

# Distant Memories

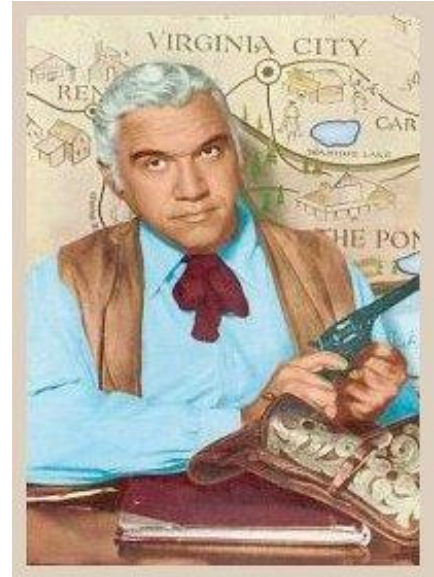
## A UFO/Bonanza Crossover Story

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Based on the Characters and series created by  
Gerry Anderson and the Characters and series  
created by David Dortort and Fred Hamilton

The Character Major Vladimir Natiroff was  
created by Deborah Rorabaugh



**Historian's Note:** The events depicted here take place about six years after *Soul Mates* and in 1862 in the Nevada Territory.

This story is dedicated to my wife, Susanne, who has been a fan of heartwarming shows like *Little House on the Prairie*, *Touched by an Angel*, *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, and of course *Bonanza*.

## **Prologue:**

June 1862:

Ben Cartwright, and his eldest son, Adam, were on their way back from Virginia City. They were on the last leg of the two hour journey home carrying the supplies needed for the next week. It was late in the afternoon and they didn't want to be late for supper. Hop Sing tended to get frustrated when the dinner bell was missed.

The Cartwright's were startled by a nearby explosion.

“What in the blazes was that Pa?”

“I don’t know son. It sounded like it was just over that ridge.”

Ben stopped the wagon and set the brake. The two men grabbed their rifles and walked over the ridge. This wouldn’t be the first time that they have had to deal with trespassers.

When they came to the top of the ridge both men stopped in their tracks. Wedged next to the rock formation was the strangest thing Ben had ever encountered. A mysterious cone shaped all metal building, that was off kilter, had seemed to appear out of nowhere. Ben was certain that it had not been there a few hours ago.

“Stay here and cover me,” Ben said, to his son.

“Pa?”

“No arguments.”

The elder Cartwright walked down the ridge to the strange looking shelter. He noticed an opening in the side and slowly walked towards

it. As he peered inside, he noticed the illumination coming from within. Slowly, he entered the shelter.

“Pa, be careful.”

A moment later, Ben yelled, to his son, from inside, “Adam, come here! Quick!”

Adam Cartwright ran down the ridge and quickly stepped into the shelter. The interior had a circular counter that went a third of the way around the circumference of the shelter. Two chairs, one on each side of the door, were in front of what looked like an engineer’s panel on a locomotive. But Adam had never seen one so complex. It had blinking lamps and dials, all over the surface of the panel.

His father was kneeling down next to an unconscious woman. She had long ash blonde hair, but her clothing was like nothing he had ever seen. *Woman didn’t wear pants.*

Ben had made sure that she was breathing and was looking at the card that was hanging around her neck. It had a color picture of her as well as her name. *Colonel Virginia L. Lake*, he read to himself. Cartwright looked around the inside of the shelter, having never seen anything like it. It gave him an eerie feeling.

“Good Lord,” said Ben, out loud.

“What did you find, Pa? Who is she?”

“I don’t know, Adam. Here, help me get her back to the wagon.”

The two men lifted the woman up and carried her out of the strange shelter. When they were outside, Ben took her himself.

“Pa, let me...”

“No, I’ve got her,” said Ben.

To Adam, it seemed if his father was suddenly very protective of her.

They walked back to the wagon and gently placed the woman in the back. It was getting late, and Ben wanted to get back before sundown.

Ben sat in the back, tending to her, while Adam sat up front and spurred the horses.

Ben Cartwright found her to be quite attractive, even though the clothes she wore were nothing a woman would normally wear. She briefly opened her eyes and asked, “Where am I?”

“You’re safe ma’am, you’re on the Ponderosa.”

She faded back into unconsciousness, but not before Ben noticed her eyes, a beautiful blue-grey.

June 1990:

Ed Straker rushed into the SHADO research center just outside of London. The facility was about ten miles west of HQ and Ed had broken every speed restriction getting there. There had

been an explosion at the facility and Lt. Colonel Kelly had left a message for him to get out there as soon as he could. Ed could not sense his wife's presence which greatly added to his sense of urgency.

He ran into the underground hanger where the captured UFO, they had recovered six years ago, was being stored only to find that it wasn't there. The only clue it had ever existed was the circle of test equipment that surrounded the circumference of where the alien craft once sat.

“Joe, what the hell happened here?” Ed asked, without preamble.

“There was a flash of light and what sounded like an explosion. Then it was just gone.”

“Where's Virginia?” Ed asked his voice filled with dread, suddenly realizing why he had been summoned.

“She was inside when it happened Commander. We've searched the entire facility and we can't

find her anywhere. The local sensors picked up a tachyon burst at the precise moment the craft vanished...”

Lt. Colonel Kelly looked at his commanding officer, unsure whether to continue.

Straker opened his thoughts, praying that he would sense her presence, but he felt nothing but emptiness.

“She’s not here,” he said.

Joe Kelly handed Straker an envelope. “She was working on the power systems, Commander, as a safety precaution she removed these sir.”

Ed took the envelope knowing, that it contained her engagement and wedding rings. He could no longer hold back the tears. Ed Straker walked to the area vacated by the alien craft and began to silently weep.

Kelly immediately ordered everyone out of the room to allow the Commander privacy to vent his grief.

When Ed had regained his composure he walked into Kelly's office.

“We still don't know what caused the explosion, Commander.”

“It wasn't an explosion, the sound would have been the air snapping together when the craft disappeared, like the crash of thunder caused by a bolt of lightning,” said Ed.

“So you think the craft jumped from one point to another?”

“Or one time to another, Joe. I want all the records, of what happened here today, sent to HQ, video, audio, sensor logs, written records, test equipment settings, everything.”

“Yes sir.”

## **Chapter 1:**

She saw him again when she woke up. He had silver grey hair, and a heavy muscular build, and she could see kindness in his brown eyes. She looked around the room seeing that it had a rustic feel to it. The sun was low in the sky and it brightened the room, as it shown through the window. Fighting off another spell of vertigo, she looked back at him.

“How are you feeling, ma’am?”

His voice was a deep resonating baritone timbre, powerful, yet gentle at the same time.

“I’m a little disorientated, I was just...I...I don’t seem to be able to remember a thing. Where am I?” she asked.

“You’re on the Ponderosa. Can you tell me your name?”

“I’m...I...don’t remember,” she said, putting her hand to her forehead.

“You were wearing a tag that had a name on it. Does Virginia Lake ring any bells?”

She looked at him, eyes searching as she struggled to suppress her fear, “I’m afraid not. Is that my name, sir?”

“Oh forgive me, I’m Ben Cartwright.”

“How do you do, Mr. Cartwright?” she said, formally.

“It’s my pleasure, Miss Lake. I’m assuming that it’s Miss, as you’re not wearing a ring.”

“Well, Mr. Cartwright, you seem to know more about me than I do.”

“Most of its simple deduction, for instance your accent is British, so I would assume that you came from England at some point.”

“I...I don’t know. Where, or what, is the Ponderosa?”

“It’s a ranch in the Nevada Territory. I run it with my three sons.”

“Nevada sounds somewhat familiar, but not the way you said it. I seem to be able to remember a

place in Nevada, called Dreamland. Have you ever heard of it?”

“No, I can’t say I have. Is it a cattle ranch?”

“No, it’s a place where they test...they test...”  
Virginia paused, shaking her head. “I’m sorry; I just can’t seem to remember.”

“That’s all right. I’m sure it will come back to you, sooner or later. In the mean time, you’re our guest. Are you hungry?”

She nodded her head, “Yes, I could eat, if it’s not an imposition.”

“Not at all,” Ben said, as he helped her stand making sure that she was steady on her feet. In a chivalrous action he offered his arm. She smiled warmly at him as she took it. They walked out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

Ed Straker walked into the control room, heading for his office. As he passed through he

said to Captain Ford, “Keith, have we received the information from the research center yet?”

“Yes sir, most of it is on your desk. I’ll bring in the sensor logs when they’re done.”

“Get a hold of Professor Reinhardt, and ask him to come to my office, please.”

“Yes sir.”

Straker walked into the office and picked up the phone. He dialed the number to his home. After only a couple rings, a young girl answered, “Hello.”

“Hi sweetie,” he said to his daughter.

“Hi Daddy, when are you coming home?”

“Later pumpkin, let me speak to Granma, okay?”

“Okay Daddy, I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Hello, Ed, is there any news?”

“Not yet, I’m afraid, the only thing we know for sure is that the craft didn’t explode. Look, I’m going to be here late, tonight. Professor Reinhardt and I are going to go over the data and see if we can figure out what happened.”

“Is there any hope at all, Ed?”

Ed didn’t know how to respond, as the alien craft could be anywhere, or anytime.

“I just don’t know,” he said, hoping against all odds.

“Then we had better start praying, Ed. Call me later, okay?”

“All right, Lynn, thanks.”

As Ed hung up the phone, Reinhardt walked into the office, and looked at his friend with concern in his eyes.

“Edward, you look terrible, perhaps we should wait until morning.”

Straker shook his head, “No, I have to find out, she could be in danger.”

“Commander, you forget, we’re talking about time travel here. If Virginia went into the future, nothing has happened to her yet. And if she traveled to the past, it’s already over.”

Ed cursed himself a fool as he knew that. He knew he must be tired. The truth was the whole concept of traveling through time frightened him. The technology that they had in their possession could be perverted into a weapon of mass destruction, more powerful than any nuclear weapon ever made. SHADO had cracked most of the secrets of the alien technology, over the past four years, and some of the capabilities were frightening. Ed’s worst nightmare was that an unscrupulous government would gain access to this knowledge.

As SHADO C in C, he had ordered all the research classified at the highest levels within

the organization. Even Henderson and the IAC had not been allowed access to the information.

“We have the other craft we captured last year, but it’s useless if we don’t know where, or when, to go, and if she ended up in space somewhere...” Ed stopped, as he was almost to the point of tears.

“Edward, stop torturing yourself.”

“I’m sorry, Professor. I’ve just lost a part of myself, the better part.”

The office door opened and Captain Ford brought in the sensor log data.

“Put it on the conference table, Keith.”

“Yes sir.”

When Ford had left, Reinhardt turned to Straker, “Shall we try to solve this puzzle, Commander.”

Ed nodded, finding comfort in the professor’s steady presence.

Virginia sat at the table, with Ben and his sons, and enjoyed a good home cooked meal. The Cartwright's caretaker, Hop Sing, was an excellent chef and she hadn't realized how hungry she was.

Virginia had been introduced to Ben's three sons, across from her sat Adam, almost as tall as his father, dark hair dark hazel eyes. By the way he spoke Virginia knew he was very intelligent. His voice was deep but not as deep as Ben and it had a different timbre. *Yeah, he could be trouble*, she thought.

Seated next to Adam, was Hoss the middle brother, who was a few inches taller than Adam and was as big as he was tall, but Virginia could tell, by his demeanor, that he was a gentle giant. He was by far the shyest of the four men. He had a pair of deep blue eyes that reminded her of someone, *someone close...*

Next to her sat Joe or Little Joe as he was called. He was the shortest of the three men by almost an inch. Virginia could see the fire of youth in his green eyes.

“So, Miss Lake, where are you from?” asked Adam.

“I wish I could tell you. As I said to your father, I seem to have forgotten who I am or where I came from. The only reason I know my name is because of this tag.”

“May I?” he asked.

Virginia removed the card from the strap and handed it to Adam. He looked at the symbol on the card, a circle with the shadowy figure of a man to the left of a rectangle that bisected the right side of the circle. In the rectangle were the letters S.H.A.D.O.

“The letters must stand for something,” he said.

Adam continued looking at the card, saying absently, “Colonel Lake.”

Virginia looked at him suddenly, “That’s me! I remember being called that... But I can’t remember by whom...” her voice trailed off as she tried to reach for the fading memory.

“That’s impossible,” said Ben. “Women aren’t allowed in the cavalry, or any military force for that matter.”

“Why?” she asked, almost forcefully.

“It’s just not done,” Ben answered. To her, he seemed to be taken back by her curt response.

Virginia considered this and somehow, it didn’t sit right with her.

“Well, Pa, whatever this organization is, Miss Lake here, is an important part of it. This card lists her title as executive officer. That is a military term sometimes used for the second in command,” said Adam, as he handed the card back to her.

“Well maybe they do things different in England,” offered Little Joe.

“It’s possible, but what would a member of the British military be doing in the Nevada Territory?” asked Ben, looking back at Virginia.

“Don’t ask me, I’m new to this.”

“Well, no matter. Boys, tomorrow morning I want the three of you to get some canvas and go out to where we found that shelter. I want it covered and buried. While you are doing that I’m going to take Miss Lake into town to see the doc and Sheriff Coffee.”

“I’ll have to get some of the hands,” said Adam.

“No, I don’t want anyone besides us to know about this thing.”

“Pa, why are you so worried?” asked Hoss.

“I don’t know, I’ve just had a strange feeling ever since I set foot in that contraption. And one more thing, don’t go inside it, for any reason.”

“Yes Pa,” they said, almost in unison.

“Well, we have an early day tomorrow, so let’s get turned in for the night. Miss Lake, I’ll show you to your room, if you’d like,” said Ben.

“Thank you, Mr. Cartwright.”

The four men stood and Ben offered his arm to Virginia. She smiled at him as she took it and the two of them walked up the stairs together.

“I think Pa’s in love,” said Hoss, when they were alone.

“I can see why,” said Adam.

“How old do you think she is?” asked Little Joe.

“I don’t know; if you went by appearance I would say that she’s my age, but judging by the way she carries herself, and if she is, in fact, a colonel, she’s probably closer to Pa’s age than mine,” said Adam.

“Did you see the way she responded to Pa’s statement about women not serving in the

military?” asked Little Joe. “I tell you, that woman is not someone to be trifled with.”

Adam considered this as he looked up the loft hallway.

“Take a look at this, Edward,” said Reinhardt, pointing to a section of the sensor map.

Straker looked at the section that the professor had pointed out, observing both the time and sensor data.

“A tachyon burst, and it coincides with the disappearance.”

“Yes, so we know that the craft did not disintegrate, it did travel through time.”

“Yes, but where?” asked Ed.

“I might have an answer. I had Keith run a computer comparison of the sensor logs, to look for related simultaneous events. Look at these sequential frames of this area.”

Straker examined the readouts noticing a sensor reading that appeared in the area almost precisely at the same time as the craft disappeared. He compared the energy signature of the two. *They match!*

“It ended up in Nevada! But there was no tachyon burst.”

“That is correct, Edward. The craft simply appeared because the timeline has been altered. We don’t see the tachyon burst because in this time line, it has happened in the past. Our reality has been changed around us.”

Ed went to his desk and keyed the intercom. “Lt. Wade, contact our New York facility. I want a cleanup and recovery team sent to these coordinates.” Straker gave her the position from the sensor logs. “Also have Seagull X-ray prepped for a morning departure to the States.”

“Yes sir.”

Ed looked back at Reinhardt, “Can we tell how far back she went?”

“Not without examining the craft. We might be able to carbon date it and compare the readings to the samples we took when we recovered it five years ago. But this is all going to take some time.”

Ed slowly sat down, putting his head in his hands as the burden on his heart became too heavy to bear.

“Edward, listen to me, it’s late, and you’re tired. Why don’t you go home and rest? The chances of rescuing her just increased tenfold. We can examine the craft in detail once we recover it. The flight logs should still be intact. And we’ll have the instrument settings, assuming they haven’t been altered.”

“You’re right, Professor, thank you. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Edward.”

Ben led Virginia to the guest room, “Miss Lake, the wash basin is on the dresser along with a pair of fresh towels and if you look in the second drawer you’ll find some bed clothes that should fit you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cartwright.”

“Well, I should let you get ready for bed. Breakfast will be at six...”

“Mr. Cartwright?”

“Yes?”

“I hate to ask, but you didn’t mention anything about your wife.”

“I’m a widower, three times over, actually.”

“I’m sorry.” She paused a moment, “I wondered why your sons looked nothing alike. Forgive me I didn’t mean to get so personal.”

“It’s all right, Miss Lake. It was a long time ago.”

“Do you think the sheriff will be able to help?”

“If you’ve been reported missing, the sheriff should know about it. Once we find out who’s looking for you we can send them a telegram to let them know where you are.”

“If anyone is looking for me, that is.”

“I can’t imagine that being the case, Miss Lake.”

It wasn’t what he said so much as the way he said it, that made her blush. She gave him a reticent smile. “Thank you, Mr. Cartwright.”

“Good night, Miss Lake.”

When she was alone again, she sat down on the bed trying to sort out her jumbled thoughts and emotions. Even though she was dealing with memory loss, she knew that Ben Cartwright was attracted to her, and under different circumstances she could find herself quite smitten with him.

She thought about the conversation at dinner. Ben’s eldest son had called her Colonel Lake and somehow hearing that phrase had jogged

her memory. She had been called that before, and by someone she cared very deeply about. She could almost picture him, a tall slender build, and the bluest eyes she could remember.

Colonel Lake, she couldn't think of herself yet as Virginia, got herself ready for bed. *Maybe a good night's sleep will help me sort my thoughts.*

## **Chapter 2:**

Ed was awakened by two thumps on the bed. As he opened his eyes he saw two sets of inquiring eyes staring back at him. His daughter, Charlene, was a spitting image of her mother, the only difference being her eyes were a tad more blue than Virginia's, and Robert looked very much like John, except that he had the same intense blue eyes as his father.

“Daddy, where's Mommy?” asked Charlene.

Ed steeled himself for this, having decided last night to be honest with his children. It would be less traumatic later if the worst case came to be true. He sat up and took both of them in his arms.

“Mommy’s missing; I don’t know where she is right now.”

“Did she run away?” asked Robert.

“No, of course not, she loves us too much, she would never run away.”

“Then where is she?” asked Charlene.

“I wish I knew pumpkin, I wish I knew.”

Ed could smell fresh coffee brewing downstairs and he desperately needed a cup.

“Hey, it sounds like Granma is fixing breakfast, let’s say we go down and see, okay?”

“Okay, Daddy,” they both said, jumping off the bed.

As the two children went downstairs, Ed threw on his robe and followed. Lynn was puttering in the kitchen and had just poured his coffee.

“Thank, Lynn, I needed that.”

“You got in quite late last night, so I figured you could use it. What time is your flight scheduled for?”

“11:00, but I have to meet the Professor at the studio, so I’ll have to leave here by nine.”

“Where are you going, Daddy?” asked Robert.

“I have to go to the United States for a few days.”

“Are you going to look for Mommy?” Charlene asked.

“Yes, dear, I’m going to look for Mommy.”

“Can we come?” said the children, in unison.

“I’ll tell you what, Mommy may come back here. Can you both stay here with Granma in case she shows up? It would be a big help to Daddy.”

The children both nodded, “Okay, Daddy.”

Ed looked up at Lynn. She had a twinkle in her eye as she smiled at him.

Virginia awoke to a knock at the door.

“Yes?”

“Breakfast will be ready in about ten minutes, ma’am,” said the voice outside the door that sounded like Hoss.

“All right, thank you.”

She got out of bed and changed into the dress that Ben had brought in to her last night. It was simple and elegant, yet dated, just like the lack of indoor plumbing. After getting dressed, she fussed with her hair trying to get it in place. She looked around, *damn no hair spray*. After about five minutes of frustration, she pulled it back and tied it with an old fashioned barrette she found on the dresser.

A few minutes later, she walked down the stairs to where the four men were seated at the table. They all stood when they saw her.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” she said, in greeting.

“Good morning, Miss Lake, I hope you slept well,” said Ben.

“I did, I think I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. Please forgive my appearance. I couldn’t get my hair to cooperate.”

“You look absolutely beautiful,” said Ben, as he pulled out the chair for her.

She smiled embarrassed, “Thank you, Mr. Cartwright. You’re too kind.”

Hop Sing came into the room with a fresh plate and set it in front of her.

“Hurry now. Eat while it’s hot.”

The food smelled good and she dug right in.

“Would you like some coffee, Miss Lake?” asked Adam.

“Please.”

She had found out at supper last night, that none of the men used anything in their coffee. She remembered drinking it black on occasion as well, except when she was assigned to ...

*Damn I just can't remember.*

“Miss Lake, are you all right?” asked Adam.

“Oh...yes. I'm sorry. I was just trying to remember something...” She shook her head in frustration. “It's gone now.”

“Well, hopefully we'll get some answers in town today, Miss Lake,” said Ben.

Virginia nodded, giving him a wan smile.

By seven in the morning, they had finished breakfast and were all gathered outside the ranch house.

“Boys, I’m going to take Miss Lake by the shelter on the way in to Virginia City. If she sees where we found her, it may help her remember something.”

“All right, Pa, we should be out there in about an hour or so to cover it.”

Ben turned to help her up on to the buck board wagon and climbed up next to her. The pair started on the trail towards town.

“There’s something strange about that lady, it’s as if she is out of place,” said Little Joe.

“Dadburnit, you’d feel that way to if you didn’t know who you were,” Hoss said.

“She seems to have taken a liking to Pa,” commented Adam.

“Yeah,” said Hoss. “I noticed that last night at dinner, but she seems nice enough.”

“Joe is right, she is out of place. It’s almost like she is from a different world.”

Hoss cocked his head questioning, “what’d yah’ mean by that?”

“I don’t know, Hoss, it’s something I just can’t put into words. You’ll understand when you see that thing.”

“Pa said it was a shelter.”

“I’ve never, in my life, seen anything like this. It’s left me restless ever since I set foot in it. Come on, let’s get going.”

The Shadair SST had just reached its cruising altitude on its way to Reno Nevada, the closest field to the site that could accommodate the hypersonic aircraft. In the passenger cabin, Straker and Reinhardt continued to examine the data from yesterday’s accident. For Ed, it was a matter of self preservation, as he tried to combat the emptiness in his heart.

Over the past six years, Virginia had become his rock, a constant and steady presence that

kept him focused and centered on the difficult task that fate had handed him. Even before they became romantically involved, Ed knew that he cared for her, but it took a month of her being on Moonbase to make him realize how deep his feelings went. And now she was his wife, the mother of his children, and his best friend. He missed her with an ache in his heart that was physical.

Ed forced himself to other thoughts, as he couldn't yet accept the possibility that she was gone forever.

“Edward, are you all right?”

Ed looked up at the older man with a haunted look on his face.

“I'm sorry, Professor. I just don't know how I'm going to get through this if she's really gone.”

Reinhardt regarded his friend with a knowing look on his face.

“Do you remember when the two of you ejected over Loch Ness, six years ago?” he asked.

“I do, I’ll never forget the pain she felt in her heart when she had to leave me.”

“I saw her later that day, by then she was convinced that you were dead. But she continued on, finishing the work that you had started more determined than I had ever seen her. So will you, Edward.”

“I wish I was as certain as you are.”

“You are in an uncomfortable place right now, as you do not know if we are going to be able to rescue her or not. You are caught between hope and despair. I won’t tell you this is going to be easy, Edward, but I will tell you that you won’t face it alone.”

Ed considered Reinhardt’s words. Alec was on his way to HQ to oversee things there and Paul was already supervising the recovery effort. For years, Ed had taken the burden of SHADO

completely on his shoulders. Virginia had taught him to share the load, and next to his children, it was the greatest gift she had ever given him.

“Thank you,” said Ed.

“The shelter is just over the ridge, Miss Lake,” said Ben, as he brought the wagon to a stop. “We’ll have to walk in from here.”

Ben Cartwright stepped down and turned the help her down from the wagon. Virginia took his arm and they walked up to the top of the ridge. When they reached the top Ben pointed to the strange building. Virginia stopped in her tracks at the sight of the object. Images, of mutilated bodies, and beings in red suits, with helmets that covered their heads, formed in her mind. She began to shake and Ben had to hold her up as she began to collapse.

“Miss Lake, what’s wrong?”

She couldn't speak and was hanging on to him for dear life.

“Virginia?”

“Oh, Ben, I saw images of people who had been murdered by the men who came from this...” She paused, losing her train of thought.

“Tell me about the men.”

“They were cold malevolent murderous beings, they were dressed in a red suit, a...” Virginia shook her head knowing that the knowledge was there but just beyond her reach.

Ben held her while she regained her composure. She knew that he had been attracted to her from the moment he had first seen her and now she was being held in his arms.

In a few minutes, she had regained control of herself, and they drew slightly apart, but she didn't let go right away, instead looking up into his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Cartwright, I didn’t mean to be so familiar.”

“Miss Lake, I think I’d rather that you call me Ben.”

“I think I’d like that, and I think I’d like it if you would call me Virginia.”

She was still looking up at him and holding him close as she trembled, not out of fear but anticipation. She slightly tilted her head, reaching, her eyes closing as Ben gently kissed her. Virginia slowly pulled away, ending the kiss and found her feelings to be in conflict. Ben Cartwright was kind, gentle, and handsome, and she was alone in a strange land, unsure of who she was or where she came from. But deep inside she felt a pang of guilt and emptiness that she couldn’t explain.

“Why don’t we take a look inside and see if there is anything that will help you remember,” said Ben, breaking the tension. “Trust me, it’s safe.”

“All right, I’m okay now.”

They walked down off the top of the ridge and approached the strange object. She followed Ben inside and they looked around. Virginia noticed a notepad on the floor near one of the chairs.

“Ben, what’s that on the floor.”

Cartwright reached down and picked up the notebook and handed it to her. She flipped through the pad looking at the notes. She recognized it as her own handwriting. Virginia read some of the notes aloud.

“I wrote these formulas, quantum singularity distribution ratios, intermix formula, temporal compensation factor, this looks like calculus, but much more complex,” she said.

“Calculus?”

“Engineering mathematics, integration, differentiation, it’s used in designing...”

Virginia shook her head trying to remember what it was used for, the answer just on the edge of her memory.

“I’m sorry, Ben, I just can’t seem to remember...”

“But this is in your handwriting.”

“Yes, but I can’t remember what it means. I can recognize some of this, but the rest is a mystery.”

“Perhaps if you study it later, it will make sense. In the meantime, we should get moving.”

“All right.”

The pair walked back to the wagon and Ben helped her up. He climbed up next to her and they continued into town.

The SHADO mobile laboratory had finally arrived, and Straker, Reinhardt, and Foster

looked over the data from the wayward spacecraft.

“It’s going to take some time to compile all this data,” said the professor.

“Has the carbon dating test started yet?” asked Ed.

“We just started it a few minutes ago, but it’s going to be a week before we get the precision results we need.”

Ed turned to Foster, “Paul, did we find anything out of the ordinary inside?”

“No, Ed, I left orders that nothing be touched until the control settings had been recorded and the flight logs are downloaded.”

“All right, Paul, let’s go take a look.”

Paul fell in step behind his commanding officer as they walked to where the buried alien spacecraft lay. The crew had completely uncovered it now and Ed placed his hand on the surface of the craft. He opened his thoughts

trying to sense the presence of his wife, all the while knowing that she would not be there. Paul watched his friend deal with his grief not having seen him this withdrawn in years.

“Ed, I never had the chance to...”

“I know, Paul,” Ed said cutting him off. “I haven’t let her go, yet. I’m still holding on to the hope that we’ll be able to bring her back.”

Foster remained silent, knowing that even though Ed had opened up after being engaged to Ginny, at his core, he was still a private man.

The two men ventured inside the ship noting that the power systems were still operational. The interior looked just like it had the last time he had been there, just over a week ago. Virginia had spent a lot of time inside this ship, spearheading the effort to crack the technology that the aliens were using. More than once it had been a point of contention between them.

They had argued about it yesterday morning...

“Ed, I have to go back to the research center today, I need to fine tune the power system formulas,” said Virginia.

“Why don’t you just have Joe send you the figures?”

“Ed, the mathematics involved here is very complex, and as bright as Colonel Kelly is, most of this is simply beyond his capability. Ed, I’m having trouble keeping it straight.”

“Virginia, I worry about you being around that thing, the last time something went wrong, we both ended up in an alternate reality. I still have nightmares about that.”

“Ed, we’ve discussed this before, we both agreed before we got married that SHADO and its mission came first.”

“Damn it, Ginny! I am putting SHADO first! I don’t want my executive officer taking unnecessary risks!”

“You mean like her husband!” she shot back.

“When is the last time I took an unnecessary risk?”

“How about the stunt you pulled last month on Moonbase! You should have left that survey to the crew. But no, you have to out there and almost get yourself killed over a piece of debris!”

She was right, even Henderson had given him hell about that. Virginia softened as she looked at him.

“Ed, this isn’t about me being at risk, is it?”

He shook his head, losing his steam. “No, it’s not.”

“Then talk to me, Ed, tell me what’s really bothering you.”

“Ever since we started experimenting with the time altering equipment on that craft, I’ve felt uneasiness about the whole idea. Virginia, we are dealing with something that we know so little about, and that could be perverted into a dreadful weapon in the wrong hands.”

“I know, Ed, it bothers me as well. But we can’t fight the aliens on their own grounds if we don’t understand the technology. They’ve used time against us more than once and we were both lucky to live through it. I still have nightmares about the Timelash incident.”

“I’m sorry, honey, I just think about how fragile the fabric of time is. What ramifications are we creating by toying with it? It’s not something I take lightly. And I worry that one day the world governments are going to demand that this technology be turned over. That’s always been the problem when technology out distances wisdom.”

“I know you won’t let that happen, and neither will I.”

Ed brought his thoughts back to the present, in his mind cursing the technology in front of him.

“Paul, double check the security clearances for everyone assigned to the recovery effort. Make sure that everyone here has Omega Level clearance.”

“Yes sir.”

### **Chapter 3:**

Ben and Virginia arrived in front of Doc Martin’s office, later that morning. As he helped her down, she asked, “Do you think he can do anything for me, Ben?”

“I don’t know, but it can’t hurt to have him look you over.”

They walked into the office and were greeted by Paul Martin, the town physician.

“Ben, how are you,” he said, as they shook hands. He looked at Virginia, “Ma’am.”

“Doctor Martin, may I introduce Miss Virginia Lake.”

“My pleasure, ma’am,” said Martin.

“Dr. Martin.”

Martin looked back to Cartwright; “So Ben, what can I do for you.”

“I brought Miss Lake in to see you. We found her not too far from the ranch yesterday afternoon. She was unconscious and has lost her memory, and the only reason she knows her name is we found a card that had both her name and picture on it.”

“I see, Miss Lake, did you have any pain anywhere, bumps or bruises?”

“I had a headache yesterday, and the back of my neck is sore.”

“Let me have a look.”

Dr. Martin lifted her hair and examined the back of her neck.

“Yes, you do have a bruise here,” he said, as he continued to examine her. When he was finished he turned to both of them.

“Can you recall anything, names, faces, or places?”

“I recognized my handwriting in this notebook, but it doesn’t make any sense.”

“May I?”

“Of course,” she said, handing him the book.

Martin’s eyes went wide when he saw the complex math equations. “This looks like calculus.”

“It is,” she said. “I recognize some of the integration equations, but a good portion of it is much more complex.”

Martin looked somewhat surprised at the scope of her knowledge. He handed her back the book.

“Are you a scientist?” he asked simply.

“I...I don't know.”

Martin finished the examination and spoke directly to Virginia.

“The retrograde amnesia, which you are suffering from, was caused by a blow to the back of the neck. It seems to have only affected your declarative memory, as your skill or procedural memory appears to be intact.”

“Will I ever get it back?”

“It's really difficult to say, you may just, all of a sudden, remember everything, or gradually remember bits and pieces. There are several things that could trigger a recovery, seeing a familiar face, or being in a familiar situation. It

could happen in a few days, or it could take much longer. There is simply no way to tell.”

Virginia looked at Ben with a frightened look on her face. He took her hand and held it.

“Well, Dr. Martin, thank you very much for your time,” said Ben.

“Any time, Ben, pleasure to meet you, Miss Lake.”

When they were outside she turned to him and asked, “Well, what now?”

“We’re going across the street to see Sheriff Coffee.”

“What if I’m an escaped fugitive,” she asked.

“Somehow, I don’t think that’s going to be the case.”

When they walked into the office Sheriff Coffee stood and said, “Good morning, Ben, I didn’t expect you to be back so soon.”

“Roy, I’d like you to meet Miss Virginia Lake.”

“It’s my pleasure, ma’am.”

“How do you do, Sheriff?”

“Roy, Miss Lake has lost her memory, I just had Doc Martin look her over. We need to find out if anyone has reported her missing.”

Coffee reached for a stack of papers on his desk and quickly looked through them. When he had finished, he looked up. “Well, Miss Lake, you’re not on my missing person’s list nor are you wanted by the law.”

“Well, that’s something anyway,” she said.

“I’ll tell you what, Ben, let me telegram the Marshall down in Carson City and see if he can find out anything about Miss Lake.”

“Roy, I really appreciate this.”

“I assume that she will be staying on the Ponderosa?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay, Ben, I’ll send word if I find anything.”

“Thank you,” said Ben, as they shook hands.

When they were outside, Ben turned to her, “Since we’re in town, is there any personal items you would like to pick up?”

“I don’t seem to have any money.”

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll take care of it.”

“Ben, I can’t it’s...”

“Virginia, listen to me. We don’t know how long it’s going to take for your memory to return and there are things that you are going to need. We can’t afford to stand on ceremony.”

“Ben Cartwright, you are a very kind man.”

She rewarded him with a heartwarming smile.

“Come on, the general store is this way.

Professor Manfred Reinhardt stepped up to the podium to address the group of SHADO personnel that had been assembled for the mission planning session.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. As you all know, a week ago today, the alien spacecraft that had been recovered from Loch Ness disappeared with Colonel Lake on board. Almost simultaneously it reappeared here, in Nevada, however Colonel Lake was missing. The energy levels of the quantum singularity based power system indicated a significant use of energy.”

“Last week we took samples from the ship for precise carbon dating measurements. Between the carbon dating procedure, the energy drain on the auxiliary power systems, and the temporal compensation factors, we were able to calculate the approximate amount of time that had elapsed during its journey. This craft, and Colonel Lake, traveled backward in time to the year 1862.”

Several gasps were heard in the room as the impact of the statement hit home. Reinhardt continued, “This single event seems to prove

one very significant fact. There is only one time line, and events that are changed in the past will have an effect on future events. Therefore, any rescue or recovery attempt must take these facts into consideration. Commander?”

Ed stepped up to the podium. “As you have just been told, we have narrowed the search window down to a six month period in the year 1862. Unfortunately that window is much too large to mount a rescue attempt. We have to narrow the target down to within a few days. Anything larger and we risk altering history. That’s a risk I can’t afford to take for anyone, including my wife.”

“Commander, isn’t history already been changed, what difference does it make,” asked Paul.

“Paul, look at time like a tapestry, if you remove the wrong thread, the whole thing comes apart. We have to make sure that Colonel Lake did not become an integral part of our history. Think

about it, she's a scientist, with a doctorate in modern physics. Suppose she contributed to advancements in science that would have otherwise not been made. The ramifications to future events could be staggering.”

Paul nodded beginning to understand the problem, still realizing how much he had to learn about time travel.

“We need to start doing historical research in addition to preparing for a possible rescue mission. Thanks to the carbon dating, and the fact the spacecraft was undisturbed for over a hundred years, we now have a place to start. Keith, were you able to find out what this area was in 1862?”

“Yes sir, I was able to find some land records from that time period. This whole area was a timber and cattle ranch owned by a Benjamin Cartwright. Apparently the original ranch house still exists.”

“Who owns it?” asked Ed.

“A gentleman by the name of Adam Cartwright, and judging by the last name I would have to assume that he is a descendant of the original owner.”

“Well that’s a start. Keith, I want you to get over to Virginia City and start digging through the records. I want to know everything there is to know about the Cartwright’s. Also, see if you can find anything on Colonel Lake, and be sure to check the both the marriage and death certificates.”

“Yes sir”

When the meeting was over Paul came up to Ed.

“Ed, why are you checking the marriage records?”

“Think about it, Paul, she’s a young beautiful woman, all alone in a time when her husband wasn’t even born yet. At some point she’s going to realize that she’s not getting home and is

going to have to accept her new life. I only hope that she didn't wait too long."

Paul looked at his friend with a new understanding; realizing that Ed loved his wife so much that he wanted her to be happy in her new life.

"Who is going out to see Adam Cartwright?" he asked.

"I'm going to send Lt. Lake. She flew over yesterday with the kids. She can go under the guise of looking for a lost family member which, for once, will be the complete truth. Are you going back to the site?"

"Yeah, Jen should be just about done with the power conversion formulas."

"She has a handle on it then?"

"Ginny taught her well, Ed. Jen is a smart lady."

Straker remembered when Virginia had recommended Jennifer Wallace for promotion, almost eight years ago. He had approved it

based on Ginny's recommendation and Wallace had performed superbly. Ed had offered her a chance to join the command team after the explosion at HQ five years ago, but she asked to remain in the research section. Ed decided to include her in the command briefings anyway in the event he needed her to step in.

Ed realized, not for the first time how much it would cost him to lose his wife, and not just on a personal level.

While Ben sat working at his desk, Virginia sat across the room with a pad and pencil in her hand. She would look up at him occasionally then continue with her work. Ben very seldom allowed anyone in his inner sanctum, but he found that he enjoyed her company. Over the past week, she had settled in at the Cartwright home and was considered a member of the family by Hoss and Little Joe. She had even

taken to doing chores around the house much to Hop Sing's chagrin.

"Miss Lake, you guest here," He complained in broken English. "Can't have you working like servant."

"Come on, I work harder than this in my..."

Virginia stopped mid sentence as the memory faded again.

"You okay, Miss Lake?"

"Yes, I'm sorry I was remembering something...its gone now."

"That's okay, you good person, you remember soon."

Adam, however, seemed to be aloof to her, sometimes going out of his way to avoid her. Ben had told her that he would make a point to ask him about it later.

“So, Virginia, what are you working on?”

“It’s a surprise, I promise I’ll show you when it’s finished.”

The sheriff had been unable to find out any more about her and she still had images that flooded her mind that she could not explain. She decided to try to put them on paper finding out that she had a knack for drawing. The previous night she had finished a sketch of a man in a cream color suit walking away from her, holding the hands off two children, a boy and a girl. It was an image that had been haunting her mind for almost a week. For some reason she felt a feeling of great sadness and loss when she looked at it.

Today she was working on Ben. He had said that he needed to catch up on the books and he would be sitting down for a while. *Good, she thought, maybe I can get this finished before he gets up.*

In the family room, Adam and Hoss were sitting across from each other.

“Well, Miss Lake seems to be settling in nicely,” said Hoss.

“Too nicely, if you ask me.”

“You don’t like her, do you?”

“I don’t trust her. It just seems awful convenient to show up out of the blue claiming memory loss.”

“Adam, Doc Martin was convinced, and she did have a bump on the back of the head.”

“You could be right, but I don’t like the way she attached herself to Pa.”

“Pa was the first person she saw when she woke up and he certainly doesn’t seem to mind.”

“I guess we’ll see.”

“You always were the suspicious one of the family.”

Ben closed the ledger book and looked up at Virginia, as she continued to work. In a few minutes she looked up and met his eyes.

“Ben Cartwright, just how long have you been staring at me?”

“Not nearly as long as I would have liked.”

She blushed at the compliment.

“You’re too kind, Ben.” She put her pencil aside and continued, “Well, it’s finished. Would you like to see?”

“Of course I would.”

Virginia turned the pad around so Ben could see it. The drawing was a picture of him working at his desk. Ben was impressed as the work was very good.

“Virginia, this is excellent work. How long have you been drawing?”

“I started the day we came back from town, I don’t remember ever drawing before.”

“Well, judging from the quality of this work, I would have to say that you’ve had some previous experience.”

“Well if I did I don’t remember it, although I want to say I know someone who is an artist.”

“Can you remember anymore about them?”

“It seems like the harder I try to remember, the further away the memory gets. The best way I can describe it is distant memories.”

They held each other’s eyes for a moment.

“Well, we have about an hour before supper, would you like to take a walk?” he asked.

“Only if I’m being asked by a handsome gentleman.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said as he stood and offered her his arm.

Outwardly, she smiled, but inside she was experiencing a moment of déjà vu. She knew

that at some point in time she had the same conversation with someone else. As she walked outside with Ben, she wondered about it. The feelings seemed to surface the strongest anytime she allowed herself to consider a future with Ben. She wondered about the blonde man with the penetrating blue eyes and the two children and she felt a pang of loneliness as she thought about them. *If I have a family they should have been looking for me.*

Captain Ford had been searching through the microfiche, of the old records, most of the afternoon. None of the records prior to 1900 were on the computer system so the task was exceptionally slow. He was looking through the death records figuring that Ginny would not have remarried. Keith had noticed, years ago, how she watched the Commander, and he had seen it grow from attraction to undying love. *No way, she would never remarry.*

The death certificate on the other hand was almost a sure bet, as she would be over one hundred seventy five years old if she were still alive. Keith checked the computer system first as that would be very quick. When that search turned up empty he turned his attention to the microfiche machine and began the tedious task of searching through forty years of records.

Keith started with January 1862, choosing to move forward rather than back from 1900. When he came across the July 1862 records his heart froze. *Virginia Lake, age 40 (estimated), died July 14, 1862, family none, cause of death, gunshot wound, description, blonde hair, blue grey eyes, average build, 5'8", possession of remains taken by Benjamin Cartwright.* Ford brought the microfiche to the clerk to have the record printed. He picked up the phone and called the Commander.

## **Chapter 4:**

Ed stood alone in front of the grave marker in the Cartwright family cemetery. The only inscription on the stone was her name and date of death. He had not allowed himself an emotional release save the one in the London research facility. But seeing the grave of his beloved wife was too much, and Ed succumbed to the grief.

When he had poured out all he was capable of he looked up as Professor Reinhardt approached.

“I assumed that I would find you here, Edward.”

“I appreciate it, Manfred, but I’d rather be alone.”

“Nonsense, Edward, you seem to have forgotten that Virginia comforted me in my hour of need. Granted she wasn’t your wife at the time, but she was destined to be. And family honor requires that I stand with you now. If you turn

me away I will be deeply offended and dishonored.”

“You don’t play fair, Professor,” said Ed, some life returning to his voice. “You know it’s ironic, I knew I cared for her back then, but I waited almost two years to do anything about it. I desperately wanted to tell her and I almost didn’t get the chance.”

“How so, Edward?” asked Reinhardt.

“During her tour on Moonbase, she was almost killed twice by mass UFO attacks. The second time she had risked her own life to save Nina and Joan not to mention the base.”

“She was a selfless individual and it’s no surprise that you would have found her attractive.”

“I’m a damn fool, Manfred. I should have told her sooner.”

“Edward, you know better than that. You can’t live your life on regrets, besides this cloud has a silver lining.”

Ed looked at the professor, “I don’t understand?”

“We know now, that Virginia may not have had a significant impact on history. That improves the feasibility of a rescue mission considerably.”

In his grief, he hadn’t thought of that.

“So if we are able to rescue her, this grave will cease to exist.”

“That is correct. When the UFO reappeared here, we proved the existence of a single timeline.”

“Manfred, that worries me more than anything else. This technology has just become a dreadful weapon, and mankind doesn’t have the wisdom to possess it.”

“I agree, but men like you have the wisdom to see that, and that gives us promise.”

Reinhardt had just paid him an immense compliment, for which he was grateful.

“I’m sorry, Ben, it’s not you,” she said, as she broke off the kiss. “It’s me. Every time I allow myself to get close to you these images appear in my mind. I feel as if I’m being unfaithful to someone.”

“I understand, Virginia, I shouldn’t be pursuing this...”

“No, Ben, listen to me. I know I love you, but I can’t let myself be in love with you right now. And it’s not because I don’t want to, I just need time to sort it all out. For all I know these images are from years ago. Hell, I don’t even know how old I am.”

“I didn’t ask, because a gentleman doesn’t inquire about a lady’s age. But you don’t look any older than my oldest son.”

“But you think I’m older than that.”

“You carry yourself as being much more mature than someone his age.”

“Telling a lady that she looks younger than she is can never be a mistake.”

She reached up and kissed him briefly.

“Ben, I don’t know where my feelings are going right now. I’ll understand if you want to put some distance between us.”

“I can’t push you away. I’m in love with you Virginia.”

She was not surprised by his confession as she had come to know him very well in a short period of time.

“I know, but I’m going to be fickle until I sort this out. There are times I’m going to want to be in your arms and other times that I’m going to need my space. Can you deal with that?”

“I could suffer far worse if it meant being with you.”

“Ben Cartwright, I’ll tell you one thing, if I knew for sure that I wasn’t encumbered, I’d marry you in a heartbeat.”

Ben was surprised by her admission, it being so out of place for a woman. But then again nothing about her was typical, and it intrigued him that much more.

“Miss Lake, I will hold you to that,” he said, deliberately formal.

“Mr. Cartwright, I’m bound by that promise.”

“Well we should get back, supper will be almost ready.”

They walked back to the ranch house hand in hand.

Lt. Lake walked up to the old ranch house and knocked on the door and a middle aged man appeared. He was quite tall with dark hair that was specked with grey. His voice had a deep

resonating timbre to it as he answered, “Can I help you ma’am?”

“Mr. Cartwright, I’m Lynn Lake. We spoke on the phone earlier.”

“Oh yes, Mrs. Lake, please come in.”

As she walked into the house she felt as if she had stepped back in time, much of the house being original construction. Cartwright must have noticed her reaction.

“Yes, we haven’t changed much over the years. It’s still pretty much looks the same as it did when my great, great, great, grandfather built it.”

“I’m very impressed, it’s truly amazing.”

Cartwright led her into the study and they sat down.

“So, Mrs. Lake, you think that my ancestor might have known your long lost relative.”

“Yes, I found this record in Virginia City yesterday, it shows that your ever so great grandfather took possession of her remains and buried them in the family cemetery. I was over there yesterday and her name is on the stone. I’d like to try to find out as much about her as I can.”

She handed him the record and he looked it over.

“Well, at least we have a date to start looking. My ancestor kept a journal and I still have it. I don’t open it very often as it’s old but in a case like this I think I need to. You see I’m a family history and genealogy buff. So by helping you learn about Virginia, I’ll learn more about Ben. By the way Mrs. Lake, please call me Adam.”

“Thank you, Adam, I’m Lynn.”

Cartwright opened the desk drawer and took out an old fashioned notebook.

“This is the first one he started, the 1860’s are toward the end.”

Adam thumbed through the book until he came to the date he was looking for. He began to read aloud.

*July 14, 1862:*

*My heart is heavy with the burden of great loss. My beloved Virginia died today at the hands of a common cattle rustler. We had gone into town that morning to pick up some art supplies and on the way back, we were ambushed by two men not far from the place where Virginia was first found. These men had intention of having their way with her and I intended to stop it even if it meant my life. Adam and Hoss happened to be nearby and heard the commotion. The men would have killed both of us had it not been for my two son’s showing up and shooting them. I had thought that both the men were dead, but one of them lifted a gun at me. Virginia saw it and*

*pushed me out of the way, taking the bullet that was meant for me. She died in my arms a few minutes later. In the six weeks I had known her she had stolen my heart and I had hoped that when she had regained her memory she would be able return the love that I felt for her as I loved her just as much as I did my three wives.*

Lynn had to fight to maintain her composure. Hearing the details of her daughter's death had brought her to tears.

“I'm very sorry, Lynn, I didn't know this would upset you so much.”

“It's all right, in the journal, it said something about art supplies.”

“Yes, if you look on the wall behind you, there are two pencil sketches, one of Ben sitting at this desk, and the other one doesn't make any sense to us. It meant a lot to Virginia and because of that, it meant a lot to Ben.”

Lynn looked at the drawing of Ben Cartwright. It was excellent work and she felt a surge of pride in seeing her daughter's work. Sure enough, Ginny's signature was in the lower right corner of the drawing.

When she looked at the second one, she knew right away who it was, Ed and the children. She wondered why the picture showed them walking away when it suddenly dawned on her.

“Adam, didn't that journal entry say something about memory loss?”

“Yes, it did.”

“This is a picture of Virginia's husband and their children. That's why they are walking away. She could see them but not their faces.”

“Well I'll be. I was just going back through this journal and there is quite a bit about Virginia in here, sometimes two entries a day. She must have been an incredible woman. Lynn, these writings, and the pictures, belong to your family

just as much as mine. If you would like we can run in to town and have copies made of the journal as well as the pictures on the wall.”

“I’d like that, Adam.”

“I found one other thing, and I’d like you to have this,” he said, as he handed her a sketchbook.

“What is this?”

“These are other drawings that Virginia had done. Most of them make no sense to us, but your family might know what they mean.”

“Thank you, Adam, you’re very kind.”

Virginia sat outside, after supper, working on another drawing. She didn’t know if she had ever done this before but she found it oddly relaxing, like playing the piano. She had sat down one evening at the upright that the Cartwright’s had in the living room and started playing a classical piece without even thinking

about it. When they asked her where she learned to play she couldn't remember, she only knew that she had always played piano.

It was starting to get dark and she closed her pad. She stared out over the land watching the last bit of sunset as it dropped below the horizon. She didn't hear Adam walk up to her.

“Do you mind if I join you, Miss Lake?”

“Oh... of course. Please.”

“It's beautiful, isn't it?” he asked.

“Yes, it is. I see why your father loves this land so much.”

“Yes, he does. Speaking of my father, I'd like to know your intentions concerning him.”

“I don't think I know what you mean.”

“Miss Lake, I've never been one to mince words, so I'll get right to the point. You're not the first woman who has blown in here and set her sights on my father and the family wealth.”

“I have no interest in your father’s wealth,” she replied simply. “I may have lost my memory, but I know that I have never judged a person by how much they have.”

“You mean to tell me that becoming co-owner of all this doesn’t appeal to you?”

“I would have been quite taken by your father, regardless of his financial status.”

“You’ll have to convince me of that.”

“Is that why you have avoided me, you think I’m up to something? You think I mean ill to your father?” she asked, allowing some anger to show in her eyes. “I would never do anything to hurt him and I resent the fact that you would even question it.”

Adam was taken back as he had not expected her to be so perceptive, and he was unprepared for the anger he saw her holding in check. *I think I’ve grossly underestimated this woman.*

“I’m sorry, I meant no disrespect...”

“Of course you did! You all but outright accused me of trying to steal your father’s wealth, not to mention questioning my integrity.”

“Virginia...”

“Mr. Cartwright, you will address me as Miss Lake.”

She paused for a moment, giving Adam an icy glare he would never forget. He looked away not being able to hold her gaze.

“I’m going up to bed. In the morning I’ll have your father bring me into town where I will stay in one of the boarding houses there.”

“That won’t be necessary,” came a resounding voice from around the corner. Ben appeared from behind the wall and stepped up onto the porch.

“Pa, it’s not what it looks like...”

“Adam, go inside and wait for me in my study.”

“But Pa...”

“I mean it, son!”

“Yes sir.”

When Adam had left he turned to Virginia and took her in his arms.

“I don’t want you to ever leave, do you hear?” Ben said to her, pleadingly.

“Ben, I don’t want to come between you and Adam, he’s your son.”

“Yes, he is. But he’s also of age. And I’ve been lonely for far too long. Adam is going to have to adjust.”

“I can understand his resentment, he doesn’t know me, hell, I don’t know me, for all I know he could be right.”

“I should have talked to him sooner, I saw this coming and I didn’t head it off.”

“You’re a very perceptive man, Ben.”

“Not really, I just know my sons. Come on, let’s go inside, don’t worry about Adam, I’ll speak to him.”

Ben sat in his study writing the days happenings in his journal. He had been prolific in his journal entries since he had meet Virginia.

*June 10, 1862:*

*It has been a week since Virginia has graced my life with her presence. Even with her continued memory loss, I find that there is so much to learn about this intriguing woman. I found out today that she would take me as her husband, if she were sure that she didn’t belong to another. That fact both delights and terrifies me, as I am afraid that she has someone else in her past. Her illustration of the man with the two children haunts me as much as it does her. I continually pray that if she has someone, he is revealed to her and they are reunited, while at the same time, I pray that this not be the case. I*

*had a very difficult conversation with my eldest son, regarding Virginia. I saw this coming and should have said something earlier. Adam saw her as an opportunist and he confronted her this evening. She was going to leave tomorrow but I convinced her to stay after Adam apologized. I hope that I was able to convince him of her sincerity as I know his actions were not out of malice. Earlier today, Virginia drew a picture of me sitting at my desk working on the books. It was beautiful work and I will have to purchase a proper frame for both these picture the next time I am in town. It is my hope that I will be making another purchase as well.*

Ed sat in the hotel room, reading the excerpts from Ben Cartwright's journal. The more he learned about this man, the more he found to respect about him. He could understand why Virginia would fall so easy for him. *Memory*

*loss, he thought. Maybe it was better that way, at least she had found some happiness.*

## **Chapter 5:**

“So what you are telling me is we can’t take this craft back in time,” said Ed, clearly upset.

“Correct, Commander,” said Jennifer Wallace. “Every time we run the calculations, they go off into infinity.”

“The problem is, Edward, the craft is already there,” said Reinhardt. “Apparently there is a restriction that keeps the temporal compensation circuits from jumping to a time that the craft already exists in.”

“Is it the hardware, or something to do with temporal balance?”

“I suspect the latter to be the case and that presents a problem.”

“You have a talent for understatement, Professor. What is the condition of the other ship?”

“Non operational, sir,” said Wallace. “It was damaged when we recovered it so it became the dissection model. We were able to learn much more by having both a working and a study piece.”

“Terrific, is there any way around the temporal balance problem.”

“I’m afraid not, Edward, we would have to jump to a time before June 1862.”

Straker began to pace to room, thinking, *the same craft yet in two different points in time just like the same craft in two different universes.*

“Can we use the systems to open a temporal portal between the two craft?”

Reinhardt considered for a moment, “You’re thinking along the lines of the accident that

opened the portal to the alternate universe that Virginia and you were trapped in.”

“Yes, can we accomplish the same thing with the ship at different points in the timeline?”

“I believe it will work, but it will take a few weeks to work out the calculations. We have to do a set for the trip back as well as the trip forward. How many people are you going to send?”

“I’ll be going myself, and I’ll be taking one volunteer.”

“Commander, you can’t be serious, Henderson will be livid if he finds out,” said Paul.

“He’s not going to find out. This whole operation is Omega Classified.”

“Edward, I wish you’d reconsider,” said Reinhardt. “What about your children?”

“Professor, this is my responsibility. Besides, I have every intention of coming back, with my wife.”

“In that case I’d better get my affairs in order,” said Paul.

“No, Paul, not you. While I’m gone SHADO is going to be your responsibility.”

“If it’s all right with you, sir, I’d like to go,” said Ford.

“I had you in mind, Keith. You seem to be quite knowledgeable about this time period aren’t you?”

“It’s a hobby, sir.”

“Well, people, let’s get to work on these calculations, shall we?”

July 14, 1862:

“Did you find everything you needed, Virginia?”

“I think so. I thought I might try my hand with paints, a full color painting of the ranch house maybe?”

“Yes, I think I’d love to see that. Did you remember your sketch pad and pencils?”

“Yes, I did, thank you.

They rode in silence for a moment, both of them enjoying the view of the land.

“Ben, I don’t think I’ve thanked you enough for taking care of me these past few weeks, my words seem pale in comparison to the gratitude I feel in my heart.”

“It’s been my pleasure, Virginia, and as you know, I do have an ulterior motive.”

“Ben Cartwright, I’m shocked,” she said, kiddingly, and then continued in a more serious vein, “I’ve made a decision, Ben, if no one shows up looking for me or I don’t regain my memory, by the end of August, I’m going to move on with my life.”

“I see, and what plans have you decided on?”

“Ben, I made you a promise five weeks ago, I’m still bound by that promise, that is, if you’ll still have me?”

“I think you already know the answer to that,” he said, as he quickly kissed her.

They were not too far from the place where Virginia had been found when two men stepped out with their rifles aimed at Ben.

“All right old man, that’s far enough! Stop right there!”

Ben stopped the wagon and said, “What is the meaning of this. You’re on private property.”

“Well ain’t that just too bad. Off the wagon! Both of you!”

Ben set the brake and got down. When he turned to help Virginia he was pushed aside.

“Never mind her, get behind the wagon,” said one of the men. “Hey, Will, get the woman.”

“Okay, Brett,” he said, as he turned to Virginia. “All right little lady, come down here nicely now and nobody gets hurt.”

Virginia stepped down off the wagon and Will grabbed her, inappropriately. Without thinking she spun and slapped him across the face. He staggered back, caught off guard. He pulled his pistol and held it on her.

“Oooo, you’re a little wildcat, aren’t you? You’re gonna wish you’d never done that. Back there with the old man.”

She glared at him as she turned and walked to the back of the wagon and stood close to Ben. He placed a protective arm around her.

“All right, what do you want?” asked Ben, in anger.

“Oh, we’re gonna take everything, including your lady. Hell we might even let you live long enough to watch,” said Brett.

Ben Cartwright looked at them with contempt and fury in his eyes.

July 14, 1990:

“Commander the spatial coordinates have been entered, and the power system intermix conversion factors have been adjusted. It’s ready, sir.”

“Thank you, Jen. Well Captain Ford, are you ready?”

“Yes sir.”

Straker and Ford were both dressed in period specific clothing, the only anachronism being the Glock .40’s they carried as side arms. Paul Foster forced himself to suppress a grin but not before Ed spotted it.

“You find something funny, Paul?”

Foster couldn’t hold it in, “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Well, Paul, let’s hope we can all laugh about it when we get back.”

Paul shook hands with his CO, “Good luck, sir,” he said, seriously.

“Hold down the fort, Paul, we’ll be back before sunset.”

Paul watched them walk towards the alien craft, looking bemused. Next to him, stood Lt Colonel Wallace.

“You know, Jen, I wonder if we’ll see him again.”

“We will, Paul, trust me.”

Ed and Keith strapped into the couches and closed the hatch. They began to run through the checklist for the time jump.

“Power system intermix?”

“Set.”

“Temporal compensation?”

“Engaged.”

“Destination target time?”

“Set.”

“Bring the primary power systems on line.”

“Standby.”

“Power systems engaged. Buildup to temporal incursion in fifteen seconds, mark.”

“Are you ready for this, Keith?”

“It’s an honor, sir.”

“Keith, I’ve not always been easy on you, but I’m glad to have you with me today.”

“Thank you, sir, that means a lot, temporal incursion in ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... power surge!”

“Abort!”

“Too late.”

The time portal opened, and Ed and Keith were thrown back in time.

July 14, 1862:

Ben and Hoss were working near the shelter where they had found Virginia, getting ready to cover and bury the entrance. They heard voices over the ridge.

“Did you hear that, Hoss?”

“Yeah, that sounded like Pa.”

“Come on.”

The two men grabbed their rifles and ran over the ridge.

They didn't notice the flash inside the shelter.

“Temporal incursion complete, exact chronometer readings coming up.”

Straker paused, while Keith checked the readouts.

“How much did the power surge throw us off?”

“We’re two hours ahead of where we should be.”

“That makes it about two thirty in the afternoon, too close. Let’s go, Keith!”

Straker and Ford climbed out of their couches and exited the craft. They heard a commotion just over the ridge. Both men ran towards the sound coming over the mound.

Will grabbed Virginia by the arm, while Brett held Ben at bay with the gun. He yelled over his shoulder, “Save some for me, will ya!”

Ben saw his opportunity and seized it. He grabbed Brett’s gun hand and the two men wrestled to the ground. While they struggled Virginia dropped to the ground flipping Will over her shoulder as she had been trained. He dropped the pistol and she scrambled for it but Will got to it first, leveling it at her.

“You know something, lady? I’ve decided you’re just not worth it.”

Ben was fighting for all he was worth but Brett was much younger and stronger. Brett punched Ben and the elder man fell to the ground losing his grip on the pistol.

“Get ready to meet your maker, old man.”

The sound of two gunshots rang out over the wilderness.

“Commander?” said Keith, concerned.

“I heard. We’ve only got a few seconds now.”

Brett dropped the gun from his hand and fell to the ground. Will dropped to the ground a second later, quite dead. Adam and Hoss lowered their rifles and started down the hill.

“Pa! Miss Lake! Are you both all right?” asked Adam, as he ran up to help his father off the ground. At the same time Hoss was checking on Virginia. She ran to Ben and they embraced.

Brett was still alive but he knew he had been mortally wounded. *I'm taking that old man to hell with me!* He reached for the gun and slowly raised it to aim at Ben.

Virginia looked and saw Brett with the pistol in his hand aiming at Cartwright.

“Look out Ben!” she yelled, as she pushed him aside.

The sound of another gunshot rang out.

Brett dropped the pistol as blood trickled down his face. He fell down face first, with a hole in his forehead.

They all turned to see a blond headed man with penetrating blue eyes. He had a strange looking pistol drawn which he placed back in its holster as he spoke, “Virginia?”

Virginia looked at him and slowly walked toward him out of recognition. *This is the man in my dreams, with the two children.*

“Ed?” she said, remembering his name first. As she drew closer, the floodgates in her mind opened and she remembered everything.

“Ed, oh my God! ED!”

She ran into his arms, holding him for dear life, her tears now flowing freely.

Behind them, Ben Cartwright watched with mixed emotions. She was kissing him deeply now. It told Ben that this man was her lover, no, more than that. He suddenly recognized him as the man with the two children. *He must be her husband.* He was grateful that they had found each other again, yet he grieved his own loss.

“Ed, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know who I was...” she was saying, through her tears.

“Virginia, it’s all right, I know all about it. It’s not your fault. I know about the amnesia.”

She looked at him, pulling herself together.

“How could you have known?”

“Ben Cartwright’s journals, I know most of what happened to you over the past six weeks. At least what he wrote about you.”

“His journal survived?”

“I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“You said six weeks, my God, the children?”

“There fine, but they miss you.”

Virginia suddenly experienced a pang of guilt as she thought about Ed and their children as well the plans she had made.

“Ed, there’s something I have to tell you...”

“You were considering marrying Ben Cartwright?”

“How did you... the journal?”

“Yeah, I told you, Ben Cartwright was quite expressive.”

“That must have been very difficult for you, oh Ed.”

“By the way,” he said, taking her left hand. “You forgot these when you left on your little trip.”

Ed slipped her engagement and wedding bands back on her finger.

“Ed, I love you,” she said as she threw her arms around him pulling him close again, thinking just how lucky she was.

Keith walked over to join the Cartwright’s while Ed and Virginia had their reunion.

“Mr. Cartwright, I’m Keith Ford,” he said, as he shook Ben’s hand.

“Ben Cartwright, this is my son, Adam, and my son Hoss.”

“Gentlemen,” he said, shaking each of their hands.

“You’re a friend of Miss Lake?” asked Hoss.

“That’s right, both her, and her husband are my friends.”

As Keith chatted with the Cartwright’s, Ed and Virginia walked over to join them. She introduced Ed to the family.

“Ben, I so sorry,” said Virginia. “I can’t even imagine how you must feel right now.”

“I’ll be all right, I’ve still got my family, and I haven’t yet thanked you for saving my life.”

“He would have killed you.”

Ben Cartwright turned to Straker.

“Ed, your wife is an incredibly brave woman.”

“Ben, sometimes she’s too brave for her own good.”

“Listen to both of you talk,” she said.

“Well, why don’t we get back to the ranch and I’ll show you some good ol’ Ponderosa hospitality,” said Ben.

After supper, Ben pulled Straker aside, “You wanted to speak with me Ed?”

“Yes, Ben, is there a place where we can speak privately?”

“Let’s go into my study.”

While Ed and Ben retired to the study, Virginia and Keith worked on the calculations for the return trip. The terms the two of them, were using were completely unknown to Adam, as he listened to the conversation. *One thing is for sure, this lady is a hell of a lot smarter than I am.*

“What are the two of you working on?” he finally asked.

“A way home,” said Virginia.

“Using mathematics?”

“Your father was a sailor, was he not?”

“That’s right.”

“Didn’t he use mathematics for charting a course?”

“I suppose.”

“This is the same thing.”

Adam just shook his head in amazement.

“So you’re telling me that the shelter is a time machine?” asked Ben, in disbelief.

“In a manner of speaking, it’s actually a whole lot more, but we don’t need to get into that. Ben, I have a problem and I’m going to need your help to solve it. I need to make sure that the time machine, as you call it, is undisturbed once we leave. If it’s tampered with at all, it could have an effect on future events.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Once we leave, I need you to get twenty feet of earth on that thing, enough to make sure that it’s undisturbed for the next hundred or so

years. The other item is going to require mutual trust between both of us.”

“I see, well, I trust Virginia, so I guess I can trust you. What is the other item?”

Ed took a vile out of his pocket and handed it to Ben. “This is called an amnesia drug. It erases to past twelve hours of a person’s memory. It’s completely safe and tasteless. I need you to give it to your three sons’ before midnight.”

“Is that necessary?”

“I’m afraid so, right now, Adam is listening to Keith and Virginia working out the time travel formulas. I can’t risk him remembering any of that. Also, there was no record of Keith or me ever being here, so we can’t risk our presence altering the future.”

“What about my memory?”

“This is where my test of trust comes in. I’m going to have to trust you to keep this to

yourself. You can never tell anyone about what I just told you.”

“I see, and you trust me?”

“Virginia trusts you, therefore I trust you.”

“You know, she is quite a lady, Ed. You’re a very lucky man.”

“Thank you Ben,” he said thinking, *I am a lucky man.*

“So tell me, does mankind get any better in the next hundred and twenty five years?”

“There’s a lot that’s going to happen in the next century, and not all of it is good.”

“You mean time travel.”

“Among other things, but I think time travel frightens me the most.”

“When I first set foot in that thing, Ed, it gave me the most eerie feeling.”

“You’re not alone, Ben.” Ed stood and shook Cartwright’s hand. “I’m glad to have met you.”

“Ed, the pleasure was mine, if you’re ever by this way or time again, you’re always welcome.”

## **Chapter 6:**

Ben Cartwright made another pot of coffee and discreetly added the amnesia drug to it, before placing it on the table for his three sons. Ten minutes later they were passed out in the chairs.

“How long will they be out, Ed?”

“Several hours with this variant of the drug, we should be gone by then. Assuming my team of mathematicians can figure this out?”

“We’re almost finished, Ed,” said Virginia. “I think I know why you had the power surge just before the temporal incursion. As soon as you reached the point of no return, history changed. There was a slight drop in the stored energy level and the quantum singularity power system surged to compensate.”

“What caused the drop in energy?”

“The power we use on the trip back. You see, the stored energy level was higher because no one from this time period used any of it. But now we are going to use energy to open a portal to our own time. That amount of energy we use will cause a measurable drop in power levels and the system will try to compensate. There is probably a piece in the formula that we are missing.”

“These conversions are complete, Colonel,” said Keith as he handed her the notebook.

“Thanks.”

“So, we should be just about ready to start entering the data.”

“Yeah, just let me get everything together here. By the way, who did the calculations for the trip back in time?”

“Colonel Wallace, you taught her well, and Keith here did the base conversions. And of course Professor Reinhardt provided the formulas. It was a team effort.”

“How long will it take you to make the journey through time?” asked Ben.

“The trip will be almost instantaneous,” said Ed.

“That’s incredible, one hundred twenty eight years in the wink of an eye,” said Ben wistfully.

An hour later, Ben had brought the trio to the spot where the time machine, as Ben called it, was located. While Keith and Ed entered the data, Virginia stood outside with Ben looking into the night sky.

“Ben, please make sure you tell your sons goodbye for me.”

“I will. You know, I think Adam is going to miss you the most. Once he found out that you played chess he warmed up to you.”

“I know, Adam and I did get off to a rocky start, but he was just looking out for his father. I can’t fault him for that. You raised three gentlemen, Ben, you should be proud.”

“You haven’t told me about your children.”

“Ed and I were blessed with twins, Charlene and Robert. They’re both five now.”

As they talked, Ed and Keith came out to join them.

“Well we’re just about ready,” said Ed.

“Well then, this is it,” said Ben. “Ed, I’m blessed to have met you.”

“The honor is mine, Ben,” said Ed, as they shook hands for the last time.

“Keith, I’m blessed to have met you as well,” said Ben, shaking his hand.

“My pleasure, Mr. Cartwright.”

Ed turned to his wife, “Keith and I will be in the ship. We’ll leave when you’re ready.”

She kissed him and said, “Thanks, Ed, I’ll be along in a moment.”

Virginia watched Ed and Keith walk back to the ship and step inside. She turned to Ben.

“Ben, thank you just doesn’t seem to be enough. I’ll never forget you.”

“Nor I you, Virginia, but I’m truly grateful that you found your husband.”

They embraced for the last time.

“I’m going to miss you, lady,” said Ben, breaking down.

“Take care of yourself, Ben.”

They held hands for a bit after breaking the embrace then Virginia turned and walked to the ship and disappeared inside. Ben watched as the hatch closed, knowing that he would never see her again. He walked back to the wagon and headed back to the ranch house.

The systems of the alien craft were powered up and it slowly built up the energy needed for the time jump. Virginia sat down with Ed in the couch, it was a tight squeeze. Ed strapped them

both in as the end of the jump was a little shaky. He noticed that she was crying.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I will be... Ed, I’m so sorry...”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“I let another man take a piece of my heart, how will you ever forgive me?”

“Virginia, listen to me, I almost didn’t come after you. The risk of contaminating the time line is enormous. The only reason I risked it was you had been killed today, in the other version of history.”

“What do you mean?”

“Had I not stopped him, Brett would have fired his pistol. You would have taken the bullet that was meant for Ben. What would have happened if you never ran across those men today?”

“I had just told Ben that if I didn’t regain my memory or no one showed up looking for me, I

was going to move on with my life. Oh, Ed, if I had only known.”

“You probably would have married Ben, and most likely had children, you’re still young enough. I would have seen it in Ben journal and the city records. At that point I would not have attempted a rescue mission. The risk would have been too great. I had hoped that you would not spend the rest of your life alone.”

Virginia looked at her husband with gratitude, to be loved so much that her happiness was more important to him than anything else, was a gift beyond measure.

“We’re ready, sir,” said Keith.

“Okay, Keith, take us home.”

“Power systems engaged, temporal incursion in fifteen seconds, mark.”

The alien craft hummed with power as its main power system built up energy quickly now.

Keith counted down the seconds, “Ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two... one... zero.”

The trio was pulled into the future by the time portal.

July 15, 1990, 01:25 Hours:

“You know something, Ed, I think you missed me,” she said to him in the afterglow.

“And why do you say that?”

“Well that was the best welcome home I’ve had in a while, I might have to do this more often,” she said, teasingly.

“Don’t you even think about it.”

“Well since you put it that way...”

Ed kissed her deeply cutting off what she was going to say. When the kiss ended she looked at him seriously allowing herself to sense his feelings.

“Virginia, I never thought I’d see you again, let alone hold you, or make love with you.”

“I kept seeing you and the children, Ed, but I couldn’t see your faces. I drew some of the things I saw. Hell I didn’t even know I could draw.”

“I know, your mom has your sketch pad and I’ve seen it, the surface of the moon out the control sphere window, aliens, the Cartwright boys, pictures of the sunsets, me with our children as we were walking away. Speaking of the children I didn’t think they ever were going to let you go.”

“I know, kind of like my husband, it’s nice to know you were missed.”

“Well the way you greeted me when you recognized me said more than any words could say.”

Virginia held him in silence for a while not wanting to spoil the moment, but something

had been bothering her soon after she had regained her memory. It wouldn't keep until morning.

“Ed, there's something else. There was no way that this accident should have happened. Ever since you and I were trapped in the alternate reality, we've taken every safety precaution possible.”

“I know, I wasn't going to bring this up, but there was a fifteen minute gap in the automated security logs just before the accident. No one knows this but Natiroff and me.”

Virginia's eyes went wide with shock.

“You're saying this wasn't an accident.”

“I think we have to consider the possibility. Virginia, we have just proven that the technology can be used as a weapon, and there are certain factions out there who would stop at nothing to get their hands on it.”

“Like we didn’t have enough to worry about fighting the aliens, now we’ve got to fight each other?”

“I know, hey, let’s get some sleep. I’ve got to let Keith know about his promotion to major and we’ve got a long day planned with the kids tomorrow.”

“All right, good night, Ed, I love you.”

“Sweet dreams, Virginia, I love you too.”

## **Epilogue:**

The men in uniform gathered around the conference table in the deep sub terrain chamber. They had been waiting over six weeks for the final report on the experiment. When it was received, they quickly arranged this meeting of all the players in the plot.

“Well it’s confirmed. The project was a complete success. The test subject was recovered last week.”

“She suffered no ill effects?”

“None, nor did the two members of the recovery team.”

“What the viability of using it as a weapon?”

“Extremely high viability. It was reported that there may be some safeguards in the technology to prevent paradoxes, but the equipment will require more study.”

“We could always arrange for another accident.”

“No, any further experiments need to be conducted under controlled conditions. That means acquiring the research and the technology.”

“We can’t do that. The current administration would never support it. Hell, if they even knew what we were planning, we’d all be facing court marital followed by a firing squad.”

“That little problem is being taken care of. In a few weeks it won’t even be an issue.”

“What about the Commander of the organization? He’s going to be a tough nut to crack, and his second in command, she’s just as tenacious as he is, worse I’ve heard.”

“In that case we resort to more direct measures. If Major General Edward Straker and his wife, Colonel Virginia Lake, try to get in the way, they’ll be eliminated, permanently.

END