

Matters of the Heart

A UFO Challenge Story for the SHADO Writer's Guild

Written by Matthew R. White

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Based on the Characters and series created by
Gerry Anderson

The Character Major Vladimir Natiroff was
created by Deborah Rorabaugh



Historian's Note: The events depicted here take place about two years after the episode "The Long Sleep" written by David Tomblin.

This story is dedicated to Hiram B. Hewett, 1879-1970, writer, poet, veteran of WW1, and my great-grandfather.

I would also like to thank Dragon for sharing the original concept of a "writer's story."

Chapter 1:

July 1986:

Ed Straker sat in his office looking at a new science fiction novel that had hit the best sellers list. The subject matter of the book was a topic close to his sense of purpose, alien invaders, UFO's, and most disturbing, a secret organization dealing with the threat. Henderson was livid when he brought it to Ed's attention.

Straker knew he had to find out if the author had any inside information on SHADO or real alien evidence. The similarities were much too close for comfort. He scanned quickly through the author's bio and G6 report. Both reports were clean as a whistle. Ed flipped on the intercom.

“Captain Ford, would you find Colonel Lake and have her come to my office.”

“Yes sir.”

It was totally possible that this was a case of serendipity but he couldn't leave it to chance. Someone was going to have to pay Mr. Hewett a visit.

Virginia Lake strolled into the office as Ed closed the door behind her.

“What's going on Ed?”

They had both dropped the formality soon after the Timelash incident but nothing else had come of the relationship. After Alec had

succumbed to cancer last year, Virginia had become his best friend, and she had resigned herself to the fact that it would never blossom into more.

“Take a look at this Virginia,” said Ed as he handed her the book.

“I’ve read it. Good science fiction with a romantic flare, some men could learn a thing or two from him.”

“Virginia...” he said seemingly perturbed.

“Sorry,” she said still enjoying the idea of teasing him about the possibility.

“You didn’t find any of this peculiar?”

“Not really, I mean the base of operations is in the mountains of the western US, there was no film studio cover, no submarine fleet, and the base on the moon was completely underground. The liquid breathing alien aspect raised an eyebrow, but quite frankly it’s just speculative science fiction.”

“Henderson doesn’t agree; he wants us to investigate it.”

“Why doesn’t he just send security?” asked Virginia.

“If he does that it’s bound to raise a few eyebrows with the all the UFO fanatics out there. He doesn’t want to give any credence to their arguments. No, what he has in mind actually makes sense. He wants us to use our film studio cover to interview Mr. Hewett on the premise of making a movie out of the book.”

“What do we have on Mr. Hewett?” she asked.

“Matthew Raymond Hewett, age 43, born March 2, 1943, he’s a semi-retired communications technician, is a private pilot, owns his own aircraft, he’s single, never been married, and he’s now a published writer.”

While Ed read the bio, Virginia looked at the file photo. *He has very attractive eyes,* she thought.

“So when do I leave?” asked Virginia assuming he was sending her.

“This afternoon, he’s going to meet you at Logan. From what Miss Ealand told me, Mr. Hewett is flying to the White Mountains tomorrow morning for a hiking trip.”

“It’s going to take me longer than a few hours to find out what we need to know.”

“In that case, you’d better bring your hiking gear.”

“Ed, I haven’t been hiking in years! You have to be in decent shape to hike those trails.”

“You’re still in pretty good physical condition from your astronaut training, and you’re still running every morning, you should be able to handle it,” he said.

It was true; Virginia had taken up running in preparation for the SID 2 mission, and she had stuck with it.

“From what I’ve been told, he’s hiking with a group of six people so you won’t be alone,” Straker added.

“Why don’t we just bring him in, question him, and then use the amnesia drug?” she asked.

“It would seem that Mr. Hewett has a rare blood condition, it’s benign to him but it also renders the amnesia drug useless.”

“I see.” Virginia thought for a moment, “You know Ed, he may not even want company; how do we know he’s not, well with someone?”

“According to the G6, he split with his girlfriend about six months ago, and this is the first vacation he has taken in almost a year.”

“What do we do if he shows interest in a movie deal?”

Ed leaned back in his chair toying with his glass paperweight, “Then we follow it through; I’m actually hoping for that scenario. It will give us the time we need to check out his story.”

“And if he isn’t interested?” asked Virginia.

“In that case your job will be all that more difficult.”

“Gee thanks,” she said.

Virginia picked the files up from the Commander’s desk, “Well I’d better get moving.”

T.F. Green airport was busy this morning, as Matt Hewett prepped his aircraft for the flight to Boston. He didn’t notice his good friend and fellow pilot Brian Higgins approach.

“Hello Matt. Where are you heading today?”

“Oh, hi Brian. I’m off to Logan this morning. I’m supposed to meet a lady from Harlington Straker Studios. She’s flying in from London.”

“I thought you were going hiking tomorrow?”

“I am. I figured I would leave a day early and meet Miss Lake in Boston this afternoon and fly from Logan first thing in the morning.”

“Miss Lake?” Brian asked.

“Yeah, she’s an associate producer at the London studio. I spoke to a Miss Ealand this morning; it seems they want to do a movie based on my new book.”

While the two men talked, Matt had finished the preflight on his aircraft.

“Any idea what she looks like?”

“No idea. I’m going to meet her at that nice restaurant in the main terminal at Logan. I figure I’ll listen to her sales pitch, kindly say thanks but no thanks, and send her on her way. She’ll probably end up being some young twenty something girl that is into heavy metal.”

“Aren’t you glad you held onto the movie rights?”

“I never expected the book to even be published, never mind be a best seller. The publishing company called me yesterday asking if I would consider selling the rights,” Mat said.

“What did you tell them?”

“I gave them a price that would choke a horse.”

They both shared a laugh.

“To be honest I’m not interested in selling, too many companies are just out to make a buck and they don’t give a rat’s ass about quality entertainment,” Matt said. “If I hold the rights I can dictate what is done with my work. Brian, I’ve seen too many good stories ruined by that morally corrupt movie industry. I’ll be damned if I’m going to let them do that to me.”

“It could make you very well off.”

Matt shook his head, “I’ve managed to save enough money over the years to be semi retired, I have a decent house, a car that runs well, and I own a Mooney Bravo; what else could I possibly

want? By the way how did you make out with the Piper?” Matt asked, pointing with his thumb to the aircraft next to his.

“The wheel bearing was bad on the port side wing gear. The FBO is bringing it in this afternoon to repair it.”

“Well that is good news; Bob will take care of you. He’s the only one I would allow near my aircraft.” Matt said as he opened the door to the Mooney.

“I should let you get moving so you don’t lose your clearance. Have a safe flight Matt.”

“Take care, Brian.”

Matt taxied the single engine aircraft down the taxiway in front of the main terminal. Although Green was considered a small airport, it still handled quite a bit of commercial jet traffic mostly small jets, 737’s and MD-80’s, as well as some corporate Lear jets. Last year the

President had flown in on the new Air Force One, a 747 and Matt had met the pilot in the restaurant. It was pretty amazing how small a field he could set that aircraft down in.

Matt turned left onto the taxiway and stopped short of the runway.

“Providence tower, Mooney Four Niner Bravo, ready for takeoff runway 5 left.”

“Mooney Four Niner Bravo, Providence tower, fly runway heading, climb and maintain 4000, clear for takeoff, runway 5 left.”

Matt pulled the aircraft onto the runway saying over the radio, “Clear for takeoff 5 left, Mooney Four Niner Bravo rolling.”

He advanced the throttle smoothly and all the way in as the aircraft rolled down the runway. At sixty five knots he pulled the yoke back and the plane leaped into the air.

“Mooney Four Niner Bravo, contact Providence departure on 135.4, good day.”

“135.4, Mooney Four Niner Bravo, see ya.”

Matt switched frequencies on the radio and called, “Providence departure, Mooney Four Niner Bravo with you, 1500 climbing 4000.”

“Mooney Four Niner Bravo, Providence departure, radar contact, turn left heading 340, climb and maintain 4000.”

“Climb and maintain 4000, turn left heading 340, Mooney Four Niner Bravo.”

As Matt reached his assigned altitude he looked around. It was a beautiful day for flying as there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Thirty minutes later the Mooney Bravo was on final approach to runway 4 left. “Mooney Four Niner Bravo, Boston tower, number two to land runway 4 left, follow the 737 on final.”

“Boston tower, Mooney Four Niner Bravo, following 737 on final, number two to land, runway 4 left.”

Matt watched as the jetliner in front of him touched down. The last time he was here he had to do a go around as the jet had gear problems and could not clear the runway in time. That wasn't the case today as the 737 turned off about three quarters of the way down the field. Because he had filed an IFR flight plan he was on a long final.

A minute later Matt's plane passed the inner marker and he prepared the flare the aircraft. The Mooney was not the easiest plane to master and it had taken him a few months to become accustomed to the new aircraft. Matt flared the plane just past the numbers and made a perfect landing. *If I only could have done that in front of my instructor,* he thought.

Matt turned off onto the taxiway and headed for the general aviation parking on the south side of the field. He would not have to refuel as the Mooney had enough fuel capacity to fly the White Mountains and back at least three times.

Matt pulled the aircraft into an unused spot on the tarmac and shut down the engine. After he finished his post flight checks he walked to the general aviation terminal. It was just before noon.

The Shadair SST was about twenty minutes from Logan and had dropped to subsonic flight. In the passenger compartment Virginia Lake was reading the reports on the man she was supposed to meet. She also had re-read some of his book. Ginny was surprised how well Mr. Hewett had handled the romantic aspects of the novel and she grinned when she thought about Ed's reaction to her statement. Ginny had finally come to terms with the fact that Ed only saw her as his best friend and not something more, although there were times that she was sure she saw something in his eyes. *Probably wishful thinking*, she thought.

In the long run that wasn't so bad, as Ed was a very good friend. Virginia still had not pursued a relationship with anyone, as it was next to impossible to carry on a meaningful relationship outside of SHADO, and her choices were limited within the organization as well. *If only Alec had survived the cancer*, she thought. It wasn't common knowledge, but Freeman, despite his flirting, had a heart of gold. He was the first person she had met from SHADO in fact it was on this very aircraft. She knew he always had a soft spot for her and would have been with her in a heartbeat had she shown interest.

Ginny looked back at the picture of Matt Hewett trying to distract herself. She still was intrigued by his eyes; they said so much yet they left so much a mystery. *Damn, another man who is a puzzle I can't solve!*

Matt walked into the Boston Bar & Grill located in terminal E which housed both British Airways and Shadair.

“Just one?” asked the lady at the desk.

“No I’m supposed to be meeting someone Miss Virginia Lake.”

The lady checked her notebook and looked up, “I’m sorry sir Miss Lake hasn’t arrived yet.”

“That’s all right; her flight should be arriving about now. Anyway I would like a quiet table for two if you could arrange it please.”

“Certainly sir, right this way.”

Matt followed her to a table in the corner that had a nice view of the active runway.

“I’ll show Miss Lake to the table when she arrives, in the meantime can I get you something to drink?”

“A Coke will be fine, and thank you.”

Matt watched as a very modern SST made its touchdown on runway 4 right. On the side of the aircraft he saw the Shadair logo. *That must be her plane*, he thought.

Virginia walked off the plane into the Shadair terminal thankful she would not have to fuss with her bags right now. She was free to go straight to the restaurant to meet Mr. Hewett. When she arrived at the desk she told the lady who she was.

“Yes Miss Lake, Mr. Hewett is here waiting for you, I’ll show you to your table.”

Virginia had the advantage as she had seen a picture of him but the picture did not do him justice.

“Hello Mr. Hewett, I’m Virginia Lake.”

Matt was caught off guard, as he quickly rose to his feet. The beautiful woman in front of him

was nothing like he had expected and he had to force himself not to stare.

“Miss Lake, it’s my pleasure. I’m Matt Hewett. Please, call me Matt.

Ever the gentleman, he walked round the table to pull the chair out for her.

“Oh, thank you.”

Virginia was impressed as she still appreciated chivalry and she knew it was less prevalent in some parts of the United States.

“How was your flight Miss Lake?” he asked as he sat back down.

“It was fine, and please, call me Virginia, or Ginny.”

“Virginia,” Matt said. “It’s such a beautiful name; Latin in origin, it means maiden.”

She was somewhat surprised, although a writer may take time to find these things out. *This was going to be interesting*, she thought.

Chapter 2:

As they ate lunch Matt found that he could not keep his eyes off her and speaking of eyes, hers were the most beautiful that he had ever seen. They seemed to change color depending on how the light hit them, predominantly grey but with a bit more than a hint of blue. He decided that blue grey best described them.

“So Matt, do you always look up the meaning of a lady’s name before you meet her?” she asked with a smile.

Damn she has a beautiful smile as well, he thought.

“Only if it is a name I haven’t heard in a while or if the name intrigues me. In your case it was both, a lovely name for a lovely lady.”

Virginia blushed at the compliment.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you,” Matt said.

“No it’s okay; I’m just not used to hearing it. Thank you.”

“That does surprise me.”

“I just don’t get to socialize very often. I have a very busy work schedule.”

“It sounds like your boss is a slave driver,” he commented.

“No not at all,” she said. “He works harder than all of us put together, and he wouldn’t ask anyone to do something that he wouldn’t do himself.”

“A man of integrity I see; where I come from that speaks volumes.”

“Yes, he is.”

The couple talked like old friends as they ate their lunch and Matt found himself being quite taken by her, finding that she was as brilliant, as

she was beautiful. Intelligence was an important trait to him and Virginia possessed it in the nth degree.

He smiled at her as he brought the conversation back to business, “So why is Harlington Straker Studios so interested in doing a movie based on this book?”

Virginia took a deep breath as she made her sales pitch.

“Well to start, it’s great science fiction, and you have a lot of dialogue in the book which would make it easy to adapt to a screenplay, it has a romantic flare to it, and you focus on character development just as much as the hardware. I think it would make a great movie.”

“Maybe, but I’m going to have to think about it, and by the way, the credit is to you Miss Lake, as I had already decided to turn the offer down. You’ve convinced me to at least reconsider it.”

Virginia smiled at him, “Well thank you. I’m glad I made a difference.”

“Virginia, this is my biggest concern. In this day and age the movie makers take a good plot, they overload it with sex, violence, and special effects, so much to the point that the meaning of the story gets lost in everything else. Hell you can’t find a decent movie to take the family to see anymore. It’s pathetic. And television is just as bad, worse in some cases.”

“I think we could work something out to keep that from happening to your story, script and scene approval maybe? Also the venture could be quite rewarding financially as well.”

“Money doesn’t even enter into it,” said Matt. “I wrote the story because I was bored and I needed something to keep me occupied. I was going to submit it to a fiction magazine when my brother stopped me. He convinced me to pursue the idea of publishing the work. I took his advice and the rest is history. The novel took

off and I donated the proceeds to a children's charity. You see Virginia, I worked very hard from the time I got out of high school and saved every penny I could and because of that I was able to retire early. I now work as a freelance troubleshooter. Communications firms bring me in to solve problems that they have exhausted their resources on. That's why I only work two or three days a week."

"I'm surprised that you're not married," she said. "At least I'm assuming as much since you don't wear a wedding band," she added quickly.

"I was very close about eight months ago, but unfortunately the young lady I was seeing had a change of heart. We went our separate ways at the beginning of this year and that's when I started my book. For me writing became a matter of self preservation. It's just as well I found out now rather than a few years down the road. I'm still a romantic even though matters of the heart can be confusing."

“Don’t I know it,” she said ruefully.

“How about you, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I was married, a long time ago, it didn’t work out,” she said seemingly lost in thought.

“I’m sorry,” said Matt.

“Don’t be,” Virginia considered before she continued. “I caught him in an affair.”

Matt was stunned; *who in their right mind would cheat on this beautiful lady?*

“The man was a fool,” Matt spat out before he could stop himself. “I’m sorry; I probably shouldn’t have said that. Please forgive me.”

“No that’s all right, it was an honest reaction.”

As they finished lunch, Matt asked her, “So when do you have to leave for London?”

“I’m going to be here for a few days. I’ve never been to Boston and I want to do some hiking on the Appalachian Trail before I go back home.”

“Really, I’m going to be hiking Mount Washington with three other couples tomorrow. Being single I’m the odd man out,” he finished somewhat melancholy.

“That sounds like it could be fun,” she said seemingly waiting for his reaction.

“Have you ever done any mountain hiking?” Matt asked working up the courage to ask her to come with him.

“Years ago. I went to school at Stanford and I used to hike the mountain trails on the weekends.”

“Would you like come with me tomorrow? But I do have to warn you it’s going to be a three day hike,” he asked, expecting to hear thanks but no thanks.

Her answer caused his heart to jump.

“On one condition Mr. Hewett,” she said formally.

“What’s that?” he asked, trying to hide his excitement.

“That you show me around the city this afternoon?” she asked, rewarding him with her beautiful smile.

“I’d be honored, Miss Lake,” he said as he felt his heart flutter.

Matt felt like he was back in high school, and he had just asked the prom queen out.

Virginia knew it was her duty to find out everything she could about him, but she also found herself enjoying his company. *There’s no reason why I can’t enjoy this assignment*, she thought to herself as they walked to the hotel together. She considered his passion for his writing and his desire that his work not be perverted. It was a trait that she found quite attractive, and Matt had raised some valid points.

By some intervention of fate Virginia and Matt were booked on the same floor directly across the hall from each other, and to add to the serendipity they were both on the phone.

“So did you make contact Virginia?” asked Ed.

“Yes, I met him for lunch this afternoon. He’s quite an interesting person.”

“Did he go for the movie deal?”

“He’s thinking it over; I might have a better idea when I see him later on,” she said.

“You’re meeting with him again?” asked Ed in a surprised voice.

“He’s taking me on a tour of the city, I’ve never been to Boston and Matt knows the city fairly well.”

“I see we’re on a first name basis already.”

“Are you jealous?” she asked, teasing him.

“You know better than that, I just want to make sure my second in command doesn’t get swept off her feet by some fast talking Romeo.”

“I’ll have you know that Matt is a perfect gentleman, very much like someone else I know.”

“Now I am worried. What is your initial assessment?”

“Matt isn’t driven by money,” she answered in her professional cool. “He has done quite well for himself through old fashioned hard work. I would consider him to be a man of integrity. Ed I’ll have a much better idea in a few days.”

“A few days!” Ed exclaimed.

“Well you told me to bring my hiking gear. Tomorrow we are going to climb Mount Washington via the Crawford Path. It’s a three day hike round trip. This was your idea, Ed”

“Will you be all right alone with him?” he asked with concern in his voice.

“I wouldn’t go if I thought otherwise, besides we are going with three other couples.”

“All right Colonel, but be careful,” Ed said deliberately formal.

Virginia hung up the phone, bemused by his sudden change in demeanor. She shrugged and got herself ready for her date with Matt.

Across the hall Matt was on the phone with his brother in Colorado.

“So tell me all about her big brother.”

“Patrick, she is the most stunningly gorgeous woman I have ever met, she’s smart as a whip and she speaks with a lovely British accent. And she has the most beautiful blue grey eyes I have ever seen in my life,” said Matt, very excitedly.

“And she flew in from London to see you about a movie deal?”

“Yeah; you know I was telling Brian this morning that she would probably be a twenty something heavy metal groupie. Boy was I wrong!”

“How old is she?” asked Patrick.

Matt thought for a moment, “You know, I’m not sure. She doesn’t look any older than thirty but she carries herself like someone who is much older.”

“What did you say her name was?”

“Virginia, Virginia Lake,” said Matt.

“And she is with Harlington Straker Studios in London?”

“Yes, she is an associate producer; she works for Ed Straker himself.”

“So are you going for the movie deal?” asked Patrick.

“I’m still mulling that over. I’m tempted to say yes if only to spend more time with Virginia.”

“This sounds like it could be serious.”

“I think I’m in love with her,” Matt admitted.

“You just met her!”

“I know, but I’ve never met anyone like her. You know that I’ve always believed in love at first sight. I just never expected it to happen to me.”

“I don’t know Matt. I’ve never believed in that kind of thing.”

“Oh yeah, well what about Debbie?”

“That was different,” said Patrick.

“In what way?”

“Well, she was Debbie.”

“And Virginia is Virginia,” countered Matt.

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt again, I was very worried when you split up with Rhonda.”

“Patrick, I’m forty three years old, and I have never in my life felt the way I did when I met Virginia.”

“I just want to see you have a normal and happy life.”

“If I’ve learned anything over the past year I’ve learned this; life is not a dress rehearsal, life is life. And in matters of the heart, you have to love like you will never get hurt. Is it risky? Hell yeah. But that’s what life is all about.”

“You know Matt, sometimes I forget that you’re only three years older than me, especially when you come out with something that profound. Dad would have been proud.”

“Well I have to get moving. I’m taking Virginia on a tour of the city and I only have fifteen minutes to get ready.”

“All right my brother, take care.”

“Bye.”

Matt knocked on the door to Virginia's hotel room fighting a serious case of butterflies in the stomach. Although she had dressed casually, she still took his breath away when she answered the door.

"Oh, come on in," she said pleasantly. "I'll be ready in a minute."

"You look very nice, Virginia."

"Thank you, so do you."

It was a warm summer afternoon and they had both dressed lightly. In a few minutes, she said, "I'm ready, shall we go?"

"Certainly," he said offering his arm.

They took a cab from the hotel to Quincy Market where they strolled through the indoor outdoor marketplace. It was one of Boston's premier tourist attractions and even on a week day it was busy.

Virginia found that she was very relaxed in Matt's company, and she found it increasingly difficult to remember why she was here. She had not taken a vacation in over a year and she had very little time to socialize and this was turning into a breath of fresh air. She could tell that Matt was attracted to her, but he was being a gentleman about it. It made him all that much more irresistible. *Damn, I can't afford to lose my objectivity*, she thought. But she knew deep down that her heart was making other plans.

“So have you given the movie any more consideration, Matt?” she asked, distracting herself.

“I haven't really thought about it,” he said. “You see, I just met this lovely lady, who has been taking up all my thoughts and I haven't been able to concentrate on anything else.”

Virginia melted inside with the compliment. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

They stopped and turned towards each other and Matt gently held her shoulders.

“To be honest Virginia,” he said, with regret in his voice. “I’m afraid if I say no, you’ll hop back on the first plane to London, and I’ll never see you again and I’m worried about the same thing if I say yes.”

Virginia looked up at him, her eyes revealing her heart’s desire, “I can’t do that,” she said in a quiet almost tearful voice. “You promised to take me hiking tomorrow.”

She gazed up at him for a moment, tempted to kiss him right then, but she forced herself to look away fighting the feelings inside. *I just met this man, why am I feeling like this?*

Matt broke the tension, “Hey, it’s getting warm out here, would you like to go inside for a bit?”

“Sure,” she said smiling gratefully at him.

She took his arm and they walked to the indoor section of the marketplace.

By 7:00 in the evening they were both getting hungry. They had spent the day walking through the different shops of Quincy Market as well as walking down some the surrounding streets. Boston was one of the oldest cities in the United States and it was easy to get lost if you didn't know your way around.

“Virginia, do you like Italian cuisine?”

“I love Italian.”

“Great, just up the street is a little open air restaurant. It's very well known, and the food is excellent.”

The restaurant was busy but they were still able to get a table quickly. As they ate Matt brought the movie subject back up.

“I think I like the idea of a movie, Virginia, but as I said, I don't want it to go down the path that most modern films go. The plot is too

important to be lost in special effects and violence.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, Matt, what gave you the idea for the book?”

“I’ve always liked a good science fiction story, but I wanted to write something original. The idea of alien invasion and secret organizations battling the threat just came to me. I mean think about it. What would happen if the general public knew of a hostile extraterrestrial existence? You remember *War of the Worlds*, don’t you?”

Virginia nodded as she considered the implications and she wasn’t surprised that Matt understood this. She found that the more time she spent with him; the more there was to learn about him.

“Yeah, that was pretty scary,” she admitted.

“Exactly so it makes sense that the entity fighting the invaders would have to be super

secret. Otherwise you would end up with mass hysteria.”

“Do you believe in life on other worlds, Matt?” she asked, as much for personal reasons as for the mission.

“Of course, I mean think about it. We live on a small planet, of a minor star, on the edge of an insignificant galaxy, in some far off corner of the universe. Out of all that, how can there not be life on other worlds?”

“Do you really think they would be hostile?”

Matt sat back thinking, “If you go by our own history you would be forced to say yes. But I have to believe that any race that developed the ability for interstellar travel would have also have developed a higher sense of morality as well. No Virginia, I think the idea of alien invaders is strictly in the realm of science fiction.”

They finished dinner and took a cab back to the hotel. When they arrived at her door she turned to him as he took her hands in his.

“Matt I had a wonderful time, thank you so much.”

“It was my pleasure, Virginia. I want to be in the air by 8:00 tomorrow. This place gets busy after that and we may not be able to get takeoff clearance if we don’t leave early. Can you be ready by six thirty?”

“Sure I’m usually up by five anyway.”

“Great, see you in the morning?”

They looked at each other and she tilted her head slightly inviting him to kiss her which he did very gently; both their eyes closing as their lips met.

When the kiss had ended, Matt looked deep into her eyes knowing that he was in love with her.

“Good night Virginia,” he said.

“Sleep well, Matt.”

Matt watched her enter her room and she gave him a smile as she closed the door. He let out a deep sigh as he walked across the hall to his room. His heart was beating double time from being in her company and he could not understand how she had such a profound effect on him. He tried not to dwell on it as he needed to be rested for the next day.

Virginia was on a cloud as she leaned back against the door. She had not felt this way about someone in years, and never as strong. *How the hell did this happen?* She got herself ready for bed, knowing that she wasn't going to get much sleep.

Chapter 3:

Late Saturday morning, Ed Straker hung up the phone just as Paul Foster walked into the office.

“You wanted to see me Ed?”

“Yes, please sit down, Paul,” he said as he closed the door.

Paul sat down next to the desk, eyeing his boss with concern.

“You look troubled about something Ed, what’s going on?”

“That was Colonel Lake. I’m very worried about her Paul.”

“She’s still investigating that science fiction writer, isn’t she?”

Ed Straker leaned back in his chair, as he contemplated his feelings.

“Yes, she’s going hiking with him and several others but she is going to be out of touch for the next few days.”

“Come on Ed, you know Ginny as well as I do. She can handle herself.”

“I know,” said Straker. “But I heard something in her voice this morning that I haven’t heard in years, at least since Craig died.”

“You think she’s falling for this guy?” asked Paul.

“I think it’s a possibility, considering the tone of her voice when she spoke about him.”

“We ran all the checks on him, he’s clean. The only reason we’re looking further is Henderson insisted on it,” said Paul stopping to consider something, “unless your reasons for worrying are personal.”

“No it’s not that, not now. Maybe a couple of years ago,” he admitted. “I never would have thought she would be blinded by love. I would

have expected that from you until a couple of years ago, but not her.”

“Gee thanks,” he said feigning hurt.

“Don’t worry Paul,” said Ed. “I’ve seen you mature a lot in the past couple of years, especially since you’ve been married. By the way, I understand that congratulations are in order?”

“Yes, thank you. Jane and I found out yesterday. The baby is due in February. Getting back to Ginny, why are you so worried about her?”

“I don’t know, maybe it just caught me by surprise,” said Ed.

“Doesn’t she deserve to be happy? She’s forty one years old Ed, and I know for a fact that she wanted to be married and have a family. If she waits much longer the argument is going to become academic. Had I not had my head up my ass at the time, it might have been me. But

she knew I wasn't ready and that's why our relationship didn't go anywhere. I'll tell you this much, the man who does marry her is going to be one very lucky man."

"I see you still think highly of her."

"Yes, don't you?" asked Paul.

"That's why I'm worried."

As Matt loaded the aircraft with their bags and equipment Virginia did the preflight check.

"I still can't believe you have a Mooney, it's even the same color as mine," she said.

"And I didn't know you were a pilot," he said.

"I'm very impressed. What else do you fly?"

"I have my multiengine and turbojet certifications. I can fly those small corporate jets."

“How many hours do you have?” asked Matt knowing she was going to have much more than he did.

“Over two thousand hours, mostly in corporate jets.”

“Wow,” he said in amazement. “I just got my instrument ratings last year, and I’ve only had this aircraft since March.”

“What did you fly before this?” she asked.

“I had a Cessna 172. It was a nice bird but it had a limited ceiling and it was slow. I have to fly out to Schaumburg, Illinois at least four times a year for training. It took almost nine hours in the Cessna. I can make the trip in five with the Mooney. I also don’t have to worry as much about the weather.”

Virginia nodded, apparently understanding what he meant. The Mooney topped out at twenty five thousand feet, enough to get over most bad weather.

They finished loading the aircraft and climbed in the plane. Matt finished the preflight checks and turned on the radios to contact Boston Clearance Delivery. Once he had the information he switched to ground control and requested permission to taxi.

“Mooney Four Niner Bravo, taxi to and hold short of runway 4 left via taxiway Delta 2, Delta, Charlie, Tango, contact tower on 128.8 when ready.”

“Taxi to and hold short of runway 4 left via taxiway Delta 2, Delta, Charlie, Tango, tower on 128.8, Mooney Four Niner Bravo.”

Matt turned the aircraft around and proceeded down the taxiway. He handed Virginia the clearance info. “Would you mind setting the nav radios and autopilot for me Virginia?”

“Certainly, it’s busy this morning.”

“Yeah, that’s why I want to keep my eyes on the field. I’m not concerned about the big boys; they

know what they're doing. It's some of these weekend pilots who don't have a clue."

"Don't I know it," she said. "It's the same way at Heathrow. I finally moved my plane out of there so I wouldn't have to deal with the mess. The only advantage was they won't let you on the field without an instrument rating."

"I'm surprised they don't do that here, although they made a big change this year. If your aircraft isn't equipped with an altitude encoding transponder they won't let you in the airspace. Green down in Rhode Island is supposed to do it as well."

"We did that a few years ago, sometimes they close the field to all but commercial traffic."

"They do that here as well. Fortunately for me most of the controllers at Green know me and they know I'm based out of there. They may have to send me around a bit but I can get into the airspace most of the time. It helps that I do radio service work for them on occasion."

Matt brought the aircraft to a stop behind a 737 waiting for takeoff. They were forth in line and the planes were stacking up behind them. He looked at the clock; it was 7:40.

“It’s a good thing we didn’t sleep in,” he said teasing her.

Virginia smiled back at him saying, “I know it, this seems worse than Heathrow.”

In a few minutes they were next in line for takeoff.

“Boston tower, Mooney Four Niner Bravo, at runway 4 left, IFR to Twin Mountain, ready for takeoff.”

“Mooney Four Niner Bravo, Position and hold.”

“Position and hold, Mooney Four Niner Bravo.”

They watched the 737 lift off the runway ahead of them as the tower called, “Mooney Four Niner Bravo, fly runway heading, climb and maintain 5000, clear for takeoff runway 4 left.”

“Clear for takeoff runway 4 left, Mooney Four Niner Bravo, rolling.”

Matt pushed the throttle all the way in and the small aircraft sped down the runway. At sixty five knots he pulled back on the yoke and the aircraft left the ground.

After they had cleared the traffic at Boston Virginia said, “You handle this aircraft well for someone who as only flown it for a few months.”

“Tell that to my flight instructor, he almost grounded me on my check ride. I hit a gust of wind just as we were about to touch down and almost flipped the aircraft. It scared the hell out of both of us. It was kind of a freak thing; I’ve done much better since then.”

“Well I hope so,” she said teasingly.

“Seriously I’d love to hear any pointers you have on flying this plane, you’ve had yours for what a couple of years now?” he asked.

“That’s right,” she said. “But I’ve been watching you and you have all the basics down cold; the rest is just time and experience.”

“I guess you’re right,” he said.

“Do you have any family, Matt?” she asked changing the subject.

“Oh yeah, my immediate family is not that big, my brother Patrick, my sister Crystal, and our mother. I lost my father a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” she said pausing for a moment. “What’s your mom’s name?”

“Denise,” he answered. “Tell me about your family Virginia?”

“I was an only child, my mother, Lynn, still lives in Brighton. I never knew my father; he was killed in World War Two before I was born.”

Matt did a quick mental calculation, *she's my age*, he thought.

“I’m very sorry about your father.”

“He was actually from this side of the pond. Dad was assigned to the eighth air force stationed in England during the war. Mom told me all about him, when I was young, so even though I never met him, I still feel as if I knew him.”

“Your mom sounds like an incredible lady, and that was such a precious gift.”

Virginia wiped a tear from her eye, as Matt had put into words how she felt about the subject. *Damn, why couldn't I have met him twenty years ago?* She placed her hand on his shoulder and kissed him on the cheek.

Matt looked over at her, “What was that for?” he asked quietly.

“I’m not sure yet,” she said as her heart and mind conflicted with each other. “I’ve just wanted to ever since we met.”

She took his hand and laid her head on his shoulder, resigning herself to the fact that her heart was going to win. Ginny had never believed in love at first sight but ever since she had laid eyes on him something had been awakened, deep inside of her, which had been dormant for years. She knew she was going to have to tell Ed; for more than one reason.

Matt knew that Virginia was in conflict with her feelings; he had seen that look before. He also knew that he was in love with her and he desperately wanted to tell her so. But age and experience had taught him to wait as he was sure that he had already won her heart, but he knew she would bolt like a gazelle if she felt pressured and he wanted her to feel safe. The mountain he was about to climb was

insignificant when compared to the mountain his heart had just fallen from.

“Twin Mountain traffic, Mooney Four Niner Bravo, turning base to final.”

Virginia awoke as Matt was banking the aircraft to line up with the runway.

“We’re here already?” she asked.

“Yeah, you dozed off for a while, are you all right?”

“I’m sorry; I guess I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Twin Mountain traffic, Mooney Four Niner Bravo, on final. That’s all right; you can sleep on my shoulder anytime.”

The single engine aircraft touched down on the field and rolled out. Matt turned off the runway at the next taxiway.

“Twin Mountain traffic, Mooney Four Niner Bravo is clear of the runway.”

“There’s not much traffic this morning,” she said.

“I know it, that’s kind of odd for a Saturday.”

Matt pulled the aircraft to a parking spot and killed the engine, while Virginia started the post flight checks.

They disembarked from the plane and tied it down.

As they off loaded their gear a voice called from across the field, “Well if it isn’t the Rhode Island contingent. Hey Matt, we thought you were coming alone!”

“Introduction time,” he said quietly to Virginia.

Virginia and Matt walked to the parking area to meet his friends.

“Hello gang. Virginia, I’d like you to meet Sandy and Jack, Diane and Paul, and Debbie and Pete.”

Virginia shook hands with all of them and then turned to Matt, “I have to use to phone before we leave, I won’t be long.”

She kissed him on the cheek and walked into the terminal.

“She’s British?” asked Jack.

“British American actually, she’s from Harlington Straker Studio’s. It seems they want to make a movie out of my book. Virginia flew over yesterday to discuss the idea with me.”

“She seems quite fond of you.”

“I know, and the feeling is mutual. Come on let’s get this gear loaded.”

“Matt is going to go over, next week, to see you about the film,” Virginia said to Ed, over the phone.

“That’s good news, so you’ll be coming back this afternoon?” asked Ed.

“No, not really,” she said “I’m going on that hiking trip with him. I have a ton of unused leave and I’m going to take some of it now.”

“This sounds serious,” he said, very concerned.

“Ed, you’ve been a good friend, but let’s face it, you’ve always known that I had hoped for more. I couldn’t wait forever, you must know that. I realized this morning that I’m in love with Matt and I just felt that you had the right to know.”

“Isn’t this a bit soon, you just met him,” said Straker in a subdued voice.

“I know, but there is something about him that I can’t put into words. Hell Ed I can’t explain to you what I don’t understand myself,” she said.

“Have you told him yet?”

“No, but I think he already knows, he’s very perceptive you know.”

“I suppose I can’t say anything to change your mind?” asked Ed.

“No, not now. I’ve made my decision and since you have already run the necessary background checks, I assume I’m free to pursue this.”

“Yes, you are, and I’m happy for you, I mean that,” he said huskily.

“Thank you Ed, it means a lot.”

“You know you’ll have to remove yourself from the investigation when he arrives here in London.”

“I know; I assumed you would handle it yourself. I think you’d like him Ed, the two of you have more in common than you know.”

“We’ll see. Virginia, just be careful okay?”

“I will, thanks Ed.”

Virginia’s reason for telling him was twofold as the regulations required her to notify her commanding officer if she became emotionally compromised. He was also a good friend.

When she got back to the van it was loaded and ready to go. Virginia climbed in and sat next to Matt in the back seat. She snuggled up next to him relaxing for the first time that morning. Jack pulled out of the airport parking lot and headed south on Rte. 3. They would pickup 302 east towards Breton Woods and the trailhead near Crawford Notch.

Chapter 4:

The van with the four couples pulled into the parking area of the trailhead. Jack parked the van and they all climbed out and unloaded their equipment. Jack walked over to Matt and Virginia and asked, “Have you ever hiked these trails before Virginia?”

“No, this is my first time here. The last time I did any hiking was twenty years ago, while I was at Stanford.”

“Okay, so you’re not a novice, good. This is only Matt’s second time up the mountain so I want to put the two of you right behind Sandy and I. This is not the hardest trail and we are allowing plenty of time, so if we are going too fast, sing out, all right?”

“All right,” said Virginia.

As Jack walked to the check in station Matt came over to Ginny. “Jack gave you the pep talk?”

“He seems a bit pushy,” she said, keeping her voice low enough so that only Matt could hear.

“He can come across that way sometimes, but he doesn’t mean anything by it. He just doesn’t want anyone to get hurt. Jack has hiked these trails at least a dozen times each. He knows this mountain like the back of his hand and I would trust him with my life.”

Matt paused as he considered something, “He saved Paul’s life last year on this mountain.”

“Really?” she asked.

“It was a freak snowstorm; they were ascending the Tuckerman Ravine trail. They had stopped near the top and Paul slipped when he shifted his footing. He’d have gone over the edge had Jack not caught him.”

“So you weren’t just being overprotective this morning when you asked to check my hiking gear?”

“No Virginia, this mountain has claimed over one hundred fifty lives over the years. She’ll try very hard to kill you if you don’t give her the respect she deserves.”

Matt helped her get her pack on and they checked each other’s gear. In a few minutes they started the long climb up the mountain.

A few hours later they had ascended above the tree line and Virginia was stunned by the panoramic view of the presidential range. She

turned to Matt saying, “My God, it’s so beautiful!”

She looked at Matt, as he gazed over the mountain vista.

“Now you know why I enjoy this so much,” he answered. “When I’m up here and all the problems of the world seem to fade away.”

Virginia had taken out her small camera and while she took pictures, of the view, the rest of the group removed their packs for a rest. Virginia was surprised how cold it had gotten above the tree line. She didn’t ever remember it being quite that cold on the southern California trails.

“Now would be a good time to put on our wind gear, the rest of the way to the Lake of the Clouds hut is exposed,” said Jack.

Matt helped Virginia remove her pack so she could get her jacket and leg wear. When she had

donned her wind gear she turned and said to him, “I’m cold.”

Matt wrapped his arms around her and she pulled him in for a long deep kiss. When the kiss had ended he looked deep into her eyes wanting to tell her his feelings. “Virginia I...” She kissed him again cutting off what he was going to say.

Nearby, Diane nudged Debbie and said, “Are you watching these two?”

“I know it,” said Debbie. “They haven’t taken their eyes off each other all day.”

“Did you see the way she looks at him?” asked Diane.

“I know, and he’s just as smitten. Quick, get your camera.”

Diane aimed her camera at Virginia and Matt just as they kissed, taking three quick pictures in succession.

“Boy, he’s going to be sore with you Diane.”

“He’ll get over it, hell he may even thank me.”

Pete, laughing, called over to Virginia and Matt,
“Okay you two lovebirds, we’ve got a mountain to climb.”

“Oh be quiet,” said Matt, embarrassed.

On Moonbase, the silence was broken by the baritone voice of SID, as it echoed through the speakers.

This is Space Intruder detector; I have four sightings, Area 157-242 Green.

Lt. Colonel Barry turned to Lt. Johnson,
“Ayshea, verify that.”

Ayshea punched up the screen and checked the numbers with the information being relayed by SID.

“Confirmed, the computer is still chewing on the tracking and range data.”

“Very well, signal yellow alert,” ordered Barry.

Nina Barry watched the trajectory termination figures as they came up. If this was a real sighting, the alien ships were not heading for Europe.

The four couples arrived at the Lake of the Clouds AMC hut just before supper. Virginia was surprised to see the size of the building, expecting something much more modest. As they walked the last few yards, Matt explained the AMC hut system to her.

“You mean we get to have a home cooked meal and sleep in a real bed?” she asked.

“That’s right. The AMC hut system was established years ago, after a pair of hikers died on the mountain, due to exposure. Hiking is great fun but you do have to be careful up here. That’s why Jack take’s it so serious,” said Matt.

“What else do they have up here besides a place to bed down?”

“Saturday night is karaoke night. It starts right after supper and wraps up around ten.”

“I’ve heard of that,” she said. From what I’ve been told, some of the singing can be abysmal.”

“Most of the people I’ve heard here can actually carry a tune, which surprised me.”

“What kind of music?” Virginia asked. She loved classical music but she also had a soft spot for love ballads of any genre.

“Oldies, classic rock, country, bluegrass, even some big band.”

“Are you going to sing to me Matt?” she asked smiling at him.

“Now how could I possibly refuse,” he said as he kissed her.

Back at SHADO HQ, Commander Straker hung over the shoulder of his communications chief, intently watching the radar track of the slightly damaged UFO, as it disappeared from the screen.

“We lost it sir,” said Captain Ford.

“What was its last known position, Keith,” asked Ed clearly frustrated.

“Colonel Carlin lost it somewhere over the White Mountain range. He said it just dropped off his radar screen, just like we saw it here.”

“The interceptors did get a near miss on one of them,” Straker paused, “Did you say the White Mountains?”

“Yes sir.”

“Damn, I want search teams over there, now!” Straker ordered sharply.

“Yes, sir,” said Ford.

Ed walked back into his office with Foster in tow. He closed the door and looked at his friend with worry in his eyes. Ever since Alec had died, Ed had found himself depending more on both Virginia and Paul. Although Ginny had become his best friend, Paul was a very close second.

“You’re worried about her,” he said as he looked at his boss.

Ed nodded, “I shouldn’t have sent her on this mission, Paul.”

“Ed, you can’t keep second guessing yourself, I’ve never seen you like this. What’s really wrong?”

Straker shook his head as he sat down behind the desk. He picked up one of his glass paperweights and began toying with it.

“I guess I cared for her more than I knew, Paul. Did I ever tell you that I almost asked her out after the Timelash incident?”

“No, you didn’t, but I wouldn’t have been surprised,” answered Paul as he sat down next to the desk.

“You knew?” asked Ed, very surprised.

“I did,” said Paul. “I think Alec knew as well.”

“So much for secrets,” he said dismissively.

Ed leaned back in his chair pulling himself back into command mode. They had an un-located UFO on their hands that went down in a remote area. The mobiles would be all but useless in that mountain terrain.

“Paul, I want you out with the search teams. Take the next transport out. Virginia and her party left from the Crawford trailhead and there should be a check in station at the base of the trail. You should be able to get a message to her through the AMC network. We have another problem as well. Mr. Hewett is resistant to the amnesia drug and if he witnesses anything with either the aliens or our operation, we’re going to

have a problem. Compound that with the fact that Virginia is in love with him.”

“You’re kidding!”

“She told me this morning. If he sees anything Paul, it’s going to put him at risk with security. I don’t want that to happen, I owe Virginia that much.”

Matt sat next to Virginia on one of the couches in the common room of the hut. Dinner had been excellent and the evening entertainment had started. Several hikers had already been up on stage, Jack had done his rendition of “Sixteen Tons” and Diane had sung “Hit Me with Your Best Shot”. Another hiker was doing a great job of “My Way” and Virginia found that she was enjoying the music.

“Jack did a great job up there,” she said to him.

“He really does know how to have a good time.”

“Do you know what you’re going to sing, Matt?”

“Yup.”

Are you going to tell me?” she asked flashing her eyes at him.

“Nope.”

“Why?”

“It’s a surprise, trust me you’ll enjoy it more.”

Virginia gave him a pouty look that made him grin even more.

As the last singer finished his song Matt heard the MC call his name and he quickly turned and kissed her as he got up and walked to the front. He had chosen a new song done by his favorite country band that he knew would express his feelings better than he could say. Matt looked across the room at Virginia, and into her eyes, as the piano intro played. He knew this song by heart and didn’t need to look at the words on the screen and he began to sing...

As I lay by your side, and hold you tonight, I want you to understand.

This love that I feel, is so right and so real, I realize how lucky I am.

Should you ever wonder if my love is true, there's something that I want to make clear to you.

There's no way I could make it without you, there's no way that I'd even try.

If I had to survive, without you in my life, I know I wouldn't last a day.

Oh Baby, there's no way.

Matt had walked back to where Virginia was sitting and took her hand, leading her back to the front of the room, where they danced as he sang to her. By now she was crying tears of joy as she listened to him pour out his heart through the music.

*I never knew until you what I was missing,
now you say forever, and I find my heart is
listening,*

Yes I'm listening...

When the song had ended, Matt said to her, “Virginia, I fell in love with you the moment I laid eyes on you. I can’t even think about life without you in it.”

“Is this a proposal?” she asked.

“Yeah, it is.”

“Then the answer is yes,” she said. “You had me from hello.”

She pulled him close and kissed him deeply.

Matt had forgotten to switch off the mic so everyone in the room had heard the conversation. Most of them stood and began to clap, some of them wiping tears from their eyes. The newly engaged couple looked around somewhat embarrassed and Matt handed off the mic and they walked back to their seat.

“How long have you two known each other?” asked Debbie.

“Well let’s see,” said Matt. “We met yesterday around half past noon and it’s what nine now? That would be about thirty three hours.”

“That’s got to be a record,” said Paul.

“Sometimes you just know,” he replied.

Colonel Foster’s transporter jet touched down at Pease Air Force Base just after midnight. The cargo crew immediately started off loading the mobiles. In this hunt the mobiles would serve as forward command posts as they were not designed to traverse the heavy wooded mountain terrain. The base commander met Foster as he disembarked the aircraft.

“Colonel Foster? I’m Colonel Bowers,” the base commander said as they shook hands.

“My pleasure, Colonel, please call me Paul.”

“All right, I’m John. So what exactly are we looking for Paul?”

“The European Space Agency lost an experimental space capsule this morning. We think it came down in an area just east of the Mount Monroe summit. We’re going to have to search the entire area.”

“That’s going to take some doing; there is a lot of ground to cover up there. If the thing landed below the tree line, you’re going to play hell finding it, Paul.”

“What are the chances of getting the whole area cordoned off?”

“An order like that would have to come from the Governor’s office, or from the President.”

“Then we’d better get it moving.”

“Paul, do you realize how much tourist traffic is on those trails right now.”

“Yes, I do. And the longer we wait, the worse the situation becomes.”

“Colonel Foster, exactly what was this thing carrying?”

“I’m not at liberty to say John, but I can tell you this. If we don’t find it before someone stumbles on it, there is going to be loss of life.”

“You want to do what?” asked Jack the next morning after breakfast.

“Virginia and I want to climb Monroe solo.”

“I don’t know about this Matt, are you two still going up Washington with us?”

“Yeah, it’s only two hours from here and if we don’t hang around too long, we can be back down here before noon. Monroe is only about an hour and a half south of here. We can all meet back here before supper.”

“Do you have your radio?” asked Jack.

“Yup, and I brought the .50 cal.”

Matt always carried the Desert Eagle when he was in the mountains. Two years ago he was hunting with a group of friends when they were attacked by a black bear. It took six shots with the .40 Glock to drop the animal.

“I see you came prepared,” said Jack. He had been with the hunting party that day.

“I had a good teacher.”

“Well all right, but you two keep in touch, you hear?”

“Yes Dad,” said Matt kiddingly.

Jack swatted at him with his hat and Matt grinned at him as he walked back over to where Virginia was waiting.

“Well, what did he say?” she asked.

“He was a bit reluctant, but he agreed.”

She put her arms around him saying, “Good.”

“Just what are you up to?”

“Maybe I just want to spend some quality time on top of a mountain alone with my future husband,” she said giving him an impish grin.

“This could be interesting,” he said as he drew her into a long kiss.

“Come on to two lovebirds,” said Sandy. “We’re ready to go.”

“To be continued?” asked Matt.

“Definitely,” she said.

The hike to the summit of Mount Washington took them almost two hours, as Matt had predicted. There were a few clouds in the sky and it was quite a bit colder than normal for a July day. Still, to Matt, the weather did not look threatening at all. Virginia took out her camera and asked Sandy, “Would you mind getting a picture of Matt and I on the summit?”

“Of course Ginny, I’d love to.”

Virginia grabbed Matt by the hand and led him up the small rocky incline that marked the official peak of the mountain 6288 feet above sea level.

“Picture time,” she said placing her arms around his neck.

“Collecting memories?” he said smiling.

“Yeah, why not,” she said drawing him in for a long kiss.

A couple of hours later, Virginia and Matt prepared for the hike back down to the hut. As he filled the water bottles, Jack walked up to him saying, “There’s a group leaving in a minute to go back to the lake if you want to go with them.”

“Okay that sounds good, Virginia and I will meet the rest of you at the hut for supper.”

“I don’t like the look of those clouds forming to the west; make sure you keep an eye on them.”

“Don’t worry Jack, we’ll be fine.”

They walked over to where a group was assembling for the trek down the mountain and Matt put Virginia’s water bottle in her pack for her and they checked each other’s gear. They bid the other three couples goodbye and started down the trail.

“Sandy told me that Jack is really worried about us going off alone,” Virginia said to him as they made their way down the path.

“There’s a story behind that, you see Jack and Sandy have been guides on this mountain for almost thirty years. His last name, Crawford; does it ring any bells?”

“This trail is called Crawford Path, there’s a connection?”

“Jack’s family has lived in these parts for over two hundred years. Crawford Notch is named for them. Three years ago Jack was teaching another couple the art of hiking. They had about

the same amount of experience that you and I do. They wanted to take a detour on the way down Washington and Jack figured they would be all right.”

Matt paused for a moment letting her consider what he had said.

“What happened to them,” she asked already sure she knew the answer.

“They were on the Tuckerman Ravine Trail when the weather turned bad, snow, ice, wind, the works. The pair had tied to each other so they wouldn’t get separated just like you’re supposed to do, but instead of stopping and digging in they continued down. They were found at the bottom of the ravine two days later. Jack assumed one of them stepped over the edge and pulled the other along. It’s a fifteen hundred foot drop. He’s never forgiven himself.”

“Matt I’m so sorry...” she said, her voice trailing off.

“The kicker is that it wasn’t Jack’s fault. They would have been all right had they stayed put. The storm passed fairly quickly and within the hour the temperature had shot back up to normal.”

Virginia could see how Matt empathized for his friend’s loss and she stopped and placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Jack’s lucky to have such a good friend,” she said to him.

Chapter 5:

“Where are they Colonel?” asked Straker.

In the command mobile Paul regarded his boss. He never remembered ever seeing him this worried.

“The last place they checked in is the Washington summit, that was about two hours

ago. I left a message for Virginia to call in as soon as they get to the Lake of the Clouds hut.”

“Any idea when they’ll arrive?”

“They should be there now,” answered Foster.

“Where exactly are you Paul?”

“The command post is parked near the Cog Railway. Our team is going to requisition the next ride up, and start the search from there. Mobile 1 is heading up the auto road now. They’ve closed the road both ways until we get into position. We can hike down to the hut from the summit.”

“All right Paul, keep me posted.”

Colonel Bowers stepped up into the command mobile. “Have you had any hiking experience Paul?”

“No, none.”

“Then you had better stay at the summit; these mountains are not to be taken lightly.”

“These little hills?”

“Trust me Colonel; they can be every bit as dangerous as their larger siblings.”

Paul had learned over the years to listen to those who had more experience, “I suppose you’re right John.”

Ginny and Matt walked into the AMC hut about two hours after leaving the summit of Mount Washington. There was no one at the counter and Matt assumed the caretaker was on a break. He filled out the log sheet noting their arrival and intent to visit Monroe. He logged an estimated return time of 6:00 pm.

The couple walked out of the hut, hand in hand, and started the hour and a half journey to Mount Monroe.

Twenty or so minutes later, the caretaker finished in the back room and came back to the

desk. He noticed that the log had been moved and checked the names. *Damn I missed them*, he thought.

He picked up the mic and called down to the base camp, “I have a message for Mr. Foster. I missed his party, but they are due to return here around six.”

“Roger, I’ll pass the message on.”

The phone rang in the command mobile.

“Foster.”

“Yes Mr. Foster, this is Jim Burns over at the AMC check station.”

“Oh, Hello, were you able to get a message to Miss Lake?”

“We missed her when she came through. She is due back at Lake of the Clouds around six in the evening.”

Damn, thought Foster.

“Where are they going?”

“The log shows that they are going to ascend Mount Monroe and then return to the hut, for the evening.”

“All right, as soon as they are back, have Miss Lake get in touch with me.”

“We’ll do our best sir.”

Matt and Ginny made it to the summit of the mountain just after two in the afternoon. Unlike Mount Washington this peak was untouched by man save the US Geological Survey insert at the summit.

“Well this is much more like it,” said Matt.

“I know it,” agreed Ginny. “It’s so beautiful.”

They both stood at the peak admiring the view. Matt looked to the west, at the clouds that Jack had pointed out earlier that day. They seemed not to have moved much at all in the past few

hours and Matt turned to Ginny as he took her in his arms.

“So why did you want to want to get me alone on this mountain?”

“Why don’t you break out your sleeping bag and find out.” she said suggestively.

“Here, now?”

“Yeah, here and now.”

Matt looked at the trails surrounding them and said, “You know Virginia, this path is fairly well traveled; more so on a Saturday.”

She looked around not seeing anyone on the trails and responded, “I don’t see anyone around for miles.”

Matt noticed that she was right. *That’s odd, the trails are deserted on a weekend,* he thought. *Oh well.*

He drew her into a long passionate kiss being overcome by the love he felt for her.

Colonel Bowers poked his head into the command mobile, parked at the base of Mount Washington.

“We’ve stopped all movement on the mountain Paul. The hikers will be held at the huts as they check in.”

“Good, let’s get the team onto the Cog. Mobile 1 just checked in they’re at the summit now. The park service is evacuating everyone up there except the weather observatory staff. They’ll be taken down the auto road.”

Paul Foster and John Bowers stepped out of the mobile and walked across the parking lot and boarded the railway with the search team. *This was going to be like finding a needle in a haystack*, thought Foster.

Northeast of the Monroe peak, a pair of aliens walked along the tree line stalking a pair of

hikers coming down the path. The high visibility of their red suits kept them confined to just inside the tree line to avoid being spotted. When they were within a few yards the aliens fired their rifles dropping the couple. They came out of the woods and began the gruesome task of harvesting organs from the slain couple.

Virginia jumped up at the sound of the assault rifle, a sound that she knew all too well.

“Matt do you have a set of field glasses?” she asked quickly.

He turned and dug into his pack and produced a small pair of binoculars. Ginny scanned the tree line below them. When she looked to the northeast she stopped seeing two red suited figures coming out of the woods. *Oh my God, aliens.*

“Matt we have to get out of here,” she said, her voice shaking with fear.

“Why, what’s wrong, what did you see?”

“Please Matt,” she begged. “Just trust me.”

Matt knew she was gravely concerned and he trusted her judgment. He helped her get her pack back on and grabbed his pistol from his pack.

“You’re armed?” she asked, surprised.

“I never come up here without a firearm. This pistol will drop a black bear with one shot.”

They quickly walked back up to the summit and looked in dismay. The clouds had rolled in and the wind was picking up. The trail leading to the hut was covered in fog.

“Virginia, here,” he said, as he handed her one end of the rope. “Tie this around your waist.”

She did as she was told while Matt tied the other end around his waist. Matt grabbed his radio and tuned it to the Mount Washington repeater. “WA1NJL from KA1BQP, are you there Jack?”

“This is WA1NJL. Matt, please tell me you’re on your way back.”

“Negative Jack, it’s all fogged in up here. I think we’re going to have to hunker down until it passes.”

“All right, stay on the peak, the three of us will come and get you.”

“No way, Jack. You know better than that. Ginny and I will try to make it to the tree line on the leeward side of the mountain. If it gets too bad we’ll stop and ride it out.”

Matt and Ginny looked at the radio waiting for an answer.

“Did you copy that Jack?” he asked.

After a brief pause, Jack came back on the radio.

“Well that argument just became academic, we’ve just been informed that we can’t leave Matt, some military organization has locked down the entire area.”

Virginia was listening to the conversation knowing that SHADO must be searching for a downed UFO. They were in grave danger and Matt was resistant to the amnesia drug. If they were to survive he needed to know what they were up against. She was worried how security would handle the mess later.

“That’s all right Jack, at least I don’t have to worry about you coming after us. We’ll see you when we see you. KA1BQP is clear.”

“Good luck, WA1NJL is clear.”

He turned to Ginny, “Are you ready?”

“Matt we can’t go down there.”

“Virginia, we have to get off this summit before the weather gets worse. The tree line will give us some added shelter.”

Matt could see genuine concern as he looked in her eyes. “What did you see down there?”

Virginia was torn, wanting to tell him the truth and worried about the implications it would

have. She knew his life would be in jeopardy either way.

“I might as well tell you, you’re going to find out anyway. The movie deal was an excuse for us to talk with you.”

“Who is us?” asked Matt, suddenly quite suspicious.

Virginia looked embarrassed as she answered.

“I work for an organization that deals with alien threats.”

“Somehow I get the idea that you’re not referring to illegal aliens,” he said.

“Not in the sense that you mean.”

Matt shook his head in disbelief.

“We’re talking about little green men?” he asked.

“Actually they’re not so little. I saw two of them down by the tree line.”

He took the binoculars from her and looked down the northeast approach. At the tree line two red suited figures were... Matt couldn't believe what he was seeing as it looked like they were cutting a person open. He turned back to her.

“Virginia, exactly what do these aliens want?”

“They come to Earth to harvest human organs for transplant purposes. We believe them to be members of a dying race.”

Matt felt his blood boil as he thought; *these bastards just murdered those two people.*

He watched them finish their gruesome task and lost sight of them as they disappeared into the woods. Sweeping the area, with the binoculars, he checked the entire eastern tree line looking for a place to set up camp. The fog was creeping over the summit now and the temperature was dropping rapidly. He looked over the area again spotting a rock formation that was only a few hundred yards down the

slope. He pointed to it saying to Virginia, “You see that rock outcropping down there?”

“Yeah, I see it,” she answered.

“That’s where we’re heading; it will at least give us some cover from the wind. Be careful, the ground is starting to get wet.”

The pair made their way down to the small rock formation that turned out to be a natural lean to formation.

“This is a stroke of luck,” he said as he unpacked the tent to get it pitched before it was too late. He paused for a second and looked at her questioningly.

“Virginia, I have to ask, what about us?”

“When I came to see you, about the book, I never expected to fall in love with you, Matt. Trust me, it’s real. I’ve never felt this way about anyone in my life.” she said.

“I’m glad you stayed, I thought you seemed more relaxed on the way up here. Your

organization was that concerned over a piece of fiction?”

“It was a very well written and believable piece of science fiction that was spot on, concerning several points. That’s why I had to call my boss before we left yesterday. I needed to tell him I had been emotionally compromised. I removed myself from the case, and took leave time because I wanted to be with you. Let me tell you, am I going to hear about that when I get back.”

Matt smiled at her as he finished with the tent and stowed their gear in the back. He rolled out the sleeping bag, inside the tent, and had her climb in. When they were inside, he closed the tent up to keep out the wind.

“Virginia, I’m leaving my pistol and flashlight right here where we both can get at it. I assume that you have firearms training?”

“I usually carry a Glock .40 caliber semi auto.”

Matt was impressed seeing that this lady could take care of herself and that aspect made her even more attractive to him.

“The .50 has more of a kick, but it’s still less than a revolver.”

“Safety on the left?” she asked.

“That’s correct.”

“How long do you think it will be before we can make it back to the hut?”

Matt looked at his watch, it was just past four, “I don’t know honey, we have only four more hours of daylight. It will take at least two or three hours to get back to the hut. If this doesn’t stop in the next hour, we’d better plan on being here overnight.”

“At least the company is good,” she said trying to make light of the situation.

“What are the chances that our alien friends will stay out of the weather and leave us alone?”

“They generally stay out of open areas, preferring the deep woods, but we are pretty isolated up here.” She looked worried as she shook her head. “I just don’t know.”

“I think we’ll be all right,” he said drawing her closer.

“Matt you’re not angry with me are you?”

“Why in the world would I be angry with you?” he asked tenderly.

“I lied about why I came to see you.”

“Virginia my love, I come from a family that has a strong military background. My father, my grandfather, my great grandfather, my brother, all served in uniform, some of them making a career of it. I know all about the need for security.”

“I’m glad you understand; most people don’t. Matt, you also need to know that I put you at risk by telling you this. From what I’ve been told you have a rare blood disorder.”

“That’s right, some enzyme that isn’t where it’s supposed to be, something like that.”

“That particular enzyme is the key element to the success of our amnesia drug,” she said.

“Oh, that would be how you maintain your cover.”

“That’s right. Anyone that runs across aliens or our organization is given the drug. It erases the past twelve hours of a person’s memory.”

“And what about those like me?”

“Recruitment or....,” she couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Elimination,” said Matt. “I can understand why. If the general public ever found out, there would be chaos, mass hysteria, and spiritual upheaval. Even today most mainline religions deny the possibility of life on other worlds. What I would like to know is how the hell they broke the light barrier?”

“I’ve always felt that they generate their own continuum, a bypass method if you will.”

“That would mean that they can control time as well,” said Matt.

The knowledge of the alien capability to manipulate time was a compartmentalized piece of information and Virginia was surprised by his insight. Her response was carefully guarded.

“I didn’t know you were that well versed in special relativity.”

“I read a lot. I’m by no means an expert but I do know a little about the subject. It might come in handy seeing that my future wife has a doctorate in physics.”

Outside the tent the weather was getting worse. The wind had picked up and the mist had turned into freezing rain. The snow started about an hour later and by six thirty there was almost a foot on the ground.

The search team had decided to make the descent from Washington down to the Lake of the Clouds hut, before the snow started. Paul Foster had decided to go with them against the advice of Colonel Bowers.

This time, it wasn't recklessness that drove him. As the senior commander at the scene it was his responsibility to maintain SHADO security. In his pack he had enough of the amnesia drug for all the non SHADO personnel, involved in the operation, as well as any bystanders. He was also worried about Ginny.

They arrived at the AMC hut just after dark and the snow was getting worse. Once Paul had warmed up a bit he went in search of the caretaker.

“Mr. Lewis?”

“Yes, how may I help you?”

“My name's Foster, Paul Foster.”

“Ah yes, I was told to expect you, by the way I’m sorry I missed your friend. I was in the back when they came through.”

“That’s all right, I need to find out who here is the best guide of the area.”

“That’d be Jack Crawford. You’re in luck, he’s here tonight. Come along, I’ll introduce you to him.”

They made their way through the common area to a table where three couples were seated.

“Jack, this gentleman would like to speak with you, his name’s Paul Foster.”

Jack stood and shook hands with Paul, “Please, join us.”

Foster sat down with them.

“You’re a friend of Virginia’s right?” asked Jack.

“That’s right, friend and co-worker.”

“I see. Well Paul, you’re probably not going to see her until morning, she’s stuck up on the Monroe peak with her fiancée.”

“Fiancée?” said Paul incredulously.

“Oh, you didn’t know? Happened right here on the dance floor. Personally I don’t think either one of them saw it coming.”

“I did,” said Sandy.

“You always were the romantic,” Jack said to Sandy, before turning back to Paul. “Anyway I spoke with them about an hour ago, over the radio. They had over a foot of snow on the leeward side of the peak then, and it’s getting worse out there.”

“I want to take a team out to rescue them tonight.”

“Mr. Foster there are much easier ways to kill yourself, if that’s what you want to do.”

“We can’t just leave them out there.”

“Don’t you think I want to go? Matt is a good friend of mine, and Sandy and I have grown quite fond of Ginny as well. But right now they’re safe. Look, Matt is a good woodsman. Don’t tell him I said that, I don’t want him getting cocky. As long as they stay put they’ll be all right. Trust me Paul. I’ve been hiking these mountains for thirty years.”

Foster wanted to argue but thought better of it. The man in front of him knew his business.

“When do you think we can go?” he asked.

“These summer snowstorms don’t usually last this long. If it let’s up by morning we’ll go at first light. Hell they’ll probably meet us halfway.”

“I certainly hope so,” said Paul as he thought, *Ginny engaged? Wait until Ed finds out.*

Chapter 6:

The mountain snowstorm ended around midnight, although the wind was still gusting to fifty miles per hour at the Washington peak. In the Lake of the Clouds hut, Paul was still awake and he sat at the table talking with Jack. He still wanted to go out with the rescue team but Jack had insisted that they wait until morning. Matt had checked in by radio around ten, and even though they were both a little cold, they were both safe.

“I still can’t believe that she said yes,” Paul said referring to the engagement.

“I take it that you don’t believe in love at first sight.”

“No, that kind of thing is for the storybooks. I don’t see it happening in real life, especially to someone like Ginny.”

Foster knew from firsthand experience that she never jumped into anything where relationships were concerned, as they had dated for a while a couple of years ago. The relationship never went

anywhere, and contrary to the belief of some people, Virginia did not sleep around.

“You just never know Paul, I fell in love with Sandy the day I met her and as a matter of fact it was in this very building. We’ve been married almost thirty years.”

“Did you propose the next day, Jack?”

“No I waited a few weeks; it was our last hike up to Washington before the summer ended. I took her up to the summit and used the traditional one knee approach. It wouldn’t have mattered though. Sandy told me later that she would have said yes the day we met.”

“I guess you don’t believe it until it happens to you,” said Paul as he thought about Linda Simmons. *What would have happened if she had survived?* To this day he didn’t know if he had been manipulated or if he had truly fallen for her as she still on occasion, haunted his dreams.

The radio on the table crackled to life, “WA1NJL from KA1BQP, are you there Jack?”

He picked up the handheld and answered. “This is WA1NJL, how are you two doing up there?”

“We’re a bit chilly but not enough to worry about. It looks like the storm has let up. There’s a full moon that is illuminating the snow, it’s a beautiful sight.”

Sandy came out into the room and took the radio from her husband, “Hey Matt, its Sandy KB1FQ. Are the two of you behaving?” she asked mischievously.

“No comment Sandy. Tell Jack that the wind is dying down.”

“Okay, I’ll tell him. He’s heading to bed anyway. The military sent a team up here to retrieve some kind of space capsule and Jack is going to be their guide; they’re leaving here at first light.”

“Then we’ll meet him halfway, anything else?”

“Ginny’s friend Paul is here and would like to say hello,” said Sandy.

“Put him on,” said Matt.

“Ginny, how are you doing?”

“I’m all right, but I’m surprised to hear you. How did you make it to the hut?” she asked.

“It’s a long story, hey before I let you go, I understand that congratulations are in order.”

“Yeah, I’m finally taking the plunge.”

“You’ll have to tell me all about it tomorrow. Good night Ginny.”

“Good night Paul.”

Matt sighed off with Sandy and turned off the radio. He had just put in the second set of batteries and wanted to conserve them.

“Matt, I have to go outside for a bit.”

“I was thinking the same thing; the wind has subsided we should be all right now.”

Matt looked around a bit at the surrounding area, the snow was about a foot and a half deep and would probably be all gone by the afternoon. There were no tracks in the snow except for the ones that Ginny or he had made. Their friends down below the tree line apparently decided not to brave the weather.

“Are you all set,” he asked as she came around the corner.

“Yeah, thanks.”

They cleaned the snow off their boots and climbed back into the tent.

“It looks like our friends don’t like snow. I didn’t see any tracks,” Matt said.

“I hope so, I really don’t have any organs I want to donate to their cause,” she said with gallows humor.

“I hear that.”

The aliens had picked up several radio transmissions from the top of the hill. They recognized two of the voices as belonging to senior level operatives what the earth inhabitants call SHADO. Taking one of them alive would be advantageous to forwarding their plans. Two of them set out towards the top of the hill in search of their quarry. The remaining two finished the repairs to their ship. They would have to depart by the midday sun.

Virginia was awakened by a howl in the woods. As she sat up Matt stirred next to her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I heard something,” she said as the howl repeated. “There, what was that?”

“A coyote, they probably won’t come above the tree line.”

Matt sat up and opened the zippered side window to look down the slope. Nothing new except...

Damn!

“We’re in trouble honey, we’ve got company. The two legged type.”

Matt and Ginny quickly got their gear on. He said to her, “We only have one gun, you’d better stay here.”

“No way, I’m watching your back,” she said in a tone that would brook no argument.

“Yes dear,” he said teasingly yet at the same time admiring her strength. He continued seriously, “Just be careful, I’ll never forgive myself if anything happens to you.”

She kissed him and said, “Nor I, let’s go.”

Matt peered out of the doorway looking around. The tracks went by the tent and continued to the summit. *They missed us*, he thought. The pair climbed out of the tent and slowly walked

around the outcropping. Suddenly, an alien stood up from behind the formation firing his weapon at them. The two of them ducked behind the rock formation.

Matt listened to the footsteps in the snow. He knew the alien was slowly walking around the corner and he leveled his pistol at the edge of the rocks where he expected the alien to show up listening carefully as it approached. The alien quickly rounded the corner bringing its weapon to bear, but Matt was already lined up for the shot. He fired once hitting the alien square in the chest.

The alien was thrown back by the force of the impact, its back being blown out by the massive bullet. Matt and Ginny, slowly walked around the corner, looking for the other alien that they knew was lurking somewhere nearby.

As they had rounded the back side of the outcropping, Matt noticed another set of tracks on the far side. *It's circling back, oh shit!*

He spun around just in time to see the alien reach for Ginny.

“Virginia, look out,” he yelled as he pushed her out of harm’s way dropping his gun in the process. He grabbed the alien by the arms and tried to keep it away from Ginny. He lost his footing and stumbled still struggling with the alien. It had a small round cylinder that it was trying to press against his neck.

Virginia cried, “Matt!” as she scrambled for the pistol he had dropped. She found it and tried to draw a bead on the alien but she couldn’t get a clean shot without hitting Matt.

The alien managed to press the cylinder against Matt’s neck and he suddenly went limp. The alien stood up only to turn and face an angry set of blue grey eyes.

Ginny had the pistol leveled at the alien’s head. She had been with SHADO for six years and although, she had ordered the destruction of

these creatures, she had never pulled the trigger herself. That was about to change.

The alien lunged at her and she fired, the shot hit the alien in the face tearing the head from the torso. The detached head and helmet landed twenty feet away.

Ginny tucked the gun in her belt and ran to where Matt lay still.

“Matt...Matt, don't you dare die on me,” she said, in a voice full of fear.

He was unconscious from the drug that had been used on him and she had to get him back to the tent. That was easier said than done, he was the same height as Ed but he had a heavier build.

She managed to drag him back to the tent and propped him up next to the entrance. Ginny went inside and dug through her pack until she found a small box. It was an antidote that SHADO had developed to counteract the

neurotoxin used by the aliens to paralyze their victims. The neurotoxin was wicked stuff, and if the antidote wasn't administered quickly it wouldn't matter. Either way Matt was going to be very sick for a while.

She prepped the syringe and administered the shot. In a few minutes he began to regain consciousness. He was still very lethargic from the drug and probably would not be able to stand.

“Virginia, are you all right?” Matt asked, in a weak voice.

“Never mind me, how about you?”

“I feel like I've been hit by an eighteen wheeler.”

Virginia looked at him quizzically as she was unfamiliar with the reference. Matt saw her look and smiled.

“A tractor trailer truck or semi.”

“Oh, that must be one of those country music references,” she said with a grin.

“Yeah, oh man I feel sick, what the hell was that stuff?”

“The aliens use a neurotoxin to paralyze their victims while harvesting their organs. I just gave you the antidote but you’re going to feel ill for a while, I’m afraid.”

“Terrific I guess we will have to go through the embarrassment of being rescued. Jack will never let me live it down.”

“Come on Matt, let’s get you inside.”

She helped him get back inside the tent and get his wet gear off. He was starting to shiver due to the after effects of the alien drug. Matt noticed the pistol in her belt.

“I see you got acquainted with my friend.”

Virginia looked down at the pistol that was still tucked in her belt.

“Yeah, it does have quite a recoil, but I like it.”

She pulled the pistol from her belt and placed it where it could be reached by both of them. She climbed into the sleeping bag next to him. His shivering was getting worse and Ginny knew she had to keep him warm to prevent him from going into shock.

“What time is it, Virginia?”

“It’s about three am,” she said.

“It will be daylight in another couple of hours.”

Not soon enough, she thought.

At the AMC hut Paul was not able to sleep. He got out of his bunk and went out to the common room. Jack’s wife Sandy was still at a table reading a book, while monitoring the radio. She looked up as he approached.

“Hello Paul, you should be asleep.”

“I know but all I’m doing is tossing and turning so I decided to get up early.”

“In that case I just made a pot of coffee. Please, help yourself,” she said.

“Thanks, don’t mind if I do.”

Paul poured himself a cup of black coffee and sat down at the table across from Sandy.

“Have you heard any word from them?”

Sandy looked up from her book, “Not since midnight, but I’m not worried about it. In fact I’d worry more if they call. They’re either fast asleep or otherwise occupied,” she said with a saucy grin.

Paul chuckled as he caught her insinuation. His thoughts drifted to the knowledge of Virginia’s recent engagement. He regarded the woman seated across from him.

“Sandy, how long have you known Matt?”

“Jack and I, have known him for ten years, we met at the Hosstraders flea market. That’s a ham radio gathering. I wasn’t licensed at the time but I used to go anyway. Jack and Matt hit

it off well and the rest is history. We finally got him interested in hiking a few years ago.”

“What kind of a man is he?”

“You’re curious as to what kind of a man your friend is going to marry, aren’t you?”

“A little,” he admitted. “You see I’ve known Ginny for six years and I’ve never seen her jump into anything without thinking it through. For her to accept a proposal from a man that she has only known for a day is completely out of character for her.”

“Well Paul I can only tell you this, Virginia is one very lucky lady as her future husband is a man of integrity.”

Paul could tell by the look on her face that she thought very highly of Virginia’s new fiancée.

“Thanks Sandy,” he said, with a smile of gratitude.

“Anytime.”

In the woods, northeast of the mountain, the alien ship had been repaired by its occupants. The other two members of the team had not returned from their assignment. As the alien hierarchy and decision making process was beyond human comprehension, it was decided that the remaining two aliens would go out in search of the two missing crew. They left the ship and started through the woods towards the summit of the mountain.

Virginia woke up promptly at daybreak and sat up to peer out the side window. She looked at the tracks that led to the tree line noting with satisfaction that there were only two sets. She didn't expect anymore as it was a given that each craft held two aliens. *There could be more than one craft*, she thought. She lay back down, next to Matt, as he began to stir.

“Good morning,” she said lovingly. “How do you feel?”

“Hi,” he said as he tried to sit up. “I’m still dizzy, and I still feel sick.”

“You’re going to feel that way for another few hours.”

“Wonderful. Sweetheart would you grab my radio, please?”

“Sure,” she said as she picked up the handheld transceiver and handed it to him.”

“Virginia, I’m going to tell them I have the flu.”

“All right, but they are going to see the alien bodies when they get up here.”

“Yeah, I know but I’m more concerned about the hundreds of others listening to the repeater.”

“Damn, I didn’t think about that,” she said shaking her head. *I must be more tired than I thought.*

Matt turned on the radio and the speaker came to life. "... from KB1FQ, are you on Matt?"

"Right on time," he said as he keyed the radio. "KB1FQ from KA1BQP, Good morning Sandy."

"Hey, how are you two doing?"

"We survived the night, but I'm coming down with a case of the flu. I won't be able to walk and I can barely sit up."

"Jack is just getting ready to leave with the team now, standby."

A few minutes later Jack came on the radio, "I can't leave you alone for a night without you getting into trouble, can I?"

"I afraid not buddy. It looks like you're going to have to stretch me out of here."

"That's all right; I've got plenty of help this morning. Everyone else down here is being moved down to the base camp this morning."

"This sounds serious."

“Yeah it is. Okay Matt I have to get moving. I’ll have the radio on this frequency if you need me, WA1NJL out.”

“KA1BQP is clear.”

Matt put the radio aside leaving it on and looked at Virginia.

“How long will it take them to get here with the snow?” she asked.

“Two and a half hours,” he said. “Have I told you yet how beautiful you are in the morning?”

“Oh come on Matt, I look like hell.”

“You’ve got the looks of a woman in love.”

Virginia blushed, “Oh stop it,” she muttered, embarrassed.

“That was a title to a song written by a friend of mine.”

“Seriously?” she asked.

“Yeah, his name is Matt as well. I sit in with his band every now and then.”

“I think I’d like to hear that song. Will you sing it to me?”

“Now?” he asked.

“Yeah, now,” she answered as she blinked her eyes at him.

Matt never liked singing without accompaniment but he also hated to disappoint a lady, especially one he was in love with.

The aliens reached the tree line about forty minutes after daybreak and scanned the area above the tree line. They spotted the tracks left by their companions leading up to a rock formation halfway to the summit. The pair pressed on following the tracks.

Chapter 7:

The rescue team left the Lake of the Clouds hut forty five minutes after daybreak. Last night's storm was the worst summer snowstorm Jack had seen in his thirty years on the mountain. The temperature was already above freezing and the snowmelt was going to make things tough going with mud later on.

Paul Foster was keeping pace right behind Jack; even though he wasn't an experienced hiker, he was in excellent physical condition. And Paul deferred to Jack's advice having learned the hard way that he didn't know everything. Paul was becoming the leader that Ed Straker knew he was capable of being.

“Jack, how long before we reach the summit?”

“We should be at the top by seven thirty, I'm familiar with the formation that Matt picked to set up camp it's only a few hundred yards below the summit, Colonel.”

After the others had left Paul had told Jack the true purpose of their mission. Jack took the

revelation fairly well saying, “I always suspected that something like this was going on.”

“So Virginia is a Colonel as well?”

“Yes, second in command as a matter of fact.”

“Boy is Matt ever going to be surprised.”

Yes he is, assuming Ginny didn't already tell him out of necessity, thought Paul.

By seven in the morning Matt was feeling better; he still couldn't stand but he was able to sit up without feeling dizzy and Virginia didn't seem to be as worried as she was earlier.

“So honey, how do I look?” he asked.

“Like hell,” she said grinning at him.”

“Gee thanks, I love you too.”

“You look better than you did an hour ago, Matt. I was worried for a while that you were going to go into shock on me.”

“I’m too mean and miserable for that.”

“Yeah, sure you are. Hey I have to go outside for a few minutes; I’ll be right back.”

“You had better take our friend,” he said.

“I should be all right; I didn’t see any new tracks in the snow.”

“Okay, but yell out if you need me.”

“Trust me; they’ll hear me in London.”

Virginia put on her gear and made her way out of the tent and walked around to the other side. When she had finished with taking care of personal matters she walked towards the side of the tent. She looked down to the tree line and out over the horizon. The vista was breathtaking and she could see why Matt enjoyed being up here. She sensed a presence behind her and spun around just in time to see an alien. It grabbed her as she screamed, “Matt!”

Matt sat up quickly, “Virginia?” He threw on his boots and grabbed the pistol not bothering with

his jacket. He bolted out of the tent and leveled his pistol at a red suited alien hitting it in the shoulder. The alien fell back in a lifeless lump. He turned to see the other one dragging Virginia down the slope. *You bastard!*

Matt could not fire without risking hitting her and he took off after them driven by sheer force of will.

The report from the firearm echoed down the mountainside.

“What the hell was that?” asked Paul.

“It sounded like Matt’s Desert Eagle,” answered Jack.

“Shit, come on let’s step it up!”

Jack quickened the pace as they were almost to the top of the mountains.

The alien noticed Matt coming down the slope and dropped the human it was carrying and took up its rifle.

Matt was hoping for this, thinking, *oh no you don't, your ass is mine!* He quickly fired his weapon dropping the alien before it had a chance to aim its weapon. Virginia lay on the ground motionless as Matt made his way down the slope crawling now. He was feeling sick again but he couldn't stop as he knew her life depended on him getting to her. When he got to her he checked her vital signs and found her pulse to be very weak. Matt checked her neck finding the telltale mark left by the alien device. Summoning all the strength he had, he dragged her back up the slope.

“Virginia, you hang on, you hear,” he said in desperation.

The rescue team crested the summit in time to see two figures near the tent one of them was laying on the ground while the other had disappeared inside.

Matt rummaged through Virginia's pack praying that she had more than one dose of the antidote. He found the small box marked SHADO along with her ID and he was beside himself when he saw her rank. He opened the box and quickly read the instructions. The syringe contained a premeasured dose that was administered intramuscular. *Good I don't have to find a vein.*

Matt went back out to where she lay and gave her the shot. He did not hear Jack calling to him as he collapsed with exhaustion.

By the time the rescue team had arrived, Virginia had regained consciousness. She saw

Paul Foster hovering over her looking very concerned.

“Ginny are you all right?”

She was still woozy from the after effects, “Paul, where’s Matt?”

“He’s right next to you, but he’s gone into shock. We’re going to try to get you airlifted off the mountain but the wind might prevent it.”

One of the SHADO medics walked over to Foster and crouched down next to him.

“Colonel we need to get them ready for the hike down.”

“No chopper?” asked Paul.

“It’s still too windy, and we can’t wait.”

The medics wrapped both Ginny and Matt in thermal blankets and hot packs to keep them warm for the trip down. Jack and Paul broke down the camp and packed the gear, while the

cleanup team gathered the alien remains for later retrieval.

The rescue team started back down the mountain carrying the pair on stretchers; it was very slow going.

The group arrived at the hut two hours later, and Ginny was feeling better. Matt however was still unconscious and in shock. The lead team medic was seriously worried about losing him.

Paul went into the bunkroom where Ginny was holding vigil at Matt's side. Although she was feeling better she couldn't stand for very long and she still had a blanket around her to keep warm.

“Hey, how are you?”

“How do I look?” she asked rhetorically.

“Like hell.”

“That’s about how I feel,” she said obviously distracted.

“Any change?”

“No, Mark said it was a miracle he was able to pull me back up the slope. He should not have even been able to stand for very long.”

“I guess that’s the power of love.”

Virginia gave him a grateful smile. “Thanks, I wish he didn’t risk his life.”

“Well I can think of one reason for that, he was saving the life of Virginia Lake.”

“You know Paul, sometimes you can be pretty sweet,” she said as she reached to hug her friend.

“I know, but don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“I promise,” she said.

After Paul left Ginny turned her attention back to Matt. *Dear Lord, please let him wake up,* she silently prayed.

Later, seated in the common room, Paul explained the amnesia procedure to Jack.

“So Colonel exactly how much am I going to remember?” he asked.

“The amnesia drug erases the past twelve hours. You will have no recollection of what happened here this morning.”

“Damn, an itch that I can’t scratch. Oh well I knew the price of admission. That means I won’t remember meeting you Colonel.”

“Not exactly, they won’t give you the drug until you are back up on Washington. Then you’ll be sent down via the Cog Railway. The rest of your party is waiting for you down at the parking area,” said Paul.

“What about Ginny and Matt?”

“We’ll take care of them; they’re both going to be sick for a while,” said Foster.

“In that case I’d better get moving, your team is waiting for me. I’m glad to have met you Colonel Foster. Just remember, if you ever need a guide up here again, look me up.”

“I’ll do that Jack, and the pleasure was mine.”

As Jack walked out one of the operatives came over to Foster.

“We’ve got the radio link to HQ working and the Commander wants to speak to you.”

This isn’t going to be fun, he thought.

Paul walked over to the console and sat down.

“Commander?”

“What’s the good word Paul? Were we able to contain it?”

“For the most part, Ed. The alien remains are still at the top of Monroe and we haven’t yet located the craft. I have an air search set for later this morning although there may not be much left when we get to it. Ginny seems to

think it is in the woods on the eastern slope of the mountain.”

“How is Virginia?” asked Ed.

“She’s recovering; apparently Matt Hewett saved her life. The aliens hit her with a neurotoxin so she is going to be woozy for a few days.”

“I take it that Mr. Hewett is the security problem?”

“Yes, they were both attacked before we could get to them. Matt is still unconscious as he went into shock from exposure and over exertion when he saved Ginny’s life.”

“It’s too bad; I know Virginia was quite taken by him. But he knows too much.”

“You’re not considering recruiting him?” Paul asked, very surprised.

“To do what Paul, I mean he is a pilot but he’s too old to train for combat, assuming he could pass the physical. And his communications

background is useless to us now that converted almost everything over to FTL.”

“There’s another problem sir.”

“Like we need another, what is it?” Straker asked with frustration evident in his voice.

“Ginny is engaged to him.”

“What!”

“It happened the night they arrived here.”

“For the love of God! What was she thinking?”

“She’s in love with him sir, hell I can see that,” said Paul, defensively.

“Tell Colonel Lake I want to speak to her.”

“Yes sir.”

“Ginny?” Paul said as he walked into the room.

“Yes, Paul.”

“Commander Straker wants to speak with you.”

“Does he know?” she asked having wanted to tell him herself.

“I had to tell him; you’ll understand when you talk to him.”

She nodded in understanding, “All right, can you help me? I’m still a bit shaky on my legs.”

“Sure,” he said as he helped her to the common room.

She sat down in front of the console and saw that the channel was still open. Ed was looking down with his head in his hands.

“Commander?”

Straker looked up and lost some of his steam when he saw how haggard she looked.

“Virginia, are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m still feeling the effects of the neurotoxin. I didn’t know how nasty that stuff was.”

“I see.” Straker paused for a moment then continued. “I understand that you have something to tell me.”

“Yes it’s true. Matt and I are engaged. I wanted to tell you myself, not have you hear it second hand.”

“Well don’t blame Paul, I forced the issue. Virginia, are you sure that you know what you’re doing? You’ve only known this man for what three days? I would have expected this from Paul, but you?”

“What’s so surprising, that I found someone I love, someone who loves me? Is that so hard to believe?” she asked, her voice full of hurt.

“No, not at all,” said Ed “If you had known him for a while I wouldn’t be concerned.”

“Didn’t you tell me once that you fell in love with Mary the day you met her?”

Touché, he thought.

Before he could respond, she went on, “Ed I waited three years for you, three years of sleepless nights, three years of unrequited love. I got tired of waiting. Matt is kind and gentle, and I know he loves me. I fell in love with him as soon as I met him. I’m going to marry him Ed, and that is that.”

“You know that he’s been deemed a security risk.”

“I had hoped that you would bring him into the fold.”

“I don’t have a place to put him Colonel, and it’s a bit late for him to go back to school now.”

Virginia was near tears now and her voice cracked as she answered, “In that case, when you put him against the wall, put me there as well.”

“Colonel!”

“I’m serious Ed, hell he may not even survive long enough to make it back to HQ. The medics say that he’s slipping into a coma.”

“I thought you gave him the antidote?”

“I did, but he went out into the cold and over exerted himself saving my life. Had he waited for the rescue team I’d be dead.” She paused as she went through another dizzy spell. “Ed I’m very tired, I need to lie back down.”

“All right Virginia, go get some sleep. I’ll talk to you when you get back to HQ.”

She closed the connection and slowly got up to head back to the bunk room. Paul took her by the arm and helped steady her. In the room he helped her into the chair.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen anyone back him into a corner since Alec died,” said Paul.

“He needs that once in a while to keep him centered, but no one did it as well as Alec.”

Chapter 8:

Around 11:00 the wind had finally subsided enough to bring the Albatross 25 in at Lake of the Clouds. Normally used for sea rescue the aircraft had the ability to land on a sloped surface. As soon as the aircraft touched down Dr. Schroeder jumped out and made his way to the hut.

“Am I glad to see you Doc. This way please,” said Paul.

They walked back to the bunk room finding Ginny still in the chair at Matt’s side.

“You should be in bed,” Schroeder said without preamble.

“Now that you’re here I think I will lie down,” she said as she headed for the other bunk.

“You must be feeling sick.”

Virginia was too tired to spar with him and she was dozing in a few minutes.

“Mark, give me a rundown,” the doctor ordered, after Foster had left.

“Mr. Hewett apparently suffered from exposure and overexertion after he was given the antidote. He’s been unconscious ever since we found him. He dragged Colonel Lake fifty yards up the hill before he passed out.”

“Damn. Okay let’s get him started on an antitoxin drip IV, one for Colonel Lake as well. I’m going to see what I can find out about the stuff they used.”

The SHADO medic opened the kit that Schroeder had brought and started the IV on Matt.

“Colonel?”

Virginia opened her eyes, “Yes?”

“Dr. Schroeder wants me to start an IV on you. You’re going to feel a little pinch.”

She nodded her head then asked, “Is Matt going to be all right?”

“I hope so Colonel, but the doc is worried.”

Schroeder walked into the common room where Foster was seated and asked, “Do you have the device that aliens used to administer the neurotoxin?”

“Yeah,” said Paul. “Here’s one of them.”

Paul handed him the small silver cylinder and Schroeder opened a small tool kit. With it, he began to disassemble the alien device. Inside was a vile of yellow liquid which he opened and drew out a small amount of the material to place on a slide. He grabbed the portable microscope out of his case and set it up on the table and proceeded to examine the neurotoxin. In the liquid he found the telltale pathogen he was looking for.

The aliens had developed a new neurotoxin last year that was resistant to the SHADO antidote. Because of that Schroeder and Jackson had to modify the treatment regime with a special enzyme to counteract the effect. He got up from the table and went back to the bunk room. Ginny was looking worse and Matt was near death.

“Mark the neurotoxin contained the J5 pathogen. Prep two shots of S5 enzyme ten cc’s each.”

The SHADO medic prepared the injections and Schroeder swabbed Matt’s forearm to give him the shot directly.

“Mark, you can administer Colonel Lake’s dose through the IV line.”

Schroeder knew it would be at least an hour before they would see any change in Matt’s condition. Virginia would fare much better, having not exerted herself to the point of exhaustion.

“Keep an eye on them Mark and let me know if you see any change.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

The SHADO aeroceptor overflowed an isolated area, northeast of Mount Munroe.

“Delta foxtrot one five to base, we found it Colonel.”

“This is base camp,” answered Foster. “Where exactly is it?”

“It’s on the eastern slope of the mountain about two hundred yards in from the tree line. Grid reference 71.25 by 41.75 green, and Colonel it’s glowing, it’s about to blow.”

Ten seconds later the alien craft succumbed to the deterioration effects of the atmosphere. The resulting explosion left a mess of debris in the forest.

“That’s it Colonel, we’re going to have a hell of a time getting that cleaned up.”

At the base camp, Colonel Foster shook his head as he answered.

“Well they’re just going to have to hike in. You can return to base. Foster out.”

Damn, one hell of a mess and no easy way to get to it!

Foster called HQ, not looking forward to giving Ed the bad news. In a few minutes Straker appeared on the screen.

“So what you’re telling me is that the clean up team is going to have to travel on foot to get to the wreckage.”

“Yes sir and we can’t just leave it as this area is inundated with hikers all summer long. The local authorities are getting antsy as well. Keeping the area locked down is going to create some problems.”

“Let me worry about that Paul. I need you to get the cleanup team in there as quick as possible and decontaminate the area. Just get the harmful waste or anything that would compromise security. Don’t worry about beautification; we’ll let the US Forest service handle that aspect. I’m sending the remaining Albatross 25’s to you that should speed up the process. Do you still need the hut as a base of operations?”

“That would certainly help.”

“All right, make sure you and your men leave it in better shape than you found it and I’ll make arrangements with the AMC to rent it for the duration. We want to be good neighbors.”

Paul smiled, “Yes sir.”

“Tell Schroeder that as soon as his patients are able to travel I want both of them back at HQ. And tell Colonel Lake that she is back on duty as soon as she can stand.”

“She’s not going to like that Ed.”

“I know, and the way things are looking she may never speak to me again anyway, Straker out.”

Matt slowly opened his eyes trying to focus on the image in front of him.

“Hey, it’s about time you woke up,” said a distant voice.

The image eventually coalesced into Virginia’s lovely face.

“Hey yourself, next time you don’t go alone.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I feel like hell, what happened?” he asked.

“The antidote was only partially effective and we both needed additional treatment.”

“How about you?” he asked.

“Better, I can stand now without getting dizzy, although I’m still very tired. By the way, I’ve been ordered back to duty.”

“When do you have to leave?”

“We’re leaving the mountain as soon as you can stand.”

Matt knew she wasn’t telling him everything.

“You said we.”

“The Commander wants us both back at HQ as soon as possible,” she said.

While they talked, Dr. Schroeder walked in to check on them.

“Mr. Hewett, I see that you’re awake. How do you feel?”

“Well Doc, I don’t feel nauseated anymore but I’m very fatigued.”

Schroeder checked his vitals and asked, “Can you stand?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“That’s good; the fatigue will pass with a few hours rest. I think you’re well enough to travel and you can both rest on the plane.”

Schroeder turned to Virginia, “How about you Colonel, are you well enough to travel?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“In that case the two of you had better get packed.”

When the doctor left, Virginia and Matt gathered their gear and packed it away for the trip.

“Matt, I have your pistol in my pack.”

He understood the reason for this and had expected it. Until this was sorted out, he was a prisoner.

“I’d rather you have it than your security boys. They don’t seem to play nice with others,” said Matt, his wit returning.

“I see you are feeling better.”

“I’ll feel better when this mess is over; I have to take my fiancée shopping for a ring.”

Virginia gave him a worried smile, hoping that they would be able to make that trip.

As they walked through the common room Paul stood up to say goodbye, “It was a pleasure to meet you Matt.”

“You as well Paul, I finally get to put a face to a name. Maybe I’ll see you when I get back.” *If I get back*, he thought.

Two SHADO security guards came in from the plane and walked up to Matt. “You’re Mr. Hewett?”

“That’s right.”

“You need to come with us.”

Virginia was furious as she saw how Matt was being treated and she had just about enough.

“Lieutenant.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Mr. Hewett is in my custody, and will remain in my custody until we arrive at HQ. Do I make myself clear?”

“I’m sorry ma’am, I have my orders.”

“Lieutenant, you are about five seconds away from a court martial. I gave you a direct order.”

The pair from security backed down, “Yes ma’am. If I may, I need to inquire as to the whereabouts of Mr. Hewett’s weapon?”

“I have it in my possession as well. The two of you will return to the plane and wait for us.”

“Yes Colonel.”

Matt whispered to Paul, “Has she ever treated you like that?”

“Well she did threaten to throw me in the brig once. But I deserved it.”

“Remind me never to make her angry with me.”

Virginia over heard the comment and whacked Matt in the arm.

“Hey, what was that for?” he asked.

“Just to make sure you’re paying attention. Come on let’s go before the goon squad gets impatient.”

In the Albatross 25 Lieutenant Barnes watched as Colonel Lake and her *prisoner* walked hand in hand to the aircraft. “What the hell is this?” he said to the pilot.

“You didn’t know? Colonel Lake is engaged to that man.”

“Well bloody hell.”

An hour later the VTOL Albatross 25 landed at Pease Air Force base and the group disembarked the aircraft to board the waiting SST. As soon as they were aboard the aircraft

was give priority clearance to Heathrow. Twenty minutes later they were in the air. Once they were at altitude Virginia and Matt shared a meal, both of them very hungry.

“Careful Virginia, don’t feed the animals,” he said tilting his head towards the goons watching him.

“Oh, stop it,” she said giggling. “They’re really quite nice when you get to know them,” she said quietly.

“I’ll bet they’re about as much fun as a tax audit.”

This time she laughed out loud, “I’m sorry, it must be battle fatigue.”

“You know *Colonel*, you’re beautiful when you laugh.”

She looked at him and said, “Matt, it’s really too bad we have an audience.”

“And why is that?”

She just gave him an impish grin.

The SST touched down at Heathrow just before seven in the evening. The security gang tried to separate them again but Virginia would hear none of it. When she got back to HQ, she was going to give whoever was responsible for this a piece of her mind. She didn't care if it was Straker himself.

“Matt, have you ever been to London before?”

“Once, a long time ago, I was ten years old and I came over with my grandfather.”

“Well if we get out of this mess, I'll show you around.”

“Thanks, Virginia; I'd like that.”

The caravan pulled into the film studio and around to the sound stages in the back. *I guess*

we're not using the executive elevator, she thought.

The jeep stopped at the rear parking area and they got out of the vehicle. Virginia turned to face the security detail, "All right gentlemen, you're dismissed. I'll take it from here."

The Lieutenant looked like he was going to argue but thought better of it.

"Come on Matt, let's go get this over with," she said as she led him to the auxiliary elevator.

They stepped into the car and Virginia pressed a button.

Voice identification please.

"Colonel Lake."

Voiceprint positive, Lake, Virginia L.

The elevator started down and not just one or two floors. Matt counted off the seconds and came up with a rough estimate of four stories.

“We’re eighty feet down,” she said answering his curiosity.

When the doors opened they were met by another security team.

“Colonel Lake, the Commander would like to see you right away. He asked us to escort your guest to room 24.”

The demeanor of this team was less threatening than the last group and room 24 was the civilian debriefing room. It had a living room look to it. It was a cell, but a nice cell.

“Matt, you go with them, and I’ll see you as soon as I can.”

They kissed each other and she walked down the corridor to meet with the Commander.

“Mr. Hewett if you would come with us please?”

Well at least these three are polite.

Matt was impressed when he saw the holding room, maybe there was hope. A fresh pot of

coffee was placed in the room and he decided to help himself. *What are they going to do poison it?*

By the time she had arrived at the Commanders office, Virginia had worked up a good mad.

“Virginia, I’m glad to see you’re in one piece. Have a seat.”

“All right Ed, just what the hell is going on? The security teams were treating Matt like a common criminal. Was that your doing?” she asked angrily.

“Calm down Virginia, I hope that you know me better than that. Natiroff got a little carried away.”

“Carried away was an understatement. I’ve seen aliens get better treatment than that.”

“Did they treat him badly down here?”

“No, I was surprised considering the way he was treated on the way here. So what are we going to do?”

“I’m still trying to figure something out, but in the end it’s not going to be my decision.”

“What do you mean?”

“Henderson has taken a personal interest in this matter, and he is going to want things done by the book.”

“And I suppose that if they deem Matt an unacceptable risk you’re going to be the one that gives the order to eliminate him?” she asked choking up.

“As C in C, it’s my responsibility. Virginia, I’m sorry.”

She got up from her chair to leave, “If it’s all right with you Commander, I’d like to spend some time alone with my fiancée.”

Straker just nodded. He was torn between duty to SHADO and duty to a friend.

He picked up the phone and called General Henderson.

When Virginia came into the room Matt could see that she had been crying. He stood and rushed to her taking her in his arms. He held her for a very long time as she cried her heart out.

“I guess I know what he said.”

She looked up at him and said, “No, but it’s out of his hands.”

“I see, well that doesn’t mean that all is lost.”

“You don’t know Henderson.”

“Who’s he?”

“James L. Henderson, president of the IAC.”

Why does that name, ring a bell, Matt thought.

“So General, what the hell am I supposed to do about this? The man has done nothing wrong except witness an alien attack, and in the process save the life of a senior SHADO operative as well as a close friend.”

“Have you talked with him yet?”

“I intend to do that once I get off the phone. James there must be something we can do about this.”

“Ed, we’ve only faced this decision twice before; why are you so concerned about this case?”

“Because Virginia is in love with him, as a matter of fact they’re engaged.”

“What!”

“You heard me right James.” Straker paused for a moment, “You’ve known Virginia and her family for years. When have you ever seen her make a poor decision?”

“Never, not even as a child; Lynn used to comment all the time about how easy Virginia

was to raise. Ironically the only decision she made that her mother ever questioned was in regard to Virginia's first husband."

"Colonel Lake is not one to repeat a mistake," said Ed.

"Send me everything you have on Mr. Hewett, files, G6, photos, send it all."

"All right, just to let you know Matt Hewett is an interesting individual."

"Matt, you said?"

"Yes, surely you knew his name."

"Just saw it on the book, he signs it with his first two initials. I didn't know his nickname."

"Well I'm going to speak to him now. Good night General."

"Commander."

Straker got up from his desk and walked out of the office heading for the holding area.

Chapter 9:

Virginia sat on the couch cuddled in the arms of her fiancée trying to burn the moment in her mind.

“Does SHADO have a chaplain, Virginia?”

“Yeah, we do, are you thinking about...”

“Why not, that is if you’re still interested.”

She threw her arms around him and kissed him deeply. When the kiss had ended he said, “I take that as a yes.”

Ed Straker walked up to the holding room and spoke to the guard, “Why don’t you go grab a cup of coffee.”

“Sir?”

“Go on, I’ll be fine.”

“Yes sir.”

Ed rang the buzzer then entered the room. “Mr. Hewett, I’m Ed Straker.”

Matt stood and shook his hand, “I wish we were meeting under better circumstances Commander. By the way everyone calls me Matt.”

Ed turned to Virginia and said, “I’d like to speak to him alone for a bit, if I may?”

Virginia didn’t want to leave but she trusted Ed not to do something brash.

“All right, I’ll be back in a bit.”

She kissed Matt on the cheek and left the room. When they were alone Matt turned to Ed and began, “So Commander, is this where you tell me that I’ve been deemed too great a risk to the security of your organization?”

“Look let’s drop the formality, call me Ed.”

“All right.”

“To answer your question, the decision hasn’t been made yet regarding your status.”

“Don’t you mean disposition?”

“You’re not going to make this easy are you?”

“It’s not in my job description. Look Commander, when I wrote *Having Hostile Intentions* I believed that visitors from another world would have a higher sense of morality. The idea of hostile aliens was strictly science fiction. That image was shattered when I watched these creatures gut a young couple like a bucket of catfish. Then I find out that my speculations about a secret organization, to defend us against the threat is what brought me under scrutiny in the first place.”

“Then you had no foreknowledge of SHADO or the alien threat?”

“Of course not, had someone ever suggested that all of this existed, I would have labeled them as a conspiracy theorist nut job.”

“I’m sorry that our scrutiny got you mixed up in this.”

“Don’t feel sorry for me Ed. I know someone else who is going to suffer more than me, and I’m worried about her.”

“That makes two of us Matt. Virginia is my best friend.”

“That speaks highly of you; she seems to choose her friends carefully.”

“It speaks even higher of you.”

Matt stood and looked at the painting on the wall that reminded him of the mountains.

“You know Commander, I understand the predicament here. Let’s face it; all of this is more important than any one man. Given the choice or opportunity, I’d lay my life down to protect this. But when does the price become too high to pay. When do we become our own enemy? What would you do if you were dealing with an eight year old child? I hope you can

sleep with those decisions. I don't know if I could."

Matt had unknowingly struck a nerve and Ed's face went ashen.

"That would be a difficult situation," Ed managed to say.

Matt noticed for the first time how drawn Ed looked. He realized that this was a man who died a little each time he made a decision that cost a life. And from the look on his face at the moment Matt knew that SHADO had cost the Commander on a personal level.

After a moment Ed spoke, "I'll bet you're one hell of a chess player."

Matt's face broke into a grin as he said, "I can hold my own; too bad we may never find out."

"I suppose."

The doors opened and Virginia came back in the room. Ed stood and shook hands with Matt. "I'll let you know what happens."

“Good to meet you Commander.”

Ed turned to Ginny, “I’ve canceled the security detail and I’m leaving Matt in your care, just don’t let him wander around unescorted.”

“Of course.”

When Ed had left Ginny turned to Matt, “What did you say to him?”

“More than I should have. That man has been through more pain than anyone should have to face in a lifetime. I should have just kept my mouth shut.”

Ginny held onto him for a few minutes.

“Come on Matt, let’s go.”

“Where to?”

“My quarters, we both need a good night’s sleep.”

“Before or after?” he asked quietly.

Virginia gave him a saucy grin, “I guess you’ll have to come with me and find out.”

General Henderson looked at the photos that had been sent with Hewett's file. *Damn he looks familiar.* He opened the G6 report and started to read it, concentrating on the section detailing his family history.

Father, Raymond C. Hewett, mother, Denise K. (Sanderland) Hewett, paternal grandfather, Hiram B. Hewett. Henderson stopped reading in disbelief. *Judas priest,* he thought.

He reached around for a photo album that he kept on the shelf behind his desk. Henderson set it down and quickly thumbed through it until he came to a faded picture dated 1953. A small boy stood with an older gentleman on one side of a much younger James Henderson and a young woman stood on his other side with a small girl. The photographer had captured the young boy kissing the girl. Henderson placed the album and the reports in his briefcase and walked out of the office.

“How’s the cleanup coming Paul?”

“It’s slow going Ed but we’re making progress. I think we’ll be out by tomorrow morning. By the way, how are things working out for Matt Hewett?”

“I still haven’t heard from the commission; I’m tempted to bring him in to the organization any way. I could always put him in security. He handled himself fairly well against the aliens for someone with no formal training.”

“Why don’t you?” asked Paul.

“If it were that simple I would, but with Henderson involved? I’d have better luck getting the appropriation for the second Moonbase.”

“It’s a damn shame; he seems like a good man.”

“I agree, but I haven’t given up yet. Keep me posted Paul. Straker out.”

As Ed ended the call with Paul the intercom buzzed.

“Yes.”

“General Henderson is here to see you sir.”

Here it comes. “Send him in.”

Henderson walked into the office and set down his briefcase. “Close the door Commander.”

“Well, what’s the verdict?”

“Before we get into that I want to show you something.”

Henderson pulled the photo album out of his briefcase and opened it to the picture he had found. He placed it on Ed’s desk.

“Take a look at this Ed.”

Ed looked at the photograph instantly recognizing the man in the middle as Henderson although he was much younger. He saw the date on the photo. *Thirty three years ago.* The older man to the left with the small

boy was oddly familiar and the woman was a spitting image of...

“Is this who I think it is?”

“Yes Ed, and the little girl is her daughter, she’s about eight years old in that picture.”

“The little boy is your security problem. He’s about ten in that picture.”

“We’ll I’ll be damned.”

Virginia and Matt were just getting to bed when the phone in her quarters rang.

“Yes.”

“Sorry to bother you Colonel, but the Commander wants both you and Mr. Hewett back in his office.”

“Tara, we’re both exhausted, can’t this wait until morning?”

“Sorry Colonel, he said to tell you that General Henderson was here and needs to see both of you right away.”

“All right give us ten minutes.”

“What was that all about?” asked Matt.

“Henderson wants to see us, now.”

“He’s here?”

“Apparently so; it looks like you’ll be trying on that Nehru suit sooner than you thought.”

“I never thought I’d be caught dead in one of these.”

“I think it will look good on you. Hurry up; we don’t want to keep the General waiting.”

Ten minutes later the two of them walked into Straker’s office. Matt looked at General Henderson for a few seconds before he recognized him.

“General Jim?”

“I thought I recognized that name,” Henderson said, “Hiram Hewett’s grandson, in the flesh.”

The two men shook hands in front of a bewildered Virginia Lake. “You two know each other?”

“I met Matt thirty three years ago when Hiram brought him over to England, with him, to attend your father’s memorial service.”

Henderson handed the picture to Ginny and Matt.

“Do the two of you remember this?”

Matt and Virginia looked at the faded photograph and they both lit up as they remembered that day.

Virginia spoke first, “I remember this, oh my God, I had no idea it was you Matt.”

Matt was in his own private reverie as he remembered, “Gin, after all these years, I don’t believe it.”

The two of them embraced in greeting, not as the adults of today, but as the young children of thirty three years ago. As the pair held each other close, Ed looked over at the General. He would not have believed it, had he not seen it himself. Out of the corner of his eye flowed a tear.

Straker walked over to Henderson, “What’s it all about James?” he asked quietly.

Henderson regained his composure and turned to Ed.

“Ancient history Commander, In 1942 Bob Lake and I were flying back from a daylight raid over Germany. Our B-17 had been shot up pretty bad, half the crew was dead. Bob was flying as my copilot and I had taken a piece of flak in the leg.”

As Ed listened, the General continued, “I was losing a lot of blood and Bob was flying the aircraft. We landed hard and the console in front of me buckled pinning my leg. Bob had

been knocked unconscious and I couldn't move. To make matters worse the aircraft was on fire. I ordered the navigator to get Bob out of the plane."

The General paused to collect his thoughts, "At the time Hiram Hewett was the base commander, and the three of us were good friends. He saw us come in hard and must have run across the field to help. The next thing I knew Hewy was prying up the console to free my leg. He pulled me out of the burning aircraft. He saved my life Ed and I owe him a debt of honor. I'm going to personally support the decision to clear Matt with security."

"His grandfather must have been quite a man," said Ed.

"He was indeed."

The General turned to Matt, "You're going to have to sign some paperwork, take the enlistment oath, and you will be considered

reserve personnel, subject to call in by the SHADO C in C.”

“It sure beats the alternative General, besides; I think I would rather enjoy working for Commander Straker.”

“You say that now; wait till you see him in a bad mood,” said Virginia.

“By the way,” the General added. “I’m going to have that picture framed for the two of you as a reminder of your wedding gift. The gift that the two of you received today can’t be packaged or bought at any price.”

“Why don’t the two of you get some sleep,” said Ed. “We’ll finish this in the morning. Oh, Virginia, am I really that bad?”

“Only every other day sir,” she said with a smile.

When Matt and Ginny had left Ed looked at the General. “It’s incredible isn’t it?”

“It is indeed Ed. It’s a much smaller world than we know.”

The General packed and closed his briefcase,
“Take care Commander.”

“Good night General.”

When they got back to her quarters, Virginia and Matt were still amazed at the revelation. They got ready for bed but rather than climb in right away, they sat down on the sofa and held each other as they talked.

“I still can’t believe it Matt, after all these years, it’s really you. You know I cried every day for almost a month when you left to go back to the States.”

“I’m in shock myself. Grandpa didn’t have your address so I couldn’t write to you. I thought about you every day that summer. When I got back to Rhode Island, I got caught up in school stuff, we lost the family cat. But I never did forget the little blonde English girl I met. I

never even knew your full first or last name. When did you stop going by Gin?”

“That was a phase I was going through, Virginia was a mouthful and Ginny to me seemed too childish, after all I was almost nine,” she said with a grin. “I stopped going by Gin when I was in my teens. I ended up coming to the US when I was sixteen. I wanted to look you up but like you I had no way to do it. I started at Stanford and had my doctorate in six years. Even when I met Brad, I still sometimes wondered where you were.”

“It’s amazing,” said Matt. “Even though our minds had all but forgotten, our hearts remembered each other.”

“You mean it wasn’t love at first sight?” she asked disappointed.

“It was though; the first time we met we were too young to do anything about it. We were given a gift by being able to live the moment

again, and to be given the gift we received tonight, how did we deserve to be so blessed.”

They kissed each other deeply; both of them overcome by the moment. When the kiss ended Matt looked at her and asked, “So now that we have the rest of our lives what are we going to do?”

“I’m going to request a transfer back to the research section in New York. I don’t want you to have to leave everyone you know to come live here. Besides it will work out better for me as well.”

“You’re stepping down as executive officer?”

“Yes. Matt I want to have a family and I can do SHADO just as much good in the research section as I can here.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.”

“Are we still getting married tomorrow?” asked Matt.

“Tomorrow night. You promised to take me shopping, and I promised to show you London.”

“When are you going to tell the Commander?”

“First thing in the morning, just before we leave. Hey let’s get to bed, it’s getting late and I want to spend some quality time with you before we get to sleep.”

Epilogue:

Virginia walked into Ed’s office as soon as she knew he was in. She had her transfer request in her hand.

“Something tells me I’m not going to like this, Virginia.”

“No,” she said almost in tears. “I’m sure you’re not. But you’ve been my best friend and

colleague for a long time. You have a right to know.”

She handed him the paperwork and he put it on his desk not bothering to read it; he knew what it was.

“We’ve worked together a lot of years, and I’m going to miss you.”

“I do appreciate that Ed, more than you know. But this is best for both of us.”

“I know, I just...”

“You see what I mean?”

The conversation paused for a moment.

“I suppose you’re right. So who do you recommend that I promote to executive officer?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

“Do you think he’s ready?”

“If you had asked me that, two years ago I would have said no. But Paul has grown up

considerably in the past two years. Yes, I think he's ready."

"All right, who replaces him?"

"Lt. Colonel Wallace, she's more than capable. And Ed, do both of you a favor; don't call her Colonel for the rest of her life; she likes to be called Jen."

"I'm sorry about that Virginia; I never meant to hurt you."

"It's all right, you finally broke through that hang up and I did appreciate it."

Ed stood and took her hand in both of his, "Good luck Virginia, to both of you. Stay in touch all right?"

"I will, thanks Ed."

Virginia and Matt met with the SHADO chaplain an hour later. He informed them that unless the circumstances were extraordinary he

was bound by the laws of the UK concerning marriage. The couple decided to wait until they got back to the States. In the long run it would be a better decision for both of them as they could at least pull together a small wedding.

They spent the day sightseeing in London and of course Matt took her to pick out an engagement ring. Virginia made arrangements to have her belongings shipped to the States as well as putting her aircraft up for sale; the cost of having it shipped to the US would be prohibitive.

By late that evening they were both exhausted having packed everything that she would need to bring with her for the next couple of weeks. They sat together on the couch enjoying their tea.

“I talked to my mother, Matt. She’s going to fly over for the wedding as soon as we set a date.”

“Yeah, I told Patrick this afternoon, he’s going to let the rest of the family know. He was

shocked to say the least. And that was before I told him who you were.”

“I’m still amazed about that, I mean what are the chances of that ever happening.”

“I don’t know; it’s higher math. It makes my head hurt to even think about it.”

“Hey, let’s get some sleep, we’ve got a busy day tomorrow.”

“No argument here.”

Colonel Foster and Lt. Colonel Wallace walked through the control room on their way to the Commander’s office. The doors were open and they both entered the room.

“Ah, you’re both here. Please have a seat,” he said as he closed the doors.

“I’m making some organizational changes today. Colonel Lake has requested a transfer back to the research section, based out of New

York, and I approved the transfer last night. With that in mind it means that I need a new executive officer. Colonel Foster, I've decided that you are going to be SHADO's new second in command."

"I'm honored sir, but I didn't expect this."

"Paul you have come a very long way in the past two years, and you're also a good friend. You've earned it."

Straker turned to Wallace, "Lt. Colonel Wallace, I'm reassigning you to HQ as a member of the senior staff as well as promoting you to full Colonel. You will be taking on most of Paul's former duties."

"Thank you sir," she said.

"You'll find that I like to be on a first name basis with all my command staff members, unless that makes you uncomfortable?"

“My friends all call me Jen, but with all due respect sir, I couldn’t address you in such an informal manner.”

“That’s all right; change takes a while to get used to. Paul if you would give Jen your duty sheet, as I have a few things to go over with you.”

After she had left, Paul looked back at his commanding officer with a puzzled look.

“Surprised Paul?”

“Yes, about a few things. Why the informality?”

“I made a promise Paul. I had never realized how much it had hurt Virginia to be called Colonel instead of her name. And she was to only one I did it to. I have no intention of repeating that mistake.”

“You really cared for her, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did. I still do. But you can’t live your life on regrets.”

“Does she know Ed?”

“She might suspect, but she as much as told me that it wouldn’t matter. It would seem that Matt was a flame in her heart that had been burning for thirty three years.”

“That is still so hard to believe.”

“Is it Paul? It’s moments like that which make this job worth all the pain that it causes. You’ll find that out eventually.”

“Are you sure I’m ready for this job Ed?”

“Paul, you just erased any doubt I would have had by asking that question.”

The Shadair SST took off from Heathrow at 10:00 am bound for Logan Airport. In the passenger cabin Matt and Virginia watched as the city of London receded into the distance. They held on to each other contemplating the future.

“Once we get home and get you settled in we’ll have to start thinking about finding a place in western Connecticut, unless you want to commute to New York from Rhode Island every week.”

“I could always fly the Mooney, speaking of which how are we going to get it back home?”

“My friend Brian owns a Piper Cherokee; he can fly us up to Twin Mountain and we can spend a day up there to relax and fly back the next day.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea.”

She looked at him with a mischievous grin.

“What?” he asked.

“The last time we were together on this aircraft we had an audience.”

“Yeah, I remember, the goon squad.”

“We don’t have an audience now,” she said suggestively.

“What about the flight crew?”

“They’re under orders not to come back here, for any reason.”

“I get the feeling that our life together is never going to be boring.”

“Not if I can help it.”

As the SST transitioned to supersonic flight the couple drew each other into an embrace of love, passion and ecstasy.

END