

A Need to Know

A UFO Story

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© April 4, 2012



Based on the Characters and series created by
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Historian's Note: This story opens in
December of 1984, but most of the events

depicted here take place in 1977, prior to SHADO becoming fully operational.

December 15, 1984:

Whoever said that this is easier the second time around, had no idea what they were talking about, thought Ed Straker, as he stood at the altar with his best friend, and best man, Alec Freeman. The bride's entourage had been delayed by a traffic accident and Ed had just learned that they would be arriving in about twenty minutes. In the mean time, he was fighting a serious case of bridegroom jitters.

"Maybe she decided that this wasn't such a good idea, Alec," said Ed, interjecting levity into the situation. "We both know how difficult I can be."

"Not a chance in hell, Ed," replied Alec. "She's just as stubborn as you are. Hell, she's probably giving that truck driver who blocked the road, a piece of her mind right now."

Ed could picture Virginia Lake, in full bridal regalia, dressing down the person responsible for the accident.

"I wouldn't want to be the one responsible for making her late," Alec added. "You're not the only one around here who can instill fear into the troops."

Since being promoted to XO, Colonel Lake's icy temper had become something of a legend and was considered something to be avoided at all cost.

"The way I hear it, Ed, they fear her more than they do you."

"By that, you mean, we deserve each other."

Freeman went serious for a moment, "You really do, Ed. You're good for each other. I haven't seen you this blissful in a very long time, and I've never seen Ginny this happy."

"You know, Alec, I was taken by her the very first day we met, but I never imagined that we

would end up together. Despite the chemistry, I didn't know if we were going to even like each other."

Alec chuckled, remembering the first time he had laid eyes on Virginia Lake. He had been turned down by women before, but he never had his ego so bruised in the process.

"You could have warned me about her, Ed. I still have the burn marks from the day I met her."

"From what I've been told, her rendition of the tale was a big morale boost to the female staff while she was assigned to Moonbase."

"I'll bet," said a slightly taken back Freeman. He pointed down the aisle. "Here comes Paul."

Foster, who was acting as a groomsman, joined the pair at the altar.

"They just pulled up, Ed."

"Thanks, Paul."

The three men took their places and waited for the ceremony to begin. The trio wore full military dress, with Ed's uniform sporting the insignia of his recent promotion to Major General.

"The stars look good on you, Ed," said Alec.

Straker nodded, but he found his thoughts drifting back to a spring day several years ago...

April 18, 1977:

"What do you mean, it's not going to be ready?" said an irritated Ed Straker, to the contractor on the end of the phone line. "The Aeroceptor has been waiting on the tarmac for six months. Skydiver is scheduled to go into service this summer and now you are telling me it's not going to be ready? Get those technicians moving and fix your problems! I expect the diver section to be ready for sea trials by the end of May! That's all."

Straker slammed down the receiver and looked up at his two best friends.

"Always said that you have a way with people, Ed," said Craig Collins, who never took anything seriously. He was one of the very few people that could get Straker to crack a smile these days.

"Now don't you start," said Straker, in no mood to be cheered up. "At the rate they are moving, Moonbase will be operational before Skydiver gets underway."

"This is all new technology," interjected Alec, in a voice of reason. "There are bound to be problems with some of it. Things could be worse, Ed. We could be having problems with the construction of Moonbase. I don't need to tell you what a logistical nightmare that could be."

"I suppose you're right, Alec," Ed said, squeezing the bridge of his nose. "I was hoping to get some early return on our investment.

Until the Utronic equipment is delivered, Sky One is our best chance of downing a UFO. Once SID is operational we should be able to compile enough data for an atmospheric intercept. It would be nice to have Skydiver in place when SID comes online."

Straker turned to Collins, "When are you leaving for Houston?"

"Tonight, I was going to wait until tomorrow, but the new SST isn't ready yet. I ended up booking a commercial flight, a 747 from Heathrow to Houston Intercontinental," said Collins. "What about you?"

Straker shook his head, "I won't be there until late next week. I'm flying out to LAX tomorrow to meet with some people from Westbrook Electronics. It seems that the chief designer is dissatisfied with the information they have been given to work with and asked to speak to the person in charge. As you are both aware, the knowledge of the alien threat is on a need to

know basis, and the commission decided that they didn't need to know."

"Sounds like fun," said Collins. "Better you than me. Well, I need to get moving. I'll see you next week, Ed."

"Take care, Craig," said Alec. "And try to stay out of trouble."

After Craig had left, Alec turned back to his friend.

"I spoke with Captain Carlin yesterday, Ed. He's going to catch a plane east and see if he can help get things moving at Electric Boat. Are you still planning to visit Skydiver next week?"

"I don't think I'm going to have time. This meeting with the design team at Westbrook has thrown a wrench into things. I should be going to Houston with Craig. We launch next month to put SID into operation."

"Why don't you let me handle the situation with Skydiver?" asked Alec. "Pete Carlin has a few

ideas on how to fix the docking latch and get them back on schedule."

"That leaves HQ somewhat bare, don't you think?"

"Major Graham can handle things here until I get back, and Miss Ealand is more than capable of handling anything that might spring up topside."

Straker nodded in approval. His executive secretary, who was a former intelligence agent, also possessed a master's degree in business administration. She was a perfect fit for the position and Straker had given her carte blanche when it came to running the studio in his absence.

Although everyone called her Miss, Janice Ealand had been recently widowed and she had two small children. Her husband, Mark, a pilot in the RAF, was killed when his plane crashed under very mysterious circumstances.

"Whatever I pay her, Alec, it isn't nearly enough," said Straker. "We were damned lucky to find her."

"Shame about her husband," said Freeman. At the mention of family, he saw a wave of sadness pass over his friend's face.

"I heard about Mary, and about what she did. I'm sorry, Ed."

"Forgot about it, Alec," said Straker, trying to push his friend's concern aside. "We both knew it would only be a matter of time before she would find someone else."

"And no one would begrudge her that," Alec added. "But asking the court to limit your visitation? There is no excuse for this. You should fight it, Ed."

Straker let his friend vent as he felt exactly the same way. But once again, the needs of SHADO would trump the well being of his family and his personal life.

"Yes, I could fight it, but that would entail answering questions that we both know I can't answer."

Freeman deflated, walking over to the servitor. He poured himself a tumbler of whiskey.

"I suppose you are right. It's just a damn shame," he said, after taking a long pull on his drink. "Can I get you one?"

Ed shook his head, "You never give up, do you?"

"One of these days you'll surprise me."

Freeman finished his drink and turned for the door, "Goodnight, Ed," he said as he walked out into the control room.

Straker glanced at the clock. It was already after eight meaning it was dark outside and Ed hadn't seen the evening sun in over three months. Getting SHADO up and running had been a long and difficult struggle, and it wasn't over yet. But he was beginning to see the light at

the end of the tunnel. Providing that I can keep these contractors focused on the task.

In the control room of the LINAC, located at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Lab in Menlo Park, California, Doctor Virginia Lake watched the event countdown timer tick its way to zero.

"Twenty seconds to event, mark," she said to her assistant, over the headset.

"Utronic beam, engaged," the disembodied voice of her assistant said from almost halfway around the world. "Standing by."

Her assistant, Phil Wade was where she wanted to be at this moment, monitoring the third in a series of tests, proving that the Utronic beam project could work. The first test had achieved the predicted readings and the second test confirmed those results. With one more successful test, they could move on to the next phase.

In 1974, a team at the SLAC, working in conjunction with a team from BLN (Brookhaven National Laboratory) confirmed the existence of the charm quark by the discovery of the J/ψ meson. After reading the results, Doctor Lake had theorized that by increasing the power to the accelerator and repeating the experiment, neutrinos moving at super luminal velocities would be produced. These particles, because of their nature, had no mass, and would pass through anything.

In order to detect and measure their speed and direction, the FTL radar, known as the Utronic Beam, had to be located a considerable distance from the neutrino source. Westbrook Electronics had purchased a small facility on the outskirts of the Australian city of Melbourne, some years ago and it was almost perfect for the test.

Lake had spent the last six months at Stanford, supervising the retrofits that needed to be done

to the LINAC for this experiment. It was a bold venture that was funded by the United States Air Force. The success of the project, her position with the company, and her reputation as a scientist were at risk. There was no room for error.

Virginia could sense her pulse racing as the timer counted down. *I haven't felt this way since Brad asked me to...*

She forced her mind away from those thoughts. After all this time, it still hurt to think about it.

When the timer reached zero the pent up energy of the linear accelerator was released and the electrons were driven down the two mile path at a velocity approaching the speed of light. They impacted the target at the end of the tunnel and produced an unseen shower of neutrinos moving at different super luminal velocities and quickly spreading out in all directions. In less than a second, the particles had passed beyond

the orbit of the moon, on their endless journey into the heavens.

Lake waited as patiently as she could for her assistant to report.

"Well," she asked, unable to reign in her enthusiasm. "Did we get it?"

"Right down the centerline, Ginny! You did it!" exclaimed Wade. In the background, she could hear the cheering of her team at the Melbourne facility.

"No, Phil, we did it!" she corrected. "Send my heartfelt congratulations to the rest of the team, Phil, as well as my thanks."

Virginia removed her headset and turned to the group of scientists and engineers in the control room. Many of them she had known from her tenure as a student at the university, some of them her instructors, and others, her fellow students.

“We got our data, it works!” she said, to her fellows.

Another cheer went up, this one every bit as enthusiastic as the one she heard on the headset. Inside, she felt a surge of pride for her alma mater.

As she made her way to the exit, she was met by a white haired gentleman whose beard and mustache matched his hair.

“Congratulations, my dear Virginia,” he said. His rich baritone voice had only a trace of a German accent.

Doctor Virginia Lake embraced her former teacher, mentor and good friend, Professor Manfred Reinhardt.

"Professor, it's good to see you again! How are you and how is Gretchen?"

"She's well, and so am I. Had we known that you were going to be here we would have postponed our trip to the old country, I..."

"Nonsense, Professor" interrupted Ginny. "The two of you needed a vacation together. I'm glad for both of you. Besides, I've been so busy with this project and I'm on a plane back to LA at least twice a week. In fact, I may have to leave tonight. I'm supposed to be meeting with a client tomorrow and..."

"Doctor Virginia Lake, call on three five. Doctor Virginia Lake, call on three five."

"Excuse me a moment, Professor."

Virginia walked over to the telephone and punched in the code to pick up the call.

"Doctor Lake," she said into the receiver.

"Virginia, Kurt Mahler. How did today's test go?"

Lake knew his interest was purely from a business standpoint and had nothing to do with scientific merit, a fact that had been a point of contention between them on more than one occasion. That, and the fact he had been

reluctant to place her in charge of the project, because of the good ol' boy attitude that prevailed in the company.

The project had sat in limbo for six months while the first designer tried to reinvent the wheel, with little regard to the time constraints. It had taken Virginia, once she had taken over, two years to get the project back on track and she still knew she was going to miss the deadline by three months.

To Kurt Mahler's credit, he had pushed hard to arrange a meeting with the man in charge of this project, and Ginny had to concede that this counted for something.

"It went well, Kurt. The Utronic beam works. By all rights, the team at SLAC deserves another Nobel Prize, but we know that isn't going to happen."

"No, especially if you want our guest to consider your proposal."

"He has agreed to come?"

"Colonel Straker is flying into LAX tonight, so I'm going to need you back here for a meeting in the morning."

"I see," said Virginia. "Well then, I had better get moving. Thank you, Kurt."

"You're welcome, and congratulations, Virginia."

Ginny hung up the phone and shrugged. *I wonder why he is being so nice.*

She turned her attention back to her mentor.

"Why don't you and Gretchen come to LA for the week? I'm going to be busy during the day but we can all have dinner tomorrow evening."

"Well I don't want to impose, and it's a bit late to get tickets..."

"I'm flying back in the company jet so you can come with me. I have to return next Monday to

finish up a few things so you have a flight back," she added. "I won't take no for an answer."

"In that case, how can we refuse? I'll call home and tell Gretchen to pack."

Virginia took her leave of him and rushed to her office to grab her briefcase and purse. She looked forward to spending some time with a couple she considered adopted parents.

The number of military contractors directly involved in the manufacture and deployment of SHADO hardware was over one hundred and twenty, at last count. To Ed Straker's surprise, only one of them had to be told the full story. It would be hard to design and build a space interceptor without guessing its need, he thought.

While several military aerospace firms were tapped to assemble subsystems, the prime contractor for both the sub launched Aeroceptor

and the Space Interceptors, was the super secret firm of Lockheed Skunk Works. The need to know group was held to less than fifty people, including the test pilots. Many of these people were already slated to become members of SHADO once the designs were tested and delivered.

As he walked into the lobby of Westbrook Electronics, Straker was met by the company's President and owner, Kurt Mahler.

"Colonel Straker, I presume," said Mahler, as he extended his hand.

Ed shook hands with the man, whose grip surprised him in its strength.

"My pleasure, Mr. Mahler," replied Straker.

On the way to his office, Mahler gave his guest the expected discourse about the company history, its role in the advancement of micro-circuitry, and his vision for the company's

future. When they reached the privacy of his office, Mahler played his trump card.

"I have some good news for you, Colonel Straker. The initial tests of the Utronic Beam were a success."

"That is good news, though it was unexpected. I was under the impression that your design team needed additional information to complete the process. That is why I'm here."

"I will be honest with you, Colonel. I know very little about the inner workings of the project. Some years ago, I had to leave the laboratory behind to concentrate on the more mundane, but necessary aspects of running a business. That is why I hire smart people. The design team that Doctor Lake has put together is second to none in the field of applied physics."

Mahler motioned to chair and reached to his desk.

"Vicky, would you have Doctor Lake join us please?"

"Right away, Mr. Mahler," replied his secretary, over the intercom.

"How do you take your coffee, Colonel?" he asked, pointing to the table in front of them.

"Light and sweet, please."

While Mahler played host, he continued. "Truthfully, I don't know why Doctor Lake needs more information. You'll have to ask..."

Mahler was interrupted by a knock on the door. Ed turned and he found himself speechless as he gazed at the woman who entered the room. He was on his feet before he knew it.

On the studio grounds, Straker had become accustomed to seeing beautiful women, and he had developed an impassive attitude towards feminine beauty, but he could see that the woman in front of him was no ordinary lady. Her ash blonde hair was cut to shoulder length

and loosely curled at the ends, but her blue grey eyes had an intensity that Ed had seldom seen, carrying an air of assurance that sharply contrasted her youthful appearance.

As he met her eyes with his, he felt as if she could see to the very depths of his soul.

"Ah, Virginia, come on in," said Mahler. "Colonel Ed Straker, may I present Doctor Virginia Lake, our chief designer.

"Nice to meet you, Colonel Straker," she said, her voice pulling him out of his reverie while still sending a tingle up his spine. Her Brit accent, coupled with the sensual tone of her voice, only added to his internal perplexity.

"My pleasure, Doctor Lake," Ed said, extending his hand.

As she took his hand, she held his gaze. For a brief moment, Straker thought he had seen a flash of recognition in her expression, but it was gone before he could be sure.

"Mr. Mahler tells me that your team has made some progress."

"Yes, we have," she said, sitting down at the table. "The Utronic Beam was able to detect neutrinos moving at high relativistic speeds to as much as twice the speed of light. The results have been verified by three separate repetitions of the initial experiment."

"It sounds very promising," said Straker.

"It's a good start, Colonel. The next step is to fine tune the sensors and emitters, as well as writing the code for the user interface, which is why I asked Kurt to arrange this meeting."

Virginia paused and took a sip of her coffee.

"Let's be frank with each other," she continued. "The system that you have asked us to build can only be described as a faster than light radar system. But you and I both know that the only particles that can exceed superluminal velocities are those with no mass. Somehow,

Colonel Straker, I don't think the Air Force is interested in tracking neutrinos."

Lake was not afraid to speak her mind and Ed found himself admiring her determination. He knew exactly where she was going, and why. But bringing another group of contractors to the truth would require the approval of Henderson and the commission.

"Why don't you show the Colonel what you have accomplished so far, Virginia?" suggested Mahler.

Lake looked like she was going to protest, but acquiesced.

"Of course, Kurt," she said. "If you would please come with me, Colonel Straker?"

Straker found himself in awe, as his guide explained the operation of the Utronic Beam. As she covered the principles of operation, Ed began to realize just how brilliant this woman

was. Yet with all her intelligence, her explanation was worded in such a way that even a layman could grasp the basics of the beam's operation and she had managed to convey the information without sounding condescending.

"Based on your explanation, Doctor Lake, I would have to assume that the Utronic Beam uses a tachyon particle stream as its working medium," Ed commented, as they entered her office.

Lake turned to him, obviously surprised. It was clear to him that she had underestimated his scientific prowess.

"You have a much better understanding of particle physics than I was led to believe," she said, a trace of irony present in her voice. "I'd ask you what it is you do for the Air Force, but I suspect I'll get the standard answer that it's classified."

She's definitely not afraid to speak her mind, thought Straker. He had to fight to suppress a grin.

"Forgive me, Doctor Lake, I had no intention of misleading you," said Ed. "While I can't talk about my current responsibilities, my knowledge of particle physics was from an earlier career path. Once upon a time, I was in line for the Apollo program."

"I see," said Lake, her face brightening. "What happened, if you don't mind my asking?"

"It came down to simple mathematics. There were only so many positions available. Had I been a few years older...well, things might have been different." Ed neglected to mention Vietnam and the aftermath of being a prisoner of war. Few people who had not lived through the conflict would be able to empathize.

"I understand," said Lake. "It's not an easy pill to swallow when you aren't allowed to follow your dreams." She paused for a moment,

seemingly lost in thought. "Colonel Straker, the success of this project means a great deal to me, on a personal as well as a professional level. In order to write the code for the user interface, as well as the detection algorithms, I need to know the approximate size of the entity, its range of speed, its expected distance. Without that kind of information, I can't guarantee that the system will detect whatever it is supposed to."

Straker had hoped that the technicians at SHADO would be able to fine tune the tracking system once it was installed. But after seeing the design architecture, he knew a specialized team of software engineers would be needed to maintain it. The Utronic Beam was a software designed system and the computer code was at the very core of the inner workings.

"I'm beginning to see your point, Doctor Lake," said Ed. "But before I can render any decisions, I need to confer with my superiors."

Virginia nodded, seemingly satisfied with his answer, but Ed knew that she would not give up easily.

"How long will it take to get the hardware for the satellite ready for shipment to the Cape?" he asked.

"The XI module for your satellite is ready now. But without the software, it is nothing more than a brick. The code that was loaded into the test unit is a fraction of the complexity of the final version."

"Ah, but that is the beauty of being able to download new firmware," said Ed. "Any improvements or modifications can be sent remotely, without the need of another space mission. Tell me, Doctor Lake, would being able to experiment with a live system help you with the development of the firmware?"

"Of course," she said.

Straker opened his briefcase and pulled out a diagram showing the Earth and its moon. In the same orbit, following sixty degrees behind was the L₅ libration point. A pictorial of the SHADO satellite was shown in the insert.

"This is where the satellite is parked," began Ed. "In every two body orbital system, there are two additional stable positions in the path of the second body."

"Yes," said Virginia. "The Lagrange points. I'm familiar with the concept."

Straker nodded and pointed to the L₅ point. "This is where SID is parked," he said. "This position will give you an unobstructed view of the SLAC facility for several hours a day."

"Sid?"

"Our nickname for the bird," Ed said, dodging the question. "I can arrange for you and your team to have access to the Utronic sections of

the satellite, including uploading to the XI module. Will that be useful?"

Virginia studied the diagram for a few moments. She finally looked up. "It will certainly help. But I still need the other information in order to finish the project."

"Let's go talk to Mr. Mahler about getting that module shipped to the Cape," said Ed.

Later that evening, Virginia found herself pondering over the mysterious air force colonel she had met that day. At dinner with the Reinhardts, she had to force herself to stay focused on the conversation as images of the dashing handsome Ed Straker danced through her head.

After the three of them returned to Lake's apartment, Professor Reinhardt retired early, as was often his habit. While Gretchen waited in

the living room, Ginny brewed a pot of tea for both of them.

"Is that mint I smell?" asked Mrs. Reinhardt.

"Of course," replied Virginia, as she set the tea service on the table. "I always have mint tea before bed. It's a habit I picked up from a dear friend."

Gretchen smiled at the compliment. It had been a chilly October night when Virginia Stevens nee Lake, had wound up on her friend's doorstep, having just witnessed her husband's infidelity.

"So, Virginia, what is his name?" asked her friend.

Ginny knew that she had been preoccupied at dinner, but she had no idea that Gretchen had picked up on the reason.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't give me that. I haven't seen a light in your eye like that in, well, it has been some time."

Virginia was aware of the fact that Gretchen Reinhardt knew her as well as her own mother. Bluffing her way out of this one was a non-starter. Reluctantly, she told her friend about Colonel Straker.

"Well, alright. You know that the firm I work for is a military subcontractor," said Virginia, pausing. "Today, I met the person in charge of the current project I'm working on, and I have to tell you, he has to be the most gorgeous man I have ever met in my life."

"Gorgeous?" asked Gretchen. "That is an interesting adjective to describe a man."

"I know, but it's the only one that seems to fit. His eyes, they are such a beautiful shade of blue, you can just lose yourself in them, just like diving into the deepest part of the ocean."

"Virginia, I know you well enough to know that a person's appearance doesn't get you this excited. There is something else, isn't there?"

Ginny nodded, "Yes. It's the strangest feeling I've ever had, but when our eyes met, I felt as if he knew everything about me. He seemed, familiar, somehow."

"Are you sure that you have never met him?" asked Gretchen.

"Positive. I'm quite sure I would have remembered meeting him. It's just so unsettling to think that a person you have never met can see into the very depths of your soul."

"Is he married?"

"I didn't see a ring," said Virginia. "But that doesn't mean he is single. Besides, most Air Force officers that make it to Colonel are married. My father didn't make Lt. Colonel until he married my mother."

"You could ask," suggested Gretchen.

"Somehow, I get the feeling that this man is just as tightlipped about his personal life as he is about military secrets. So let's forget about playing matchmaker, okay?"

"You can't stay in mourning forever. How long has it been, Virginia? Three years?"

"Next month would have been our four year anniversary. It still seems like only yesterday."

"Don't you think it's time to move on, dear? You shouldn't spend the rest of your life alone."

"I know, Gretchen, I do get lonely at times, but I don't know if I can trust anyone enough to ever make that kind of commitment. What Brad did to me really hurt and I don't want to go through it again."

"Virginia, if I've learned anything, I've learned that life is not a dress rehearsal. One day we wake up and find that life has passed us by. I don't want to see that happen to you."

Gretchen stood and turned to the bedroom.

"I should let you get some sleep, unlike Manfred and I, you have to work tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Gretchen."

When she was alone, Virginia considered everything that her dear friend had said to her.

Ginny had come to the United States when she was only sixteen to attend Stanford University. As a person with much better than average intelligence, she excelled at her studies and finished her bachelor's degree in just over two and a half years. She spent the next three and a half years cramming the courses needed to obtain her doctorate. At twenty two, she became the youngest post grad student in the history of the university.

Being young to start with, coupled with the fact that she was, physically, a late bloomer, had limited her social and romantic interactions. That all changed in the summer of her third year. Although she was still carrying a heavy course load, she had caught up with the classes

she needed for her master's degree. This allowed her more time to socialize, but the greatest challenge she faced was her transformation from a clumsy awkward teenager to a beautiful curvaceous young woman. Ginny found all the male attention which she was now getting, somewhat uncomfortable and she declined many invitations from guys who had not given her a second look prior.

This change was not lost on a young man who had befriended Virginia the year before. Marc Egan, now a senior, asked her out, and to his surprise, she agreed. Because of their close friendship, Ginny felt comfortable with him and it wasn't before the couple became inseparable.

A week after their first date, the starting quarterback of the school football team, went out with an injury and Marc was chosen to be his replacement. Under his leadership, the team did well that year and Ginny found being the

girlfriend of the quarterback put her in some social circles that she wasn't used to and she soon learned that popularity wasn't all it was cut out for.

Much to her delight, Marc seemed unaffected by this and she soon found herself falling for him. But fate was soon to intervene.

Marc and Virginia had been invited to a party in late January of 1966 but Ginny was involved in a project which made use of the linear accelerator and the time she had been assigned coincided with the party. Not wanting her boyfriend to miss the event, she encouraged him to attend without her. On the way back from the party, the car that Marc was riding in was broadsided by a semi. The truck driver had fallen asleep at the wheel and all of the occupants in the car were killed instantly.

It was at the funeral where Virginia had met Gretchen Reinhardt for the first time. The support that Ginny received from the

Reinhardtts helped her cope with her grief and forged a friendship that had lasted over ten years.

Virginia knew that had Marc lived, they would have married and had children. It was something they had talked about. *And I never would have married Brad, she thought.*

Ginny looked up at the clock and noticed it was after midnight. She removed her robe and climbed into the rollaway bed, dimming the lights as she pulled the sheets over her.

The next morning, Straker passed along Dr. Lake's request to Henderson and the commission. He had surprised himself by his own recommendation. Dr. Lake had made a convincing argument for her position and Straker had been forced to agree.

There was another concern to be addressed. SHADO was going to need a specialist to fine

tune the system when it was installed, and Virginia Lake was the obvious choice. While he was on the phone to HQ, Straker ordered Lake's dossier to be sent to him. To say that her accomplishments were impressive would be an understatement. Ed noted that her father had been an American, a B-17 pilot assigned to the Eighth Air Force during World War Two. Sadly, he was killed in action while flying one of the last raids of the war. *I wonder if my father knew him*, thought Ed. He would ask, but Straker had been alienated from his father for many years. His cover as a film studio executive only added fuel to the fire.

As a student of military history, the raid on the German city of Dresden had always confused him. Besides the transportation hub and communications centers, the city had very little military value. Those targets that did exist could have been dealt with by a surgical strike. Leveling the city had been a waste of munitions, and a waste of lives. But for some unknown

reason, the Allied High Command had chosen to completely destroy the city and that decision remained controversial to this day.

Straker found it ironic that both of their fathers were flying the same mission, on the same day. *Maybe that is the connection I felt with her*, he thought. Had they met eight years ago, Ed would have pursued the chance that something was there. But those thoughts were tempered by one very important consideration; despite the separation and subsequent divorce, he was still in love with his ex-wife.

The startup of SHADO had more than monetary consequences. Ed knew that at least two other marriages had ended in divorce and another was on the rocks, due to the needs of the organization. "*...oh break the bloody rule for once!*" Mary had said to him one night after he had come home very late. But the IAC and SHADO security had laid out, very specifically, what the spouses of its operatives could be told.

Mary knew that Ed was still active military, even though he dressed in civvies for work. She also knew the new film studio was going to be a front for a Top Secret military project. But that was all she could be told, by IAC decree. Ed knew that this was for her own protection, but he also knew a better balance needed to be struck or finding willing young recruits would become problematic.

Ed's own marriage had ended with a legal separation in 1973, soon after his son had been born. The couple had tried twice to reconcile, the first time when Johnny had almost died at three months old from an adverse reaction to an antibiotic. They tried again a year later but both times, Ed found himself pulled away from his family when they needed him most. By the end of 1974, Mary had succumbed to her mother's wishes and filed for divorce.

It wasn't long before Mary started seeing someone, an old family friend named Steven

Rutland. For the first few years, Straker never saw him, as his ex-wife managed to keep her new romance separate from her family concerns. But, quite recently, that had changed. When Ed would pick his son up for his weekly visit, Rutland would often be there. The two men exchanged nothing more than a nod, if that, but Ed could sense a trace of animosity in the way that he watched when Mary and Ed would discuss things concerning their son.

Two months ago, Mary informed him that she was going to marry Rutland. "*Johnny needs a father figure, Ed, and you're not around enough to fill that gap,*" she had told him. Straker wanted to object, but the cold hard truth was, she was right. Many times, over the past few years, Straker had been forced to reschedule or cancel visits altogether due to the never ending needs of SHADO. In the end all he could do was wish her well. Ed's visitation with John had been set for once a week, and alternating weekends, so he was shocked when

Mary asked him to limit his visits to one weekend a month. Reluctantly he had to concede, although he was sure that she had succumbed to pressure from Rutland. The court notice, sent by Mary's attorney, had been no surprise to him.

Ed forced his thoughts away from Mary as he prepared to visit a few unsuspecting contractors while he waited for an answer from the IAC. He knew that the commission would take up the West brook question in their next meeting scheduled for the end of the week. *At least I can make some good use of the time by ruffling a few feathers in Silicon Valley*, he thought.

Several days later, Straker received a call from General Henderson informing him that the commission was taking his recommendation under advisement.

"I expect that the question will be debated at the next meeting," said Henderson.

"That's good news, General."

"Don't get your hopes up too soon, Colonel Straker. Informing Doctor Lake's design team of the situation means bringing more personnel onto the payroll. We are already twenty three percent over budget in that category. We've had to cut expenditures by postponing two of the planned submarines. Bringing Lake on board will force their cancelation, as well as nixing any chance of getting that second satellite you've been hounding me for."

"General, you know how important it is to have redundancy in our tracking network, and recruiting the people who designed it only makes sense," countered Straker. "There must be some way to swing this without cutting any more programs."

"I'm sorry, Colonel. This is the way it has to be. So I need your decision now."

Once again, Straker was forced to concede military hardware in exchange for the personnel to staff the organization.

"Don't feel too bad, Colonel, the commission may make this all a moot point," said Henderson just before he hung up the phone.

Straker felt resentment for his old mentor. The past several years had greatly strained their relationship and although he knew this wasn't true, Ed was beginning to feel like he was being set up to fail. These feelings were a far cry from the respect and admiration he once held for the aging general and Ed didn't like the thoughts it left him with. He picked the phone back up and dialed the number for Westbrook Electronics.

Across the Atlantic, the aged military man leaned back in his chair and gazed out the window. A man with an Eastern European accent began to speak.

"That was difficult for you, wasn't it?"

"He seems to think I enjoy holding the purse strings so tight," replied Henderson. "The person he wants to bring into the fold, well, I've known her since she was a child. But you probably already knew that."

"Indeed," replied the man, "along with the biographies of all those in key positions. It's what you pay me to do."

Henderson dismissed the statement with a wave.

"I imagine if fate hadn't intervened, I might be having the same argument with her father. He was one of my closest friends."

"Lt. Colonel Lake's death was, tragic, of course. Would he have been your first choice to command SHADO?"

"My first choice would have been me," replied Henderson. "Bob would have been my deputy. The original plan had called for fifteen years of

R and D before we would be ready, not the thirty it took. Even if I hadn't been injured in the attack, the writing was already on the wall, no, we were both too old."

Henderson turned back to the window, a wistful expression on his face.

"Jackson, I want you to do a background on Phil Wade and Kurt Mahler. Associates, co-workers, friends, family, everyone they have routine contact with."

"And Virginia Lake?" queried Jackson.

Henderson handed a folder to the man standing on front of his desk. Jackson quickly skimmed through its contents. He looked up to see the General's gaze, who was obviously waiting for his reaction.

"Does she already know?" asked Jackson.

"I've known her mother, Lynn, for a good many years. She wouldn't have risked her daughter's

life by telling her. I think it is safe to assume Virginia knows nothing of this."

"You are aware, of course, that this secret is going to eventually reach the other member governments."

"With any luck," said the General. "I'll have long since retired and that will be someone else's problem."

When Ed arrived at Virginia's office the next day, he was surprised to see her toying with a model aircraft. He was sure that it wasn't there the last time he had visited. Gently he tapped on the open door to announce his presence.

"Colonel Straker, please come in," she said, standing to greet him. She must have seen his interest in the replica and added, "It's a model of the bomber my father flew during the war."

"May I?"

"Of course," she said, handing it to him.

Straker studied the replica with interest. The model had been constructed with great care and detail. The paintwork was exquisite with every nuance carefully reproduced. The nose art was markedly different than was the norm for the time. A pair of blue eyes with long lashes appeared under the words *Lady Lynn*. On the tail, the markings of the 379th Bombardment Group were proudly displayed.

"Very nicely done," said Straker. "Where did you find it?"

"A gift from my mother," she replied. "I've always wanted one, but I could never find a model of the newer G series."

"I'm not surprised. The G model didn't reach production until mid 1943." Changing the subject, Ed asked, "Is the module ready for shipment?"

"It's being loaded aboard the company aircraft as we speak. I'll be leaving for the airport within the hour. I plan on supervising the installation."

Before Ed could object, she added, "Colonel, I know you have you people at Houston to do the final checkout, but there are adjustments that need to be made after the XI module is installed. It's a very delicate procedure and I'd feel more comfortable if I do this myself."

"Do you always get your way, Doctor Lake?"

"Well, that remains to be seen, but, yes, mostly," she said, her smile conveying several messages at once.

Virginia Lake had a decidedly barbed sense of humor which Ed found amusing. *It suits her*, he thought. *I wonder how Alec would fare in a battle of wits with her.*

Conceding her point, he replied, "I guess it would be foolish not to take advantage of your expertise. When do you plan to perform the procedure?"

Virginia picked up a notebook from her desk.

"According to the schedule, this component is considered a hot item. It's slated to be installed as soon as it arrives. I suspect I'll be working 'til midnight to finish. "

"I see," said Ed, thoughtfully. "I had hoped to observe the procedure, since I'm going to be one of the two astronauts responsible for commissioning the bird. But I'm afraid my flight doesn't leave until tomorrow."

"You are certainly welcome to accompany me," said Virginia. "It's a long flight and I wouldn't mind the company. That is, if you don't mind having a lady pilot."

"You fly?"

"I soloed at sixteen, and since Westbrook owns several aircraft, a fleet of four, Lear 24's and a pair of Piper twins, I've had a chance to rack up my flight hours."

Virginia jotted a note on her pad and handed it to him. "LAX, terminal A1-1," she said.

"Westbrook's hanger is on the southeast corner of the field, closest to runway 25 left."

"Thank you," said Ed. "I guess I'd better get moving. I still need to pack."

"I've scheduled a departure time of 11:30."

"More than enough time, see you then."

After he left, Virginia considered her offer to ferry the mysterious Air Force Colonel to Houston. She was almost certain that he could have pulled rank and secured a military flight if he so chose. Maybe he enjoyed her company as well. From her conversations with Straker, she had learned that he held a masters degree in astrophysics, so they certainly had much in common. Truth be told, Virginia missed the casual conversation one had when they were getting to know a potential mate. She asked herself, *potential mate? Do I really feel that way about him?* Gretchen's words had

obviously had an effect on her as she had spent so much time avoiding social entanglements.

Quickly, she forced those thoughts from her mind and looked at the weather report. A storm system was making its way over the southern Rockies and she altered her flight plan to stay north of the worst of it. *This should only add an hour to our arrival time*, she thought as she finished. She faxed the document to the airport and gathered her belongings. The courier had been kind enough to take her bags to the airport along with the XI module.

As she walked to her car, Virginia remembered a bit of advice her mother had given her some years ago. *"Just relax and enjoy each other's company,"* her mother had said. *"It's not like you're going to marry him."* This advice had served her well back then and she decided it would do just as well, now. She climbed into her waiting vehicle and started towards the airport.

Sol 3, a remarkable habitat for a rather unremarkable species, thought the senior member of the procurement team. As he piloted the spacecraft on its hyperbolic path to keep it hidden behind the sun's glare, the commander of the mission considered the history of the life forms that inhabited, or more accurately, dominated the planet. Six thousand years of warfare, including two global conflicts, had done little to squelch their inherent propensity of self destruction. *They have so little consideration for each other, why should show any for them?* This question was posed by his superiors before each and every mission as a means of justification for what they had to do to survive. It had nothing to do with compassion as such emotions had long since been purged from their psychological makeup. The inhabitants of Sol 3 were a resource, a resource they needed to survive. It was that simple.

When they had first discovered this system, sixty years ago, the approach and landing on

this alien world was relatively simple. The procurement missions had kept a low profile and even though some of them had been seen while conducting their operations, the purpose for the visits was still a mystery to the planet's inhabitants.

This changed as the second global conflict drew to a close. Technology began to advance at a logarithmic rate as the two major powers engaged in a dangerous game of brinkmanship. Both sides had now developed surface to air missiles capable of destroying even an advanced craft. In addition, advancements had been made in radio detection and ranging and sophisticated tracking networks had become a reality. As a result, the approach to Sol 3 had become considerably more difficult as the spaceflight profile required maintaining superluminal velocities until just before atmospheric interface.

The procurement missions had been supported by an intelligence network since before the second global conflict. One of the indigenous governments had even collaborated to obtain advanced technology. The wisdom of this action had been debated by the leadership, but it was decided that the benefits would outweigh the risks. That all changed, eight years ago.

The intelligence network had learned about a plan for a defense organization to be created and supported by the larger governments. The catalyst for this action seemed to be photographic proof that these incursions were of, as they called it, extraterrestrial origin.

A plan was conceived to quash this operation, by eliminating the individual mostly responsible, but the plan backfired by confirming that a real threat existed. The focus had shifted to targeting industries and personnel that might contribute to this new threat. Last week the sensors at the edge of the

solar system had detected a tachyon beam that was much too strong to have emanated from any natural source within several light years. The intelligence network confirmed that a FTL tracking network was being developed by one of the entities supporting this defense organization. The key component for this system was being transported by the very scientist responsible for its creation. This was his mission, and she was his target.

Finding the Westbrook hanger took a bit longer than Ed had anticipated, and when he walked into the building, he could see Virginia Lake finishing her external inspection of the aircraft. He noticed that her attire had changed as well, a dressed down look that didn't detract from her appearance in the least. Jeans and a white blouse which was cinched in at the waist completed her outfit. In his uniform, Ed felt overdressed.

"I was beginning to wonder if I was being stood up," she said wryly, as he walked up to her. Noticing his gaze, she added, "I like to be comfortable when I fly."

"I apologize for my tardiness," he began, but she dismissed his contrition with a wave.

"I still get lost in this place. Shall we?" she asked, gesturing to the aircraft.

The Learjet 24 was capable of carrying eight persons, including the flight crew and compared to the supersonic Seagull series transport, these aircraft were economical to operate. Straker had ordered a dozen of them to fill the role of a short to medium range personnel transport. As they boarded, Ed could see that this aircraft was in exceptional condition. His suspicions were confirmed when he looked at the placard set into the exit frame and saw the manufacture date of 1976.

"You can stow your luggage in the back," said Virginia, as she secured the hatch behind him. "I need to finish the preflight checks."

Ed stowed his gear and made his way to the front of the passenger cabin. Secured to the front passenger seat, was a large shockproof case containing SID's most vital component, the XI module, which was itself a container for the computer code still under development. He was ready to take the seat in the back when Lake called to him.

"You're welcome to join me up here."

Ed turned and poked his head into the cockpit. To his surprise the right seat was empty.

"Do you always fly solo?" he asked.

"Most of the time," she replied, trying to suppress a grin. "Kurt has tried to pressure me into taking a copilot when flying the jet, and I do if the situation warrants, but it drives him crazy when I refuse."

Straker knew that an experienced pilot could handle the Lear 24 alone as he had done it himself. Compared to the heavies, the Lear handled like a sports car. Gingerly, he slid into the copilot's seat and strapped himself in. No sooner did he have himself situated when he found the checklist placed in front of him.

"Do you mind giving me a hand?"

"No," he replied, "of course not."

The cockpit of the business jet was small and even though they were both slim, their shoulders almost touched and they brushed each other as they reached to set the controls. Ed could swear that he felt a tinge of electricity between them.

In the underground complex, known as SHADO HQ, Lieutenant Keith Ford had the day watch. Being the OOD meant he was not only responsible for himself, but for all the junior

officers he supervised. Keith had been recently assigned to HQ as the communications chief. Having been the person responsible for implementing the worldwide communications network which SHADO depended on, his duties had taken him all over the world.

Seated at the radar console was a dark haired second lieutenant who was fresh out of training. Her exceptional test scores, coupled with her enthusiasm had caught the attention of the Commander and landed her a position at HQ.

"Keith?"

Ford walked over to her console and leaned over.

"What do you have, Ayshea?"

"A possible sighting," she replied. "But I can't hold it. The signal keeps fading out."

Keith watched the signal appear briefly, only to disappear before a lock could be confirmed. The new tracking system had been plagued with

numerous bugs such as this, ever since it was brought online. The idiosyncrasies were being identified and eradicated, but this was a painstakingly slow process.

"Do we have anything important on the schedule today?" he asked.

Ayshea glanced down at the daily briefing.

"Skydiver docking tests are being run at the Electric Boat facility. Two supply ships are slated to return from the Moonbase construction site later this evening and the Utronic XI module for SID is being delivered to Houston today."

Keith considered the items which she had listed. The delivery of the XI module, which was the key component for the FTL radar system, was a significant event.

"When is the XI flight scheduled to leave?"

"It should be in the air now," she replied.

He rubbed his chin, thoughtfully, then finally said, "Keep an eye on that radar ghost."

"Yes, sir," she answered.

Keith made his way back to his station and picked up the phone.

"Major Graham," he said into the phone. "I think you might want to have a look at this."

"One hundred ten knots...one hundred twenty, V one...rotate," her companion called.

No matter how often she experienced it, Virginia found the art of the takeoff to be the most thrilling part of any flight. It didn't matter whether she was flying a small two seat Cessna or the Lear 24, currently under her command.

"Retract landing gear," she directed.

A few seconds later she heard him reply, "Gear up, and locked."

The thought of having a full bird air force colonel as a copilot suddenly amused her and she had to stifle a giggle. The speaker crackled to life, distracting her.

"Learjet six-three-whiskey, turn left bearing zero-seven-five, proceed on course, climb and maintain six thousand, contact Los Angeles departure on 135.4. Good day."

"Turn left bearing zero-seven-five, proceed on course, climb and maintain six thousand, contact Los Angeles departure on 135.4. Thank you, tower, Learjet six-three-whiskey," she replied.

Fifteen minutes, and several exchanges with air traffic control, later, she had reached a cruising altitude of thirty-eight-thousand feet and had placed the aircraft on autopilot. She turned to her companion, "Now that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Not at all," replied Straker.

"Really, why are your hands shaking?" *Gotcha*, she thought, as he involuntarily looked down at his hands. "Relax, Colonel. I was kidding."

It took a few seconds, but his face soon broke into a slight grin.

"You are full of surprises," he retorted, dryly. "So, what's next, aerobatics?"

"Not in this thing. Although the Lear is maneuverable enough that someone might try it. I remember a Boeing test pilot doing that once."

"Alvin Tex Johnston, August 6, 1955," replied Straker. "He preformed the maneuver in a 707 to impress representatives of the International Air Transport Association. He was called on the carpet the next day and told never to pull a stunt like that again. But the maneuver made aviation history."

"I didn't know his name," said Virginia. "I was only ten when it happened and I still was living in England."

"How long have you been in the states?"

"I came to the US when I was sixteen, and I've lived here for sixteen years," she said. *God, that's half my life,* she said inwardly. *I do need to start living.*

"I have the UFO on positive track," said Lt. Johnson.

Major Graham strode up to her console.

"Trajectory termination?" he asked.

Ayshea punched up the data on her console and looked up at her CO.

"Best estimate is the western United States, sir."

Graham turned to Lt. Ford, "It looks like you were right, Keith. They're after the XI module. Contact our people at Edwards and get the

prototype in the air, and get Colonel Freeman on the line."

Lou Graham never had expected to be the incident commander during SHADO's first genuine UFO sighting. His next decisions would be highly scrutinized by the upper brass, and what he did or didn't do would determine whether lives were lost. *Hell, we're not even fully operational yet.*

He was born, Theodore Francis, but to just about everyone who knew him, he was known as, Beaver. The nickname came from his earliest days in his career, when his flight instructor had called him the eager beaver of the group. The name stuck, and when he got his wings, his flight christened him with the call sign "Beaver." His eagerness for flight never waned, as all his life all he wanted to do, was fly. As he rushed down the tarmac to his waiting aircraft,

Captain James considered the events that had led up to this day.

His naval career had started in the early 1950's making him old enough to have seen combat in the skies of Korea. James also had the reputation of being a loud mouthed maverick, but his natural skill as a pilot forced his superiors to overlook a multitude of sins. When once asked about his attitude, he replied, "I don't ever want to be promoted out of the cockpit."

Beaver mellowed considerably when he met the woman who was to be his wife. Not long after he married Christina, James was promoted to Squadron Commander. For a while, he enjoyed the best of both worlds, reaping the benefits of the higher pay grade, yet still spending most of his time in a cockpit.

Beaver's commanding officer had taken a liking to the young man from day one and when a

golden opportunity came along, he steered James in that direction.

"Lieutenant Commander James, this is a once in a lifetime chance. The Navy has decided on a new aircraft to replace the aging F4s, but the aircraft they've chosen does have a few issues. We need to help the manufacturer work out the bugs"

"Is that the new F14 we've been hearing so much about, Captain Thomas?" asked James.

"So much for security," said Thomas, dryly. "Yes, it is. Grumman Aerospace has agreed to incorporate Navy test pilots into the program. Of course this means you will have to take a stateside transfer, as well as enduring the hardship of being home every night, that is, if you're interested."

Beaver's wife had just informed him that they were expecting their second child. He was at sea when their first was born. His decision took all of a millisecond.

"Yes, sir, I mean, thank you, sir!"

"Now don't screw this up, James. I personally gave your name to SECNAV. Pack your bags; you leave with the next COD run."

"I won't let you down, sir."

True to his word, Beaver James threw his heart and soul into the project, all while finishing his aeronautical degree. His wife, Christina, was supportive of his decision as they had agreed early on that he would put in all of his sea time during the first part of his career. Having him home now, even if it was only nights and weekends, was an added bonus.

In 1973, right after the F14 project reached Initial Operational Capability, Lt. Cmdr James was summoned to Washington. While he had no idea he was going to meet the President, that event would be paled by his encounter with a mysterious Air Force Colonel named Edward Straker.

Over the next hour, James was shown the evidence of the alien craft which had been captured on film, now three years ago. And he became privy to the multinational organization being formed to counter the threat.

"So, Commander James, the reason you have been called to Washington, is to consider an offer. SHADO needs good people, both for getting the operation up and running, and to staff the operation when it's ready. You can refuse, of course, as we have the means of extracting this information from those who chose not to join..."

"That won't be necessary, Colonel Straker," interrupted James. "I'm honored to be considered."

It was those very real beginnings that landed him into SHADO, and he was going to have a chance to make the first UFO interception.

As the alien craft passed through the upper ionosphere, it began to decelerate rapidly, eventually slowing to Mach 5 as it broached the upper stratosphere. Having approached over the northern Pacific basin, the UFO began a sweeping turn to the south. By the time the alien craft was at fifty thousand feet, it was screaming over the Rocky Mountain peaks at five times the speed of sound.

Ed Straker was seldom comfortable being in an aircraft unless he had absolute confidence in the skill of the pilot and this trip had been no exception, but he soon found that his fears were unwarranted. Despite her seemingly carefree attitude, Virginia Lake handled this aircraft as well as some of the best pilots Ed had known. *Probably runs in the family*, he thought.

Since takeoff, Ed had been watching Lake carefully. Her movements of the flight controls were smooth and precise, never overcorrecting.

Clearly she had logged a considerable amount of time in this type of aircraft. Though the Lear 24 was nimble, it was nothing like the Phantom II that Ed had flown during the war. But he decided that Lake possessed the skill required to fly it.

Ed turned his attention to the storm system to their south. The weather reports had predicted heavy snows in the higher elevations of the southern Rockies. Out his window, Ed could see the angry flavor of the cloud formation and the tops looked like they went up to almost fifty thousand feet.

Beside him, Virginia switched on the weather radar. “Hmm,” she said.

“Problem?” asked Straker, looking back to her.

“It looks a little rough up ahead. I’m going to see if I can get us above this muck.”

Virginia keyed her microphone, “Oakland Center, Learjet six-three-whiskey with you, request flight level four-eight.”

“Learjet six-three-whiskey, Oakland Center, climb and maintain flight level four-three, expect flight level four-eight, contact Denver Center on 134.8.”

She acknowledged the message and switched frequencies. The Denver Air Traffic Control Center granted her altitude request and soon the radar scope was clear, excepting the storm to the south.

“We should be over the worst of it now,” she said.

“That’s good news, Doctor Lake.”

“Hey, we’ve known each other for almost two weeks now, what’s your first name?”

“My friends call me, Ed,” he said, smiling sincerely. Straker had intended to keep things

formal, but he soon found this capable young lady had grown on him.

“Most of my friends call me Ginny,” she said. “A few call me Virginia,” she added.

Virginia is more formal, thought Ed. *It’s also beautiful.*

“I have a habit of moving against the tide. I think I’ll call you Virginia.”

“Somehow, Ed, that doesn’t surprise me.”

She held his gaze for a moment, and in that moment, Ed once again felt like she was peering into his soul. *Do you see all the pain, all the hurt, all the sacrifice, Virginia?* Ed was both relieved and saddened when the duties of flying the aircraft drew her attention away.

The aircraft flown by Captain James was known as Sky-Alpha. A concept prototype, the aircraft was designed and built to test the airframe handling characteristics of the proposed Sky

aeroceptor. Lacking the added weight of the reinforcing struts and heavier skin materials required for the submergible craft, yet still powered by the same scramjet engines, the prototype was capable of moving two Mach numbers faster than its younger sibling. It also lacked the computer controlled fly by wire system making the jet extremely difficult to fly. Out of all SHADO's test pilots, the only one qualified to fly it in combat was James.

Soon after takeoff, James had climbed to sixty-thousand feet and had the UFO on his scope.

“Sky-Alpha to SHADO control, I have the target. It has closed to within fifty miles of the civilian aircraft, request permission to intercept.”

“Sky-Alpha from SHADO control, weapons free. Splash me a spinner,” said the voice of Major Graham.

“Roger control, going for intercept, out.” *I'm going to have to hustle if I'm to catch it.*

Her heart had jumped when she heard her given name on his lips. As she felt herself flush, the rigors of flying the aircraft provided her a welcome, albeit, temporary escape. He must have noticed but had the good grace not to say anything. The thought of him seeing her innermost thoughts both excited and terrified her.

She was avoiding looking in his direction when something on the northern horizon caught her eye. It was just a flicker at first and she assumed it was light reflecting off another aircraft. But as the object got closer it was clear that this craft was unlike anything she had ever seen.

“Ed, do you see this?”

Straker leaned over to look out her side, “Oh my God,” he said, in a tone that sent a chill up her spine.

“Virginia, dive!”

Seeing the still taken from the cine film did nothing to prepare him for the sight of the alien craft in flight.

Captain James was at fifty two thousand feet and closing on the UFO from behind, when the alien craft suddenly decelerated to subsonic speed all while dropping its altitude by fifteen hundred feet. The unexpected maneuver caused James to overshoot the UFO and he had to circle around for another pass. But with his aircraft moving at over fifty miles a minute, he was quickly moving away from the initial datum point. To make matters worse, the UFO was dangerously close to the civilian aircraft.

In his mind, Beaver had already written the small jet off for lost.

He had spoken in what she knew was his command voice, a timbre that got people's

attention and caused them to snap to when he spoke. But this had nothing to do with the real reason she had instantly followed his instructions. *I trust him, implicitly.*

Without thinking, she had yanked the power levers back and pushed the yoke forward. As soon as the small jet started down, a flash of light flooded into the cockpit. At the same time, sparks shot out of the communications stack and half the circuit breakers tripped in sympathy.

“Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, Learjet six-three-whiskey, in trouble, we’re going down, repeat, we’re going down.”

The configuration alarm blared in the background as the aircraft approached its maximum speed and the yoke vibrated wildly as the mechanical stick shaker tried to force her out of the dive. As soon as the aircraft was obscured in the clouds she pulled back on the yoke to bleed off the excessive airspeed.

Virginia had gotten a good look at the mysterious craft and it suddenly dawned on her that this craft was not of this world. As she reached to advance the power levers a new problem distracted her from questioning her companion about it. Instead of spooling up and producing power, the turbojets remained dormant.

“Flame out!” she shouted.

Virginia set the throttles for a restart and mashed the igniters. But the engines temperature gauges continued to unwind as the turbojets refused to start.

Beside her, Straker was reaching to reset the circuit breakers on his side of the aircraft. When he finished, she shouted, “Ed, take her for a minute!”

Lake leaned forward and pushed in the breakers on her side but to her dismay, several of them refused to stay engaged. With no light and heavy snow pounding the windshield she could

not see which systems were affected. She could only hope the igniter circuits were engaged.

“Okay, I have the aircraft,” she said when she was finished. “I wasn’t able to get them all to stay in.”

“Three are out on this side,” he replied.

Once again, Virginia tried to restart the engines, but the temperature gauge continued to drop signifying an ignition failure. *Well, this is it*, she thought. They were in an unpowered aircraft with zero visibility and losing altitude over a treacherous mountain range. She knew their chances for survival were almost nil.

Captain James yanked the throttles back and pulled the aircraft into a steep bank. As any combat pilot knew, excessive airspeed was the enemy of corner velocity and dropping to Sky-Alpha’s best maneuvering speed took over a minute. By the time he reacquired the UFO, the

alien craft was once again breaking Mach one as it began a steep climb.

James kicked in the afterburners and pulled up on the stick to follow his quarry. At sixty-thousand feet and in level flight, the SHADO prototype had a significant speed advantage over the estimated speed of a UFO, but the alien craft had quickly gained altitude and was already at seventy-five-thousand feet. With the thinner atmosphere it was rapidly gaining speed.

Beaver knew he was going to lose his chance if he didn't fire now. He triggered off a missile and watched it close with the UFO.

The hypersonic missile carried by the SHADO aeroceptor had a top speed of over Mach eight and it quickly closed with the UFO, but the proximity fuses were still under development and the weapon exploded a hundred feet from its target. Even though the explosion showered

the alien craft with debris, the UFO suffered little apparent damage and continued its climb to orbit.

“Damn,” said a frustrated James. “I should have had him!” He keyed his microphone, “SHADO control from Sky-Alpha, that is an N-I, negative impact. UFO has traveled out of range.”

“Understood, Sky-Alpha, any sign of the civilian aircraft?”

“Negative, control, the UFO has some kind of jamming transmitter. My scope is still scrambled.”

“How is your fuel state?”

James looked down at the fuel gauges. The afterburning climb had used a considerable amount of fuel.

“I’m down to twenty-five percent. I can loiter for about thirty minutes.”

“Very well, Captain, commence search operations for as long as fuel permits. SHADO control, out.”

Captain James had already set his throttles for the most efficient operation. The cloud ceiling was at fifteen-thousand feet which was perilously close to the tops of some of the mountains. As a precaution, James switched on his terrain following radar.

When the Lear broke through the clouds, the visibility was still below a mile. At the controls, Virginia struggled to keep the aircraft level as the altimeter crept below fifteen-thousand.

Ed had been through in flight emergencies before. In any military operation, each and every scenario had a text book solution. In this situation, the book called for punching out, ejecting from the damaged aircraft. He had done it several times in an F-4, once over the

skies of Vietnam. But he was quite sure his seat was not manufactured by Martin Baker.

“Do you have any idea where we are?” he asked.

Virginia shook her head, “We should be over southwestern Colorado. But with all the avionics out...”

She had left unspoken what they both knew and Ed focused his attention to the view forward. The aircraft was moving much slower than normal and Ed sensed they were dangerously close to a stall. As if she was reading his thoughts, he saw her push the yoke forward to regain some airspeed. The altimeter was now reading below fourteen-thousand which meant they were surrounded by mountain peaks.

The snow seemed to let up a bit and the outline of a mountain peak became perceptible through the windshield. Before he could speak, she had banked the aircraft hard to the left and pulled back on the yoke.

“Brace yourself,” she shouted.

The abrupt maneuver caused the aircraft to slip as it lost airspeed. It collided with the side of the mountain at an oblique angle causing it to skid down the snow covered slope. The Learjet came to an abrupt stop on an outcropping of rocks, partially buried in the snow.

The white exterior finish blended well with the snow, making the aircraft almost invisible from above.

“I’ve reached my fuel state,” came the voice of Captain James, from the speaker.

Major Graham flipped up the mic and answered, “Understood, Sky-Alpha. Return to base.”

“Roger, control. Major, the landscape down there, I mean, it’s all mountainous terrain. If the aircraft went down there...” James left the statement unfinished.

“Message received, Beaver, return to base.”

Lou Graham knew just how important the Utronic Project was. The equipment could be replaced, but the knowledge and experience of the chief designer was irreplaceable.

Lt. Ford approached him with a clipboard.

“This is the passenger manifest from Westbrook, sir. You might want to take a look at it.”

The blood froze in his veins when he read the second name on the list, “Lt. Johnson, get Colonel Freeman on the line, priority scramble. And patch it through to the Commander’s office.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ayshea had trained under Major Graham and had never seen him so agitated. She asked, “Major, what’s wrong?”

“Everything, Lieutenant, everything.”

As soon as he heard the news, Alec Freeman was unable to contain himself.

“For the love of God, what the hell was Ed thinking? He didn’t call and tell you?”

“No, Colonel,” replied Major Graham. “The first we heard about it was when Keith requested the manifest from Westbrook.”

Unconsciously imitating his close friend, Freeman rubbed the bridge of his nose. Every since taking on the role of SHADO C in C, Straker had resisted any and all attempts to surround him with extra security. “If they are bound and determined to get me, Alec, nothing we do will stop them,” Straker had once said.

“Do we have any idea where they went down?”

“We have the search area narrowed to a hundred mile radius of Culebra Peak, on the Colorado, New Mexico border, but there is a springtime snow event in progress. The cloud

deck is at fifteen-thousand feet and it extends upward to forty-five-thousand. Visibility is less than a quarter mile below the deck with wind driven snow,” replied Graham. “Beaver James loitered as long as fuel permitted, in an attempt to locate them.”

“What’s the extended forecast look like?”

“The worst of the storm is moving east and conditions in the search area are expected to improve by nightfall.”

Freeman considered this, “What about the ELT transmitter?”

“Nothing,” said Graham. “James was monitoring the distress channel all while he conducted his search. He never even heard a Mayday call.”

“Damn!”

“There’s more, Colonel,” continued Graham. “When Beaver reacquired the UFO, it was making for orbit. We have to consider the

possibility that the aircraft was destroyed in flight.”

Although he did not want to admit this, Freeman knew the evidence strongly supported the scenario Graham had just outlined.

“I’m going to catch a plane out to Edwards, just as soon as I confer with Henderson. Keep me posted, Lou.”

“Understood, Colonel.”

“Are you hurt? Virginia! Talk to me!”

She awoke to the concerned voice of Ed Straker, rousing her back to consciousness. As her head cleared, she took in her surroundings.

From the cockpit, the aircraft appeared to still be in one piece, although it seemed to be resting at a precarious angle on the edge of a cliff. Even with the windshield half buried in snow she could see outside.

“I think so,” she replied to her concerned companion. As she went to untangle her left arm from the yoke, a sharp pain traveled from her wrist causing her to cry out.

“Here, let me help,” said Ed.

Straker gingerly freed her wrist from the controls. She winced in pain as he checked for breakage.

“It doesn’t feel broken. Can you move it at all?”

She tried to comply and immediately cried out in agony. Shaking her head, she replied, “Not without it hurting like hell.”

“Stay here. I’ll get the first aid kit.”

“Okay,” she said, cradling her injured wrist against her chest.

While Straker rummaged in the back, Virginia tried to get the radio working. The circuit breakers were in, but the unit seemed to not be getting any power.

“The ELT is out as well,” said Ed, retuning with the medical supplies. “I suspect none of the avionics will work.”

As he treated her wrist, Virginia thought about the strange craft she had seen. It seemed to defy the laws of aerodynamics, and the flash of light had to have been a directed energy weapon of sorts. *Flying saucers are supposed to be flatter*, or so she thought.

“Ed, what was that thing? And please don’t tell me it was an experimental aircraft.”

“It wasn’t one of ours,” he replied. It was clear to her that he was dodging the question.

“I’m quite sure it wasn’t Russian either,” she quipped, sarcastically. “Nothing of this world can maneuver like that.”

Straker remained silent as he wrapped her wrist with the bandage. “Here, let’s get this sling on you...”

“Ed, please, tell me. Was that craft the reason for the Utronic Project.”

In his eyes, she could see a battle being waged, “Please,” she offered once more.

Straker nodded his head.

“We’ve had solid proof of their existence since 1970,” he began, while he fitted the sling over her head. “There had been numerous cases of UFO sightings, coupled with mutilated bodies, organs missing. In early 1970, a navy pilot, his sister, and a friend managed to get a film record of an alien craft.”

Ed slid the nametag on his briefcase revealing the words *Destruct Negative* and snapped open the locks.

Right out of a James Bond movie, she thought.

He handed her the picture than had been taken seven years ago.

Virginia gazed at the picture contemplating it in silence. In her hands, was concrete evidence

that they were not alone in the universe, a belief that she had held even as a child. But these visitors from another world, countless light years away, were not the benevolent morally superior beings that she had always assumed they would be. They were hostile, their current situation a testament to that fact.

“To be honest, I had a feeling that this is why the Air Force wanted the Utronic Beam developed. But I had always believed that an advanced society would have an equally advanced sense of morality.”

“The reason why they come is still subject to speculation,” said Ed. “Throughout our history, we have examples of cruelty and disregard for our own kind. Perhaps they don’t consider us intelligent life.”

To Virginia, what he said made sense and she was forced to agree. She shuddered, both from the thoughts she now had, and the fact that it was getting cold.

“Whatever happened to the witnesses?” she asked.

“Only one of the survived,” Ed replied. “The body of the female friend was found mutilated, with several organs missing.”

Virginia lowered her eyes, “What became of his sister?”

Straker didn’t respond immediately. Instead he looked out at the snow covered wilderness beyond.

“Ed?”

“Missing,” he finally replied. “Presumed dead.”

Lake turned her attention to the window. Outside, the snow showed little sign of letting up. She tried in vain to suppress another shudder.

“What does it look like in back?” she asked.

“We’re still in one piece, if that’s what you mean. Do you think you can stand?”

Virginia nodded, and he helped her make her way to the rear of the aircraft. When she was seated, Ed ducked into the luggage area and returned with a pair of thermal blankets. He draped one around her shoulders and wrapped himself in the other.

Taking the seat next to her, he said, “We might as well make ourselves comfortable, we may be here for a while.”

In his office at IAC Headquarters in London, General Henderson listened dispassionately as an agitated Colonel Freeman broke the news to him.

“I’m going to hop a plane to Edwards and take charge of the search myself,” he finished.

“Colonel Freeman, you are to stay right where you are,” said the General. “Unless and until Straker is located, you are in command of SHADO. For all we know, this incident is an

alien plot to cripple SHADO's command structure.”

“But General, no one knew Straker was on that plane except for a few people at Westbrook. They didn't disclose the information until we asked for it,” Freeman countered.

“That may be true, but we can't risk it. You are to stay in Groton until further notice. I'm sending Jackson out to coordinate the search and recovery effort. You will order your forces at Edwards to extend him every courtesy.”

Henderson had introduced Freeman to his security strong man soon after he joined SHADO. He knew that the senior SHADO Colonel had taken an instant dislike to the eastern European. In Freeman's words, both Jackson's demeanor and methods were unnecessary and sinister.

“Jackson? What the hell for?”

“Colonel Freeman, do you really expect to find Straker alive after a crash landing in that mountain terrain?”

Freeman said nothing and General Henderson softened his voice.

“We need to make sure that our security has not been compromised. All other concerns are secondary. You have your orders, Commander.”

“Yes, sir.”

Unknown to Alec Freeman, General Henderson was dealing with his own demons. Despite the strained relationship he shared with the headstrong SHADO commander, he still respected, and even admired the man.

It was in late spring of 1964 when a paper crossed Henderson’s desk. It was a graduate thesis, written by a young Air Force Captain named Edward Straker. The paper went into explicit detail, the problems, as well as several viable solutions for establishing a permanent

base on the lunar surface. From that point forward, Henderson took a keen interest in the young man's career, occasionally nudging it along when in the rare instance it was needed.

Henderson first met Straker in 1968 when the newly promoted Lt. Colonel was assigned to Air Force intelligence. It was there that Ed Straker started perusing through Project *Blue Book* reports, those that couldn't be explained away by weather balloon or atmospheric phenomenon. Separating the wheat from the chaff, Straker had helped Henderson isolate the most likely UFO incidents which strongly suggested an extraterrestrial involvement.

A year later, Straker was posted as Henderson's aide, although his duties more resembled that of an assistant. It was then that James Henderson informed the man, he had been mentoring from afar, that the alien threat was believed to be real. But, by order of the American President and the British Prime

Minister, evidence that had been collected during the Second World War was classified at the highest levels, and would not be shared with the rest of the world. The implementation of *Angel Project* would have to wait until new evidence could be collected.

Henderson and his aide did not have to wait very long.

In the spring of 1970, the solid proof they needed literally fell into their laps. A young navy pilot on leave, was attacked by a group of aliens after he had captured an image of the craft on film. By some miracle, the camera and its contents survived the attack. As much as he wanted to share with Straker, Henderson was still under orders to keep the earlier evidence compartmentalized.

These thoughts brought him back to the loss of his closest friend. The image of Lt. Colonel Lake's aircraft being incinerated by the alien directed energy weapon still haunted his

dreams. After Bob's death, Henderson and his wife looked after his pregnant widow. In June of 1945, Lynn gave birth to a baby girl and the older couple offered to be the child's Godparents.

In 1968, soon after Virginia graduated from college, Henderson pulled a few strings with a military contractor to help her land a job. Based on her grades, she shouldn't have needed any help, but Henderson was well aware of the uneven playing field she was facing. Life events would prevent him from keeping tabs on her career and it wasn't until four years later that he learned she had been named as project design leader for the FTL radar system. While Jim Henderson felt an immense feeling pride for her accomplishments, he was also gravely concerned for her safety.

His emotions in turmoil, Henderson gazed at the London nightscape. It was a cold February afternoon when a much younger James

Henderson was tasked with the unpleasant duty of informing the wife of his best friend, that her husband had been killed by an alien attack. He now faced the unpleasant possibility of informing Lynn Lake, her daughter had suffered the same fate.

As night began to fall, the temperature inside the crippled Learjet had fallen close to the freezing mark. Outside, although the snow had stopped, the sky was still overcast and the wind chill was thirty below zero.

Unable to take his own advice, Straker had torn into the cabin ceiling in an attempt to gain access to the strobe light atop the fuselage. Snuggled in her blanket, Virginia watched with, what appeared to him as, amused interest. Each time he cursed under his breath she would give him a quirky grin. As much as he pretended to dislike it, Ed found himself captivated by her playful mannerisms. *If only we had met...* Ed

stopped himself in the middle of his thought. *I hardly know this woman*, he reasoned.

Ed's courtship with his ex-wife had been a whirlwind affair, but he never intended to propose to her so soon, firm in his belief that lasting relationships take time to nurture. He considered love at first sight to be something out of fairy tales, but his close brush with death in the Rolls Royce incident caused him to reevaluate that belief. Ed proposed to Mary the night he was released from the hospital.

Straker truly loved his wife, of that he was certain, but he never experienced the magnetism with her nearly as strong as the connection he felt with Virginia.

He pushed those thoughts from his mind and concentrated on the task at hand.

"Are you having any luck, Ed," she asked in her low sultry voice, further distracting him from his work.

“I found the wiring for the strobe light. Now if I can find a power wire, I can tie it directly to the light, bypassing the switch.”

Earlier, Straker had inspected the wiring in the cockpit and found most of it had been melted. None of the avionics or the lighting worked in the aircraft. The emergency locator transmitter or ELT had been reduced to a fried mass of charred components.

Using an automotive style test lamp, Ed probed each of the wires, looking for one which might provide the voltage needed for the strobe.

“You are assuming that the battery is still intact,” she remarked.

“Yes, I am. But, to borrow a line from the movies, what have we got to lose?”

She answered him with another quirky grin, bringing an involuntary smile to his lips. He turned back to his task just in time to see the test lamp illuminate. *Bingo!*

Straker separated the wire from the bundle and cut it, giving himself enough slack to connect to the terminal strip. Loosening the screw, he slipped the wire underneath and retightened it, capturing the power lead.

Through the windows, they could both see the flashing of the strobe light against the snowy background.

“Ed, you did it!” Virginia said, unable to contain her excitement.

“Yes, hopefully the batteries are still in good shape.”

Straker pushed the ceiling panel back into place and secured it with the hardware he had saved. The panel material would provide some insulation against the elements. He let out an involuntary shiver at the thought of the cold. He hadn't realized how stiff his hands had become.

When he sat down, Virginia grabbed his hand, “My God, Ed, you're freezing.” Before he could

protest, she slid next to him with the blanket open to wrap both of them.

“Give me a hand with this,” she said, having trouble with only one good arm.

“No, I’m fine...” he began to say but she cut him off with a sharp tone and gave him an icy blue glare colder than the wind outside.

“Don’t argue with me.”

Straker reluctantly complied, not having the energy left to resist. He pulled the coverings around both of them secretly grateful to be back under the relatively warm blankets.

He also found himself being allured by the low note of her perfume.

“The weather is starting to clear from the west, Doctor Jackson. As soon as they refuel my bird, I’m going back up.”

While Captain James was spouting his intentions, Jackson was carefully studying the search map giving the illusion that he was not paying attention. He circled an area while rubbing his chin.

“Doctor Jackson, did you hear me?” asked an impatient James.

“Yes, Captain, every word,” replied the Slavic man. He was still contemplating the map in front of him. “I think you should concentrate your efforts here,” he finally said, pointing to the circle.

James looked down at the map for the first time. The area marked by Jackson was a significant distance from the initial datum point.

“That’s quite a ways off the beaten path, Doc. Their flight plan was well to the south.”

“Yes, it is,” replied Jackson, picking up a copy of the document. “If they went down in the area

where they encountered the UFO, I would expect to find nothing but wreckage. You stated that you did not observe an explosion when the alien craft fired its weapon.”

“That’s right. Somehow they must have missed. A direct hit would have exploded the fuel tanks.”

“So it is safe to assume that the aircraft stayed airborne after it was fired on, at least for some period of time.”

James nodded, “Yeah, it makes sense. But what makes you think they traveled so far...”

James stopped mid sentence as he seemed to realize where Jackson was going.

“You think they were flying away from the storm center,” he said.

“Indeed, Captain James, as a pilot yourself, I’m sure you understand the logic in this course of action.”

Jackson pointed down to the larger circle on the map.

“This line represents the maximum distance a Lear 24 could travel without power. Assuming they took a northerly heading, away from the storm, this is where they should have set down.”

Jackson was now pointing to the smaller circle which still covered a large area.

“I don’t see many runways down there, Doc,” replied James. “It will be a damned miracle if they survived.”

As the gruff pilot walked out of the briefing room, Jackson pondered his words. The man they were looking for had cheated death before, and the IAC security man was not ready to write him off.

There must be a crack in the airframe, she thought. Virginia could feel the draft on her face each time the wind kicked up and she knew the

cabin temperature had to be close to whatever it was outside. *At least it's sheltering us from the wind.*

Sharing the blanket with Ed had helped, but she soon started to shiver again, so much that the chivalrous Air Force Colonel had wrapped his arms around her to keep her warm. The day before, she would have dreamed of being held by him, but the precarious nature of their situation dampened any pleasure she might have derived.

They hadn't spoken much, except for him telling her a bit more about the aliens. "Truthfully," he said. "I've told you...almost all we know about them." The cold had started to affect their speech.

Virginia assumed that the military was devising some type of planetary defense, but he didn't offer any details, and she had the good grace not to ask. She already knew more than she needed to know.

“Ed...tell me about...yourself,” she asked, in an effort to break the silence as well as keeping her mind off the cold. “Are you married...any kids?”

She winced inside when she felt him tense up and she was going to withdraw the question when finally he spoke.

“I’m...divorced,” he offered. “I have a...four year old son.”

“Me too,” she replied. “Divorced...that is. Do you have...a picture...of your son?”

Straker reached into his pocket for his wallet, flipped open the photo holder and handed it to her. In the picture, the young boy was playing with a toy train set and looking up at the camera with a huge grin.

“Last Christmas,” offered Ed. “Mary said...the train set was...a big hit.”

In the child’s face, she could see the features and lines of his father.

“He’s...adorable,” she replied. “Do you...get to see him often?”

Once again, she felt him tense up and when she looked up, he had turned away.

“I’m...sorry,” she said, hoping he knew that she meant it. A few moments later he turned back to face her and she returned his wallet.

“What...about you...Virginia...any children?”

“No...it just...wasn’t in...the cards.” Her voice was colored despite her best efforts to prevent it. Quickly, she changed the subject.

“Why did that...alien craft...attack us? I mean...if they are looking to...abduct people wouldn’t it be...easier to...get someone on the ground?”

“I don’t...think it was their...intention to abduct...us. The energy...weapon...had hit us dead on...would have...exploded this aircraft. We were caught...in the blast nimbus...sort of like...bullet graze.”

“Were they...after...you?” she pressed.

“Unlikely. Nobody...knew I was on this aircraft...except for Kurt Mahler...and his secretary. They were probably...after the XI module...”

“That’s...crazy,” she interjected. “I told you...the module is nothing...more than a brick without the...firmware...loaded.”

“Or...they were...after the designer,” Ed finished.

Virginia allowed those words to sink in. If what he said was true, a sentient species, from who knows how many light years away, had somehow managed to commit an attempt on her life.

“How...would they know...”

“We believe...the aliens have a presence on the planet...or at least in the solar system. There...have been...several cases of sabotage...committed against

other...contractors and installations. This is one of the reasons...that...security has to...be so tight.”

Involuntarily she shuddered as the thought of never again being safe in her own bed crossed her mind.

“Of course...now...that you...know...and now that you...seem to be a target...we are going to have...to arrange for...additional security...for you.”

“I guess I...should say...thank you,” quipped Virginia. Again she shuddered, this time because of the temperature. They were both quiet for a while.

“Ed...it’s getting...colder...in here. And I’m...getting...sleepy.”

“No...you don’t,” he chided. “We both...have to stay...awake.”

She heard him, but his own voice sounded if it was filled with fatigue and she felt herself being

slowly dragged into unconsciousness. “Just a little catnap...if...that’s...”

Virginia faded off despite Ed’s feeble attempt to rouse her. A few minutes later he joined her in the cold induced slumber, still cradling her in his arms.

Captain James had flown out to the farthest point before dropping below the clouds to conduct his search. The cloud cover was broken instead of overcast and James reasoned that this would give him a chance to overlook most of the search area on the way back.

He was only a few hundred feet above one of the highest peaks when a flicker of light to the east caught his eye. The light was not intense and James realized it was a reflection off the clouds. But it was pulsing at the same rate as an aircraft beacon would.

“Sky-Alpha to base,” radioed James. “I’m going to check the area just to the east of my position. I thought I saw a flash in the clouds.”

“Roger, Sky-Alpha, deviation approved.”

I’m glad they approve, Beaver thought, I was going to do it anyway.

Beaver pulled the stick to the left, banking his jet to an easterly course. As he passed over the ridge, the light seemed to fade from the clouds.

James reduced his airspeed as much as he could and started a reversing turn that would bring him back over the spot from the opposite direction. As the jet came around, Captain James spotted the flashing light on the cliff edge.

Unlike its newer twin, Beaver’s prototype aircraft lacked VTOL, or vertical takeoff and landing capability.

“Sky-Alpha to base, I found something. I’m transmitting my coordinates now.”

“Acknowledged, Sky-Alpha, coordinates received.”

While he was transmitting, he made a low pass over the crash site, followed by several more. On the third pass, he got a good enough look for a positive ID of the aircraft. A few minutes later, Jackson came on the radio.

“Captain James, what is the condition of the crash site.”

“It’s definitely a Lear, Doc,” replied James. “The aircraft appears to be intact.”

“Is there any sign of life?”

“I made a few passes over the crash site. Other than the strobe light, the rest of the aircraft is dark. No signal flares, no radio transmissions...Doc, I’ve made another low pass over the site as we have been speaking. If anyone is still alive, they’re not able to respond.”

“I concur, Captain. The rescue choppers are in the air and their ETA is twenty five minutes. Please loiter in the area as long as fuel permits. Jackson, out.”

Beaver brought the jet around for yet another low pass. This time he came within a hundred feet of the crash site.

If that doesn't wake them up, nothing will.

When Virginia awoke, her ears were being assailed with a drone she knew she recognized but could not yet identify. Added to her confusion was the fact that she was warm.

“Miss Lake, how do you feel?”

The voice of the medic brought her back to reality and she realized that she was on board a rescue chopper.

“Where's Ed,” she offered trying to sit up against the safety restraints.

“Just relax, Miss Lake. He’s alright and we’re bringing him up now. Both of you suffered from exposure.”

Virginia had forgotten about her injured left wrist. She winced in pain when she tried to use it.”

“Miss Lake, I’m going to give you something for the pain.”

She laid back on the stretcher succumbing to the fatigue. She reasoned that if she had survived than Ed should be fine too. Absently she watched the medic prepare an injection and she hardly felt the pinch as the needle entered her forearm.

Within a handful of seconds she began to feel strange as if she was being pulled down into a deep trance. As the last fragments of conscious thought left her, she overheard the medic saying, “Yes, Doctor Jackson. We followed standard procedure...”

As soon as he was hoisted into the chopper, Ed Straker grabbed the headset from the medic.

“The UFO, did we get it?”

“Not precisely, Commander,” replied Jackson. “Captain James did intercept the craft, but only damaged it. It was able to make orbit before it exploded.”

“Meaning they were able to tell their friends that they missed,” said the Commander, unable to mask the sarcasm.

“Perhaps, and perhaps they assumed the aircraft would crash and their objective was accomplished. It is difficult to say.”

Straker had to concede the point. They just did not know.

“Tell Captain James I want to see him when this thing lands.”

“I will have him report to you at the hospital.”

Before Straker could object, Jackson cut him off.

“This order comes straight from General Henderson.”

Begrudgingly, Straker was forced to concede. He turned his attention to the young woman beside him.

“Virginia?”

“I’m sorry, Commander. You won’t be able to speak to her for at least twelve hours.”

Straker looked confused and the medic elaborated, “The amnesia drug, sir. She’ll be out for at least that long...”

“The amnesia drug?” barked Straker. “By whose order?”

“Doctor Jackson. It is standard procedure.”

Straker said nothing as he contemplated the event with mixed emotions. *Maybe it’s better this way.*

When she awoke, Virginia was disoriented and surprised to find herself in a hospital bed. *The last thing I remember was setting the autopilot...*

“Doctor Lake, how do you feel?” asked the man she assumed was her attending physician.

“Strange,” she began. “I...I seem to have lost something here.”

“You were involved in a plane crash. What is the last thing you remember?”

“I...I’m not sure. I remember taking off and reaching cruising altitude, but, after that...nothing I’m afraid.”

“Yes, I’m not surprised. You appear to be suffering from retrograde amnesia. It could have been brought on by a physical trauma or psychological trauma. In your case, since I can find no evidence of injury, I have to assume the latter.”

She was suddenly hit by a bout of vertigo and she was forced to lie back against the bed.

“Colonel Straker,” she cried out, as she remembered that he was with her.

“He survived, Doctor Lake. In fact, he is waiting to see you, if you think you are up to it.”

Virginia nodded her head, “I think I would like that.”

When he walked into the room, she greeted him with a warm smile and for a fleeting moment he thought she might still remember some of what they shared. That hope quickly faded when she spoke.

“Hello, Colonel Straker,” said Virginia, as formally as the day they first met.

“Hi, how are you?”

It was then that he noticed her blushing and her formal tone took on a new meaning.

“You’re probably wishing that you had stayed with Pan-Am. I suppose that you’ll never want to fly with me again,” she replied. It was now clear to him that she was deeply embarrassed over the incident. “I’ve never lost an aircraft before...”

“It wasn’t your fault,” offered Ed. “Something happened to the engines and we couldn’t get them restarted. You glided the aircraft down in the middle of the storm. I don’t think I could have done any better.”

The last statement was total honesty on his part as he had not expected to survive the crash. She rewarded him with another warm smile.

“You are a gentleman, Colonel Straker.”

“Don’t tell anyone, it will ruin my reputation as a hard ass.”

They both shared a laugh for a few moments before an awkward silence overtook them.

“Well, I just wanted to make sure you were okay before I leave for Houston. My plane is fueled up and waiting on the tarmac.”

“So you’re not flying Pan-Am?” she asked, with the same quirky grin he had become fond of.

“Not this time. NASA just happened to have a T-38 available. The XI module is being loaded now.”

“I see,” she said, the disappointment evident in her voice.

“I know you wanted to install it yourself, but Doctor Jackson says he’s holding you a few more days for observation.”

“I know, he already told me.”

“I’ll be in touch as soon as I hear from the commission,” he added, as he turned to leave.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “Where is my flight bag?”

Straker looked around the room until he spotted the leather case she had brought on board. He walked over to the wardrobe and retrieved the item for her. Quickly, she rummaged through it until she produced a dog-eared steno pad.

“I made some calibration notes and corrections to the installation procedure. The factory documentation hasn’t been updated yet. Your technicians will use this to complete the checkout procedure.”

Ed accepted the notebook and thumbed through it.

“There is more than just the calibration procedure here. Are you sure...”

“I trust that you will return it when you are finished,” she said.

“I’ll see to it personally,” he replied. “Take care, Doctor Lake.”

As he started for the door, she called, “Colonel?”

He turned to see a pensive expression carved into her face as if she was having second thoughts about something. She finally found her voice.

“Be safe, okay?”

“I promise.”

Ed quickly made his exit before she could notice the warmth rising in his face. As he walked down the corridor he came to a set of double doors. As he opened the door, an older couple just happened to be on the other side.

“After you,” said Straker, as he held the door open for them.

“You’re most kind,” said the woman in a noticeable German accent.

After they passed, Ed pressed on, intent on speaking to Jackson before he departed for Houston.

In his office, Jackson had watched the exchange between Straker and Lake, looking for some clue that she might remember the ordeal she suffered. Right away, he noticed an air of familiarity between the two people. He made a few notes and put her chart aside.

“All right, Doctor Jackson,” said Straker, as he walked into the office. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Commander,” said Jackson, offering a chair to his agitated guest.

Straker sat down in the chair provided and launched into his tirade.

“I’ve already filed a protest with General Henderson regarding this incident,” began Straker.

“Yes, Commander, I have a copy of your objections right here. The amnesia drug has been tested at least a dozen times in the lab and twice under actual field conditions. I assure

you, Doctor Lake will suffer no ill effects from its administration.”

“It was still an unnecessary risk. You know as well as I do, that Doctor Lake is a valued researcher who is being considered for a Security Clearance...”

“For which she has yet to be granted,” countered Jackson. “Commander Straker, you above all people know what is at stake here. No single person, nor group of people, can be allowed to compromise the security of our operation. We are all expendable.”

Straker seemed to deflate, and Jackson knew he had persuaded him to his side of the issue.

“Forgive me, Doctor Jackson, you are right, of course,” said Ed. He paused a moment before continuing. “Do you think she remembers anything based on your observations?”

Jackson reached for Lake’s chart.

“I see no indication that she recalls anything about the alien attack, but I did note a much higher than expected trace of intimacy between the two of you...”

“Doctor Jackson, I hardly think...”

“Perhaps intimacy is too strong a word,” interrupted Jackson. “Let’s say fondness instead. It may interest you to know that her pulse rate increased by almost twenty percent and there was a marked increase in her electrodermal activity when you entered the room.”

“I fail see the relevance, Doctor Jackson.”

“Persons who suffer a shared traumatic event often form a close bond with each other. Should Doctor Lake begin to remember this bond, she may also begin to recall the event itself.”

Straker was silent for a moment, as if he were weighing a decision. His response caught Jackson by surprise.

“The response you saw had nothing to do with the attack,” he began. “Virginia Lake and I formed a bond the day we met.”

“I see,” said Jackson, leaning back in his chair. “I know this is difficult for you, Commander, but please, elaborate.”

Obviously uncomfortable, Straker told the psychiatrist of the moment of recognition they shared when first meeting as well as the details of their interaction prior to the attack.

“So, you and Miss Lake were on a first name basis before the UFO sighting?”

“Yes,” replied Straker.

“Interesting,” offered Jackson contemplatively. “In her room, she called you by title so she obviously doesn’t remember the conversation in the cockpit. Tell me, Commander; is it your intention to pursue a relationship with this woman?”

Again, Straker paused, seeming to weigh the question.

“No,” he replied.

“But by your own admission, you find her attractive...”

“It’s irrelevant, Doctor Jackson. If Doctor Lake passes muster with the commission, there is a good chance she will become a member of our research staff. I don’t think I need to discuss the complications we both know such a relationship would entail.”

“Yes, of course.”

Making a few more notes in Lake’s chart, Jackson added, “I think I would still like to keep her a few more days for observation, but based what you have told me, I believe she will not require additional therapy.”

Straker seemed satisfied with that. Jackson followed his gaze to the monitor showing

Doctor Lake's room. He addressed the unspoken question on the Commander's face.

"Close friends of Doctor Lake, so I'm told. The gentleman is the Professor of Physics at Stanford University."

"I met them in the corridor," replied Ed. "Has the final version of the cover story been decided on?"

"Yes, it is right here," said Jackson, handing over the document. "It just requires your signature for approval."

As Jackson watched, the Commander quickly read through the document. He looked to be almost finished when he suddenly looked up and spoke.

"Pilot error?"

"It seemed to be the safest explanation," offered Jackson. "The aircraft was relatively new and the mechanical inspection records are impeccable. The likelihood of..."

“Change it,” ordered Straker, his voice indicating he would not take no for an answer. “I wasn’t just trying to ease her mind in there, Doctor. Virginia Lake’s piloting skills were exceptional. I meant every word when I told her I couldn’t have done any better.”

“I suppose we could cite a short circuit in the electrical system,” replied Jackson.

Straker nodded his approval.

“Well, there is a plane waiting for me, Doctor Jackson.”

“Of course, Commander, let us hope your journey is without incident.”

When the Commander had left, Jackson pulled out the file he had on the Straker and reviewed it. His psych profile indicated a very private man, who had few close friends. His willingness to discuss his feelings regarding Virginia Lake had intrigued Jackson.

Straker's profile also indicated a very strong degree of loyalty to his duty, and to anyone he considered to be a friend. Jackson was well aware that Straker knew the methods he would be required to use should anyone show resistance to the amnesia drug. This led him to believe that the emotional bond he shared with Virginia Lake was significantly deeper than he was willing to admit.

He made a few notes in the Commander's file and placed the document back in his briefcase.

It will be most interesting to see how this plays out, he thought.

“Virginia, we were so relieved to hear that you were all right,” said Gretchen Reinhardt, as she hugged her friend tightly.

“Seeing you alive and well brings joy to my heart,” added the Professor.

Virginia was both surprised and elated to see her friends.

“You just missed Ed,” she said. “He left not thirty seconds before you arrived.”

I think we passed in the hallway,” said Gretchen. “Virginia, you were right. He is gorgeous. How in the name of heaven were you able to control yourself?”

“It wasn’t easy, Gretchen. Did you see his eyes?”

“Oh, I know it, Virginia...”

“Well, the two of you sure know how to make a man feel inadequate,” said the Professor, in a serious vain. It wasn’t until they both looked at him that he allowed himself to smile, punctuated by his deep laughter.

“Oh, Manfred,” said his wife. “You know you are my everything. Virginia and I are just engaging in girl talk.”

“Oh, is that what it’s called,” quipped the Professor. “So, Virginia, tell us, what happened?”

Her expression transformed from one of joy to one of contemplation.

“I still can’t remember much past the point when we reached cruising altitude,” she said. “After that, it’s all a blur. The next thing I remember clearly is waking up here. Ed said that I was at the controls when we crashed, but I don’t remember it.”

“I see you are on a first name basis,” observed Gretchen.

“No,” Virginia wistfully replied. “We’re not.” *At least I don’t think we are*, she thought to herself. Yet, in her mind, she could almost hear him calling her name.

The Reinhardt’s visited with her for over an hour before they had to leave. In that time, she learned that she had been brought to a military

hospital, although she couldn't complain about the care she received.

Soon after her guests had left, Doctor Jackson came in to check her vitals and reiterated the need for her to stay at least another day or two so he could monitor her recovery. He told her that her wrist had not been broken but suffered a bad sprain and would heal in a few weeks.

Later that evening, she received several calls with one of them being from her mother who had just learned of her whereabouts. Virginia spent the next few minutes assuring her mother she was all right and that she didn't need to take the next flight out. Virginia was looking forward to seeing her the following week. Although she didn't expect it, she was disappointed not to hear from Ed Straker. It would be another six weeks before she would see him again.

“Well, Ed,” quipped Craig Collins, as he assumed a professional slouch in one of Ed's

office chairs, “I’d say that was a finely executed mission. SID is humming along just fine at the Lagrange point, keeping an eye out for hostiles, we made it back without any of the interference that Alec was so worried about, it doesn’t get any better than this.”

Straker was forced to stifle a laugh as the image of Alec Freeman doing his best imitation of a mother hen came to mind.

“The problem is, Craig, one of these days, he is going to be right,” he replied.

“If you spend your life worrying about what might happen, you’ll live a boring life, Ed.”

“Is that why you always push the envelope?”

“Of course,” said Craig. “I learned a long time ago that life is not a dress rehearsal.”

Collins suddenly became all business and leaned forward in his chair. “Tell me, Ed, how well do you think this new FTL tracking system is going to work? I got a chance to look over

some of the code while we were installing the modules. I've been an engineer for almost twenty years and I could only understand a fraction of what I was seeing. It's radically advanced stuff."

"The theory is sound," said Straker. "Doctor Lake believes that once the system is fully implemented, we should be able to detect objects moving at superluminal velocity beyond the orbit of Mars, and be able to triangulate their position within thirty million miles of Earth."

"That's quite impressive. So, how is this going to work, I mean, a civilian having access to our tracking network?"

"Well, technically Doctor Lake isn't a civilian anymore. General Henderson called just before you arrived. The commission has given their approval to bring Doctor Lake and several members of her team into SHADO."

“Her team?” questioned Collins. “Why, Ed, I do believe you’ve been holding out on me. Tell me, what’s she like?”

Straker handed his friend Lake’s bio, and watched as Collins scanned the paper.

“Pretty,” said Craig, when he glanced at her file photo. He continued to read.

“Stanford, graduated *summa cum laude*, finished her doctorate in six years,” said Craig, rattling off her credentials. “Advanced applied physics, quantum mechanics and inter-dimensional theory, is she as impressive in person?”

“Her bio doesn’t do her justice,” admitted Ed.

“I think I would like to meet this lady, someday. So, when is she coming over?”

“Not until the Utronic project is completed. Doctor Lake will continue to be employed by Westbrook until SHADO signs off on the final

system configuration. After that, she'll be assigned to our new facility in New York."

"You mean the new research section?"

"Yes, but she's going to oversee the tracking facility as well. SID and the tracking system are going to be her baby now. Besides, I need your engineering expertise supervising the lunar construction project. The surface domes are completed and pressurized and excavation for the interceptor bays begins next week."

"What kind of shape are we in with the project?"

"As of right now, we are still on target to have the base fully operational by March 1980, but the substrata where the launch bays are to be located is unstable. There was a mix up in the initial core samples and it wasn't found until the team geologist ordered an additional survey."

"Smart man," agreed Collins. "How bad is it?"

"We may have to excavate an additional thirty feet to get to solid bedrock."

Craig thought about this for a moment. “This shouldn’t be a problem,” he said. “We can reinforce the subflooring and use the extra space for storage or workshops. Of course, this means that the piston lifts for the interceptor launch pads will need to be larger than the original design called for. And we’ll have to add additional reinforcement struts to the piston assembly as well.”

“Henderson will be livid when he sees the cost overrun,” replied Straker. “I’ve already had to sacrifice two satellites to fund additional staff.”

“It looks like I’ve got the easy job. But, you’re much better at finagling money from the General than I would be. When do I leave for the moon?”

“As soon as I return from the states,” replied Ed. “Alec is still tied up at Electric Boat with the Skydiver issue and I have to give Doctor Lake and her team the news, as well as their first

briefing. I'll need you to mind the store for a few days."

"Not a problem. It will give me time to set some things in order before I take my lunar sabbatical."

"Do you ever take anything serious?"

"Not if I can help it, Ed. But, I am being serious now, you take care, okay?"

Craig extended his hand which his friend took firmly.

"I will."

When Straker left, Craig looked over Virginia Lake's bio again. While he found her attractive, in more ways than one, another thought came to his mind. *She'd be a good match for Ed, that is, if the old dinosaur would open his eyes to see it.*

Virginia was engrossed in her work when a knock at her door drew her attention. She felt her heart start to double time when she saw his face.

Ea...a...Colonel Straker, I'm sorry, I wasn't told you were here," she said. She could feel herself flushing as she took his hand in greeting.

"Hello, Doctor Lake. Forgive me, I asked Mr. Mahler not to say anything until I saw you myself. I believe I promised to return this," he said, handing her a steno pad.

Virginia looked at the notebook. It was the same one she had given him six weeks ago.

"You didn't have to fly out here for this," she said, pleasantly. *But I'm glad you did.* "Can I get you some coffee?"

"Please," he replied, taking a seat at her conference table while she prepared the beverages.

“The data we have been getting from your satellite is incredible,” she said, her voice conveying her enthusiasm. “The entire area between the moon and Earth is inundated with superluminal particles. I could spend years just studying the data we’ve collected already. I assume that is why you are here.”

“To be honest, he replied. “I have a more important reason for coming today. While the subspace particles you are seeing do hold great scientific value, they are not the phenomenon that SID is designed to track.”

Virginia stopped what she was doing and strode over to close the office door. She retrieved the two coffee mugs and sat across from him at the table.

“Thank you,” he said, accepting the drink.

She leaned back in her chair, “Please, Colonel, by all means, continue.”

“The commission finally gave approval.”

Straker lowered his voice and proceeded, “What I’m about to tell you is classified at the highest levels.”

He reached into his briefcase and produced a photograph.

Virginia studied the image intently. Inside, she felt an unexplainable feeling of dread, and she knew that this craft was not only extraterrestrial, but hostile.

“How long...?”

“The picture was taken in 1970,” he said. “It was a wooded area in southern England, and even though there have been other confirmed sightings in other parts of the world, this was the first.”

“Alien?”

“Yes, and hostile, Ed said. “Two of the three people who took this film are dead or missing. One of them was mutilated, almost beyond

recognition. The second was severely wounded in the attack.”

Virginia felt her blood run cold as she stared at the spacecraft. An image flashed through her mind of the craft in flight. She suppressed a shudder.

“You’ve seen this before,” he said, not in the form of a question.

“I...I don’t know. Until now, I would have said no, but...” She put her hand to her head, trying to jog her no longer to be trusted memory.

“When we were flying to Houston, we were attacked by one of these craft.”

Over the next hour, Straker detailed the ordeal they had shared, the attack, the crash, and the circumstances surrounding their eventual rescue. He continued on about the formation of SHADO, as well as the extraordinary security measures in place.

“So this amnesia drug prevents a person from remembering the events of the past twelve hours?”

“Yes, although we have had cases where people have been able to recall fragments of their experience. Security decided this was an acceptable risk as most people would dismiss the images as nightmares.”

Virginia considered this in silence for a moment. She finally asked the obvious question.

“What happens to those people who have this information, but aren’t asked to sign on to your organization?”

“It depends on the circumstance in which they are given the classified data. In your case, we need your expertise, regardless of whether you are asked to sign on or not. You will be required to sign a non-disclosure agreement. Violation of that agreement is dealt with very directly. I don’t think you want me to go into the details.”

“No, I think I get the picture,” she said. “The very cost of all this...”

“That is only part of the equation,” added Ed. “Can you imagine the social upheaval such knowledge could cause, not to mention the fact that these aliens are hostile.”

Virginia hadn't considered that. All her life, she believed it was possible that life did exist on other worlds but having solid evidence of their existence caused her to question her own spiritual beliefs. And she was a well educated woman of science, with an open mind to such knowledge. She tried to envision a population suddenly saddled with the realization that they were no longer supreme in their corner of the universe and in constant danger from an unknown extraterrestrial enemy. The picture wasn't a pretty one.

“I think I understand,” she answered. “The general public can never know.”

“That's correct.”

Virginia stood and walked over to her window, contemplating her world, a world she would now always see in a different light. As grave as the situation seemed, Colonel Straker had offered her a vision of hope. An organization, dedicated to defending the planet which she called her home. He hadn't asked her, yet, but she already knew she wanted to be a part of this.

“Tell me, Colonel Straker,” she began, as she returned to her seat. “This SHADO that you spoke of, do they have room for a theoretical physicist?”

“... don't blame you at all. If I was the one getting married, I would be as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof.”

Alec paused when it was evident to him that his friend wasn't listening.

“Ed, are you still with us?”

Freeman's voice brought Straker out of his reverie and back to the here and now. He turned to his friend and smiled.

"I almost let her go, Alec," he said, in a serious vein. "We had been seeing each other for almost six weeks the morning Miss Frasier awoke from the coma. I was having second thoughts about the two of us."

"Really?" questioned Alec. "Did you tell her?"

"Not in so many words, but I was deliberately formal with her in my office that day. Then, things got crazy, as they always do and we didn't have time to talk."

Straker paused for a moment and Freeman knew better than to press. Ed continued, "When Catherine died, Virginia was down in the lobby waiting for me. I looked at her, we didn't say anything and I just walked away. I know I hurt her by doing that."

“Ed, sometimes we walk away because we really want to be alone and sometimes we do it to see if someone cares enough to follow us into hell.”

“I suppose you’re right. As you said earlier, Virginia doesn’t give in once she has made her mind up.”

“This, from someone who should know,” quipped Alec.

Before he could respond, Ed’s attention was drawn down the aisle, where Professor Reinhardt had just signaled they were ready. Keeping with tradition, he hadn’t seen her wearing her wedding gown and he felt his breath catch when she finally appeared.

Ever the analyst, Straker had worried about the ramifications that their union would cause. The aliens had made several attempts on his life and at least three on hers. And even though the security at their new home was state of the art, Ed worried about the safety of the family they planned to build together.

Then there was the inherent complication of being married to his second in command and even with the blessing of the commission, he knew they would need to be extra diligent in their efforts to keep the relationships in balance.

All of those concerns seemed to fade in significance as he gazed on his wife to be. His only regret was not revealing his feelings sooner than he did. Ed remembered a quote he had heard as a younger man. *Give me today, and I will be happy.* Joining hands with Virginia, he made himself a promise to love her without reservation and live each day as if it were his last. As he took her eyes with his, he was certain she was thinking the same thing.

END