

THE SUPREMACY SERIES

NEPHILIM

THE TRUTH IS HERE

L.A. MARZULLI

ZONDERVAN

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Nephilim

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To my loving wife, Peggy

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When men began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose. Then the LORD said, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years."

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.

—GENESIS 6:1-4

1

Alone in the dark, Art MacKenzie slouched on a torn sofa in his disheveled studio apartment. His bare feet rested on the single piece of furniture from his marriage he still possessed: a coffee table with one leg missing. He sipped slowly from a dirty glass and felt the Grand Marnier warm its way down his throat, adding to the fire that already burned in his belly.

He took another sip, this time a longer one, closed his eyes, and relived it all one more time.

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He runs frantically down a hospital corridor and slams into the door of the emergency room. It bursts open, crashing against the wall, the noise reverberating, startling doctors, patients, and nurses who look up at him, wide-eyed.

He steps into the room and stops. His eyes dart wildly from person to person, one hand pushing his hair off his fore-head as he tries to catch his breath. His chest heaves—to get here, he has run faster and harder than he has ever run in his life. He knows he must appear crazy, but he doesn't care.

He draws a deep breath, so deep it hurts, and bellows:
"Maggie!"

No one answers.

His heart hammers in his chest, feeling as if it will burst through the bone and muscle as it pounds.

"Mr. MacKenzie?" someone asks.

His muscles tense. "I'm MacKenzie," he blurts out.

A nurse rises from her chair behind the nurses' station and scurries to him. She grabs his hand and rushes him down a hallway.

And there is Maggie, his wife. She doesn't see him at first. Her hands and tear-stained face are pressed against the observation window, as if she were trying to melt through the glass.

Mac touches her shoulder; she jumps, and then they look at each other for an agonizing second, neither saying a word. Mac takes her hand, and together they watch a team of doctors and nurses working desperately on a young boy. Their son, Art junior.

The sheets that cover him are soaked with his blood. His short brownish hair is matted and wet with blood and perspiration. His hand hangs limply over the side of the table. He is fragile, helpless, alone, and defenseless against what has happened and is happening to him, and Mac wants only to rush in and hold him, to wash away the blood

from his fore-head, to see his hazel eyes and crooked smile.

He can imagine the scene, so comforting: he would simply walk into the operating room and tell the doctors that everything is all right, it's just a slight bruise, no need for all of this. Everyone can go home now.

A faint but alarming sound reaches Mac through the window, shattering his daydream. It comes from a monitor at the head of Art's gurney. Mac has seen the movies, the television shows—he doesn't need to be a doctor to know that his son's heart has flat-lined. The doctor who appears to head the team grabs a syringe held out to him by a nurse. He plunges the needle into Art's chest and pumps its liquid in.

He stares at the monitor and looks for a change. The heart doesn't respond.

Mac is tortured by "if onlys." If only Art had been sitting in a different seat in the family's van, there might have been less damage. If only the firemen had been able to free him from the twisted wreck more quickly. If only the rush-hour traffic hadn't been so heavy, delaying the ambulance on its way to the hospital. If only he hadn't lost so much blood.

So much blood . . .

"Come on . . . Come on!" The doctor shouts, pressing Art's chest with such power Mac is surprised his son doesn't fall through the table.

Maggie squeezes Mac's hand; when he looks at her, he sees that she is biting her lower lip with such force blood runs down her chin.

There's panic in the operating room now; the monitor's long, droning, monotone note seems to be terrifying every-one. There's cursing and yelling. Instruments are flung to the floor; people rush back and forth, undoubtedly carrying out logical, preassigned tasks, but to Mac it merely seems the pointless, random scurrying of panic, back and forth, from one end of the room to the other. Mac can't see his son now because of the crowd of milling, frantic doctors and nurses, ten people trying with all the skill they collectively possess to bring Mac's son back.

And still the note drones on.

O

MacKenzie took another sip of Grand Marnier. He was almost numb ... ready to pass out. The liquor worked like it always did, numbing the pain, the wound that festered in him.

Two years since little Art died. Two years, and the pain lingered.

He felt the room spin as he sipped again. Hovering on the verge of consciousness, he sometimes fell into a dreamlike state, then came out of it, back into a waking stupor, back to watching meaningless images on the TV

His line of consciousness blurred, and as he slipped away, he heard a quiet voice that he at first assumed came from the TV "I'll take your pain. I'll take your pain."

His last thought as he tumbled into the oblivion of sleep, only vaguely aware of the half-full glass falling from his hand, was to wonder how he could hear the TV when the sound was turned down.

Mac groaned, wrapping the pillow tighter over his head, fighting to stay in his alcohol-induced oblivion and to ignore that shrill, insistent sound that slowly registered in his mind as a ringing telephone. He moaned, rolling across the lumpy mattress that sagged like an old horse, testifying to the weight and girth of its previous owner.

The phone erupted again, and his head throbbed in unison.

"Already?" he mumbled into the sheets.

He extended an arm and groped for the phone on the cluttered nightstand by the bed. He lifted the receiver and tried to pull it toward him. It wouldn't budge. The cord was a tangled jumble of knots, coiled serpentlike around its base. Mac yanked—and the phone flew off the nightstand, bringing with it an unread paperback, a dish full of change, an empty bottle of Grand Marnier, an unopened letter from Maggie, and a past-due telephone bill.

"For crying out loud," he mumbled, and put the phone to his ear. "Hello."

"Mr. MacKenzie?" The voice of a female operator crackled through the tiny speaker.

"Yeah." He exhaled.

"Good morning, sir. It's 6:45 and this is your wake-up call. Have a nice day, sir."

MacKenzie sat up in bed and slowly rubbed the two-day growth of stubble on his face. How had he gotten into bed last night?

"Oh, my head," he moaned, and forced himself to get up. He stretched slowly, took a deep breath, kicked some dirty clothes out of his way, and shuffled toward the bathroom.

After his shower, he grabbed a large bath towel, still slightly damp from the day before, and dried himself. He wiped a clean spot on the fogged mirror with the palm of his hand and attended to a razor cut on his chin, dabbing at it with a piece of toilet paper. Then he left the bathroom in search of something clean to wear.

He stared at the eclectic variety of clothing in his closet, everything from three-piece suits to worn Levi's with seasoned holes at the knees. He found a pair of slacks that didn't look too bad and opted for those. The choice of a shirt, however, was more difficult. He finally settled on a blue pinstripe, which he matched with a bold electric-blue tie, secured with a flawless Windsor knot.

The phone rang. His desk, unlike the rest of the apartment, was fastidiously maintained. His computer and fax machine all sported dust covers. His files, papers, and resource material were neatly stacked and arranged, habits left over from better days. MacKenzie went to his desk and switched on the speakerphone.

"Glad to see you're up," the voice of Jim Cranston, his editor, echoed through the apartment.

"Yep. Thanks for the bone," Mac answered.

"Well, it's not much . . ." There was an awkward silence, then Jim continued, "But it'll pay the rent. And it is an assignment."

"You don't have to tap dance, Jim. Don't worry. I won't drink a drop until after I write the story," Mac said, with a touch of self-conscious sarcasm.

"Look, the deadline's tomorrow night. That new wing cost millions."

"I'll treat it seriously, don't worry," Mac said.

"Fax it in tomorrow?" Cranston sounded annoyed.

"Yep. Promise."

"Write it like the old Mac?"

"Yep."

"Okay. I'll look forward to seeing it."

"Yep."

Cranston hung up.

Mac switched off the speakerphone and glanced at his watch. About time to leave.

Looking around the apartment to find his keys, his eyes settled on the picture of his three children on the corner of his desk. An old picture—taken before the accident. Little Art would have been celebrating his twelfth birthday two months from now. Pain washed over Mac anew as he stared at the smiling face of his oldest boy.

He turned away and stared blankly out the large, wood-framed window in front of the desk. Then, in need of comfort, he turned and looked at the partially emptied case of Grand Marnier by the bed. *Not now*. He forced himself to look away. *I've got an article to write*. Feeling guilty and disloyal, he forced the painful memories from his mind.

He picked up his appointment book, grabbed his keys, and walked out of the apartment. He took every other step going down the two flights of stairs that led to the small vestibule. He opened the weathered stained-glass door—one of the pieces was about to fall out of its lead lining—and stood for a moment on the front steps. Patches of blue shone through the mist; the sun was beginning to burn away the fog along the coastal California town of Venice Beach.

He hurried to his jeep, parked in front of the large gable-roofed house, now converted into apartments.

At one time, Venice had been a prime resort. But the community had diminished as the inner city pressed in on it, leaving much of it to the addicts, gangs, and homeless. The current owner of the house Mac lived in had inherited it at his grandmother's death and had converted it, illegally, into four apartments.

Mac opened the jeep's door and slid onto the worn seat, adjusting a folded beach towel under him. He slid the key into the ignition, rolled his eyes toward heaven, and turned. The starter hesitated, clicked—and then kicked the engine alive.

"Thank you," he said, as he patted the dash reverently.

The drive to Westwood bogged down on the predictably crowded freeways. What should have taken a half hour turned into a fifty-minute, stop-and-start crawl. He switched on the radio; a catchy country tune came on. When the singer reached the chorus and twanged the lyrics, "I'll take the pain away, darlin'," Mac gave the radio an odd, surprised look. *Interesting coincidence*, he thought, remembering the phrase that had come unbidden into his alcohol-drugged consciousness the night before. He turned the dial to another station so he wouldn't have to hear the chorus again.

Once he got beyond a stalled car in the fast lane, traffic began to flow again. Finally Mac steered the jeep off the free-way and began inching his way along the congested streets to the hospital.

The construction of the hospital's new wing must not yet be completed, Mac realized as he pulled into the freshly paved parking lot. A large construction trailer bearing the faded sign of Viking Construction sat in the far corner of the lot, with a few pieces of machinery and equipment camped around it. A lone security guard sat on the metal steps

of the trailer, cigarette dangling from his mouth. He watched Mac suspiciously.

Mac parked between a Porsche and a shiny new BMW with the dealer sticker purposely left on the rear window

"Mental health business must be doing well," he smirked as he slid out of the jeep. The towel followed and fell to the ground. He picked it up and threw it back onto the worn seat, covering several springs that showed through the tattered upholstery.

The security guard shook his head and blew out a long stream of smoke.

Mac grinned back and started across the newly planted sod. He immediately regretted it; his shoes were soaked after two or three steps. He reached the main walkway, stomped his feet on the concrete, and looked up at the mirrored glass building that rose six stories above him.

At the main entrance, two oversized glass doors silently slid open to reveal large squares of rose-colored marble in the foyer. Mac walked to the reception desk, consciously putting on his "objective eyes," a phrase he used to describe a journalist's ability to size up situations, people, and events, to sift through what might appear obvious and find the extraordinary. Mac had spent years training himself to pick up on the little things of life, subtleties most people never noticed.

"Good morning. May I help you?" a well-dressed young black man said, as he smiled at Mac.

"I have an appointment with Ms. Kennedy. I'm Art MacKenzie from the *Times*."

"Just a moment. I'll ring her for you." The man picked up the phone and dialed.

As he did, Mac scrutinized him. Close-cropped hair, athletic, long bony fingers, small scar on the back of his left hand—maybe a graduate student from nearby UCLA.

"Good morning, Ms. Kennedy. This is Thomas at the front desk. A Mr. MacKenzie is here from the *Times*." He nodded his head as he listened, then put the receiver down. "She'll be right down. You can have a seat by the elevators if you'd like." He motioned to a cluster of comfortable looking, floral patterned couches.

A few minutes passed. Mac watched a steady stream of doctors and nurses vanish into one elevator or appear from another.

The elevator opened again; a woman exited and glanced around, her eyes quickly alighting on Mac. Late twenties, attractive, professional, self-assured, assertive—probably the positive personality winner of the year. Mac smirked.

"Mr. MacKenzie?" She smiled and leaned her head to one side. A lock of blonde hair bluntly cut to chin length fell in front of her face; she quickly brushed it behind her ear.

"Call me Mac."

"I'm Evelyn Kennedy. Welcome to the Westwood Center."

Mac followed her into the elevator. While they ascended, she apologized that the construction wasn't yet completed, rattling off financial figures and lamenting unforeseen delays. Even so, she assured him, the new wing was fully functional—the only work that remained was essentially cosmetic. The doors opened and he found himself on the fourth floor.

"The old wing is to our left, new wing to the right," she informed him as they stepped out and she guided him into the new section. "This is where we treat our outpatients. Twenty psychologists and psychiatrists practice here on a daily basis. There is also a fully staffed pharmacy on the floor directly below us," she informed him proudly.

Mac glanced at the polished floors and sterile acoustical ceiling tiles. Words like

antiseptic, institutional, and non-threatening crossed his mind.

They walked down the hall. Kennedy pointed overhead to the air-conditioning ducts, explaining with delight how the air circulated through a filtering system before it was pumped through the building. "No Legionnaires' disease here," she laughed.

Mac forced himself to focus on her endless stream of facts and figures.

"Fascinating," he replied insincerely as she finished informing him of the special acoustical properties of the over-head ceiling tiles. He cleared his throat. "Do you treat any serious cases here?"

"Well." She paused. "There are varying degrees of mental illness, of course. Some of the more serious cases we receive are sent on to other locations."

"How serious are they? Why are they treated somewhere else?"

"I'm glad you asked that." She brushed her hair back from her face. "If one of our doctors believes a particular case is serious enough that the patient should be institutionalized, then there are facilities better equipped to handle that patient's long-term needs. So we refer that patient to those institutions."

Mac stopped walking. "Wait. So you don't treat anything really *serious* here? Say, uh . . . multiple personality disorders?"

Kennedy thought a moment. "We could treat that, providing the patient was nonviolent."

"Is that some sort of criteria for being treated here—lacking a tendency toward violence?"

"That would be one."

"Oh." Mac stared at one of the ceiling tiles overhead, then said, "Well, surely some of your patients must occasionally get violent?" He was hoping for something more interesting for his article than the endless series of facts and figures.

Kennedy shifted her weight from one high-heeled shoe to the other and said offhandedly, "Occasionally, but it's rare."

Mac sensed her uneasiness. "How often is occasionally?" he pressed. "Is any of the staff ever injured? Do the patients hurt themselves?"

She folded her arms in front of her, smiled, and said, "Mr. MacKenzie, I'm afraid that I can't give out any information that specific about our patients. But let's say that we are pre-*pared* for that eventuality."

Mac pursed his lips and frowned. "So do you isolate the more violent patients?" he asked.

"We have designated areas for them, yes."

"Would you show me one of them?"

Kennedy's cheerful expression faded. She stared at Mac. "I was informed by your editor that you were here to do a story on the overall construction cost and the special features designed into this wing of the hospital."

"That's true." Mac shrugged in acknowledgment. "But I'm a reporter; reporters ask questions."

"Even so, I don't see the connection between that assignment and your questions about the behavioral patterns of our patients here," she said tersely.

Her reluctance piqued his interest, but he knew he'd get no information from a well-disciplined, hostile PR professional. He decided to back off. "I suppose you're right."

"So would you please limit your questions to the construction of the new wing?" she

asked, accenting her demand with a phony smile.

Mac nodded in acquiescence. "Is there anything unique about the, uh . . . water system?"

"I'm glad you asked," Kennedy replied and launched into a monologue, informing Mac how incoming water was filtered, bath water was recycled and used to irrigate the grounds, and so on—for another half hour.

Mac drifted in and out of her monologue, trying his best to nod at the appropriate times. He even took a couple of notes, just to make it appear that he was really listening.

She guided him into a large office where he was introduced to hospital administrators who boasted about how well the new wing of the hospital was functioning.

The rest of the tour was uneventful, and eventually Mac found himself back in the lobby. He watched with satisfaction as the elevator doors closed, grateful to see the last of Kennedy and her phony smile.

Mac walked quickly through the foyer, involuntarily shuddering as he stepped outside and felt the warmth of the sun hit him.

He walked briskly down the tree-lined walkway into the parking lot and climbed into his jeep. He slipped the key into the ignition, closed his eyes, and gave the key a turn.

Nothing.

"For crying out loud!" He exhaled angrily, and tried again. Still nothing.

He got out, struggled to find the hood latch, and popped the hood. He stared at the oil-grimed motor, chagrined that after all these years of driving he still didn't have a clue as to how it really worked. He cautiously reached in and jiggled the battery cable, encrusted around the battery terminal with a salt-like deposit of green crystals. He got back in and tried to start it again.

This time the engine responded with a clicking noise. Encouraged, he climbed out to try again and noticed the security guard walking toward him.

Mac ignored the man and stuck his head under the hood, trying to look like he knew what he was doing. He knew when the man reached him by the sudden smell of nicotine and unchanged clothes.

"Trouble?" the guard asked.

"Yeah . . . won't start. I think it's the cables." Mac nodded at the corrosion.

The guard's eyes narrowed shrewdly and he poked at the green pile of flakes with a long, grease-darkened fingernail. "There's your problem. No juice comin' from the battery." Before Mac could reply, the man produced a worn Swiss army knife from one of his pants pockets. "Handy little thing," he said, as he placed it on the radiator. He reached into his faded blue uniform shirt pocket, grabbed a pack of Marlboros, and gingerly pulled a cigarette out and placed it between his lips. He let it dangle there, unlit. He picked up the knife and selected one of the blades.

'All that green stuff keeps the juice from the starter," he said as he pulled the cable from the battery's post. He scraped away the flakes encrusted around the cable's clamp and forced it back onto the post. "Give it a try."

Mac climbed back into the jeep and turned the key. The engine fired up. The guard closed the hood, winked at Mac, and lit his cigarette.

"Thanks," Mac called out.

"Better get some new cables."

"It's on the top of my list," Mac lied.

"You got a relative in there?" The guard nodded in the direction of the new wing. Mac laughed, and shook his head.

"Good thing, too," the man said sagely.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't ever want to spend the night in that place."

"Why?" Mac turned off the motor, his curiosity piqued.

The guard took a couple of steps closer and put his foot up on the running board of the jeep. He inhaled for what seemed like a minute and then began talking as he slowly let the smoke out of his mouth.

"I have a lady friend that works there. Does the night shift, been there since the place opened up."

"Nurse?"

He shook his head. "Maintenance. Changes the sheets, cleans the toilets, tidies up the place."

"It's honest work," Mac replied, reaching for the ignition key.

The man's eyes narrowed and he leaned closer to Mac. "She gets up to the sixth floor."

"What's so important about the sixth floor?"

He took another long drag. Mac watched the ash glow red, crawling up the length of the cigarette.

"It's where they keep the real crazies. All sorts of weird stuff up there. Run by the military."

"The military?" Mac repeated. Kennedy hadn't said any-thing about the military. But then, she hadn't said much about anything at all. Mac looked at the guard skeptically. "What goes on up there?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

"I make my living by not believing what I hear."

"What's that mean?"

"I'm a reporter."

"Newspaper reporter?" The guard looked shocked.

Mac nodded. "I'm here to do a story for the *Times*."

"Sixth floor is where your story is. Bet they didn't let you anywheres near there." The guard chuckled knowingly.

"Right about that. But what's so special about the sixth floor?"

'Aliens.'

Mac's stomach flipped and his fingers gripped the steering wheel. A flood of unwanted memories flashed in his mind. "Aliens." He forced himself to say the word.

The man nodded, took one last drag, and flicked the butt onto the asphalt.

"UFO stuff. Ab-duc-tions," the man said, with an attitude, enjoying his role as an "insider."

'Abductions,' Mac heard himself repeat.

"The aliens kidnap 'em and do experiments, and after they're done experimenting the poor slob's wind up here." "What kind of experiments?"

The guard shrugged. "Mostly with the women. My friend I told you about? She says most of the women are so doped up they sleep most of the time. But she hears pieces of the same story out of each of 'em."

'And do the pieces make a picture?' Mac asked.

The man thought for a moment, then said slowly, "My friend's shift starts at seven. Be here just before that and see for yourself."

Mac looked at him. Was this guy telling the truth? *That could explain Kennedy's reluctance to discuss what kinds of treatment the hospital is involved in*, Mac thought. *On the other hand, maybe this guy's seen too many episodes of the X-Files.*

"What time did you say?" Mac asked.

"Be here before seven. We'll sneak you in. Make you up like a maintenance man."

"Okay. See you before seven." Mac fired the engine. "But this better be good." He backed the jeep up, nodded at the guard, and sped out of the parking lot. He glanced back once in his rearview mirror.

"Aliens," he scoffed.

But his mouth went dry.

3

Later that evening, Mac pulled his jeep into the hospital parking lot. The overhead lights cast dim pools of light on the asphalt. He parked and hurried toward the security guard's trailer.

Lights shone through the tiny windows, and he heard a man and a woman talking as he rapped on the battered aluminum trailer door.

"Just a minute," rasped a voice, which he recognized as the guard's.

The door opened, and a cloud of cigarette smoke billowed from the trailer.

"See you decided to check it out after all," the guard said. "Come on in." He motioned Mac forward.

Mac climbed the steps and entered a wreck in progress. Dishes were piled in the sink; stacks of newspapers and magazines littered the floor. ATV sat precariously on a table with a broken leg; a coat hanger substituted for its antenna. Layers of smoke permeated every nook and cranny of the cramped quarters. *My place is a palace compared to this*, Mac thought.

At the rear, an emaciated woman sat on an unmade double bed in a wrinkled white uniform. One skinny leg clothed in support hose dangled over her other knee. Her stringy hair, piled loosely on top of her head, was held in place with bobby pins. She looked at Mac, then exhaled a stream of smoke that slowly added itself to the growing haze. With long, bony fingers, she flicked an ash into an overflowing ashtray; her ashes slid off and fell to the floor.

"This him?" she asked.

The guard nodded.

She looked at Mac and asked, "You the reporter Harry told me about?"

Mac opened his mouth to reply and immediately choked on the smoke; he erupted in a fit of coughing, then finally cleared his throat and said, "The very same. And you are . . . ?"

"Linda," she said. "Harry says you want to go to the sixth floor." She glanced at the guard who leaned against the shower stall.

"I do, if what Harry tells me is true."

"Well, it's off-limits. Military people run it. You need special clearance." She paused, then added, "And what Harry here told you's true all right." She uncrossed her legs and rested her elbows on her knees. "I oughta know, I'm up there every night. Least the nights I'm working my shift. What you gonna write about, anyway?"

Mac leaned against the tiny Formica counter that was part of the trailer's kitchen. "It depends on what I find out. There may be nothing at all to write about," he said flatly.

"There's plenty to write about, all right. Harry told you about the ... the aliens then?"

"He mentioned them. So what? Crazy people make up crazy stories. That's why they're here, isn't it?" Mac challenged.

Linda glanced skeptically at Harry, then stubbed her cigarette out.

"Look, Mister. I clean up there, make the beds, keep everything tidy and hospital-like.

So I see everything. And I tell you, there's something going on in that place. Why else they have them cameras everywhere?"

"Cameras?"

"You come up there with me and see for yourself."

"Linda got you a uniform to wear," Harry interjected.

"I could lose my job for this, if they ever found out," she grumbled.

"Don't worry," Mac said. "I wouldn't be much of a journalist if I didn't protect my sources. Nobody has to find out anything."

"Put 'em on," Harry said, and handed Mac a rolled bundle of white clothes. "You can change here." He opened the shower stall door.

After struggling for several minutes, his body banging against the fiberglass walls of the tiny stall, Mac finally succeeded in putting the uniform on. He emerged from the stall.

"Pants are too small for him," Harry said, pointing to the bottom hem of Mac's pants, which fell just short of his ankles.

"That don't matter. Nobody cares whether his pants are too short, just as long as he's got some on," Linda laughed, reminding Mac of the sound of a crow. "You just follow me on my rounds and do as I tell you. This time of night is slow, and most of them that's up there's all doped out anyway."

That didn't sound hopeful. "Will any of the patients be coherent enough to talk to me, then?"

Linda thought for a moment, then replied, "There's one woman, kinda new, came in early this week. She's a wild one. They had to restrain her the first couple of nights 'cause she was yellin', screamin', makin' a racket, disturbin' all the other patients. But they settled her down, all right. I was cleanin' her room when the nurse come in to give her some pills. I saw her put those pills into her mouth and pretend to swallow. But after the nurse left she spit 'em out and put 'em under her mattress."

"What's wrong with her?" Mac asked.

"Same as the others. Says she was abducted by the aliens. But she's more afraid of the people who locked her up. We'll work our way to her room and you can see for yourself."

Mac nodded.

Linda rose from the bed. "Just stay close by me."

"Promise," Mac said.

She looked at Harry and said, "I could lose my job over this."

Harry shrugged. "Nothin' gonna happen, so stop your worryin'."

Linda mumbled something and left the trailer; Mac followed. They walked across the parking lot, down the driveway to the truck dock at the rear of the hospital, and entered through the service garage.

Linda punched in and set her time card back in the plastic rack.

"*Hola*, Linda," a Latino woman called out from across the large room.

Linda squinted as she tried to identify the person, then replied, "Hey, Theresa. How'd your shift go?"

"Just like always," the woman answered. "You breaking in a new man?"

Linda nodded toward Mac. "Yeah. Gonna show him the ins and outs of keepin' the place tidy and all." The crow-cackle laugh erupted from her throat again.

Theresa nodded and went back to work stacking sheets and supplies on her cart.

Mac kept his head turned down and away from Theresa as he followed Linda across the gray-painted concrete floor. She got her cart. "Filled it at the end of my shift last night, so's I don't have to start work by workin'." She winked at Mac and pushed the cart past a stack of boxes with medical markings stamped on the side, then meandered slowly toward the service elevator at the end of the room.

When they reached the elevator, Linda produced a ring of keys. She selected one and slipped it into the lock at the side of the closed elevator doors. She put them back into her pocket, folded her arms, and sighed as they waited for the elevator.

"What do you want me to do?" Mac asked, wondering whether he was expected to be more than a spectator tonight.

"Nothin', just tag behind me and hand me what I ask for."

The elevator doors opened. Linda pushed the cart inside and hit the number five button on the control panel.

The doors closed and the elevator began its ascent.

"I thought we were going to the sixth floor," Mac said.

"I got to make my rounds on the fifth first."

"How long is that going to take?"

"Depends on how messy the patients is."

Mac shook his head. This could take all night. And in the end he might have nothing to show for it.

For the next hour and a half, Mac obediently followed Linda around the fifth floor like a well-trained dog, providing a never-ending supply of towels, sheets, cleansers, and disinfectant—and wondering why he had ever decided to be there at all.

"Last one, then up to the sixth," Linda informed him as she went into another room.

Mac perked up, and actually began to respond faster in the hope of expediting his arrival at the sixth floor.

"Hey, you're gettin' the hang of this," Linda praised him genuinely.

"Thanks," Mac mumbled, and handed her the disinfectant, feeling more like a maid than a reporter.

They finished cleaning the last room. Mac pushed the cart to the elevator.

"Special key," Linda stated proudly, holding up a red key. "Lets me get to the sixth floor."

"Why you?" Mac asked. "How come you have the run of the place?"

"Somebody gotta clean up."

Mac pushed the cart into the elevator and they rode up. When the doors opened on the sixth floor, Mac whispered, "Why is the lighting different?"

Linda shrugged. "Beats me."

The entire corridor was lit with dull amber, in contrast to the bright, white, fluorescent glow on the floors below.

"This way." Linda jerked her head and walked down the corridor.

The first room they came to was empty. So was the next. The occupant of the third room was bound to her bed at the wrists with cloth straps. She lay on her back, openmouthed, breathing deeply. There was a fresh scar at her temple.

My God—she's had a lobotomy, Mac realized, and his stomach flipped. He wasn't yet ready to buy into Linda's story that this floor represented some kind of military covert op, but whatever was happening here, it didn't seem to match up with what the glib Ms.

Kennedy had told him.

Linda went into the bathroom and washed down the toilet and the sink.

"Get the bed pan, will you?" she called.

"What?" Mac asked, surprised. "I thought only nurses did that."

"Yeah, the nurses help the patients use 'em. But then they leave 'em for me to clean up." She pointed and said, "It's by the bed."

Mac found it and carried it into the bathroom.

"She's not the one I was tellin' you about," Linda whispered as she took it from him and emptied its contents into the toilet. "The one you want's in the next room."

Back in the hallway, Linda locked the wire-reinforced glass door behind her and pointed to the camera attached to the ceiling a few feet above the door. "They got them things everywhere," she whispered. "They're always watchin'. But not so much at night."

Mac glanced at the camera and pushed the cart to the next room. When Linda unlocked the door and opened it, Mac saw a woman who appeared to be in her early thirties standing listlessly by the barred window, gazing out at the city below her. Even though she must have heard them come into her room, she remained at the window and gave no hint that she knew they were there.

"Is this her?" Mac whispered.

Linda wiped her nose on her sleeve "You got till the bathroom's clean."

Mac nodded.

The patient at the window turned and looked at him. Mac felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up as he felt the intensity of her gaze. She crossed her arms in front of her and grabbed her hospital smock with both hands as she began to walk slowly toward him.

As she approached, Mac's journalist's eye took in her disheveled hair, the dark rings around her eyes, the nervous twitch at the corner of her mouth, her chewed fingernails.

She stopped a few feet away and stared at him with troubled, unblinking eyes.

Mac reached into his shirt pocket and clicked his tape recorder on.

"You're not one of them, are you?" she asked. Her voice was a surprise, for although it sounded pained, there was a natural melody to it that contrasted sharply with her appearance.

Mac hesitated, then replied, "I'm not sure what you mean."

"You don't work here."

"Why do you say—"

"Because you're not helping the cleaning woman. If you worked here, you'd be helping her. Did my husband send you to spy on me?"

"No."

"Why are you here then?"

Mac thought for a moment, then answered truthfully. "I'm a reporter."

Her eyes sparked with sudden interest. "Will you listen to me—please?" She glanced at the camera in the corner of the ceiling. "Will you help me get out of here?"

As she spoke, she became increasingly emotionally agitated, and Mac reminded himself that he was dealing with a mental patient. "Sure," he said reassuringly, and tried to smile.

"Don't humor me," she said. "I'm not crazy."

"I'm sorry. I just don't know—"

"They took my baby." Tears appeared in the woman's eyes. "That's why I'm in here."

Mac frowned and waited for her to continue.

"They took my baby from me. They take whatever they want. They're horrible."

"Who's horrible?"

The woman shook her head. "What's the use? You won't believe me. You're just like my husband and everyone else. You think I'm making it up. Well, I'm *not!*" she shouted.

Linda appeared at the bathroom door, shaking her head and holding a finger to her lips.

"It's all right," Mac told her. "We're okay." He turned back to the patient and replied softly, "I don't think you're making it up."

"You don't?" She wiped the tears from her eyes, took a step closer, and began again, "They're not human. They come from somewhere else, somewhere far away . . ." Her voice dwindled and her eyes focused somewhere outside the room. "They come at night. Always at night. With the darkness. They come to my room and take me. My husband, he's always asleep, and I cry out to him but he doesn't hear, and they carry me out of my house." Her words came faster, in a rush. "I try to struggle but I can't move!" She started to sob again.

What have I gotten myself into? Mac wondered, feeling the goosebumps rising on his arms.

"I lie on a table and they do something to me, something sexual, and I can't do anything about it. They put something inside me and it hurts and I'm alone and afraid, so afraid ..." Her voice trailed off, and she seemed to withdraw inside her-self.

I'm losing her, Mac thought. "Who took you?" he prompted gently.

"They're not from here."

"Where are they from?"

"Outer space," she whispered.

Well, there it was. Mac had known what he was likely to hear tonight, but that didn't lessen the hollow fear in the pit of his stomach when he actually heard the words. *Here we go again.*

"My husband and I were trying to have a baby, and when I got pregnant we were happy. We were actually *happy*. That's because they do something with your memory so you don't remember, you think everything is normal. Then the next thing I know I'm on the bathroom floor and it's night and I'm bleeding and my ... my . . ." She bit down hard on her lower lip, and as the blood trickled down her chin Mac felt a gut-kick memory of another night, a trickle of blood down Maggie's chin...

Another baby taken away . . .

"And my baby's gone!" She stared through Mac for a moment, and Mac found himself nodding, understanding perfectly.

"The doctor says I did something to the baby, that I caused a miscarriage and that they don't know what I did with the baby. 'Where's the baby?' they say, over and over, and I don't know, don't remember anything, and they search the house but they don't find anything and then when I'm in bed, suddenly I remember what happened—they came and took my baby from me." She stopped and wiped the trickle of blood from her chin with her wrist. "I tried to make them stop, I screamed at them, but it doesn't do any good, they can do whatever they want and you can't stop them. I could feel them down there, taking the baby out of me, and then they hold it up and show it to me . . . they show it to me . . ." Trembling, she wrapped her arms around herself.

He wanted to comfort her, wanted to put his arms around her and hold her close, but he couldn't move. He was frozen, standing there feeling a mixture of compassion, fear, and denial.

"They take the baby," she continued in a whisper, "and they show it to me. And I can't believe it—it's not human." She looked at Mac with the most haunted expression he had ever seen in another human being. "And when I look at them, I realize that they are enjoying it—showing me that it isn't . . . isn't ..."

Mac cleared his throat and gently asked, "Where did they take your baby?"

Still holding herself, she moved her shoulders from side to side, rocking.

"I don't know. Up there ..."

"What did they look like?" Mac asked. "These—" He had to force himself to finish his thought. "These beings from outer space?"

The woman closed her eyes, shook her head, and continued to rock back and forth.

"We got to get going," Linda called from the bathroom door.

"What?" Mac answered.

"We gotta leave now," Linda said, and she pushed the cart toward the door.

Mac walked slowly backward toward the door, not taking his eyes off the woman, mentally photographing every detail.

A bony hand pulled at the shoulder of his borrowed smock. "Come *on*," Linda insisted. She pulled him out of the room and quickly shut the door. "Satisfied?" she asked with a look of triumph as she turned her key in the lock.

Mac reached into his pocket and clicked off the tape recorder. He rubbed the back of his neck and nodded slowly. Linda grinned. "I told you."

"It doesn't mean she's telling the truth," Mac whispered as they went to the next room.

"What?"

"She might just be crazy. That is, after all, what this place is in business for." He gestured toward the room they had just left.

"Well, that don't explain the others, does it? And why does the *military* have them locked up here?"

Mac shrugged. "There's no way to corroborate her story."

Linda stopped pushing her cart and looked squarely into Mac's eyes. "I spend a lot of time around crazy people, and these women who seen the aliens is different. And sane people don't tell stories like she did if they ain't true. Why would they? Look where it's gotten her."

Mac was about to answer when footsteps sounded in the corridor.

Linda's eyes opened wider, startled. "Security making their rounds. Get in here." She hustled into the next room. "Take this and scrub the toilet in there." She handed him a sponge and some spray disinfectant.

Mac took them and hurried into the bathroom. He knelt down next to the toilet and began to scrub vigorously. As the footsteps grew louder, Mac felt his heart beating faster. He was about to get busted. By the military, no less. And was it worth it? How could he possibly get a story out of what he'd just heard?

"Hi, Linda," a tenor voice echoed in the hall.

"Hi, Carl. Just about wrapped up, this is the last room," she answered.

"Okay, you know the way out," the man chuckled. The footsteps continued down the corridor. Mac stood quietly and listened to them fade.

"It's all right, he's gone," Linda whispered. "Let's get you out of here."

"I'm all for that," he said.

They wheeled the cart quickly down the corridor and boarded the elevator. When the elevator doors opened after their descent, Mac found himself back in the service area of the hospital.

"You can find your way back up to the trailer," she said when she had taken him back to the door to the outside. "I still got work to do. You gonna write the story?"

"We'll see. I have to listen to the tape again, see what's there."

She nodded then asked, "You won't use me and Harry's name, will you? I could lose my job."

"Promise," Mac answered. "Thanks for getting me up there." He stuck out his hand.

Linda shook it. "You better get goin'."

Fifteen minutes later, in his own clothes again, Mac climbed into his jeep and looked at the watch he had hung from the rearview mirror. Close to midnight. He fired up the jeep and sped out of the parking lot, making the tires chirp as he shifted into second gear.

4

Slouching at his desk, Mac stared at the blank screen of his computer monitor. The glow emanating from it—along with the always-on television—were the only light sources in the room.

Next to him lay a notepad with a dozen scribbled ideas crossed out. He glanced at his watch: two-thirty in the morning. Still plenty of time before he had to fax the story about the Westwood Medical Center to Cranston.

He looked at the half-empty case of Grand Marnier next to the bed. *My reward when I'm finished*, he thought, tapping a pencil on the edge of his blotter.

Restlessly, he changed positions in his chair. If he stuck strictly to his assignment, all he would have is a bunch of boring figures regurgitated by Kennedy and the rest of the bean counters.

Then, as they had dozens of times that night already, his eyes strayed to the small tape recorder sitting next to the monitor. What he really wanted to write about was in there.

He didn't work at the *Times* anymore. What was the worst that could happen? The story wouldn't go to ink. And if it didn't, he wouldn't get paid. And he needed the money.

He put the pencil in his mouth and bit down on it.

His eyes drifted toward the corner of the desk where the picture of his children rested. He picked it up and studied their faces. Then, turning the frame over, he unhooked the plastic fasteners that held the back on and removed two photos stashed there.

The first was black-and-white and grainy, taken when Mac was eight years old. His father and mother stood protectively on either side of him. In the background was the tiny brick church they had attended in New Mexico. He turned away and stared at the floor near his bed, lost in thought.

Then he shook his head, as if to clear it, and looked back at the youthful face of his father, frozen in time. "You were crazy," he said out loud, and flipped the photo onto the desk-top.

He hesitated a moment, looking at the ceiling, and then forced himself to look at the second photo. It showed a much older Mac, an adult, with three children and his wife, Maggie, standing under the spreading canopy of an ancient, gnarled California oak. Behind them stretched Maggie's parents' vine-yards in Paso Robles. Beams of sunlight streamed through the foliage and surrounded the family, creating a magical weave of light and shadow. In the distance, trellised rows of grapes ripened in the sun.

Different days. A different life.

He put the photo with his wife and kids back into the frame but kept the one of his parents out, leaned it against the tape player, and clicked the play button.

He closed his eyes and listened to the recording he'd made at the hospital, envisioning in detail the woman's haunted features as her chilling account of alien abduction and impregnation crackled over the small speaker.

You're all crazy, the bunch of you, he thought, and that was what he really wanted to

believe. It would be such a relief to dismiss the woman as just another wacko, fringe-dwelling, conspiracy-theorizing nutcase.

He opened his eyes and stared again at the picture leaning against the recorder, feeling rising anger and resentment even all these years after the man's death. He'd been fairly successful in recent years in putting his father—and his father's beliefs—out of his mind, or at least buried so far within him that they never came to the surface. Talking to that woman tonight had brought it all screaming back.

But isn't that the real reason I went back to the hospital and subjected myself to Linda and the inside of a toilet bowl—to somehow come to terms with the past and overcome it?

The voice on the tape recorder caught his attention: "They show it to me. And I can't believe it—it's not human ..."

He shivered.

Did he want to spend the rest of his life in fear, avoiding things, hiding? Wasn't it time to face this thing?

He grabbed his notepad and scribbled a title: "The Abduction Phenomenon: Fact or Fiction?"

He stared at it. There were possibilities here.

He jotted down a couple of ideas, refined those and added a few more, liking what he saw.

He chuckled grimly. None of this had anything to do with his assignment. Worse, it hinted at a possible secret floor in the newly constructed wing of the Westwood Medical Center, operated by the military. 'And especially designed to deal with UFO abductees, at that! Cranston's going to have a cow. Maybe two!' he said to himself, laughing.

He looked one last time at the rough outline, then tore that sheet off and rearranged the ideas on a clean sheet. He pinned it with a paper clip to the lamp next to his monitor and began to peck away at his keyboard. He hunched over his work, totally absorbed, for over an hour, and knew that he had the beginning of a good story. Half an hour later he finished the second draft and read it.

Mac straightened in his chair and arched his back, making the bones in his spine crack. He grinned as he read the story one last time, then opened his fax software and selected Cranston's number. *Why do I do things like this?* he asked him-self, shaking his head. *Bucking the system, playing the wild card—Cranston's going to be ticked.*

But besides that internal warning, Mac also felt a degree of satisfaction.

Or was it just that he was being deliberately spiteful? Into his awareness swam another thought he'd been trying to sup-press for two days, since Mac first heard from a friend that Cranston was seeing his ex-wife. Was there something going on there? Had Jim been biding his time, waiting for Mac and Maggie to split up so that he could move in on her?

Mac shook off the thought. He didn't even know if it was true. What was more interesting was that Cranston happened to be on the board of directors at the Westwood Medical Center. Of course that didn't mean he was implicated in anything. In fact, Mac's article didn't directly accuse anyone of anything.

Mac double-clicked Cranston's number and waited for the linkup, smiling as the machines talked to each other.

When the transmission was complete, Mac slipped the dust cover back over his computer, turned off the ringer to his phone, and bounded over to the case of Grand

Marnier to select a bottle. He slipped off his tennis shoes and sank onto the worn, lumpy couch, staring at the soundless screen. An old John Wayne movie was on. He broke the seal around the neck of the bottle and gently eased the cork out. He looked around for a glass. The one he'd used the night before was on the floor a few feet away. But getting up would be too much effort. He tipped the bottle back and let the first taste of the liquor swirl around in his mouth before it trickled down his throat. He stared at the silent action on the television. He sipped again, a little longer this time. He felt his body relax into the couch and adjusted a pillow against the small of his back to get comfortable. Another hit from the bottle, and he began to feel lightheaded. The thoughts he had held at bay rushed in on him:

My dead father.

My dead son.

My dead marriage.

The crazy woman at the hospital who might as well be dead.

Linda's bony hand pulling me out of the room ... rescuing me?

He guzzled from the bottle, spilling some of it on his shirt. His eyes rolled in his head, and he felt the bottle slide out of his hand—and with it, the thoughts plaguing him began to slip mercifully away . . .

O

At his desk early the next morning, Jim Cranston tried his best not to yell into the receiver. It was bad enough that his paper was involved in a libel suit. Now it was starting to look as if they might actually lose. In the middle of trying to explain to one of the paper's lawyers why losing wasn't an option, he was interrupted midsentence by a knock at his door. He squeezed the worn golf ball in his hand, threw it a couple of feet in the air, and yelled, "Come in!" Then he caught the golf ball and finished his sentence to the attorney.

An attractive woman entered and walked briskly toward his desk. He looked her over appreciatively and made a mental note: *Ask this woman to lunch.* Meanwhile, he toyed with his perfectly clipped white mustache.

She stopped a few feet from his desk and held up some kind of manuscript, pointing at it with her free hand. Cranston squinted at it—which reminded him he needed to get his eyes checked—then shrugged. It was Art MacKenzie's piece. "What?" he blared into the telephone receiver. Had that lawyer just said what Cranston thought he'd said? He waved her away.

The woman shook her head adamantly and pointed again to the article.

"That's impossible and you know it!" Cranston yelled into the phone. "Hold on a second, will you?" He exhaled wearily and loosened his tie.

Seeing her opportunity, the woman quickly said, "You need to read this."

"What?" Cranston said absently, taking a quick hit from the glass bottle of imported water sitting on his desk. "Just handle it, Rita. I'm tied up. Is it written well?"

"It's not *how* it's written. It's *what* is written." She took a step closer, holding the article out to him.

But Cranston had already retreated into his telephone conversation again. "We're not paying that amount! No way. *No way!*" he yelled into the receiver.

Rita shook the article to get his attention, but Cranston waved his hand in dismissal and swiveled his chair so that his back was to her.

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