

CHAPTER

ONE

IT WAS JUST ANOTHER DAY ON CONQUERED PLANET EARTH, DRIVING up to my job lying to people.

I headed out to the Beverly Garden Suites in Beverly, Massachusetts, early in the morning, about seven. Traffic wasn't too bad. Coming from Revere you're bound to hit some snarls where the road runs into 128 North. No prob. Just put the Beastie Boys on the MP3 and let them grate at me from the speakers.

Every so often I looked in the rearview mirror. Good. Didn't look like anyone was following me. Not saying I thought Janos was clever enough to have me tailed, but I didn't get this career path by being loosey-goosey.

I stay safe by being paranoid. Works for me.

Anyway, the drive up to the Suites was uneventful. I pulled into their parking lot right on schedule. Well, a minute off—the cars coming the other way were led by some idiot from Pennsylvania who decided driving by a strip mall and old houses in Beverly, Massachusetts, was a fine way to sightsee. Pennsy drivers. When you grow up in New Jersey, you never find worse.

I liked the motel. Nice, cozy place to stay when you were pretending

to be a businessman visiting from out of town for the spring and summer. It was a two-story building with a brick lower floor and white siding with green trim up top. Good old American eagle perched atop the stairwell in the center, lots of greenery around the front. Just, you know, a nice place.

There were only two other cars in the parking lot along the front of the motel: a decade-old VW bug, complete with a burn-your-eyes-out yellow paint job and filled with so much junk only a college student could stand the mess; and a shiny blue Chevy Cobalt. No great difficulty figuring out which one Janos drove.

He was early. Good. So far he'd stuck to his script. After four months of playing pal with the guy, one would hope I'd know his habits.

Not that I could criticize him for his choice of ride. Mine was a black Hyundai Santa Fe, a short, stubby SUV. It was something a nuclear family of tourists would drive to haul their kids around Maine for the summer, mother-in-law in tow.

But that was all part of the game. Janos couldn't see my real car, or my real clothes, or my real face.

Anyone else around? I stretched my arms and yawned like I was tired. Which I was. You don't stay up playing the newest *Assassin's Creed* until midnight without serious video game hangover.

Hmm. Across the road, parked in front of the mini mall, were two sedans and a big Excursion—all black, tinted windows, engines running, judging by the exhaust ghosting in the cool morning air. I rolled my eyes and zipped the neck of my pullover. “Way to stay low-key, boys,” I muttered aloud.

Okay, item check. Stone green fleece pullover? Check. Wallet? Check. Swiss Army knife? (Thanks, Dad.) Check. Change? I patted my pockets. Nope. Found 87 cents spilled all over the seat. That's the downside of wearing khakis.

Finally, the big enchilada itself, a briefcase that surprised me with its weight. Who knew a half a million in \$100 bills was that heavy? If

it were me, I'd have brought a bearer bond. Untraceable. Negotiable at any friendly bank. And not nearly so obvious.

But Janos didn't trust banks. So I carried cash.

On the way to the stairs, my shoes clicked across the two parking spots nearest the office—one for handicapped drivers, with its familiar white wheelchair on a blue square. The other was a white drawing of a figure with two legs and four arms, set on a green diamond.

A four-armed alien.

Pssh. Now even the little mom-and-pop businesses had to provide parking for the Ghiqasu. Thanks very much, federal interference and the Consociation Accommodation Act.

“Stupid qwaddos,” I said.

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Janos Vanchev was a big man. Not big influence-wise. Big as in rotund. Round like a parade balloon. He was also a foot shorter than me, which left me feeling confident in all our dealings. Nothing like looking down on a guy's shiny bald spot to give you a boost.

He grinned that moronic grin of his. “Caz! Come in, please, yes. Is good to see your face again.”

That was Janos for you. Sounded like he stepped out of a bad eighties movie about Soviet spies. There might be some merit to the rumor that Janos was ex-Committee for State Security, the Bulgarian secret police. Who knew the Bulgarians had their own secret police?

“Hey, Janos, how're you doing? You don't look any better than when I saw you in May.”

It was true. His hair was thinner, more gray than black. There were dark circles under those solid brown eyes. He was just as pasty white as his driver's license, though he'd grown a scraggly goatee in the intervening month. Illegal activity was apparently bad for his complexion.

“You like my new car? Is best model on road.”

“That Cobalt? Not flashy enough.”

“Says the man driving Japanese piece of *boklutsi*. You like drink?”

“No thanks. I don’t do rakia at—” What time was it? 7:25. Sweet. “Almost 7:30. You got any orange juice?”

“Orange juice? What are you, child? You drink rakia or coffee in this room or nothing. Sit. Please.” He indicated the chair by the TV. The news was running—CNN, with some talking head reporting from Berlin or Bonn or somewhere German. Sound was muted, so the only noises in the room were from the two of us and the air conditioner whirring.

“I’m good.” No way was I going to sit and let him have the upper hand. A maroon chair was stuck in the corner of the room, facing out toward a tan couch. Those two bits of furniture formed a triangle with the door as the third corner. Janos’s briefcase was in the corner of the room. Looked like it threw up his wardrobe on the floor. He’d left *TIME* and *The Week* discarded on the couch cushions. I’d have gone for *The Economist* myself. Off to the right of the couch was the kitchenette, where Janos hummed some Old World tune while he clattered around with the glass and a half-empty bottle of rakia, fruit brandy from his motherland.

“My Chevrolet has the new fusor cells. Runs forever. No charging batteries. What does SUV have? Your little shoebox down there?”

Keep talking, Janos. I could’ve cared less that his car ran on Low-Energy Nuclear Reaction. Okay, so it was fusion, and perfectly harmless, but whatever. I scanned the room from where I stood. Where’d he stash the sketches? “Gas mix. Gets a ton more mileage than anything I had in college. Don’t have to buy a whole new fusor core when it burns out either.”

“Fusors are way you must go, Lancaster.” Janos chuckled. “Unless the *izvŭnzemni* make our cars fly too.”

“No dice on that one. You think the qwaddos would let us?”

“Bah. Is nothing we can do to satisfy the *izvŭnzemni*. Best for all to take their alien technology and let them run what they want to run. If not for them would be no fusion, and coal would choke us, yes?”

“Hey, man, things ain’t so bad now. When was the last time we had a major war?”

“You see news? They send Chinese and United Nations soldiers off to some rock through Big Ring. They all fight whatever *izvŭnzemni* tell them to on other planets. No fighting men left on Earth! Is no one left to fight!”

“Whatever you say. I for one don’t want another particle weapon zapping the U.S., even if it was an evacuated town.” I didn’t want to dwell too much on the qwaddos.

“Bah. The *izvŭnzemni*, they make life tremendous pain since 6/16.”

Janos liked to use that catchphrase, along with several billion other people who could speak English. Short for June 16, fifteen years ago. You know, when the qwaddos showed up with their masters. The aliens didn’t threaten conquest. They just bought us out.

See, the whole thing hinges on the Big Ring. That’s what the average guy calls the huge structure the qwaddos and their masters built in orbit, between Earth and the moon. It’s a gateway among worlds that shaves months off their interstellar travel time. As if having faster-than-light spaceships wasn’t impressive enough. According to them, the fabric of space-time in this region is perfect for such a portal.

To use it, the qwaddos made us a nice cozy protectorate on their highly valued interstellar trade and security route. Put a huge military base and trading post on the moon. Issued intergalactic travel permits to select individuals and paid big bucks—well, platinum and such—to reimburse our governments and hire our armies as mercenaries.

No alien invasion. More like alien corporate takeover.

Janos trundled out of the kitchenette, rakia glass in hand. He took a swig and bared his teeth. “*Nazdráve!* Puts hair on chest, as they say.”

Bet he’d rather it was hair on his head. I patted the briefcase. “I brought you a present.”

“Ah, yes. Have yours right here. Is like Christmas!” He took another drink before setting the glass on the counter.

Janos dug through his briefcase. Socks, shirts, and underwear—okay,

really didn't need to see those—went flying. Something crinkled, sounded like rain shaking leaves. He hoisted a bag from the clothing.

“Yes, you see? Everything you asked of me. Picasso, Matisse, Braque. So for this you brought me five hundred thousand. Is best in cash.”

My heart pounded against my chest. Not because I was nervous around Janos. The man was a marshmallow. An armed marshmallow, but still, a marshmallow. And I had his money, every last bill the real deal. No worries there. What had me jumpy was the fact that he'd stuffed hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of art, these irreplaceable works, into Target bags like he'd shopped 'em out of the office supply aisle. “No cash for you, chief, until I see them.”

“What, you are not trusting me?”

I grinned, made it look as real as possible. Checked the watch. 7:30. The guys were waiting on me for the signal. “Just protecting my rep, you know? The collector depends on me to deliver the goods, and he's not about to hand over half a million for cheap forgeries.”

“Forgeries! Never. You look here, see what Janos brings for you.”

It was one of those rare moments when Janos got upset. All it took was a dig at his ability to filch honest-to-goodness works of art. He fumbled with the knot tied in the top of the plastic bags, his fingers pudgy like sausages and hairy to boot. Nasty. But you don't hang out with a guy for months and pretend to be a colleague in the world of art theft without learning to suppress your sense of disgust.

I took a few steps toward the couch. He was on the kitchen side, struggling with that knot. Whatever he muttered had to be some Bulgarian profanity, judging by the spittle. “You need a hand?”

“No, no, set out the money.” Janos sounded irritable. He must be nervous. But this was his big score, after all. I'd be nervous too.

“Want me to count the money?” I set the briefcase down on the couch. Gently. No sudden moves, you know? It's like dealing with a scared dog.

“Let me count . . . ah! Aha! Here we are.” The knot gave. Janos

pulled the bag apart and dumped the sketches onto the couch without flourish.

Lord, don't let me flinch.

Funny praying right then. There wasn't much of it in the preceding months. Or years, for that matter. Another of those people I needed to keep in touch with and failed miserably.

Thankfully the works were individually secured in plastic sleeves, like someone decided they were giant baseball cards. Unreal. The top-most one was a Picasso that hadn't left its owner's possession for fifty years, until it was stolen eight years ago. It gave me chills when my fingers caressed the sleeve.

"You see? Janos delivers. No empty boasts here, my friend." He laughed and clapped me on the shoulder.

Ick. Just count the money already. "These are amazing, Janos." No lies here. Such beautiful work. It should be displayed in a museum for all to see and to love. Or at least cared for in someone's home, barring that. Not traded flippantly in a hotel room, like drugs or hookers.

So I could be sentimental. Sue me.

"Yes, yes, pretty pictures. Now, the five hundred thousand." Janos retrieved his rakia. Drained that puppy in a matter of seconds.

"Like I said, it's all there." And so were the sketches—the entire inventory. Whew. One more thing going my way.

Come on, Janos, get counting.

He took wads of bills and fanned them. A beatific smile creased his expression. "Is wonderful smell, yes? Smell of money."

"Yeah. Fantastic." Easy, there. Don't get tense. "You should do bearer bonds. How many times have I told you?"

"Pah. Trust only in bank of mattress, yes?" He chuckled heartily.

Ha-ha. I didn't like him standing on the kitchenette side of the couch. Left him with room to hide. But the door and window were behind me, at least. Checked my watch—

Uh-oh. Time to move.

“Hey, you mind if I turn the news up? I missed it when I had to roll out this morning.”

“Yes, yes. Not too loud, though. Is not good to listen to bad news in world for long.” Janos’s eyes were glued to the briefcase. He took his time with the stacks of money. Good for him.

I found the remote sticking out of a couch cushion and thumbed the volume. The newscaster, guy with hair Ken could have styled for Barbie’s benefit, was in the middle of saying: “There’s no word of when the United Nations will continue negotiating with the Panstellar Consociation for technological allowance. Since the inclusion of Earth in the Consociation’s protectorate program, the Consociation has been reluctant to share anything beyond the development of fusion power. U.S. officials are pushing for medical research and space exploration information. The president has convened a press conference for later next week at the site of former Nantucket, on the fifteenth anniversary of its destruction by positron weaponry that the Consociation fielded after U.S. refusal to disarm.”

“Barbaric creatures,” Janos muttered. His face never left the money. “Make a whole city evacuate and then turn the island to glass. And they lecture us on violence! Bah.”

“Rough deal, no doubt. At least no one got killed. And no radiation clouds.” Frankly, if we hadn’t threatened to turn our Air Force loose on the qwaddos’ diplomatic ships, Nantucket would have still been a lovely place for rich people to vacation. The U.S. learned real quick that buddying up to the qwaddos was the best way to make sure everybody got what they wanted.

Namely, money.

I just wanted to keep the volume running to cover the footsteps that were coming up the stairs. I hoped they were, anyway.

“Ah. Is good.” Janos turned to me and smiled like a little boy on Christmas. “All the money is here.”

“Hey, told you so.”

“Yes, you did! Good man.” Janos clapped his hands together. “Another drink. Come!”

“One sec. I have to call the collector.” Here goes. Got the cell phone out. Breathed normal. Played it cool.

“Da, good. Tell him—no, please, let me speak to him! I must tell him has been pleasure to deal.”

“Oh, you can probably do that.” Pushed send twice. It rang. Don’t have a stroke, Janos.

The door crashed open. Half a dozen men in black uniforms, boots, body armor, and helmets thundered through. They all shouted commands at once, variations on “Get down!”, “Don’t move!”, and “Show us your hands!”

Since they had M4A1 carbines and Glock 22s, I obliged. But only after I let the lead man slam me against the wall. Which he did a bit too convincingly.

“Isaac, you don’t gotta lay it on that thick,” I hissed through my teeth. My face was pressed hard against the wall, arms and legs spread-eagle, with a gun’s muzzle in the center of my back and a rough hand patting me down.

“Shut up,” he whispered back. In a louder tone he ordered, “Lancaster Foss, you have the right to remain silent! Anything you say can and will be used—”

Blah, blah, blah. Heard it. About a bazillion times. You know, I could probably play a cop on TV as many times as I’ve been “arrested.”

Yeah, I put those quotes in there on purpose.

“*Ne! Az sum nevinen!* I did nothing wrong!” Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* looked less shocked. They had Janos on his knees in the entry to the kitchenette, hands on his head. He couldn’t look away from the open briefcase of money. Probably wondering if he could make off with it when the guys with long guns stopped paying attention.

“Janos!” I hollered. “Don’t say a word! Don’t make a deal with them. It’s worth your while.”

Isaac prodded me right in the kidney with that gun. One of his

stooges put me in zip ties. Together they spun me around and shoved me toward a corner.

“Caz!” They dragged Janos out the door. Oddly, in that moment, I heard the chickadees singing outside the door, even over the mumbling news commentator and the thumping jackboots. Janos’s sweat stank, mingled with the odor from the rest of the men. Didn’t anybody use deodorant? “Foss, help me!”

They hurried him out. The door slammed shut. Finally. I exhaled.

“Nice show, huh?” Isaac went to the window. He removed his mask. That was one friendly Filipino man, skin all bronze and hair black as coal. Wrapped up in his riot gear, he looked like a total thug. He grinned great big at me. “I think I’m getting better each time.”

“Certainly more realistic. Cut these off me, will ya?” I hated zip ties.

“Sure thing.” He sliced them with a knife you could have used to carve the Thanksgiving turkey.

“Thanks.” I rubbed my wrists.

“You got it all. Nice work, man.” Isaac holstered his pistol and tapped one of his men on the back. “Hey, Falcone. Make sure those sketches get properly secured and tagged. Every bit needs to be taken care of.”

“You got it, sir.”

I shook Isaac’s hand. “Always a joy doing business with the FBI, Isaac.”

“You’re the best, Caz, no matter what they say about you.”

That’s my name, FYI. Caz, short for Casimir Fortel, thanks to my parents and their sentimental attachment to their Eastern European heritage. Janos knew me as Lancaster Foss—also nicknamed “Caz.”

“The reward will be in your account by this afternoon, man, and you earned every cent.” Isaac looked at the sketches as the agents slipped them carefully into a new briefcase. “Can’t believe that slug thought he could steal from a retired art critic and hide ’em forever.”

“Thanks.”

“You know, you kind of look like that guy from that space show.”

“What guy?”

“That show you like. The canceled one. With the space cowboys? Come on, man, it was on Fox ages ago and you never stop yapping about it.”

“Oh, *Firefly*.” I frowned. “Nathan Fillion.”

“That’s the boy.” Isaac gestured. “See?”

I regarded my face in the mirror on the far wall. Okay, so with the haircut and coloring, and the contacts, I did kinda look like Captain Mal Reynolds. Bright blue eyes, light brown hair cut short and combed semi-neatly, chin crooked slightly to the left, scar on the right side of my nose, medium build on the muscled side—according to me—six foot one. Good looking, have to admit.

“Yeah, keep staring.”

“Thanks, jerk.”

“No prob.” Isaac grinned again. “Grow your beard back. It looks better.”

“Says you of the ever-present goatee.”

“Did you ever have trouble with Janos? How’d you get him to agree to this, anyway?”

“What kind of a question is that? Seventy-five percent of what Janos knows about me is a lie. The trick was to find out what he wanted to hear and tell it to him.”

That’s my job.

CHAPTER

TWO

IN MY DREAM, I WAS CAPTAIN OF A STARSHIP.

Forget which one it was this time. Probably *USS Defiant*, my favorite. Ever watch *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*? Loved that show. Avery Brooks was the man. It was like having smart-mouth Hawk from *Spenser for Hire* with his own space station.

Anyways, somewhere in the middle of shouting orders to my helmsman to fire phasers on the nearest *Jem Hadar* warship, a doorbell rang.

The helmsman turned around, all stocky and curly-haired, and said in a voice three octaves too high for an Irishman who should have a brogue, “Hey, babe! Get your butt outta bed!”

Something about Chief O’Brien calling me babe snapped me right awake. Three bleary-eyed blinks later, my apartment ceiling coalesced.

“Mmmph.” My first word of the day.

Something gurgled in the kitchen. Coffee pot? Either that or a drunken robot. Left the question of who was making the stuff. Not that I drank it, but I kept a few brands stocked for entertaining guests. Must mean I had a guest, and she was still here.

The doorbell rang again, more clearly this time.

“Did you hear me? Get up!”

Man, her voice was shrill. Somehow it had seemed silken and seductive last night. Though after enough margaritas, a car horn was probably just as entrancing.

“Comin’. Eventually.” I staggered out to the living room, red T-shirt and black shorts in all their glory. It was painfully bright, enough to make me shield my eyes. A wonderfully blue sky over Revere Beach and the Atlantic Ocean shining in the sun—it didn’t help that the walls were white and the carpet beige. This must be the kind of pain vampires feel. “You opened the blinds. Great.”

“Don’t be snotty.” She wore another of my T-shirts, the black one emblazoned with the silver *Legend of Zelda* crest, and blue jeans. Must have found them on the floor. “You gonna get the door or what?”

Door? Oh, yeah, the bell. My brain seemed to be stuffed with rags and nails versus the normal rag matter.

My cell phone buzzed. Where was it? Over on the table by the couch—no, under the table. Okay. I scooped it up. “Yello.”

“Open the door.” It was Isaac.

“What?”

“I said, drag your lazy white rear over to the front door and open it so I can stop ringing the doorbell like I been doing for the past five minutes.”

“How’d you get past the security door?”

“FBI, you dope.”

He sounded alert this early in the morning. What time was it? Nine? Oh, so not so early then. “Hold on.”

I dragged myself to the door. Bread in the toaster popped up, mostly black and somewhat brown. The girl smiled at me as she poured a cup of coffee. Long blonde hair, long legs, blue eyes, freckles on her nose and cheeks . . .

Wished I could remember her name.

I opened the door. Isaac leaned against the jamb, arms crossed, cell phone cradled in one hand.

“Morning, sunshine.”

“Shut up. You want coffee?”

“Nah. You got any of that orange spice tea?”

“Yeah, probably. Come on, I’ll get the water started. Thanks for wearing civvies on this social call, by the way.”

“Hey, man, I know how to work undercover too.” He had on a dark blue polo shirt with white stripes, khakis, and brown dress shoes. No gun that I could see. A big old watch worth mugging a guy for. “So let’s just cut . . .”

His words trailed off. I turned around. He stared, mouth stuck mid-sentence, at the woman in my kitchen. What in blazes was her name? “Hey, babe?”

She sipped at her coffee, mug cradled in both hands. “Yeah?”

Would’ve been a lot easier if her name had popped up like that toast. No dice. “We need to talk. Could you . . . ?” I rolled my hand in a vague motion. Do what? Go hang out on the balcony?

Leave?

She flicked her gaze from me to Isaac and back again. “I could take a shower, but the coffee’s ready.”

“Warm it up later, then.”

“All right. Fine.” She slammed the mug down on the counter. Coffee sloshed over the edge and formed a nice puddle around the base.

Isaac sidled over to me. “She’s nice. Anonymous. Can we recruit her?”

“Remember the part where I told you to shut up?” A headache pounded right behind my eyes. “What’re you doing here, anyway?”

He dropped into the easy chair. There were two of them facing the couch; he took the one that offered a better view of the deck and the ocean beyond. He put his oaf shoes up on my table. “Got a job for you. A big one. Probably the biggest one you’re ever gonna get.”

“Peachy.” I slumped onto the couch. Gave me a nice look at the oil paintings on the opposite walls, my scenes of the Maine coast.

The girl—woman—whoever—went storming across the dining area. She had her clothes bundled against her chest and her chin up,

refusing eye contact. The bathroom door slammed shut. Loudly. I winced.

Isaac shook his head. “You got great taste, man.”

“That sounds like sarcasm.”

“Crack investigator, that’s you.”

“Am I that predictable?”

“Yep. When was the last time you went out with somebody minus the aid of the local bartender?”

“Long time. Drinks dull the emotions.” And that was for the best, trust me. “What do you know about it? You’re married.”

“Uh-huh.” Isaac twisted the gold ring. “And lovin’ every minute.”

“Puke. Okay, so what’s the job?”

“It’s art. One-of-a-kind piece. Well, one of a kind around here.”

“Here, where?”

“Earth. Plus the rest of our solar system.”

Well, now. My headache receded and my eyes ignored the bright light blasting in the windows. Even my posture improved. I rubbed the stubble that was on its way to a beard. Alien art. That’d be a good-paying job. “So what do you need from me?”

“First, get showered and dressed. You smell funky, as usual.”

“Nice.”

“You’re riding with me to HQ in the city. Then we call out to Denver.”

My enthusiasm came to a screeching halt, like the Blue Line T braking in the tunnel to Boston. “What the blazes is in Denver?”

“DEXA office.”

I groaned. “You mean I gotta tangle with Department of Extraterrestrial Affairs on this?”

Isaac shrugged. “I told you, man, this is a big one. Anything involving the qwaddos—er, the Panstellar Consociation’s monitors—goes through them. Anything and everything.”

“Including theft of alien artwork. Fantastic.”

“Right on.” Isaac leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. “Now go clean up. Get in the kitchen and make me tea when you’re done.”

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Took longer than usual to get ready, what with the bathroom occupied. The girl didn’t say a word when I grabbed my toothbrush and a washrag. Fortunately, I’d gotten a shower last night before I’d gone out. Made my BO passable, despite what Isaac said.

I dressed in something more appropriate than my underpants. I’m partial to a black polo shirt and khakis when going to an official pow-wow. Ever see George Clooney in *The Peacemaker*? 1996? Awesome flick. Makes me want to go jumping from hood to hood of every backed-up line of taxis within a block radius.

A quick glance in the mirror confirmed I was, in fact, still good-looking—though this soon after finishing a job (and a binge), it was always a shock. The hair was golden-blond and spiked, with a shorter cut. I had the beginnings of a neatly trimmed beard, also blond. The eyes were back to their normal pale hazel, mostly brown with green bursts around the pupils.

The real me. Caz Fortel, at your service.

Isaac drove his personal car. Thankfully the man had the sense not to bring a Fedmobile to pick me up. The Chevy Malibu was white and decked out with a leather interior. Those felt good on my back, which was pretty torqued from, I assume, sleeping on my left shoulder the wrong way. Again.

He had the music turned down low on his favorite rock station as we rolled out onto North Shore Road. My apartment complex loomed behind me over the rest of the buildings facing Revere Beach, like a half-dismantled pyramid of concrete and glass. Okay, so it was ugly, but it was home.

“You ever figure out her name?” His eyes were hidden behind dark sunglasses. Couldn’t see the mischief in them.

“How’d you guess that?”

“Again, FBI. The ‘I’ is for Investigation. You never said it. Not even when you ushered her out. In a hurry.”

“Yeah, well.” Couldn’t say much else. You think I like not remembering the name of the woman who’d left my apartment? “Should’ve checked my phone. That would have told me. But I wasn’t exactly up to speed.”

“So you found it?”

I wagged the phone in the air. “Laci.”

“Pretty name.”

“It is. And so is she. Probably a nice girl who’s very smart and good at her job too. Whatever that may be.”

“Don’t sound so thrilled.”

“It’s just that the likelihood of this going anywhere beyond the sheets is slim to none.”

Isaac nodded but didn’t comment. He knew me well enough to not say anything when it could hurt more than help.

He had a compact Bible sitting on his center console, right next to the water bottle and candy wrappers. Its pages were worn and torn. Didn’t realize I was staring at it until he said, “You can read it. Ain’t gonna bite you.”

“Funny guy. I’ve got my own, thanks.” Well, used to have one. I turned my attention to the buildings blurring by.

“When was the last time you read it?”

Inquisition, much? “Do they teach FBI special agents subtlety?”

“I missed that class.” He grinned at me. “So you still read it. That’s good.”

“How’s about we leave my spiritual life or lack thereof out of this?” He knew how to tick me off. Had to give him credit.

More silence. Isaac cleared his throat. Great. Here we go again. “You still believe.”

It didn’t sound like a question and was surprisingly genuine. Did I still believe? Of course. “That’s never been the problem, Isaac.”

He nodded. “Okay. Well, if you ever want to talk it out . . .”

We left it at that. It was his third such invitation in the last year. Must be I'm his new hard case. Oh, well. There were worse people than Isaac bothering me about why I hadn't been to church in a long while.

Listen, when you lie to people for a living, and you realize how often they lie to you, going to church every Sunday tears at you. Plus I get sick of reopening old wounds.

"Know forgiveness is always there for you, man." Isaac kept his eyes on the highway as he changed lanes.

Okay, so he was really worried about me. I got rid of the sarcastic answer I'd planned. "Thanks. Really. I know it."

Nothing more to say until we reached Government Center.

"You seen this yet?" Isaac leaned over the steering wheel.

"What, the big hole in the ground since they tore down City Hall? That thing was the ugliest building in town. I don't exactly miss it." Wait a sec. What was that new tower? It had to outreach the Hancock by ten stories. What was immediately obvious was that it was not man-made, and by "man," I mean human. "When did the qwaddos put that up?"

"Last week. Grew it like Jack's beanstalk, Thursday, I think. You shoulda seen it, man. Took no more than six hours. I don't think the agents and staff on my floor got a thing done all day."

It was—well, it was wrong. A slender spire, with four sections that looked like tendrils of a vine wrapping around a central core, covered in a reflective surface just like the Hancock only more iridescent. Instead of taking on the sky's blue, the crazy thing shimmered and moved. Like it was alive.

Goosebumps rose on my arms. "Well, no wonder they paid the city to build a new hall a few blocks over. That one's almost done, isn't it?"

"Gonna look a whole lot nicer than the upside-down pyramid on crack they had from the sixties." Isaac found a parking space on Cambridge Street, opposite the curved building of brick and concrete facing Government Center—One Plaza Center, FBI field office.

Downtown Boston was heating up nicely for a summer's day. The

smell coming out of the T station was outstanding: sweaty people carried on a gust of hot air with *eau de garbage*. Okay, so I didn't sell you on it. But for me it was a trigger for lots of good memories. Going to college, touring the town, waiting tables.

Meeting her.

Great. My teeth ground together. "Remind me to thank you for dragging up old times. Maybe we should go get me a new Bible while we're at it."

"No prob." Isaac donned his sunglasses. "Hang on. I thought you said you had one."

"I lied. Got rid of my last one years ago."

"You lied to me?"

"I lie to lots of people, Isaac. You the least often. Makes you special."

He snorted. "I'd feel better getting a Hallmark card."

The center was mobbed with people—tourists mostly, and clusters of well-dressed passersby I took for business types. A flock of police drones buzzed overhead, air from their turbofans shaking the leaves on the trees. Black-and-white plastic versions of dragonflies a foot long, that's what they reminded me of.

Right about then I saw the qwaddos.

Everyone saw them, no doubt. But only a few stared like I did. Give folks a few years of the outlandish on a daily basis and they take it to be normal. For me, though, the sight of four-armed extraterrestrials, each with a head that reminded me of a cross between a horse and a wolf, set my teeth on edge. Caught a glimpse of armored snouts, strangely patterned hair, skin the color of brick, or sand, depending on the species, I guess. I turned to avoid any further scrutiny—or heaven forbid, eye contact.

Saw a lot fewer churches, that's for sure. The ones I did see had been converted to uses that fit better, considering they must've lost all their congregations. One was a coffee shop, the other affordable housing.

My church, not far away, was one of them. Casino.

Meanwhile the qwaddos got their own parking spots for whatever it

was they drove and their own bathrooms. There was one of those forest green automated restroom stalls right by the T-stop for Government Center, a gleaming metal arc emblazoned with the familiar silhouettes of men and women. Attached to its side like a silver slug was a pod half the size, with the same weird patterns and undulating surface as the new tower. Its oval hatch was marked with a bright green sign with the white silhouette of a four-armed alien.

That's what passed for normal, fifteen years in.

Isaac stepped out into the street, fearlessly striding through the temporary gap in onrushing traffic along with a dozen other brisk walkers. No waiting for changing lights or crosswalk signals. That's the way you gotta do it in Boston. Three qwaddos joined the herd like they did it every day—which they probably did.

The inside of the FBI office was just as drab as usual. Dingy white walls? Check. Dark carpet? Check. Solemn people in suits and ties? Again, check. Isaac led me past security without bothering with the metal detector or the HD scanner so new you could smell the plastic from six feet away. We took the elevator to the uppermost floor where resided a fancy conference room. Never been allowed there before.

No one told me the boss man himself would be waiting inside. He sat at the head of the table like he was Grand Moff Tarkin. Come on, the table was even glossy black just like that scene in the Death Star. Hopefully I wouldn't choke.

A big shiny FBI emblem covered the wall behind him. Windows to the right gave us a great view of Government Center with its crowds, and the rest of the panorama would have been superb if not for that qwaddo monstrosity.

"Mister Fortel." Moff Tarkin's smile was blindingly white. I felt my earlier headache throb back into existence.

"Special Agent in Charge Harold H. Carpenter."

We shook hands. The FBI sure knew how to pick its bosses—this guy could have been the next governor of Massachusetts with his gray-ing hair slicked back, his tanned complexion, perfectly pressed navy

blue suit, and red tie pinned precisely in place. There was an American flag pinned in place on his lapel, God bless. Whatever aftershave he'd doused on his chin was strong enough to kill a large dog. I resisted the urge to retch.

"How's it going?" I plopped down in the nearest seat.

"It will be going better once you agree to work for us." Carpenter's smile went stiff. "Please, have a seat."

Ah, sarcasm. "You didn't tell me your boss had a sense of humor, Isaac."

Isaac scowled. He took a chair opposite mine. "Would you mind, sir?" he asked Carpenter.

"By all means."

"Shut up, Caz, and behave yourself."

Carpenter nodded appreciatively. Jerk. He went on my list.

It's a long list.

"We won't waste any more of your time on pleasantries, Mister Fortel," he said. "Suffice it to say this job is the most vital ever to come across my desk, a fact I feel we need to impress upon you."

Carpenter's gaze slid sideways to Isaac, who stiffened up like he was on trial. Had he vouched for me to this clown? Sorry, man.

"So tell me," I said. "What'd the qwaddos lose this time? I mean, this isn't the first theft of their artwork. Every exhibit that's shown up on Earth has been targeted at one point or another. Though why anyone would want qwaddo art is beyond me. Have you ever seen it?"

"It's very organic in appearance and makes wonderful use of natural lighting to reflect color," Carpenter said. "The MFA put on an excellent show in their galleries last spring."

Only years of practice at concealing my inmost feelings kept me from dropping my jaw on the floor. Okay, mental note. The clown wasn't completely clueless. "I was gonna say rotting vegetables slathered in mildew, but okay, let's use your description."

"This time, though, it is not the Ghiqasu who have been targeted." Carpenter tapped the table in front of him. The center, a bit off to my

left, split open and the two halves slid apart with a soft whirr. Not sure what was hiding in there, I leaned back slightly as a silver and black—bowl? It looked like a bowl—rose from the crevice. Light glowed and pulsed. Ah, that's what it was. A picture sprang into the air about a foot above the table.

I nodded appreciatively. "Nice hologram projector. The aliens donate that one to the FBI for services rendered?"

"No, as you're well aware, projectors like these are just entering the market for government use. I have little doubt as licenses are made available, civilian models will follow."

There was a glowing white symbol on the base, an apple with a bite taken out. It figured.

"The subject of the hologram is our problem." Carpenter tapped the table top again. He must have a recessed touchpad. My inner tech geek salivated. The image zoomed in on itself.

Well, now. Can't say I'd ever seen anything quite like it. Writhing reds and golds and pinks intertwined. They reminded me of DNA strands, like at the beginning of all those *X-Men* movies. A brilliant glow emanated from every corner. Something like crystal shimmered along and between the strands. "What is that, a sculpture? It's—magnificent. Look at the detail and the symmetry." I really, really wanted to touch it.

"All the more impressive is its size." Carpenter's voice took on its own hushed awe. Man, if that's what I sounded like, mooning over the thing like some country kid who's never seen a Rembrandt, I'd lost my edge. Probably due to too many margaritas. "This sculpture was created on the atomic level. What you see is its representation under an electron microscope."

One of the puzzle pieces in my head clicked into place. "Not qwaddo art, then. You guys are working for the big guns: the Jinn."

No insult meant. It was the socially acceptable name for them. Hey, what can I say, their language doesn't translate well into English. Near

as I've heard, their long, unpronounceable designation means "true people who bring wisdom and light to all beings."

Gee, no arrogance there.

"Don't be so surprised, Mister Fortel. The Jinn are the power behind the Panstellar Consociation, as you well know."

"Not too shabby for microscopic aliens," Isaac said. "So their sculpture was stolen. How long ago?" I said.

"Between 11 p.m. yesterday and 5 a.m. today, Mountain Standard Time."

"Haven't you guys put out feelers on this with your own art theft squad?"

"No. That's not feasible. Within our building only myself, Special Agent Manzano here, and you are privy to the nature of this crime. The fewer people who know, the better. This is a highly sensitive matter and we cannot risk even one breath of it getting out." All traces of Carpenter's smile vanished. "Not considering the way the Jinn value their art."

"What do you mean?" I gave Isaac a questioning look. His face was a very unhelpful blank. Thanks, pal.

"As in, stealing art from the Jinn is a crime punishable by death," Isaac said.

Whoa.

"This particular piece of art is 1500 years old," Carpenter said. The image spun in the air before him, dazzling with its shifting colors. I could see right away why someone would desire to have it, even if you needed a microscope to fully appreciate its beauty. "And it is crafted from the carapaces of several esteemed philosophers and political leaders of their nation."

"Dead people. Carved into a sculpture."

Carpenter nodded.

"That's a first for me, no doubt." I got up from the chair and paced to the window. Something about this didn't sit right with me. The Ghiqasu building loomed over Government Center. People milled about with qwaddos mixed in—just a few handfuls. Never noticed

until then that their skin colors came in as many hues as our human skin does. I stared at them and the tower, trying to get some answers. No such luck. “Any idea why I’ve been requested?”

“As I said, we’re trying to steer this out of official channels.” Carpenter spoke each word carefully. “That and, well, once the Ghiqasu Hounders reviewed the list of individuals we recommended for this task, they specifically asked for you.”

My heart dropped. Not in a hey-that-girl’s-got-the-hots-for-me kind of way, but in a great-now-what’d-I-do-wrong kind of way. My temper started its slow burn. Did I mention I get ticked when things aren’t spelled out black and white? Yeah. “What? Me? Why?”

Carpenter started to say something but stopped himself.

Way to clam up, Einstein.

Isaac filled in the silence. “They know you’re a Christian.”

“You blabbed?”

“Yeah. But they asked first.”

“Weird.”

Carpenter cleared his throat. “Our thoughts were similar.”

I said a bad word right there. Not going to repeat it, but I’m working on cleaning that stuff up.

Isaac winced.

“The Ghiqasu value religion. They see it as a true indicator of a thriving civilization.” Carpenter smiled at me. “Perhaps it’s xeno-anthropological interest.”

Oh, great. Qwaddos wanted to study me like a chimp in its natural habitat. “Could be they just want to fill out their resume with another religion they helped ease into extinction.”

“Hey, man, Jesus isn’t going anywhere,” Isaac said. “Just because churches are closing doesn’t mean the faith is dying.”

“Yeah, well, that’s your opinion.”

“We’ve been around this block before, Caz.”

All I could think about was the empty pews in the buildings for sale in the Beantown suburbs. All those people who looked up to the sky

fifteen years ago this June and saw they weren't at the center of God's universe anymore. They up and split.

Isaac was one of the stalwart exceptions.

"Enough, gentlemen." Carpenter made a sour face. "You can debate the merits or demerits of the downfall of Western religion some other time. Needless to say, the recovery of this sculpture is an absolute necessity to head off a diplomatic nightmare. The Ghiqasu already have Hounders assigned to the task, and the Jinn leadership have been made aware. They're displeased."

Understatement of the century, no doubt. What do you do when the alien overseers are mad at you? Besides pray often. "Lucky for us the Consociation likes our pretty blue planet for its location."

"We are a second-level protectorate of the Consociation. Hardly an exalted rank." Carpenter sighed. "Thank goodness they parked the Big Ring here. We'd be the backwater of the galaxy otherwise."

"Yeah, it wasn't so bad before."

"Which part? The wars? They don't allow those, you'll recall. Remember what happened to Iran and Israel?"

"Ouch."

"Exactly. As the United States, we're in a tenuous position. The Consociation admires the drive America showed with the Apollo program, not to mention the shuttle flights and continuous unmanned exploration during the intervening decades. We went from bicycle salesmen cobbling together an airplane to interplanetary travel in sixty years, and they take our planting the flag on the moon as a first claim. That's part of the reason they came to us when they started building their base of fleet operations on the dayside of the moon. Thanks to that, we don't have to go through the UN Committee on Alien Interaction, just as the Chinese and the Russians are exempt. However, that puts more pressure on us to not foul up."

"What a blessing." Sarcasm alert! "So what do I get out of this—their undying gratitude?"

"One million dollars."

He said it so matter-of-fact, it didn't quite register.

"Mister Fortel?"

I must have gone quiet for a long time. Isaac looked worried. "Uh, yeah. Yes. I'd say you can count me in, boys."

Carpenter beamed that shiny, toothpaste commercial smile. "Excellent. This is fantastic. We'll get you on your way to Denver immediately. Special Agent Manzano here will escort you to Logan Airport. We've secured a seat on the next Skywhale flight. You'll leave by 1100 hours."

"That's not a lot of time to pack."

"Make it quick then." Carpenter stood. So did Isaac and I. We exchanged happy handshakes. "This is great news, gentlemen. The folks at the University of Wyoming will be relieved to have someone of your caliber on the case, Mister Fortel."

That brought all the dancing dollar signs in my head to a crashing halt. "UW? What's at UW? That's in Wyoming."

"Very astute," Carpenter said. "Their art museum is the location of the exhibit. Even with top security precautions it seems the thief was undeterred. It's not a problem, is it, Mister Fortel?"

"No. No, sir." Sir? Since when did I "sir" anybody?

"Good." He practically skipped out of the room.

Isaac clapped me on the shoulder. "Hey, man, you okay?"

"Wyoming, Isaac."

"Yep."

I sighed. "Sure, I'm okay. I enjoy having old wounds reopened with a rusty spoon."

"Kind of ironic."

"What?"

"The Ghiquasu want you because you're a Christian."

"I wouldn't call it irony. More like misplaced hope. Come on, what did they want, a preacher or an investigator? You can bet, oh, a million dollars on which one they're gonna get."

“Doesn’t sound like it’s their problem, man, but yours.” Isaac slipped his sunglasses back on.

I glared at him, but he just grinned and ushered me from the room. He was such a pain in the butt when he was right.

Besides, I still had two questions rattling around in my head.

One: Why did the qwaddos want a Christian on the job?

Two: Did I count as one?