Wouldn’t it be amazing if it were indeed all imagined? That would be as amazing as the truth of it all. He guessed he would explain it as best he could. What else could he do?

“So listen, then,” he started.

SANTOS SHUT OFF the van's engine and doused the lights. He was glad he had stopped to call Alex and Christie on the edge of town. Medical attention might well be needed. He was in no mood for compromise and he might likely develop a real aversion to these characters that he and Carol would soon put out of the dope business.

He held the magnum for a few seconds, then tucked it under the seat. It would be a greater challenge without it, and Carol and he would, of course, be capable. Could one imagine, he thought with a wry smile, these reprobates trying to sell him worthless powder for that kind of money? He sat calmly in the dark, slipping the gold earrings through his pierced ears. In a moment, he knocked on the door.

The dark-haired woman opened it. "Hey ... you must be Carol's friend." Her eyes told Santos that something was wrong, very much wrong.

"Yeah. That's right."

"Come on in." Santos walked inside to meet the others – Sid ... JoAnn. He saw it in their eyes.

Sid was quick to explain without his asking. "Carol and Danny went over to a friend's house. They oughta be back any minute. " He was anxious. "Come on back to the kitchen. We'll take a look at this stuff."

"Hey, them's nice earrings," said Barbara.

He only glared at her. "Bad weather to be out," said Santos, following Sid to the kitchen.

"Yeah. They're not far. Just up the street a way. They oughta be back any time. You can be tryin' this stuff if you want to."

Santos eyed the table with the coal oil lamp and brown package. Very convenient, he thought, noticing one of the women – Barbara was her name – fumbling with something under her jacket. They had a perfect set-up, a perfectly nervous set-up. Dumb asses! Santos sat in the chair. The women were both behind him, on either side but behind, for the advantage. They were welcome to it.

"So is this good stuff? If you got me all this way for nothing," said Santos evenly, "I think I'll stomp your ass."

Sid was visibly unnerved at Santos' surprising threat. It put an edge on the women too, Santos noticed through the corners of his eyes.

Sid, pulling back his long, oily hair, tried to laugh.

"Naw! Naw! It's good. Just get on in here and try it out." His switchblade flicked open. Santos steeled himself for a reply, but Sid only took the package and cut the string. JoAnn gripped the small pistol tighter under her coat. Barbara unconsciously shifted the tire tool under her jacket.

"Go ahead," said Sid, easing over to his seat, the knife still open. "Get into that plastic there 'n we'll do a little toot. There's a spoon right there ... there on the table." Santos saw Sid's eyes shift anxiously to JoAnn, who moved forward, pulling her hand from the coat. Santos' knee tipped over the table, the oil lamp went crashing. Flames swooped up and Sid was screaming, his pants on fire.

Santos wrenched the .22 from a bedazzled JoAnn and sent a hard blow to her stomach, then quickly shoved her into the wall. The tire tool thudded into Santos' forearm, painfully. He winced, but swung a hard blow to Barbara's jaw. She fell backwards. Sid's wailing filled the room; he had almost smothered out the flames, but the table and floor were ablaze.

Santos rapidly grabbed a quilt from the sofa and whipped it over the flames, smothering them down. He grabbed a sofa pillow and began furiously beating out the remaining fire on the overturned table.

Barbara tried to get up, coughing, dazed. The room had filled with choking, eye-watering smoke. Santos' fist, flush in the face, sent her crashing against the wall again, blood splattering from her nose. Sid was crawling toward the door, his leg burned black and smoking. Santos' swift kick in the stomach crumpled him.

Santos walked evenly into the bedroom, came back quickly, dragging a bedspread toward another pool of flames that was threatening to flicker up the wall. He smothered it into smoke with the spread, eyes wary to his fallen protagonists, and, with the flames under control, pulled out the .22.

The first worry now was Carol. JoAnn was trying to get up on one knee. Santos walked swiftly to her and jerked her head up by her long brown hair. "Where is Carol?" he asked calmly.

She could only moan, eyes clenched.



“Answer the question,” said Santos, “or I’ll send you home with no teeth.”

“Oh-h-h!” groaned JoAnn, still queasy from his blow to her stomach. “In the other room. Sorry ... we’re sorry.” Santos shoved her to the floor and was off.

He kneeled beside Carol in the dark back room, feeling her tiny body shivering under the thin spread, pulling free the harsh gag on her mouth.

“Carol,” he whispered softly to her, feeling the cold bare skin of her legs and breast through the spread. She was shivering uncontrollably, unable to speak, her face bruised and blood-streaked. The tears welled inside Santos, of pain and rage. They ran down his taut, reddened cheek as he held her to him with all his might, feeling her suffering cold, smothering it in the heat of his energy vibrations. They radiated through him and warmed her and he held her firmly until the shivering slowed, long minutes, it seemed, until cold’s grip loosened to occasional trembles, erratic vibrations that lost their way, and finally succumbed to his inhuman energy-heat.

“Carol,” he whispered tenderly. “Carol.” The light behind him turned suddenly to darkness as the door slammed. He heard the lock turning. Without a word, Santos pulled himself free from Carol’s grasp. She was conscious, sitting up in the darkness. He walked to the door and, with a swift kick, shattered the midsection into a mass of splintered boards; Sid was there, wide-eyed, with the knife. Santos’ forearm tore a larger opening through the door and he pushed his way inside to confront his harried protagonist, frightened, knife poised in the smoky ruins of the room. JoAnn was huddled with Barbara, her face bloodied, in the corner.

Santos again pulled the .22 from his pocket without a word and aimed it at Sid’s head, watching his excitement turn to hopelessness. He cocked the hammer. Sid backed up. Suddenly his hands were up, but still holding the knife.

“Don’t shoot! Okay, don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” He was very much afraid now, still backing up. Santos moved toward him steadily, the pistol erect, backing him into the wall. He jammed the barrel to his neck, choking him into a gasp, pushing him against the wall, gripping his wrist hard with the other hand until the knife hit the floor. Sid was panicked. Santos jammed the pistol harder into his wind-passage, tearing the skin, listening to him cough and gasp for breath, struggle in wide-eyed vain.

“I’m not sure you deserve another breath,” said Santos calmly. Sid’s face was turning a desperate red. He pulled away the pistol suddenly, grabbed Sid by the hair and hurled him across the room, sending him crashing hard into the refrigerator.

Carol leaned into the doorway, weak, holding to the facing and surveying the wreckage. Santos walked past her to the bedroom again, past Sid who seemed unable to get up this time. In seconds he returned with a shabby white pillow, thrust it to Sid.

“Here ... hold this. Right there.” Santos shoved it against Sid’s head. “Hold it there!” Sid’s fingers grasped the pillow over his head, squirming. Lying huddled against the refrigerator.

“Santos. It’s all right. Let’s go.” Carol called to him from the doorway. He cocked the hammer.

“Don’t! What are you doing?” she called to him.

“Killing him. Making a judgment.”

“You can’t do that. No! You can’t”

“It’s easy,” he said.

“No! It’s barbaric! You can’t react like this. It’s insane.”

“Aren’t they?”

“We’re not! You can’t do it. It’s not right.”

“Judgments have to be made here Carol, right or wrong.”

“No...”

“I’m part of Earth now, too,” he said to her, as if realizing it for the first time, seeing her worry, then turning to the trembling mass huddled and whimpering under the fat pillow, the one who had tortured her body and would do the same to any of their brothers or sisters.

“I’ve decided to stay here,” said Santos, “so it’s all right.” The pistol exploded in his hand and Barbara screamed. JoAnn began a loud wailing.

He pulled the barrel from the smoking, searing hole in the pillow and watched Sid's legs stretch out stiffly and fall limp. Carol's hands buried her face; she slumped to the floor.

He walked over to JoAnn first, watching her screwed-up face wailing in frightened anguish. He grabbed her by the hair again. Barbara was quiet, scared. "Be quiet," he said firmly to them. "You just fucked with the wrong guy, that's all," he left her, whimpering, to go to Carol, who was crying softly. She was limp in his embrace.

"Why?" she cried. "Why? Why did you do it?" Not a thought, he noticed with furrowed brow. Not a thought of her own abused body. She grieved for the dead one. She was stunned that he would ever be this cold and uncaring.

He held her, crumpled in tears, close to him on the floor, feeling her body tremble in his embrace, glaring quietly at the frightened women across the smoky room, huddled together against the other wall, daring not move. Neither would he; neither would he think. He only wanted to comfort her.

THE NOISE Jason heard down the street could have been a shot. It could have been. But it was faint. He looked through the window in his darkened foyer, bundled in his fur coat, ready to head down the street with another such sound. His story was finished, but she hadn't replied. He almost hated to hear her reaction.

Joni only got up with a sigh, pulling the blanket firmly around her nakedness. "That's really..." she nodded, hesitating, "really a hard story to believe. First, you have to believe in aliens being here, then ... it goes on from there."

Jason didn't reply. "I thought I'd be wasting my breath but I didn't have anything else to do."

"And you're still hearing things."

"I heard something."

"So did I. But ... what do you think it was?"

"Maybe a moose farted."

Joni looked at him in bemusement, suddenly bursting into laughter. “Jason ... Jason ... Jason. I came down here to show you something. Watch.” She was up from the sofa and came walking past him to the front door. She had the handle, jerked it, and before he could respond, she was walking outside, into the snow, the blanket wrapped about her nude body, her boots crunching through the snow.

Outside! Jason sensed a clear danger somewhere inside him. “Get back in here!” There she stood, whirling around in circles in the snow, smiling broadly at him.

“Come on out Jason! Let’s make a snowman.”

He gripped the rifle. What could he do? It had to be quick. She was laughing at him, outside in the snow-covered street, laughing at his fear. He stood dumbfounded, at the side of the doorway, staring at her folly, her amused folly. He had to get her back! He burst outside before he could think more about it, crunching through the snow toward her stooped body. She was making a snowball, lifting her hand to hurl it at him when the rifle shot split through the night.

As he reached her, she fell hard against him. His rifle dropped to the ground. He was dragging her, unconsciously, when the next shot rang his ears, tearing his arm loose, burning through his skin, and sending them sprawling into the cold snow. He tried to move, feeling the aching pain shoot through his arm, paralyzing it, numbing vibrations pouring up into his shoulder and neck.

He thought better of moving, shifting slightly to lie, painfully, half-buried in a snowdrift, helplessly open to the gun, only a few agonizing steps from his front door, a few steps from the rifle. If he moved, he felt, they would kill him. He would be still. He listened in vain for a sound.

Maybe she was dead. Pain stabbed through his arm. Maybe it was all over. His heart sank. They would both die.

“All right, don’t move!” The voice called out to break the silence.

“Don’t move a fuckin’ muscle!” It was another voice.

“Go on and take a look,” hollered the first voice. “If anything moves, I got it!”

Johnny kept his aim at the two bulks half-buried in the snow. He eased forward, quietly, through the deep fluff. If one of them was alive, he'd shoot him dead. And Danny had them covered. He eased steadily on, rifle ready. And if either of them was alive, they'd be shivering like hell in that snow. He walked on, eyes searching for a movement, ever so slight in the darkness.

As he moved closer, he could see her bare leg. My God, she ... Hell, she don't have no clothes on, Johnny realized, just half-wrapped in a blanket, bloody now. No movement from the other, that bastard Jason, snow swirls hanging on his beard, mouth open. Dead, he reckoned. His face was contorted. And the woman was – fuck! – naked except for the blanket. He reached his rifle barrel to her body and flipped over the blanket to stare at her nakedness, ogling her breasts, her bloodied body.

A rustle. He jerked around – too late! -- to see Jason's arm lift up out of the snow, to hear the explosion and feel a powerful pressure blast through his forehead; his eyes watched his lifeblood spurting before they rolled away.

A rifle shot tore into the snow beside him as Johnny's body fell. Jason's pistol bullets rang into the night, firing once, twice, three times into the darkness, clutching at her body clumsily and firing again. He dragged her toward the carport, between the car and house as another rifle shot ripped into his wall with a loud thud.

They were trapped in the carport now, beside his car. He panted wildly to get his breath. Was she alive? He desperately clutched her body to him, a throbbing, numbing pain coursing through his arm, but he still held the pistol in it, shakily, trembling. He fumbled through the blanket to find her wound.

From the angle of the last shot, they were safe – if only for a moment. The blood rolled out from her shoulder wound, luckily no lower. She was breathing hard, whimpering, face scrunched in pain. He could feel her rapid heartbeat. She might be in shock, bleeding, soon to be freezing out here. He wrapped her as best he could in the blanket, feeling the blood rolling down his own wrist and the hand that gripped the pistol.

He had to think fast again. Who had he killed? It looked like Johnny Bannister. He dared not peek around the corner of the house for fear of drawing another shot. But she was bleeding, only half-conscious, and delirious. He had to act fast.

Danny's heartbeat wouldn't let up. He couldn't control it. He was scared. Bannister was dead. The guy had gotten up and got away! God Damn! How had it happened? He had to get a better angle. He had a rifle; and he could see Jason's rifle lying near Johnny's body, out there in the snow.

He could get a good shot if he could move to a better angle ... carefully, quietly, or maybe he ought to run for Sid. He made his way quickly through the darkness, behind a boarded-up cabin and up beside it to find a better angle at the car. They'd try to get away, if they were able. But they wouldn't! He tried, in vain, to make out something in the dark carport. Suddenly, the car's inside light came on. He fired. Glass shattered and he heard an anguished scream, loud, painfully disintegrating into a dying moan.

The scream sent a chill through his body. I got him, he enthused to himself, with wide eyes. I killed him. I got him with that one! No mistake! The car light was still on; the hole in the windshield surrounded by a maze of cracked glass. What a scream! I shot his ass off! Ha! I shot his ass off with that one! He was tryin' to get in an' crank it up and get away, and forgot about the light. Got to hurry up there. No! Hell, no! Got to be sure this time. No mistake this time. Bannister lying there dead in the street. Fuck! No doubt I shot him that time. He screamed like he was dead, behind that shattered windshield. Had to be dead. I shot his ass off!

The ploy had given Jason yet another edge. It was his again. He slipped under the supports of his deck as quietly as he could, to reach the pickup with the snow blade. It was a gamble. He had to make it work.

His arm felt numb; he didn't know how long he could use it. He slipped up beside the pickup, watching the street. He could see it all from there, and could kneel for protection behind the snow blade. But he had to come soon. She was bleeding and cold. He had to come soon or she'd die. He had to! And he, himself, couldn't miss. His mind gripped the single purpose: he couldn't miss. He would hit him; he would do it. All of his self-discipline, his control would pay off. It would be a clever trap, devised in his mind, executed by his body. And self-confidence would help make it work. Maybe he wasn't coming; he had to have an alternate plan. He'd draw another shot to the pickup this time and return his fire quickly and accurately to the rifle fire. But no need.

He saw Danny in the street, easing across, wary, rifle trained on the carport.

He jerked open the pickup door, clutched and pulled the headlights on. Danny was blinded in the shower of light. He fired at the pickup, the bullet whistling over Jason's head as he gripped the pistol in both hands, crouching behind the snow blade, and fired. Once! It whistled past. Twice! Danny grabbed his shoulder as his rifle fell to the ground. Grunting, he slipped to one knee, clutching his shoulder and turned to run headlong, slipping and sliding, down the street.

Jason, still behind the blinding glare of the headlights, fired once more at the fleeing man, missing again. He doused the headlights and stepped out into the street. The pistol was empty. Two headlights appeared from down the street. The man was running for help. There were others, coming to get him. He made his way toward the rifle in the snow. The man was running toward the headlights, holding his shoulder, framed in the bright lights. Slipping again and sprawling in the street. The headlights loomed larger. Jason pulled the rifle out of the snow. The man was up and running again. Maybe he'd fire or maybe he'd wait. He took aim. It was a white van. He could stop the driver with a clean shot, but he sensed that he shouldn't. No! His psyche screamed at him to wait. The running man tried to make his way to the side.

Suddenly, the van swerved toward Danny as he stopped short, lifting his arm in vain. The powerful thud drove his body into the ground where the van crushed out an anguished grunt as his rib cage shattered.

Jason's finger eased back on the trigger. The van, its hood dented from the impact of the collision, slowed down and rolled steadily toward him, blinding him. He realized suddenly there was another voice, something else! He jerked around to see more headlights bearing down on him from behind. Weakly, he slipped to one knee, bathed in the merciless lights that bombarded him from both sides, his bloodied arm too weak to raise the rifle, surrounded by some power that he couldn't face.

Whatever would be, he seemed to have lost his strength, but he still had breath. He tried again to lift the rifle, hearing a door slam somewhere. On one knee was okay. Still blinded. Squinting to see. Almost hopelessly out of breath. He made out the face of ... a man ... with dark beard and ... earrings. He tried to feed the words through his brain, his dry mouth. "Who ... are you?" His tortured arm dripped blood into the snow; in his other, he cradled the rifle uncertainly, ready to fire again.

“We’re not here to hurt you,” said the man firmly, unafraid. Jason believed him; neither was he. He lowered the rifle; the barrel fell into the snow. Another face appeared, handsome, with dark hair and eyes, then a beautiful woman with long, black hair, and finally ... Carol, her beautiful face battered. She knelt beside him and he felt everything melt away.



## CHAPTER 12

Jason opened his eyes to the jostling of his limp body, strapped in, hearing the grinding sound of an engine. He was riding, with headlights washing the road ahead, strapped into some kind of vehicle. A jeep. He turned his head to see Carol driving, her face scratched and bruised. He tried to remember what had happened, as she turned to see that he was awake.

“Where’s Joni?”

“How do you feel?” Carol asked him, not slowing the jeep.

“Weak. Is Joni all right?” He couldn’t move his left arm, noticed it was bandaged and pinioned to his body in a tight sling.

“Yeah, we had a couple of trained medical people come around. She’ll be okay.”

“Where are we going?” He tried to recognize the road, turned to see that they were towing his Volkswagen behind.

“We’re going to set up an accident. Your car, some personal things. They’ll say you died in an avalanche.”

“An ... avalanche?”

“Yeah. What’s the name of your book?”

“Snowfall.”

“Yeah,” she said smugly. “It fits, doesn’t it? So you’ll go under, supposedly, in an avalanche and people will be forever figuring out just what all happened up here.”

“Figuring out what?”

“Well, my friend Santos killed a dude down the street, and he left two banged-up women who may or may not get out of Netherland before the shit storm. There’s another dead guy in the street too. Santos ran over him.

And the guy you shot. He’s dead. Then there’s Joni, all perplexed and troubled.”

“So the authorities will be looking for me, no doubt.”

“You’ll disappear. They’ll say you were buried by the avalanche, and you’ll be lost until next spring sometime. A lot of speculation will go on, and on, and on. Snowfall ought to make the bestseller list. Don’t you think? That’s the plan.”

“I guess ... it’ll be in the news.”

“A lot of news. Three dead – and you, they guess. A lot of headlines, especially if they locate the two women. We’ll probably arrange for that. And your book hits the market with a bang.”

“What? Do you manipulate everything? What about me?”

“You’ll get to see Roci if you want to. I don’t know if it’s for the best, but that’s what you earned with your courage. And that’s what was decided.”

“Roci? My God, is that where we’re going?”

“Not immediately. We’ve got work to do. We have to finish the project.”

The road was steep; the jeep spun its way uphill to a wide curve. “These roads are dangerous as hell,” she frowned, pulling to a stop and jerking up the brake. She got out. “I’ll be back in a minute,” she said. “Just relax.” She closed the door.

He heard her rustling the chain, strained to look over his shoulder. He could see her by the red tail light, the Volkswagen, with its bullet-shattered windshield, rolling free. It disappeared downhill, into the darkness. She threw the chain away and made her way back to the door.

They heard the muffled crash as she sat down and pulled the door closed. “What do you say?” she asked. “Bon Voyage?”

“So ... there went my car,” Jason groaned, “and ... what about the avalanche?”

*Jim Cleveland*

“Santos is in charge of that project. It’s due to happen at midnight ... from just above here, up at Needle Point. He has enough dynamite to jar half the mountain down.”

“It’ll cover the road then. Everything. Where are we going?”

“To the cabin I told you about. I invited you earlier. It’s a good thing you didn’t come.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“I’ve been testing you ever since I arrived, it was my assignment. We wanted to test your character, judge your powers of logic and intuition, see what your values are, see if you are brave.”

“What if I had failed?”

“They would’ve considered you weren’t good enough for Roci. She needs support, not a horny drone. She does want to see you,” Carol shrugged, “but we had to consider what’s best for her, and whether you can carry out an additional important mission - back to the days before your Eden. Remember?”

Jason buried his face in his hand, trying to understand. “I don’t remember much. I ... think I loved her. I think she was beautiful ... like you.”

“Well, there’s a good reason for that. And that’s one reason they wanted me to do the job. Plus the fact that it’s important that I’m satisfied with the deal.”

“Why?”

“She’s my mother.”

“That ... can’t be right.”

“If you could remember my people, you’d know that it can. I was extracted as a fetus, nothing unusual, on the leader ship. We have laboratories for child development. We’re grown out there, scientifically you would say, more rapidly, more efficiently, with genetic corrections, and the nurturing of all our functions.”

“So ... you’re beautiful and smart, huh? That’s ... part of it. You’re genetically ... superior.”

“Just a bit more evolved than you,” she said, smiling.

“What were you doing with ... those people?”

“They did prove to be a rather foul bunch. I was studying them, of course. I’m a student.”

“A student?”

“In alien cultures. I’m almost at home here, though. This is where I was conceived.

“Here? On Earth?”

“By you,” she said. “Don’t you remember any of it?”

He could only stare, wide-eyed, at the profile of her beautiful face, driving them up the dark mountain road.

“It ... seems impossible.”

“Of course, I’m most like my mother, as you’d expect. But it caused quiet a fuss,” she said, laughing. “Control decided it was actually a stroke of good luck, for study purposes of course.”

“You’re ... really my daughter?”

“Yeah. You want me to call you ‘Pop?’” She seemed amused at his amazement.

“And ... you’re a student.” She was a part of him then, though surely a small one.

“Yeah,” she said. “Kind of like sociology, you know. I’ve learned a lot these past few weeks.”

Jason leaned his head back onto the seat. He was very tired.

“Yeah,” he said. “There’s always something to learn, I guess. How old are you?”

“Between seventeen and eighteen Earth years they say, but of course I didn’t require nearly that long.”

“It was only two years ago; that’s all,” said Jason.

*Jim Cleveland*

“Well,” she said. “We just know how to produce a healthy environment. These are things you could learn.”

“What are you after?” asked Jason.

“Information. We use that to get knowledge.”

“Where do you go?”

“Here and there. Someday another galaxy.”

“Where do you come from?”

“Much nearer the center. There’s lots of life in there, they tell me. You’re out on the edge here, and you don’t know crap about the universe, thanks to the Lucifer rebellion against First Source and Center. You’ve been quarantined from the universe broadcasts for a long time.”

“What are you gonna do here?”

“Take charge of everything.”

“Everything?”

“All of the allied government and business power structures. They’re the ones who manufacture and market war weapons for profit. They’re bound to fuck everything up here if we don’t stop them.”

“So you’ll ... rule over us.”

“Control decided it was too beautiful here to be ruined, so we came back. We formed the corporation with explorers who had already studied here.”

“It sounds like a big job – even for you – taking over governments.”

“We’ll control the money; that’ll control them. Besides, only a few of ‘em make any difference.”

“Where are you going?”

“That’s up to Control. Study for a while and then to work for the corporation. Some job that’s right for me.”

“You’ll be with your mother?”

“No. We don’t do things that way. We all love each other. It isn’t right for us to have cliques.”

“What about Roci? What about us?”

“That’s different. She’s about as human as you are now. Her physiology was changed by her relations with you ... and the human-style childbirth ... and by mutual choice.”

“What’s she doing?”

“Using her talents to help people.”

“Where?” When will we be there?”

She laughed. “You’ll find out.”

All of it came together for Jason, as the jeep pushed its way carefully over the snow-laden road, up to the cabin. His daughter was driving, carrying him eventually to some vague dream of a woman who would soon materialize, her mother, his lover, from some hazily remembered liaison. Maybe he remembered some of it, maybe all that he thought he was making up came out of real experience, not imagination. The fever did it. It screwed up his thinking after the experiences. Mega said that. The book came out of all of this in ways that appear now to be masterminded.

He remembered much of it, and put it down without knowing it, unintended reportage. And now the elaborate plan would sell books and make some points for their enlightened philosophy – his too, and the manuscript he was working on now, pretty much as Joni saw it, would bring it up to date, the same character threatened with death, struggling to cope with it– and brought to reality. Now he had lived it, and that was a big difference, and the second manuscript can now move forward.

THE OMEGA Corporation was growing stronger through their special talents. It was beginning to have an influence in world affairs. The aliens had the power. And here in this pivotal place, there were three dead; he and Joni could’ve been two more. Dangerous games to play.

“Jason.” She glanced at him from her principal chore of holding the jeep in the safest path. “I wanna make sure you understand how you got in that mess back there. We didn’t intend it to get that out of hand.”

“Who made the phone calls?”

“Sid. I told him what to say. It was part of your test, to see how you’d react and what you’d be prepared to do. But you passed the test with your resolve. I sensed it when you came to the window. Except for an accident, it would’ve all worked differently. We didn’t plan for anyone to be killed. They thought you had the dope that I destroyed. It was all supposed to be part of another scenario, but everything got mixed up. We intended to put them out of the drug business and turn them over to authorities. We didn’t intend for you to nearly die.

“But I saw you kill one of them. You just ... ran him over.”

“Santos’ anger took control of him. He’s under stress right now. He shouldn’t have killed any of them, but he’ll have to answer for it. It’ll probably mean a complete mental rehabilitation.”

“Which means?”

“A new orientation for him. He’s out of control in this one. There’s some kind of mysterious dark light energy that afflicts everyone here. He’s going to be picked up tomorrow night near Granby, and re-assigned. He’s too hot here.”

“And what about us?”

“You’ll be picked up at 11:30. We should have some time to visit,’ she said. “It’s only 10:30 and the cabin is just ahead.”

It sat in the bend, surrounded by a cluster of bare Aspen trees and draped in deep drifts of snow. An inviting swirl of smoke curled out of the gray chimney.

“Who’s here?” Jason asked as they pulled up near the door.

“No one. The fireplace fire was on time-release. We’re right on schedule.”

Jason made his way out gingerly in his arm sling. She led the way to the door, searching in her jacket. He looked inside the heavily barred window to the warm scene inside, a bristling fire in the hearth, soft chairs and a shaggy rug.

“Jason, I don’t have the keys.” He turned to see her concerned face. “They were in my jacket lining, the jacket Sid searched to find the paper.”

“What?”

“He found the cabin key, too. It was here, in the lining.”

“So we can’t get in. This door’s heavy and the windows are all barred.” Jason tried the doorknob, roughly, then pulled on the firm bars of the window and began circling the house. He soon returned.

“The back door’s latched with a two-by-four.”

“It’s cold,” she said. “Too cold for you.”

“The jeep has a heater.”

“The tank’s about empty. We hadn’t planned on bringing the jeep.”

“So we may have to bundle up with everything and tough it out,” Jason reasoned. “How do you know they’ll be here? How are they coming?” She was pulling a dark bag – a bowling bag – from the back seat.

“This looks like it’s going to be good,” said Jason.

She unzipped the bag on the snow-covered ground and pulled out a large round object wrapped in a dark cloth. She carried it a few paces further away and laid it carefully on the ground, in the middle of the clearing. Jason took a cautious step closer, watching her unwrap it --!

The ball of light blasted free, doubling up Jason, who backed away, shielding his eyes from the powerful brilliance. He felt her small hand on his back, guiding him further back from the merciless light of the energy she had released.

“It’ll level out in a minute,” she said in his ear. “Wait for the flow.” In a moment, the power of the light had indeed diminished to a bright white glow that easily illuminated the clearing. It was bright, but they could look at it without discomfort.

“It’s a Pinnacle,” said Carol. “It’s okay to look. The navigate will bring them close and they’ll find us by the light.”

“The ... navigate?”

“Inside,” she said.



“It doesn’t produce heat, “ said Jason, beginning to shiver in the cold air. “Aren’t you cold?”

“No. Our bodies can produce enough heat, but not likely enough for you.”

Jason looked again in the window, helplessly freezing, one-armed, with a warm fire so close, so very close. He looked around for anything helpful.” He eyed a stack of firewood, and beside it, several longer poles.

“Or we could ram the house,” said Carol, “knock down the door.”

Jason was already on his way to the wood. “We need a ram.” He hollered at her. “Get behind the wheel. I’ll get a good log.”

Soon he was standing between the door and the groaning jeep, one-handed, balancing the log, placing an end of it against the door, next to the bottom hinge. The engine roared, the door sagged, only slightly, for the wheels were spinning in the slush of the snow. Jason watched, dismayed, getting colder, shivering, and trying to shove the jeep from behind. The wood splintered with a mighty...Crack! The door hinges ripped loose as the log fell with a clump.

Soon they were sitting by the warm fireplace. The navigate, a glowing crimson orb, lay on the floor beside them. The door was propped back in place; a cup of hot chocolate steamed in his hands.

“We make a good team,” she said, her feet curled under her, beside him on the sofa.

“I guess we should,” he mused, staring into the fire. “It’s hard for me to believe who you are.”

“It has been a little strange for you, hasn’t it?”

“The thing that bothers me is that I’ve killed somebody...I knew him. I don’t feel good about it.”

Her soft brown eyes told him she understood. “I’m proud of you for feeling that way,’ she said.

“But I’m alive,” he said, almost in a whisper, as if reflecting on the reason for it.

“It requires many choices and judgments to live here successfully,” she said. “You have to learn to make them in light of what makes sense, what’s logical.”

“Even if you have to regret it.”

“No,” she said certainly. “You don’t logically regret what you reasoned had to be done, because you used all of your power in making the decision. The regrets of the night aren’t yours.”

“I’d never been in such a desperate situation.”

“Under the circumstances, you should be grateful.”

“I could’ve been dead though.”

“But you’re not. You used your talents well. You controlled the winning edge of the dark light that is here. As you reflect on it, you’ll gain more self-esteem and confidence from your success, which will make you stronger still. So you’ll be even better prepared to be the companion my mother needs.”

“Does ... she need me?”

“Yes. You could make her happier. And you can work together on a new mission.”

The realization of it swept through his brain, that he was strong enough to influence her ... one of these superhuman ones, that he could be a cause for her happiness, that his presence, his love could mean something to her. He hadn’t thought about giving himself in a very long time, ... too long. He suddenly wanted to shower her with his love – though he knew only her mind and the vapor of a vision, one that sat reincarnated in front of him.

Her battered cheek belied her soft beauty in the fire glow. He stared in her eyes for an interminable silence, only hearing the soft crackle of the fire. He couldn’t speak. Finally, he lowered his head, shaking it, his face breaking into an uncontrolled smile. She laughed. And he was laughing, joyfully. And he reached to take her hand, she squeezing his. She was a part of his being, and he a part of hers. And the feeling was strong.

THE PORTLAND PANTHERS, owned and coached by Santos, had posted an 11-5 record, toppled Dallas 21-7 in the first round of the play-offs, and the Los Angeles Rams 23-17 in the second. The Super Bowl would pit their run-oriented offense and a solid defense against San Diego's high-powered passing game and a storied front four that measured up as both the biggest and best of the NFL's rush lines. Santos knew it would be a classic game.

The motorcycle churned and strained up the incline, tearing through the snow, to the wide bend known as Needle Point.

Santos could feel, if not see, the masses of snow on the steep slopes around him. He didn't need to see. He was sure the scouting advisers were as smart as all of his fellow explorers. And they were equally wise, as he was, through the guidance of Control. There was never a mistake, never a loss. They were almost always perfect, and in this world that was strange indeed. They were the strange ones here, the intruders, the unnatural, after all. If he were fallible, maybe he should stay here, maybe he would belong. If he were fallible, as they had judged him to be, then maybe he should. Maybe he no longer belonged with his kind, all obedient, trusting and wise, loving and learning equally, living equally, equally perfect in a steady kind of harmony that wouldn't suit his taste again. This had to be the place for him if they would let it be, if Control would let him stay. He could win and lose here and that's what he wanted now. It made more sense to have challenges to meet; otherwise, you would have to create them, even as they do here, day after day, time after time.

Yet, he realized this was the last world in the galaxy that Zenith Command would want him to be.

At Needle Point, Santos let the bike run, noisily, as he removed the box of dynamite and sat it on the ground. He had a lot of fuse – a lot of it. He guessed something like twenty minutes worth. That would be interesting. He got to work with the knife.

He had done this kind of work on the Saturn station, he remembered, exploding asteroids to clean up the area. Too much space garbage always caused problems of one kind or another, so they had blown down the larger ones and had stayed in that lonely station for a short while. The crew there had been calm and serene, he recalled, evolved through redundant labors in their tiny cocoon of life, not knowing the joys and thrills of the places he could go as a soldier. They were utterly at peace with a kind of

half-life serenity that reduced them to careful observers and pushers-of-buttons. He couldn't do it and all would be agreeable with everyone, and he would be someone else. He couldn't do that kind of work. He knew it.

But he knew they wouldn't let him stay, not after four unauthorized deaths, the first from malicious negligence, the others from unauthenticated reasoning. A second judgment would have been required for Moss' execution, yet he had tacitly ignored that fact in his report. And now the two that he would have to report when he called Mega at 2 a.m. He dreaded it.

What could he say that made any sense to Mega? And there was none wiser among them than Mega. That's why he was the General Chairman, while Santos could never expect to even be among the management group. It wasn't genetically possible.

On Earth, he was free to rise and fall, and the challenge could give new meaning to his life. He had to stay here, but he knew he couldn't. He was a conscious violator of their code. He was helpless; there was nothing he could do.

Santos again felt the jerk of the pistol as it exploded in his hand, the puff of feathers about the seared black hole, and the man's body stiffening, falling limp. He had killed evil! He saw Moss' ugly face, screwed up in frightened surprise, his battered chest bathed in blood. He had cleaned up the species. But no one appreciated it.

Santos lit the fuse. He had twenty minutes, give or take a few. He walked easily to the bike and removed his strapped-on bag. Unzipping it, he pulled out a ski mask, then zipped it again and tied it down firmly again. The bike continued to rumble its readiness.

Bad memories. He could almost feel again the searing heat, straining in vain against the burning car, his skin hurting, hair smoking, burning acridly, lying in the dusty ditch pushing from his mind that the man he left behind was burning, perhaps had still been alive. Santos shuddered, guilty again. The man's eyes in his headlights, terrified, white, the terrible thud and crunch of the tires. Santos straddled the bike and wiped at the tears welling in his eyes. He slipped on the ski mask and glanced at his watch. Seventeen minutes until, he noted. It would be interesting. The bike pulled off, tearing through the snow for a steep downhill run. Santos squeezed down on the throttle.

*Jim Cleveland*

The bike tore madly through the snow, cold air pushing at his eyes, gliding smoother, picking up speed, and soon an incredible speed, careening wildly through the darkness, holding steady, downhill, another turn, throttle open, all the way, blinding speed, flying downward, turn to make, soaring off the road, into the sky, flying, riding the sky high above the trees, headlight washing night, reaching toward the Heavens ... soaring ... and faltering ...

## CHAPTER 13

Jason and Carol stood in the circle of light, waiting for his ride to visit Mega. The pinnacle's light commanded the snowy scene with its brilliance and, while it was powerful, it was still agreeable to his eyes. He looked up into blackness, the sky hidden from him by the intensity of the light around them. His watch told him it was only seconds from 11:30.

"Eleven seconds," she said, as if reading his mind. "Hey, I wanna wish you the best of everything Jason, okay?" She said in her best hip-youngster voice, reaching for his hand.

He took it in both his hands, squeezing it, and smiled. "Take care of yourself."

"For sure."

"I care a lot about you, Carol," he said. "I've got to tell you that. I'm ... proud we're a part of each other."

"Yeah. It's really nice to know you've got a cool old man floatin' around someplace." She seemed to be practicing her street language. He wondered how that could make sense.

"Why are you talking that way?"

"Playing a role," she said. "That's what I do here, so I can fit in."

He almost jumped at the sudden, silent movement in his peripheral vision. Something was coming down from the sky.

A round silver cylinder descended quietly down before them. It glistened where it came to rest, hovering just above the snow some ten paces in front of them, reflecting brilliantly against the pinnacle light. An eye-level window surrounded the cylinder; a shiny silver doorknob invited him inside. He gritted his teeth, no reason to back off now.

“I hope things work out for you two,” she said, flippantly it seemed to Jason, as if the ... space carrier in front of them were no more than a streetcar.

“Will your folks check on Joni for sure?” he asked her.

“I promised you I would.”

“And we’ll see you soon?”

She laughed. “Is this how a dad is supposed to act? Anxious?”

“Don’t put yourself in danger, okay?”

“It’s good to challenge yourself,” she said. “How else can you grow? You have to see it’s the same with me as it is with you.”

He did see it, of course. But while they thrived on challenge, searched it out, knowing that their strengths would overcome it, he was different, just a human, prone to do things they wouldn’t – fear, worry, dread. He wasn’t as strong as they were, but he was stronger than he previously was. They hugged each other tightly.

He reached for the silver handle and turned it easily. Relieving the pressure inside with a puff and a sigh, the cylinder swung free, a small step above the snowy ground. He stepped inside and closed the door.

Out the window, he saw her face, the tough, young beautiful face of his unimagined daughter. A tear, glistening in the light, fell from her clear eyes; he was surprised, and suddenly fraught with feeling for her. Her tear, it seemed, would further bind them together, forever to share the moment. The sharing of tears, he realized, had that power. She had just taught him.

His eyes welled with tears too as the cylinder rose smoothly and swiftly, carrying him upward, out of her sight, quietly up into the night. In his mind came the poignant memory of a long-ago time when he had watched Roci ascend in just this way, from the peak of a nearby mountain.

He soared into the dark sky now, carried up through the icy clouds, above and beyond, into a field of glowing stars and the clear night air. The air was fresh and warm inside the cylinder, his precious silver womb from the paralyzing chill outside.

The alien ship was a massive shadow, somehow undetectable, impervious to their technology. Soon its murky shadow blotted out the star field on either side of him, darkening the nightglow of the carrier. Jason couldn't see directly above, but the carrier was continuing its rapid ascent. Surely there would be a passage to the inside.

He hoped so. The gray mass of the spaceship was soon all around him seemingly on a collision course, so the passage had to – Jason gripped the bar and braced himself – be there! Darkness exploded all around him – sweeping him up into the body of the ship. He gripped the bar tighter in the blackness. The cylinder slowed, and then stopped abruptly, jarring his taut body. He strained in vain to see ... anything, whatever strange and alien environment he had been drawn into. It was quiet.

Gradually, light appeared, and he could see that the cylinder had somehow lifted away, leaving him standing on the open floor. And there, in front of him was a wooden door that was all too familiar, his own.

The doorknob turned, and swung open to reveal Mega, white hair and beard neatly styled, brown-skinned, in an open-neck white shirt with matching pants and shoes. He was a vision of casual elegance. He wore a shining pendant around his neck with three blue concentric circles.

“Jason,” he said warmly. “I’m glad you’ve arrived. Come in.” Jason stepped through the threshold to shake Mega’s large and warm hand.

“Can I get you some coffee?”

“Yes,” said Jason. “I’ll have some.” Mega stepped gracefully into the kitchen.

Jason’s eyes spanned the den, a clever duplication of his own. He waited there as the dapper alien disappeared into the kitchen.

“Have a seat,” Mega called back. “I’ll be out in a moment. Cream and sugar?”

“No, thanks.” It was dark outside. His computer was there, and all of his papers and books.

“Do you live here?” he called.

“Of course not,” Mega called back. “You do.” He appeared in a moment with two steaming cups, handing one to Jason. “This is where you’ve chosen to be in your life, Jason, so it’s the logical place for us to start, a comfortable venue.”



“So where is all this going?” Jason walked to the glass door and looked out into the darkness, onto his snow-covered deck.

“You’ll continue to choose your own course,” said Mega, “as you’ve always done. Your free will is a right given by First Source and Center, which you usually call God or Father. Even First Source doesn’t mess with that.”

Jason walked back to the front door and looked outside. The silent snowfall of Netherland had replaced the carrier. “When did it all become unreal?” he asked.

“This is all certainly real,” said Mega, “although your physical presence is asleep in another state of consciousness, while you’re dreaming in this reality, a separate one and not attuned to your physical aspects. No less real.” Mega saw that he was confused. “Think of it as a vivid dream,” he explained. “You and I taking a drive through the countryside. I’m driving; you’re choosing the road. You receive information into your mind, which you can use. Your body can rest all the while.”

“I’m choosing? What are the choices?”

“What you’re going to do with your life. What you want to talk about in our last visit.”

“Maybe some real answers. Maybe a look at the future.”

“You can’t predict the future. How can you predict something that everyone is trying to make into something different with their constant free will actions? I wouldn’t be too concerned with the future. You can’t live anywhere except in the present. That’s all that’s real. That’s all that’s happening. You should be most concerned with using your time well. It’s finite, you know, as a mortal, I mean. You only live once in mortal form. Then you ascend.”

“What are you going to ultimately control with the corporation, everything? Against our free will? Or with it?”

“We can’t abrogate your free wills. That’s against the Plan. What we will do is give people much better choices than they have had and they will make mostly good ones. We’ll show the people benevolence and a personality fulfillment in business and industry that they’ve never seen before. They’ll benefit from it and they’ll appreciate and embrace the philosophy behind it. It will permeate into all their institutions, so that they will be genuinely altruistic, rather than just striking self-serving poses.”

“How do I fit in?”

“Present altruistic values. You can choose the work that appeals to you. One choice is that we’ll give you a satisfying position with the corporation. You can oversee your posthumous literary success through another identity. Lost forever in a giant avalanche, just like the book you wrote, uncanny, and you can work with us on some very interesting assignments, some advanced learning and growing experiences for your mortal classroom. You might even re-appear in the flesh some day.” Mega paused to let Jason absorb some of it.

“And you can work with Roci,” he added. “She’s about five miles down the highway. There’s a ranch there for homeless children, a lodge and some cabins. It’s operated by one of your evolutionary churches. We have in mind a timedrop mission that you might consider working on together.”

“I know the place. Just down the highway from Netherland of all places. And I’ve never stopped. How long has she been here?”

“Since before you came. It’s likely she influenced your coming here in one way or another.”

“Then ... she’s only been down the road a few miles, all this time. Why didn’t she contact me?”

“You had a job to do. The book. Your environment had to be right for it. You had to also be deemed right for her and our work. It will require courage, and more. And Roci had to become established here too. You realize it was a big change for her.”

“Does she want to see me?”

“She asked for it to be arranged. That’s why we’ve tested you. We have a continuing concern for her welfare. You need to be good for each other and be able to work together as you are needed. You have previously been a self-centered, self-serving hedonist with minimal spiritual wisdom.”

“I ... I’ve got my faults. I’m not as perfect as you are. I’ve already had to face my weaknesses.”

“You did. We’re not looking for perfection. We considered you in light of what’s possible and probable for you. So within the context of your character and potential, you’re acceptable. You stood up to these challenges well given your resources. You can join our team.”

*Jim Cleveland*

“What about Joni? Will she be all right?”

“Yes. Our people there are paramedics. We had them nearby because we were expecting trouble.”

“From where? The people who shot us? Johnny Bannister?”

“The cretins we targeted. They thought you and Carol had stolen their cocaine. They wanted it back, but Carol had destroyed it. She was involved with Santos, our other explorer whom you met, in a disciplinary action for Bannister and the others. They were involved in selling some very bad drugs a few weeks ago, and they beat up a very honorable fellow, put him in the hospital. Santos essentially deals with specific evil people here, on assignment. Sometimes we decide to send them on their way.”

You don’t mean ... kill them?”

“We only end their mortal lives,” said Mega, “because they are counterproductive to humankind’s needs for progress. We could never touch their souls, their spiritual life, which is in the domain of First Source.

“Your world is in an awful mess as a result of the Lucifer rebellion against God. Much of what you have written through our inspiration is absolutely true. But in your year of 1984, these matters were adjudicated in the celestial courts. No more dark energies of self-serving conflict and greed and self-reliance are pouring into your planet; the light energies are replacing them as your quarantined world is returned to the universe family gradually, incrementally. In the meantime, we need allies here who are knowledgeable and fully capable of fighting evil and corruption in many ways.”

“How did Joni fit in? Surely she wasn’t supposed to be hurt.”

“We called her away. She shouldn’t have been there, but we’ve had problems from the start of this project. She became too involved with her story and you to follow directions. And then our soldier, Santos, was too reckless with his adventuring and got into serious trouble. He was supposed to create a disturbance with law officials. It would lead them to Netherland. But he suffered a mental split, became much too lethal and judgmental, and now he’s in conflict with Control. So we’re really not perfect either, as you can see. We are, in fact, mortals like you. And all this alienation here on your twisted world seems to rub off.” Mega chuckled.

Jason reflected. Their power over him was fully evident if they chose to use it. “So I’ve got the choice of a job with a corporation and a reunion with Roci. What would be the other?”

“We can forget the whole thing. We could cover up everything we’ve done, and you can stay here, at home, just as before. Like I said, we’re not here to abrogate your free will, unless we have to kill you to get you out of the way and that only comes after comprehensive research and a Mission Control decision. This is the highest form of logical deduction, which we most often use for decision-making.”

“Well .... Yeah ... Maybe you could just leave it alone then. Why did you want to make me an unwilling pawn in your...corporate plan? Maybe I really didn’t write Snowfall. Maybe you did. ”

“That’s not a valid conclusion,” said Mega. “It’s a negative viewpoint. The truth is we only gave you values for your consideration. And we inspired you to expression. It can’t be all that bad. Our aims are always noble, as you should know. All books are inspired by thoughts and projections well beyond your mortal understanding.”

“I’m sure that must be true,” Jason sighed. “I was wrong. As I’ve so cryptically written, the curse of Lucifer is still on us. I know I’m twisted by it from time to time, to be cynical and abrasive. I’m not nearly as perfect as you. But I’m all I’ve got, there’s nothing other than myself to consider. I can only feel true achievement on my own. It’s hard to take satisfaction in your manipulating sales for the book by staging ... a grand illusion.”

“You don’t approve?”

“No. I think it’s deceitful and ... maybe I still don’t understand the way everything happened, but what seems to be important is that people were killed. And some of the responsibility seems to be yours.”

“Regrettable. Not your fault. So what do you choose to do?”

“Ask you to make it like it was. If I can’t make it big on my own, I’ll just make it as big as it can. It won’t bother me either way. I just want to contact Roci and see if we can develop some love and peace of mind together.”

“Do you want us to publish your book at all?”

“How good is it?”

*Jim Cleveland*

“It’s good,” said Mega without expression. “Jason, tens of thousands of books have been published that aren’t nearly as well-written as yours; your message of a spiritual ascension plan and God’s overcontrol of evolution is a fairly unique concept that humankind should strongly consider.

Jason didn’t speak.

“The publishing company is going to make money on it too,” said Mega wryly, “if we devise some marketing to make some sales.”

He didn’t reply.

“And you and Roci can live with one another in virtual exclusion just up the road for awhile. We’ve opened a real estate firm in Denver and can send our representatives up here to move your property discreetly.”

Jason shook his head in the amazement of it all. “Well, who am I to argue with ET’s who are tuned into God?”

“Just a mortal of the realm. Omega is giving you the standard deal for a first-time author, no special treatment. If people want to buy it, that’s their business. You didn’t go out in an avalanche then. You maybe just moved to Kansas. There probably isn’t a marketing gimmick in the whole state.”

“That’ll be grand. As long as Roci is there.”

“I understand humans, believe, me,” said Mega. “ You want what you call soul mates. You’re among my favorite species, actually. But ...maybe you think we’re meddling too much here, what do you think? Should we go away? Or wouldn’t you like to work for Omega?”

“Well ... I think we can use all the help we can get.”

Mega smiled and stared at him for a few seconds. “What do you want in life, Jason? What’s your plan?”

Just to be with Roci. I have no mind beyond that right now” said Jason. “Maybe there will be nothing of substance between us at all. I don’t know. But I am still a mortal, a human, with our ... evolutionary desires and motivations. And I think somehow that she and I together could achieve great things ... and we would be at peace having one another. We can give each other the inspiration to succeed. I may be too un-advanced to embrace high ideals, but I can love the beauty to which I am attracted, and I’ve come to realize the great values that come from the male-female partnership, in

mind power, in intimate, soulful sharings, and I believe that together we can create Goodness. A goodness in family.

Yes,” said Mega. “As God created Eve. That’s the human quest as we see it too, and, well, she’s just down the road, in her familiar place, which shows that it pays to look all around yourself, Jason. Look at everything. See it. Feel it. Understand it. Then make of it what you will for what really counts in your life, service to your humankind brothers and sisters.

“But that’s too lofty for you right now. You’ve got the woman in your mind. Sure. Just concentrate on that. Blest was a gifted explorer; as Roci, she is a fine human as well. Personalize your quest. Relish the joy of being mortals, starting on the first rung of the First Source ascension ladder. Embrace the demand that corruption be ended on your world and bring it out of the dark light and into a higher reality of peace and love.”

“I will work for these values ... if I can.”

Certainly you can,” said Mega. “and you’re capable of heroism and self reliance tempered with altruistic true values. It will be the mortals in the various quarantined rebellion worlds, not us, who will ultimately work their way out of the sophistries of Lucifer’s philosophy and the animal tendencies of their physical evolutions, and bring their worlds into peaceful cooperation with the Divine Plan, rejoin the cosmic family that includes billions of evolving planets and trillions of different and evolving beings, as far as we know, no two exactly alike. Are you ready, Jason, to come into this expanded cosmic consciousness, an understanding of larger spiritual concepts?”

“Sure,” said Jason, “bring it on.”

Jason’s body felt weightless. Dizzily, he sat down on the sofa, his eyes trying to focus on the blurry image before him. He slipped into a peaceful black.

“You’re going back to your physical reality now,” he heard Mega say, his voice calm and soothing in the darkness. “You have a winning edge now. You understand the dark light. You can destroy it. You see a higher light. You can bring it. First Source has much invested in the ascending mortals of time and space, the ‘be ye perfect’ plan, and is counting on you to fulfill your potential.”

He did have it – his work, the promising prospect of Roci’s love, the courage he now knew he could summon upon demand, and an insight into the growing influence of the benevolent alien force that seemed destined to bring Earth’s love to flower. It was a decided edge, and he knew he again had to work hard and use his knowledge and talent.

“Look what Jesus did as an incarnated human,” said Mega. “He ended the Lucifer rebellion, even as one of you. Now, you’re cleaning up the disasters it wrought. You are also children of the One God, and you can do likewise.”

Jason was already unconscious. Oh, well, thought Mega, I’ll catch him up over time. Next, he would need to put an alternative plan in motion to hit the bestseller list. He wouldn’t bother getting Jason’s approval for this one.

SANTOS COULD see objects in the misty air, bluish, hard to decipher through the pain of his shattered forehead. He wiped at a trickle of blood dangling from his eyebrow.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he could make out the shapes as trees, covered in an ethereal snowfall that surrounded him and sealed his fate. It was as quiet and cold as a crypt here; even he was beginning to get cold.

The wreckage of the motorcycle lay gathering more snowflakes, twisted against an unyielding boulder where it came to rest. In time, they could soon be buried by the soft snowfall here, together, he and the machine, if there were time. But there wasn’t. It was four minutes until, according to his watch, which was still running through a cracked crystal. There were four minutes until the explosion, and then the snow mass of the mountain would come crashing down upon him, all at once.

His desperation had passed to no avail, and was gone, without his finding some miraculous link to safety, another triumphant escape. There was nothing this time, no opportune chance, no escape hatch to another open road again. There was no place to run to, nor time to do it, no helping hand nearby, no way to move very far with a broken leg. He shifted it painfully. It was all over.

The Portland Panthers had been on the way to the Super Bowl, going down in a fiery crash into a mountain, a great tragedy, and an enigma for eternity’s fans, to speculate on the likely winner of that ever-imaginary game, it was fitting.

There wasn't time to discover why he was here. He knew his mind, especially his new and unharnessed one, was too complex to understand. Mega would wonder why; so would he. Suicide? From frustration? Or recklessness? From the same cause? Or just by design part of the game? An accident? Maybe part of each. He would never know. But he wouldn't lose because he wouldn't give in. He could embrace death as an inevitable end to his powerful life, his great gift. It was readily worth the price of death. So he didn't choose to make it an enemy. How could such an inevitability be regarded as such? He shouldn't begrudge this return to the darkness after such a glorious opportunity. He had tried to make the most of it.

Santos' face turned into a smile – only seconds until – and then a chuckle, a laugh breaking into an explosion that jarred his ears and shook soft snowflakes to float wispily around him. He laughed as the rumble grew, laughing defiantly. Loudly. The rumble grew louder. A tree trunk cracked. The darkness rolled down upon him, losing his laughter in the roar.

WHEN JASON awoke, he felt more refreshed than he could ever remember. He knew he was in his bedroom and his bed, but he didn't really know why. Through it wasn't an unusual place to be, he couldn't, for the life of him, understand how he got there. He could only remember talking with Mega, after the trip into the sky ... from the cabin with Carol ... after the flight from Netherland ... the killings.

He made an effort to get up, wincing at the soreness in his arm. There was a small bandage just above the elbow. He remembered getting shot; he remembered passing out in the street. But now he realized suddenly that the ride up the mountain with Carol didn't really happen physically. Neither had the goodbyes in front of the cabin. It only happened in their minds, his and Carol's minds interlocked. And the talk with Mega, it happened in his mind too.

They had actually taken him there to his bedroom after he was shot, after he killed one of them and watched the other die. That had all been real. But the mindvisit was real, too, in an altered reality, an alternate state of consciousness.

Jason got up and dressed, his arm remarkably free now of soreness. He walked out into the den to see them sitting quietly at his table, waiting for him. There was a steaming cup of coffee at his familiar place, and they were waiting ... Alex, thought Jason ... and Christie. Mega had told him their names.



He walked forward to stand in front of them, searching their open faces for any sign of their demeanor. They sat in their perfectly honed beauty, but void to him of any emotion at all. Alex stood up to say: "We knew you'd want coffee. Take the bandage off tomorrow. Your car keys are on the table here."

"Fine."

"We're leaving," said Christie. "Come with us to the door and we'll show you something."

"Why don't you stay? I'd like to talk to you."

"We're not prepared to exchange ideas with you," said Christie. "Come to the door." He followed them into the early morning light. The day was cloudy bright. It was cold, and snow was piled up in large drifts up and down the row of houses on either side of the street.

"The man you shot is over here," said Alex, "buried in the snow. Very deep." Jason stared into the ponderous drift of white under his window.

"There's another one over there under the snow, and a third one down the street. We'll have them all picked up tonight," said Alex. "The marshal heard some shooting and came looking for you last night, but didn't find anything. You weren't here."

"Look over here," said Christie. Jason walked a few steps to look into the carport. A bullet had shattered his windshield; another had splintered through a facing. "Vandals," he said. "Yes," said Christie. "The two women down the street decided to leave town. Joni is in a clinic down the highway. She has a very hazy and selective memory and won't cause you any problems.."

"We'll get our coats and gear and go to the bus station," said Alex. "We'll be picked up there. Good luck." He offered his handshake with a pleasant smile. She came forward to do the same. They walked resolutely down the street.

When they had gone, walking up the hill to the bus station, he drank his coffee in quiet contemplation. Soon he got up and strapped on his web belt and filled his canteen. It was routine to fill the canteen, always be ready, part of his discipline. And it was good to be disciplined, yes, but not to be cold-hearted. His heart was as important to nurture as his mind. It was a balance; newfound perhaps, that mustn't be lost to him again.

He pulled out his light daypack and put a clean shirt and sweater, socks, underwear and some toiletries into the pack. He hoped to stay the night. He may as well be positive. He felt very positive today, maybe like those Christians who got zapped by the Spirit of Truth in the upper room.

Soon he was ready, weighed down with the pack and standing outside in his boots, ready for his hike in the snow, to the other side of town, and to Roci. This place could rest a while, out of his mind. He wanted to walk, and leave most everything behind.

He looked at the snowdrift by his window, ... nothing but white, sins hidden in white. He kicked the house roughly with his boot heel and a large pile of snow fell, deepening the drift that covered the death he was leaving behind, the death of several kinds in his life. He began the long walk, in deep wonder and contemplation of the life that lay before him.

As he walked up the hill resolutely, boots crunching the soft white snow, he thought about the dark and violent energies that had pervaded him for these few hours. There was a dark energy in this time and space world, he thought to himself. We are driven to battle evil and be heroes as best we can, and we can all earn our mettle and celestial acclaim by standing up to grow our souls, strong, visionary, heroic, loving, wise and decisive souls who will help God continue building and nurturing the universe. We can capture and hold the living balance, the strategic edge over this dark light that comes from some mysterious devil within us. We grow the most in adversity. Perhaps we only grow at all when we are challenged. And so all is proceeding well in the evolution God set in motion.

For now, he just wanted fervently to see Roci's face in front of him, this one face, this one person in all the world, to hold her flesh to him and share with her a deeper love than he could ever imagine. It would be their microcosm, then, that being the purpose of all life.

Meantime the mortal form of soldier Santos lay deep within a massive tomb of white. A moon station near Saturn made a notation that the new technician would not be arriving as scheduled. His soul was carried away by seraphims for resurrection on the mansion worlds, should First Source deem his personality worthy of survival and capable of soul growth. The Ancients of Days later decided that it was.

Mega looked out over a wintry blizzard swirling across the light-studded Manhattan skyline. Preliminary investigations into aberrant behaviors on the planet seemed mired in a quagmire of mind-body-spiritual complexities.

*Jim Cleveland*

He thought to himself that even Zenithians don't understand a lot about the universe, not really. Well, that makes exploration such a wonderful experience. Sometimes what you don't know is more exciting than what you do. He was justly proud that the Zenithians were the most prolific and benevolent explorers in the local universe, and always leaving good works behind in keeping with the free will and unearned knowledge mandates.

Joni awoke in a hospital room near Eureka. An extraterrestrial hybrid who calls herself Carol was there to offer a smile and a kind word. On behalf of Head West magazine, she stated, a deposit of a hundred thousand dollars would be made to her bank account as a nuisance payment. She was expected to produce a full account of the weekend within 30 days for the April issue, no word limit.

She could not comprehend the note from Jason that Carol passed on.

*"Hi Joni, I'm translating into another dimension. Close to here but afar. A journey without distance. Thank you, my Loved One, Jason."*

By the time Jason could see the neat brick children's home, he was red faced from the chill and a little out of breath. He strained his eyes to see an assemblage of children with sleds, traversing up and down a bank of snow.

She wore a shiny white parka, and as he came closer, she turned to show him a face exquisitely carved in a deeply beautiful grace. The hood fell away and her golden hair fell upon her shoulders.

Mesmerized in her brilliant green eyes, Jason could only gasp to himself, almost unconsciously. "Lord."

I will fight any evil. For this truth, beauty and goodness that I envision here.

And God was pleased.

