

# **RIVER OF FEAR**

## **BOOK TWO**

### **PURSUIT**

By

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January 2004

Lober splashed ice cold water on his face in an attempt to clear the fog from his brain, and the sleepiness from his eyes, but it was a futile attempt. He did not get much sleep during the night, and the same thing happened the night before. Lober was the leader of a renegade group of scientists, which had named themselves, SASS (Scientists Against Scientific Suppression), and they had set up a temporary base of operations in a rural town known as Baldwin Plantation in the Northwest Mountains of Maine. The group had planned to conduct numerous experiments on specimens that had already been identified in that area, and performing those procedures on location would save them a significant amount of time. Everything had been proceeding according to plan until Rob Day walked into an area where they were just getting ready to abduct a hawk, and he witnessed the entire event, from beginning to end.

Mr. Day owned a vacation home that was located less than one half mile from the temporary laboratory. The fact that he had witnessed an abduction in progress did not upset a single scientist in the group. They knew that if he chose to report what he had seen, he would only join the ranks of the publicly ridiculed. The fact of the matter was, even when he showed up in the nick of time to witness several other abductions, and it became obvious that his presence was not a coincidence, they still did not feel that he was a threat. But their cocky mindset quickly changed when his interference spoiled several of their attempts to capture an intended target.

Rob Day's interventions had set them back, and that WAS a problem. Several of the SASS members were getting nervous about the delays, and called an impromptu meeting to discuss their options. They were fighting an unforgivable deadline, and all their work could go up in smoke if it was not completed on schedule. It was *paramount* that they find a way to make up for lost time.

Fate, which Lober's colleagues had deemed it to be, recently offered them a short window of opportunity to quickly gather a large number of specimens that fit their criteria, and that in and of itself would put their research goals years ahead of schedule. In fact, this project was going to take 38 days to complete, when normally a project of this magnitude would take around three to four years. However, unlike his colleagues, Lober thought that he was fulfilling a destiny, and that the gods had handed this opportunity to *him* on a silver platter.

The meeting lasted for more than two hours, and when all was said and done, the group unanimously decided that they needed to know more about Rob Day before making any decisions. They had never encountered persistent interference from any Earth person before. In fact, whenever an unsuspecting individual had encountered their presence, it appeared like they could not vacate the area fast enough. However, that was not the case with Mr. Day, and SASS members wanted to know what made him so different.

Lober was the Chairman of SASS, and he made the executive decision that he would personally conduct the investigation, and he had no idea how fateful that decision would be.

Unbeknownst to the group, the Chairman had his own personal agenda, and while the temporary laboratory in Baldwin Plantation was in the early planning stages, he manipulated each and every member in such a way as to make sure that the over all mission complimented every single one of his objectives.

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Lober placed his hands on each side of the bathroom sink and leaned toward the mirror to get a closer look at his eyes, especially the puffiness underneath. However, the moment that he saw how blood shot they were he began to tighten his grip on the sides, and all the color was forced from the tips of his fingers. Besides the setbacks, Rob and Eileen Day, and Jack and Nancy King had collectively added to his problems. Scanning their genetics, health status and DNA turned out to be an extremely difficult task. In fact much more so than any other subject that he and his colleagues had ever targeted before. Somehow each one of them had always caused the scan to end well before all the required information was recorded. But the word 'quit' wasn't part of Lober's vocabulary, and eventually his determination paid off. His trusted friend and colleague, Guarl, transferred all the data into their computer memory banks, and created a macro that would allow him to use those statistics at a moments notice.

Lober slowly straightened up as he studied his reflection in the mirror, and the second that he was erect his face turned beet red. Suddenly he blurted out, "All this *crap* will come to an end today!"

Little by little, as the deep red color drained from his face a sinister smile began to fill the void. Before leaving his office last night he had made up his mind that the time had come to abduct the two females, but he needed some pertinent information before he could implement a plan. He ordered the night crew to monitor the Days and Kings until they could determine when the women would be left alone.

His mind changed gears as he watched his smile develop into a sneer. When it came down to the bare facts, these two women perfectly conformed to everything he wanted to accomplish in this mission, and as he thought about the *special* plans that he had for Eileen, his grin turned sinister. These two women were *his* subjects, and he was going to make it very clear that until he deemed otherwise, no one was to have any contact with them whatsoever, and only he would be privy to their treatment and files.

\* \* \*

Lober locked the door to his quarters, which were seven floors below the SASS Transport Center, and turned to his left to head down a stark white hallway toward the elevators. As he turned the corner to the waiting area, he saw one of his colleagues stepping into the lift and yelled to get his attention, but the man never heard him. The never ending stress over the past few days had worn Lober's patience to the breaking point, and when he reached the row of satin finished stainless steel doors he slammed the illuminated call button with all his might. After only a few seconds he hit the button several more times, even though he was fully aware that the exercise couldn't possibly get his transportation there any quicker. He could hear his heart pounding in his head, which meant that his blood pressure was hitting the top of the scale, and that was not a good sign. His doctor had warned him long ago that he was a time bomb waiting to explode, and cautioned him about his volatile behavior. Lober was aware of the fact that he needed to quickly get his mind focused on something pleasurable to bring his stress level down, otherwise there could be severe consequences. He began pacing back and forth in front of the elevators, and in just a matter of moments his mind settled on the perfect antidote. His pace slowed dramatically as he visualized Eileen Day sitting on the couch in his private study, which was conveniently connected to his personal laboratory. He could feel his agitated state begin to melt away, and soon he felt a sensation in his loins unlike anything he had ever known before. Lober had become enamored with Eileen ... a feeling that was totally alien to him. He had always been so wrapped up in his work that women were never part of his life, until now....

The elevator doors slid open, snapping him out of his self imposed hypnotic state, and he was relieved to see that the lift was unoccupied ... especially since he didn't think that he'd be able to easily conceal the huge bulge in his pants.

\* \* \*

The elevator came to an abrupt stop, something that Lober had constantly complained about to no avail. When the doors opened to expose the control room, a flood of light poured into the dimly lit compartment where he was standing. Stacks of electrical equipment hugged each of the eight walls in the octagon shaped room, and multiple colored lights were flashing everywhere. The brief fantasy that he had while waiting for the elevator still had him in a semi euphoric state, and when he stepped into the Transport Control room he had a genuine smile on his face ... something that was seldom seen by his colleagues.

Lober spotted Guarl across the room sitting in his cubicle, and he seemed to be staring at his monitor. The Chairman started to make his way toward him, and as he nonchalantly strolled across the floor, he tried to recall just how long he and his colleagues had been on this planet. Then talking out loud to himself, he said, "Ah yes, it will be eleven years in six days. My, how time *does* fly when you're having fun!"

\* \* \*

Pursuant to Lober's orders the night before, Guarl had taken the responsibility to personally monitor the Day's and King's conversations, and he was beaming with pride as the Chairman approached him. Lober paused in mid stride, looked Guarl square in the face, and before he took his next step he knew that his colleague had struck pay dirt. Lober rarely showed jubilant emotion, but it came through loud and clear as he said, "So tell me Guarl, when are the women going to be alone?!"

Guarl paused a few seconds to resolve how he should answer his boss, and then said, "Rob and Jack made a decision to use electronic surveillance equipment to capture and record specific data on our transport gate, and they developed a plan that they believe will work."

Lober looked closely at Guarl as he said, "And do you think their plan will succeed?"

"Only if we decide to let it happen. I recorded their conversation, and I think it would be beneficial for you to listen to it."

Lober nodded his agreement and Guarl handed him a headset so he could listen to the recording in private. Fifteen minutes later he set the earphones on Guarl's desk, and then said, "They should be out on the snowmobile trails most of the day. It's perfect! We don't have to rush! We can pick and choose the precise moment that we want to snatch their wives."

Lober was quiet for the better part of a minute, and then said, "There's just one loose end that we've got to take care of."

A frown formed on Guarl's face as he said, "I don't understand."

Lober's head was gently shaking up and down, obviously deep in thought as he said, "Didn't you pick up on the fact that Mr. Day asked Len Purdy and his friends to stay with Eileen and Nancy while he and Jack were out on the trails?"

It was time for one-upmanship, and Guarl carefully chose his words. The last thing that he wanted to do was to set Lober off on a temper tantrum. He looked his longtime friend in the eye and said, "You have taught me over the years to take all potential scenarios into consideration when formulating a plan, much like playing the game of chess ... am I right?"

Lober instinctively knew that he was being set up for something, but his mind could not react fast enough to fill the silence between them. He mentally blamed his failure on the fact that he was extremely tired and said, "Yes ... you *are* right. So what is it that you're trying to tell me?"

Relieved that he had succeeded in avoiding an unpleasant scene, Guarl said, "I transported two of our colleagues to the camp where Mr. Purdy, and his two friends, Bubba and Stormin are staying, and I had them sabotage two of the snowmobiles. They'll break down somewhere between the Day's camp and theirs, in the middle of nowhere. There's no way that they'll get to the Days place ... not today anyhow."

Lober looked his friend in the eye as he gave him a pat on the shoulder, and that act of genuine thanks and friendship surprised both of them. Guarl felt a temporary pang of guilt as an involuntary thought jumped into his head, "I think he's totally lost his mind!"

\* \* \*

Lober strolled aimlessly around the transport center as he mentally worked through every detail of the abduction procedure. Eileen Day and Nancy King had proven themselves to be very resourceful in the past, but their elusive talent was not of a concern to him today. He

was certain that surprise was on his side. All of the information that had been gathered on the women was entered into their database and merged into a new search and seize program that Guarl had recently designed. Lober ran each step of the plan through his mind time and again, and as far as he was concerned, it was bullet proof. The program had been tested many times over the past few days in the Greenough Pond area, which was located just outside of Errol, New Hampshire, and that fix had not been chosen by accident. SASS was in the process of building a new temporary laboratory there, and each seizure went off flawlessly. The beauty of the new procedure was the fact that they could instantly lock onto, and abduct the intended subject within seconds. It was a major improvement, especially when they took into consideration the fact that the previous operation, from beginning to end had taken the better part of a minute. This time the warning signs would be brief, and these capable women wouldn't have a *chance* to defend themselves.

The abduction process was not the only procedure that had been revamped. Lober was still seething over the escape of several subjects that they had been holding in captivity. Sometimes a protocol included several procedures that needed to be implemented over a period of time, normally two to ten days. Experience had taught them that it was much easier and expeditious to hold a subject in captivity for the duration of an experiment. It had been thirty-six hours since these human lab rats had escaped, and he could not understand why they had not been located yet. It was another setback that he had to deal with, but he considered it to be minor in comparison to the headache caused by Rob Day and Jack King.

\* \* \*

Guarl stood up to get Lober's attention, and as soon as he felt his boss' eyes lock onto his, he gave him a nod to let him know that they were ready to begin. Natsen's workstation was right next to Guarl's, and Lober could see the man's fingers dancing over the keyboard as he covered the short distance to the programmer's desk. Natsen was so involved in his work that he was somewhat surprised when he heard the Chairman's voice. A smile enveloped his face as he turned around to greet his superior. "Hello my friend, everything is set. I just entered the codes to establish a command sequence to locate the women, and Yarnif is almost finished adjusting the transmitters. Everything will be ready momentarily, and when the sensors pin point where Nancy King and Eileen Day are, we can take them at your command."

An evil sneer that co-workers had come to accept as being Lober's personal trademark, flashed onto his face as he began to wring his hands together in anticipation of the event. "Perfect! Automate and activate the systems - *now!*"

Yarnif hit the enter key and their heads swung in unison toward the wall closest to them. Almost instantly an image of the women standing near an old farmhouse appeared on the huge screen. But there was an unexpected problem. There was another person in the abduction zone with them, and there was no way to eliminate that individual from the process. Just as the final stages of the procedure began to kick in, Lober recognized the intruder and blurted out, "Thad Cook! Damn!"

\* \* \*

Without saying thank you, or bidding his colleagues adieu, Lober spun around on his heels and started to head toward the recovery platform located just outside the building. He had a huge grin on his face that stretched from ear to ear. Arrangements had already been made for two of his most trusted colleagues to greet the new guests, and in just a matter of minutes they would be on their way to his private laboratory, well, at least two of them would be. Before leaving the transport center Lober had seen the two women begin to run toward a toboggan, but he had failed to see Thad grab something from underneath his snowmobile seat.

As he hustled down the hallway toward the recovery platform his mind drifted back to the single stroke of luck that had made all of this possible, and as far as he was concerned, this was just the beginning!

It was Friday morning and rapidly approaching twenty-four hours since Eileen Day and Nancy King had disappeared. Their husbands had organized a rescue effort that included three men on snowmobiles, plus seven aircraft. The snowmobilers had been asked to provide ground tactical support, while the pilots worked together to create a diversion so Rob Day and Larry Williams could fly their planes into the circle of wavering air. It had been decided that they would fly in formation, with Rob's Cessna being the lead plane. His assignment was to shoot for the lower right hand quadrant, while Larry aimed his Piper at the upper left. The plan was well thought out, but they had underestimated the cleverness of their adversary.

The operation began at 8:30 AM, and each and every attempt to penetrate the circle of distorted air had been thwarted by the opposing team. By 10:30 AM the fuel gauges in Rob's Hawk HP were hitting the half way mark, and he was considering landing to top off his tanks. However, he never had an opportunity to implement that plan.

\* \* \*

They were making their fifth pass of the day at the circle of wavering air when reverse radio type waves shot out from it. They passed Rob to his upper left, and he knew that Larry was going to be in big trouble. He also knew if he got close enough to the circle of shimmering air, that it would disappear, and so would the radio waves. He pushed his throttle to the stop, but didn't get any noticeable acceleration. He started rocking forward like he was trying to physically push more speed out of the Hawk, knowing all the time that the effort would be futile, but he *had* to do something!

He was about the length of a football field from the circle of distorted air when he saw Mel's Skymaster flash into view as it buzzed it. But he knew immediately that Mel had not just buzzed it ... because he clearly saw that part of Mel's wing had penetrated the outer edge. His mind quickly winked an image to his consciousness of the Skymaster doing cartwheels in the snow below.

Jack broke his thought pattern when he yelled, "The circle's gone! It's gone!"

Rob's reflexes took over as his mind screamed out the exit plan. He pulled the yoke almost all the way back into the pit of his stomach while banking the Hawk for a right turn. The steep climb almost immediately began to burn off some of the kinetic energy that they had built up in their run at the circle. They were just breaking through 1700 feet AGL when they heard Steve Savage say, "The bogey's back already! It's in the exact same position as before."

Jack looked over at Rob and, said, "They're toying with us!"

Rob looked out his left window to see if Larry was still with him, and as soon as he caught sight of him in his peripheral vision he turned to Jack and said, "I'm tired of playing this game! All that matters is that we penetrate that circle of air."

As he continued climbing to 2500 feet AGL he pressed the microphone button and said, "Lima Romeo, this is Mike Yankee. At 2500 feet AGL I'm gonna break right, go into a dive and I'm not holdin' back on the speed. They might not be expectin' us to try anything this quick. Every time they've pulled this disappearing act today we've regrouped, and they just might be

expecting us to repeat recent history. If we're going fast enough on the approach, we just might get lucky."

Larry keyed his mike and said, "Lead the way Mike Yankee!"

Rob shouted back, "I'm probably going to red line this mother, but we're going in!"

Both dogs began barking in a frenzy the moment that Jack started pounding the dash and yelling, "DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!"

Rob jammed the throttle all the way home as he rolled to the right and put his plane into a dive.

\* \* \*

Art Bell was listening to the conversation between Larry Williams and Rob Day, and when they had finished he keyed his mike and said, "This is Foxtrot Gulf ... I'm at 1500 feet AGL and I'm heading directly at the circle from Black Nubble. I'm going to drop-down to about fifty feet above treetop level and head for the lower left quadrant. My plan is to fly straight ahead and make a climbing left-hand turn after passing the circle. Acknowledge Mike Yankee and Lima Romeo."

\* \* \*

Both Rob and Larry acknowledged Art Bell's radio transmission. Rob yelled, "Perfect. Jack, I'm going to set my heading to a target seventy-five feet to the right of the circle. When they see Art Bell heading at them, they'll surely think it's me coming from that direction again, and move quickly to the right. The way it looks to me right now, we should just about be at the target the moment that it moves."

\* \* \*

Jack was wide-eyed and had a big grin on his face as he said, "I think you're right!"

They were only half the distance to the circle of shimmering air when Rob noticed that his Air Speed Indicator had already gone into the *never exceed* territory. Suddenly Steve Savage was on the radio saying, "It looks like there are some bad guys trying to get near the circle. Maybe they are going in for another pickup."

\* \* \*

Focusing one hundred percent of his attention on the target that he established seventy-five feet to the right of the circle of air, Rob quickly said, "With all this going on, the operators of that distorted air have got to have their hands full ... Jack, I think that we're gonna make it this time!"

Jack was rapidly shaking his head up-and-down and said, "Yeah! Yeah we are! We're gonna make it this time!"

Rob guessed that they were about three-quarters of the way to the circle of air. He didn't bother looking over to see where Larry was. He knew that with his fighter pilot training, that he'd be right with him.

\* \* \*

Jack yelled, "Less than three hundred yards to target!"

Rob didn't even bother to look at his Air Speed Indicator again because he knew that it was probably pegged by now. He was as scared as he'd ever been before in his life. So much was riding on success. He didn't even want to think about the excessive stress on the airframe, because if it let loose, *everything* would be lost ... his life, Jack's life, and Eileen, Nancy, and Thad's chance to come home.

Jack yelled out again, "Two hundred feet to target!"

Rob saw Art Bell out of the corner of his eye, and he was only a short distance from the circle. Just as he expected, the circle disappeared and reappeared right in front of them. Suddenly they hit turbulence that was so violent that it shook the earphones off their heads ... and immediately the dogs stopped their barking. Rob looked at Jack and yelled, "I sure hope this ol' girl hangs together!"

Jack yelled back, "She will! She will! I know she will! We're going in!"

\* \* \*

The moment that they hit the surface of the distorted air, Rob felt a shimmering sensation quickly pass through the entire upper half of his body, and two things happened simultaneously ... the airspace in front of them flipped to a light gray, and silence pervaded the

cabin. To his amazement, Rob couldn't hear the sound of his power plant, and he knew it was working because the tachometer needle was pointing to 2400 rpms. What surprised him even more, he found himself yelling at the top of his voice when he said. "Jack, did you feel a sensation pass through your body!?"

Without turning his head, Jack yelled back, "YES! Awesome man! Awesome!"

\* \* \*

Rob and Jack stared into the gray void that enveloped the Cessna's spinning propeller. They felt like they were in a rain cloud that hadn't yet matured, and both of them yearned to see anything that could relieve the vertigo sensation that had taken over their minds. Just a few seconds had passed by since they felt the wavering sensation pass through their body. However, to them it seemed more like minutes. Suddenly, in the blink of an eye they were in a spiraling tunnel, and off in the distance they could see a tiny bright light. Thad's description of the tunnel in his near death experience flashed into Rob's mind, but this one seemed to be much shorter in comparison.

\* \* \*

Rob was an instrument rated pilot, however that training wasn't of much help to him right now. His tachometer was the only functioning instrument. All the rest were either spinning wildly, or flopping insanely back and forth, but one good thing had happened ... the air had instantly transitioned from extremely turbulent to smooth. Normally when a pilot's instruments fail in IMC (Instrument Meteorological Conditions), his workload can get very stressful, but this situation was different. Rob had the bright light at the end of the tunnel to use as a focal point to keep spatial disorientation from setting in. Unfortunately that advantage was not going to last very long since the beacon that he was homing in on was rapidly looming in the windshield. Intuition told him to take his hands off of the controls and let the plane fly itself. As it turned out, his instincts were right on target.

\* \* \*

Rob and Jack's attention was riveted on the scene unfolding in front of them, and both of them had the sensation that time was standing still. Suddenly the light at the end of the tunnel filled the entire windshield, and at that same moment the plane violently bounced up and down about ten feet each way. It was almost as though they had hit a thin wall of extremely turbulent air. As quick as the episode began, it was over. Simultaneous to the fierce beating that his Cessna took, Rob felt adrenaline surge through his entire body, and it got an extra boost when the dogs began to bark raucously.

\* \* \*

There are times when a person's mind perceives that they are in grave danger, and it will temporarily take them someplace else to relieve the stress. That is exactly what happened to Rob. Similar to life passing before one's eyes, another event moved momentarily into his thoughts. He was on his way to Washington, D. C. to begin the first phase of a turnaround-consulting contract. The flight controller at Kennedy International Airport that had given him his assigned course and altitude had accidentally sent a departing Boeing 757 directly over his flight path. As soon as the controller warned him about what he had inadvertently done, Rob looked to his left and searched the entire sky for the huge aircraft. He spotted it at the 10 o'clock position, and climbing. It appeared to be at least one thousand feet above him, and around five miles away. A few mental calculations told him that the 757 would intersect his intended flight path at around the 4 to 5 mile mark, and he knew that if he stayed on his present heading, he'd soon run smack into mayhem. His decision made, he banked his Hawk into a hard left turn to fly parallel with the 757's wake.

Rob maintained that heading for about one mile before changing it back toward Dulles. He had all the confidence in the world that by then the wake would have sunk well below his altitude. However, he was wrong. Less than a minute after being back on his original heading, he hit what felt like an invisible barrier. In an instant the plane bounced violently up and down. In the process his seat restraints bit deep into his flesh. Later that night, while getting undressed for bed he saw the deep purple bruises that the straps had left behind, and he considered himself to be much more than just lucky that he had made it safely to the ground.

\* \* \*

Even though Rob and Jack had the sensation that time had stood still when they penetrated the circle of air, the transition from their world to the next took only a few seconds. Simultaneous to being catapulted into the new world, Jack went into a panic mode. Sensitive electronic equipment that was essential to this mission was sitting in the back of the plane. It had been secured for a rough ride, but nothing like this.

The dogs weren't barking and Jack had totally forgotten them when he decided to make sure that his equipment was OK. He pushed himself up off the seat as high as he could to get a clear view, and when he looked into the back he came face to face with Rudy. A long wet tongue caressed his left cheek, and Jack couldn't help himself as he let out a loud "YUK!"

\* \* \*

In spite of the fact that his mind had diverted his attention to relieve stress, Rob had put his hands back on the yoke the second that his Hawk hit the turbulence. The upheaval was as quick as a camera flash, and in that same instant the Hawk emerged into a bright blue sky. Ever mindful of midair collisions, he quickly checked the air space all around him, and then sussed out the instrument panel. A temporary feeling of elation flowed through his entire body when he noted that each instrument in the panel was operating like it should.

Like Jack, Rob was also concerned about the electronic equipment in the back of his Cessna, and a little knot of anxiety settled in the pit of his stomach as he said much more confidently than he felt, "How'd your equipment fare, Jack?"

Jack was in the process of wiping Rudy's slobber from the side of his face as he said, "Oh, I think the equipment is just fine, and I'll tell you something else ... I think Rudy still loves me."

Another scan of the instrument panel and a careful look outside the aircraft told him that all was well. The smile of relief that he had on his face began to disappear as he thought about the task at hand. He glanced over at his buddy and noticed that he was focused on something below the aircraft, and the look on his face was pure awe. Curious, Rob looked in the same direction. After the better part of a half-minute passed by, all he could say was, "Holy Moly!"

\* \* \*

A huge mesa, the largest that either one of them had ever seen, stretched as far as the eye could see. Finally Rob broke the silence between them when he said, "That mesa has to be at least fifty miles long, maybe more!" There was a short pause, and then he said, "And I'll bet that it's at least fifteen miles wide! What do you think, Jack?"

But Jack was no longer looking out the front of the aircraft. His attention had been diverted to something else, and Rob never heard the "Mmmm hm" that Jack had muttered. "Hey, Rob! I think there's something that's even more astounding than that mesa?"

Rob had an inkling as to what Jack may be referring to and said, "Are you talking about the shape of the valley? Because as far as I can see, without that mesa in it, the lay of the land is exactly the same as it is between Rangeley and Stratton, Maine."

"That's right! And that's not all. Look at the mountains surrounding this valley."

Rob took his time sizing up each mountain in the entire area, and he could not believe his eyes. It looked like the same forces that had formed Bigelow, Black Nubble, Saddleback and East Kennebago mountains, had shaped them, and even more significant was the fact that they were located in the same respective positions. But there was a major difference. They were huge in comparison, maybe five to ten times larger.

The giant replicas were blanketed with snow, as was the mesa below them, and it appeared that there was plenty of vegetation covering most of the surfaces, and that was a surprise. Usually there were no trees above a certain altitude.

In contrast, there wasn't any snow in the valley below. Actually it was very close to being barren. Clumps of bushes or trees were scattered here and there throughout the entire valley, but from their altitude it was impossible to tell exactly what they were. "You know Jack? The surface below the mesa looks very much like desert terrain."

Jack sounded like his mind was elsewhere when he said, "Yep, it sure does."

\* \* \*

Rob looked at his altimeter and noted that the needles were pointing at 4,500 feet above sea level. However, when he looked down at the desert like terrain below, he estimated

the distance to be about 10,000 feet, and the space between the mesa and the Cessna to be about 2,000 feet. He had no idea how high the mountains were, but they were towering above his Hawk XP by at least 5,000 feet. When he looked over at Jack, he noticed that he was fixating out his side window. "Hey, Jack! How about a penny for your thoughts?"

Without turning to face him, Jack said, "They're worth a lot more than that my friend." He leaned back in his seat as far as he could and said, "Feast your eye balls on that!"

Craning his neck forward as much as he could, Rob got a glimpse of two pyramids ... one very large, and one about half its size. He studied them for a bit before saying, "They look like they're about ten miles apart, and I'll bet that they're the ones that we saw in the circle of air. Remember? It was that one time when the shimmering lines flattened out a bunch."

"Yeah, I remember that. Did you see the buildings to the left of the smaller pyramid?"

"No."

Jack leaned back again so his friend could see past him, but Rob never had a chance to completely focus on the structures. The dogs began to bark in a frenzy, and almost at the same moment, Jack yelled, "Look out Rob!"

He turned his head just in time to see a large object directly in front of them. Like everyone else, Rob was convinced that emergencies always happened to the other guy. However, he still invested time and money to keep his emergency procedures sharp, and now that training was about to pay off. Without having to think, Rob pushed in the yoke while turning it hard to the right, and at the same time he jammed the starboard rudder peddle all the way to the firewall. They were almost inverted when the object's belly slid past them with less than a foot to spare. Rob's voice was perfectly calm when he said, "That thing looked like something I've seen before." Then everything came back to him. Excitement filled his voice as he said, "Jack! I *did* see it before! It looked just like that paper machete type bird I saw in the circle of wavering air! Remember?"

Jack's tone was almost deadpan when he said, "You think it was *that* big?"

"No! This one was much larger. At least it seemed so. I'll bet that its wingspan was as long as the ones on my Cessna."

Enough time had passed for the shock of the incident to wear off, and Jack's heart began to pound in his chest as he yelled, "Damn Rob! That was way too close! I don't give a rat's rear end what you say! That thing wasn't made of no paper machete!? What in the hell was it!?"

The dogs had stopped their barking, and Rob's internal shock defenses had worn off also, right along with his calm resolve. Stress had taken full command when he yelled back at Jack, "How the hell do I know!? For all I know ... it could've been a frigging descendant of the pterodactyl!"

Jack gave Rob an incredulous look as he said, "Yeah. Right!"

"OK Mr. Know It All! YOU tell me what YOU think it was!"

Getting back in control of his emotions, Jack said, "I don't know Rob, but I hope and pray that it wasn't anything close to what you said, and I'll tell you why. If that thing is any indication of what's in this world, can you imagine what we might be dealing with once we're on the ground?"

Rob let that statement sink in a little before saying, "Yeah, that wouldn't be cool at all. It's a good thing that Tommy Yorks is with ... Hey! We haven't heard from Larry since we penetrated the circle of air!" He keyed his mike and said, "Piper Chieftain Two Three Niner Lima Romeo, what is your 10/20?" He repeated the call several times before turning to his long time friend with a quizzical look on his face, and said, "Say, Jack, I wonder if our radios work over here?"

Jack couldn't believe his ears and hoped that stress had momentarily spaced his buddy out. "Come on, Rob! I don't care what world you're in, radios will still transmit and receive. There just wouldn't be anything that could stop the transmission." Then a recent event jumped to the front and center of his thoughts, and he said, "Maybe I should recant that statement. Remember when I was in my Cherokee, and you were on your snowmobile, and we were trying to find a way to penetrate the circle of air?"

"Sure I do! But as I recall they jammed the airwaves with static, and I don't hear anything like that right now."

"That's true Rob, but think about this ... maybe their technology works differently back in our world, and just maybe their systems allow them to stop radio transmissions in *this* world, without *having* to jam the airwaves."

Rob let that sink in a little before saying, "That could be, but let me ask you a question. If we're on this side of those mountains, more than 5,000 feet below the peaks, and let's assume that Larry is on the other side of them at the same altitude, will the radio waves bounce over those monsters and get back down to us?"

"Hmmm. That could be a problem. They would probably work their way back down to our level, but it would be a long way from here. "

The pterodactyl incident, or whatever that flying behemoth had been, was temporarily forgotten. Rob pushed the throttle in a little way to bring up the rpms, and pulled back on the yoke as he said, "I want to get some attitude and try Larry again."

Jack looked at his buddy and said, "I'll tell you what Rob ... I don't know what the exact ceiling is on this plane, but we haven't got any oxygen on board. Look, there's an opening past that Black Nubble type mountain. Why don't we get into that airspace and give it a try?"

Rob knew that his friend was right, and said "Yeah, good idea! By the way, what was it you wanted me to see over by the pyramids?" And when out of the corner of his eye he saw that Jack was starting to lean back in his seat again, he said, "Jack, just tell me. After the near encounter that we just had, I want to focus on flying this plane."

A few moments of silence followed while Jack gathered his thoughts. "I saw a pyramid in the circle of air twice. The first time it had buildings around it, and the second time there weren't any. Do you recall that?"

"Sure. What's your point?"

"Look Rob, give me the controls and I'll make sure that we don't run into anything. I want you to take a good hard look at that smaller pyramid, including the buildings around it. Then tell me what they remind you of." Jack took the controls and leaned back in his seat as far as he could, and got just a little peeved when Rob took his sweet time getting to the task at hand.

Before leaning forward Rob glanced into the back seat to see what the dogs were up to. At the outset he thought Rudy was sound asleep, but he wasn't. The wily old Basset made it plain that he was wide-awake and alert. His left eye popped open and he stared right back at his master.

A new smile formed on Rob's face as he tried to lean forward to see past Jack, but his chest restraint held him firmly in place. His mind jumped to the conclusion that the holdfast mechanism might have locked up when they hit the turbulence. All efforts to loosen it failed, and he ultimately had to unbuckle, and re-buckle the restraints. Of course that action was not without its trepidations. The bone-jarring incidents and the evasive maneuvering that happened during the past ten minutes were still fresh in his mind. However, when he was finally able to get into the right position to look out the starboard window, all he could see was the tip of a pyramid and the top of several buildings. He tapped Jack on the shoulder and said, "Give me the controls for a second."

Rob stepped on the left rudder pedal as he turned the yoke to the right, and the moment that he had a complete view of the pyramid and surrounding buildings he gave the controls back to Jack. Something about the scene below looked vaguely familiar, but he could not quite grasp what it was. He started to ask Jack for a hint, and then it hit him. "Jack! I think I see what you're talking about! It looks similar to the Strip in Vegas."

"I'll do you one better than that my friend. We were practically on top of those buildings when we had that near encounter with whatever it was, and I had an *excellent* view of the city. As far as I'm concerned it's an *exact* replica. But there is one exception. That pyramid is much larger than the Luxor." Then he thought to himself, "Yeah, but it's a lot smaller than the pyramid that's further out in the desert. I wonder why?"

"Jack, I'm taking the controls back!" In his excitement he almost forgot why they were trying to get past the Black Nubble look alike, and then said, "Whoa! Not yet!"

Jack had a confused look on his face as he said, "Not yet - what?"

"I was going to do a one eighty and take a closer look at that city, but it's far more important to see if we can reach Larry." The moment that the Cessna was clear of the mountain Rob pressed the microphone button and said, "Piper Chieftain...."

He stopped short when Jack blurted out, "Hey Rob! Why in the hell are you using proper radio protocol? It's a sure bet that the FAA doesn't have any jurisdiction in *this* airspace!"

"Yeah, you're right." He keyed the mike again saying, "Larry, this is Rob, do you read me?" He turned up the volume on the radio so he could hear the faintest response, but he didn't even hear the slightest hint of a click that always followed when a microphone button was released. He tried several more times before deciding to wash Larry out of his mind for the time being.

Rob dropped the Hawk's left wing to make a one hundred and eighty degree turn to head back toward the pyramid for a better look at the buildings. Just as the turn was almost completed he said, "I wonder if this city has a mayor as colorful as Las Vegas' Oscar Goodman?"

Jack looked over at Rob and said, "I didn't know that you knew that much about Las Vegas."

"I don't. But whenever I've been there to contribute to their tax base, I've always taken time out to watch the international news with Tom Brokaw on NBC, and sometimes I also catch the local news to see what's happening in town."

"So what's that got to do with Oscar Goodman?"

"Only this Jack. It seems that every time I watch the local news, he's either being interviewed by a newscaster, or a columnist by the name of John L. Smith is making a statement about him, but there's usually something. From what I've seen the guy's not only colorful, he's *real* popular with the people."

Rob's mind quickly changed gears as his eyes focused on the large pyramid beyond the city. He stared at it for a couple of moments before saying, "I wonder why that humongous pyramid is sitting out there all by itself?"

Jack was shaking his head up and down as he said, "Yeah ... me too."

\* \* \*

While they were covering the distance to the Las Vegas replica, Rob kept a vigil on every bit of terrain that he could lay his eyes on. Something was bothering him, but he could not come to grips with what it was. Then, like being whacked on the back of the head to bring him to his senses, it hit him. "Jack, did you notice that there aren't any signs of human life? I mean ... there's that city that looks like Vegas, and that huge pyramid, but there's nothing else. Where's the traffic? How come we don't see other cities or buildings in the distance? Where's a road leading to the city, or to that huge pyramid out there for that matter? And how come we don't see people anywhere?"

Jack had been scanning the terrain below with his binoculars ever since Rob took the controls from him. He pulled them away from his eyes and said, "Well, I think that I might have an answer to *one* of your questions. How about doing another one eighty, and once you come about, take a look about five miles down along the top of the mesa, toward the 11:00 o'clock position."

Rob brought the aircraft about and it took him a couple of moments to locate the most likely spot that Jack had been referring to. It looked like a group of small buildings, but he couldn't really make out anything else. Pointing to the objects he said, "I take it that those gray buildings off to the left are what you're referring to?"

"Yep. I also saw about a dozen people walking in and around them, and that ain't all. There were three snowmobiles right in front of the biggest building, and each one of them had a tagalong sled behind it. What does that....."

Rob never heard the dog's low rumbling growl, but when they started barking like all hell had broken loose, he felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. It didn't take him very long to determine which direction was the shortest distance to the edge of the mesa, and he put his Hawk into a ninety-degree turn that that made his pal feel like he had instantly gained fifty pounds.

Jack began to get a scowl on his face as he said, "What're you doing, Rob!?"

"I'm getting below the edge of this mesa as fast as I can, and I hope that those people didn't see us. I'd rather no one knows that we're around just yet."

A look of surprise burst onto his face as he said, "Rob, I think that you need to get back to basics. Tell me, just what rationalization makes you think that we *snuck* through that distorted air? Think about this for one second ... these people have very sophisticated technology. There's no way that we *slipped* through undetected. They probably know exactly where we are, right at this moment!"

Getting an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach he said, "How quick we forget the lessons in life. I think we'd better find a place to set this bird down ... fast! We need a plan, and we need to start working it ... now!"

Jack was still looking back toward the buildings as he said, "I couldn't agree more." He paused just a bit before continuing, "I've been wondering about something Rob. How do you suppose Rudy and Ginger always know when something's about to happen? What I mean is ... OK, I'll come clean. I accept that it's no coincidence that they begin to bark or growl just before the crap hits the fan."

Rob looked over at his friend with a half a smile on his face and said, "I know what your mind set has been all along, and it must have been *real* difficult for you to make that statement."

Jack's voice sounded like he wasn't sure he should've asked the question as he said, "Yeah, well, my opinion has been changed on a lot of things over the past couple of days."

Rob wasn't sure if he should let sleeping dogs lie, or not. Then making up his mind he said, "Listen, Jack. Just like us, they've got a sixth sense, and I think that it's more developed than ours. Think about this ... before dogs were ever domesticated they had to depend a great deal on all of their senses to survive, right?"

"Hey, Rob! Unless I missed something in history, humans didn't have any picnic either!"

Rob's head was bobbing up and down as he said, "Yeah, no doubt about that. But I think over time we lost a lot of ground in that arena, and I think it's time we begin to work on getting it back."

Jack was quiet for a few seconds before he said, "And just how do we go about doing that!?"

Another smile began to form on Rob's face as he looked over at his passenger and said, "That's a subject that we'll have to cover at another time. But there's a way."

Right at that moment the land below them dropped away and Rob said, "Listen Jack, we're goin' to have to get at least a mile, or maybe more, past the edge of this mesa before I lose too much altitude. I had to put in a pretty hefty cross correction in order to keep this bird flying in a straight line, and I *know* I don't have to tell you what *that* means!"

"Yeah, the wind 's blowing hard, and that means there's going to be a serious down draft when we get past the edge."

"Yep!" Rob picked out a landmark in the distance to keep them flying in a straight line, and then said, "Why don't you use those binoculars to find us a decent place to set this bird down?"

Little did they know how eventful that landing would be.

Don Patten and Kenny Winston were hard working loggers, and for most of their lives they had lived in Errol, New Hampshire. Demand for pulp had been dwindling over the past few years, and logging work in the area became very limited.

Errol was a small, laidback town. Other than shuffleboard, pool and weekend dances at the local pub, there wasn't much entertainment to be found. That was not a problem for Don and Kenny because they both loved to hunt, fish, ride their ATVs, or go snowmobiling. It didn't matter the time of year, they always had something to do.

Several years ago, before times got hard the childhood friends had pooled their funds together to buy a couple of snowmobiles and enough material to build an ice fishing shack. Each winter they put the shanty on the southeastern end of Big Greenough Pond, which is noted for its rainbow trout and brookies. Don and Kenny usually caught enough fish to feed their families, and that always helped to offset the cost for a case of Milwaukee's Best.

\* \* \*

Before breaking up their celebration party Thursday night, Don and Kenny made plans to go ice fishing early the next morning. These guys were so tight knit that they could have been brothers. Good things, as well as bad, always seemed to happen to them right around the same time. And Thursday was a perfect example. Both had been notified to report back to work on Monday morning.

\* \* \*

Three more days to fish ... that was their tune the night before, and their wives knew what that meant. It had been mostly fish and game since their husbands had been laid off from work. Sandy and Lorraine were not complaining though. They were grateful to have food on the table. Just the same, they as well as their children were looking forward to a welcomed change in their diet.

Don and Kenny had been in their shack on Big Greenough Pond since sunup, and it wasn't a stellar day for fishing. Two hours had gone by and not one of their tip-ups had flashed its red flag. But that was OK. These two guys were wise to Mother Nature's ways. They always had a backup plan to pass the time ... Gin Rummy, snacks, and they never forgot to bring the Milwaukee's Best.

Don was getting fidgety and looked out the shack's only window to see if any of their tip-ups needed tending, but the pond's finned inhabitants were still being elusive. A glance to the west told him that the sun was sitting low in the sky, and he could see long fingery shadows laying on the pond that had been cast by leafless trees along the shore.

The card games had gotten boring, and worse yet, the snacks and beer were gone. Don grabbed his belly as he looked at this friend and said, "Hey Kenny, why don't we call it a day and get a bite to eat?"

Kenny didn't know how many cards he had in his hand, but guessed that it must be at least twenty. No matter the number, it was plain that he a ton more than what his friend had, and he was more than happy to leave.

Ever since the first hand that morning, it had been a lousy card day for Kenny, and Don never let a single opportunity to needle him go by the wayside. He rubbed it in every step of the way, insisting that it wasn't the cards ... it was the player.

\* \* \*

They packed up all their gear, secured the ice shack door and walked over to their snowmobiles. As Don was lashing his knapsack to the back carrier on his machine, he sensed that something was wrong. The bungee cord hook still hadn't found a home when he raised his head to look for a clue as to what it could be. Finally he said, "Do you feel that, Kenny?"

"Feel what?"

Don stood up as straight as he could and took a long look around the entire pond before saying, "The nothing."

Kenny had been watching his buddy as he searched their surroundings for a clue, and a smirk of get even time surfaced on his face as he said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

But before Don could answer, Kenny felt a vacuum sensation. He dropped the starter rope handle and stepped up on his tunnel rails to join his friend in the search. "Hey Don, what do you think is going...."

Suddenly the vacuum sensation was replaced by a faint hissing noise. Both Don and Kenny had spent enough time hunting various types of game that they had developed animal like instincts. A deer stands completely still when it senses danger, barely moving a muscle until it determines what and where it is, and that is exactly what these guys did. Kenny was the first to talk. "What the hell is that?"

Don was a typical New Hampshire native and took his time to think things through before answering. "I haven't got a clue, Kenny. But if I didn't know better I'd say that we got wintering locusts that are trying to find a mate."

The entire time that he had been thinking about an answer to Kenny's question, Don continued to search for the source of the sound. Finally he saw something that looked out of place at the northwestern end of the pond, but it was too far away to identify. Pointing toward that direction he said, "Hey, Kenny, look over there and tell me what you see."

When Kenny focused in the direction that Don was pointing, he saw something that looked like a patch of murky air at the end of the pond. He couldn't see the woods on the other side of whatever it was, and it reminded him of trying to see through mucus in his eye. "I see something down there alright, but there ain't no tellin' what it is."

Don rolled his eyes up toward the sky before saying, "Only one thing to do then. We need to get up close and take a look. You gonna come, or you gonna wait?"

Kenny reached down for the starter rope as he said, "I'm with you buddy. I wanna know what's goin' on too."

\* \* \*

The moment the air-cooled engines were humming a friendly tune, they turned their sleds around to face the other end of the pond. As usual Don took the lead. They had traveled about three quarters of the distance to the anomaly when he brought his Skidoo to a complete stop. Kenny pulled up alongside, and both remained seated on their machine as they stared in awe at the spectacle before them.

There were three people, and each was standing next to a snowmobile that had a tagalong sled behind it. The tagalongs were piled high with something that looked like wire cages. But it wasn't the riders and their sleds that had invoked their awe. Slightly to the right of the snowmobilers was a translucent object, and after a moment or two they both came to the conclusion that it looked like a big circle of swirling air.

\* \* \*

Al Deyoe had been "the" maintenance man at the Rangeley Airport for the past five years, and he only got one day off a week. Of course that didn't bother him very much because he loved being around airplanes, and when you come right down to it, not much else interested him.

Retired from a very active life as an extremely successful garment salesman, Al could not stand to be unproductive. Back during his working years, and before his wife had a stroke

that left her very dependent upon him, he was always on the go. If it wasn't work, he was at the flying club, or playing the piano at the Elks.

For one reason or another, Al never completed all the training required to get his private pilot license, but he had a genuine quality about him that the majority of people liked, and all but one of the pilots in the flying club befriended him. That was a big plus for Al. He ended up spending lots of time in the right seat of many different airplanes. Sometimes just as a passenger, and others as a spotter for a pilot doing some instrument work under the hood.

Al's love for flying never dwindled, and that turned out to be a huge problem solver for him. At the young age of seventy-two he began to spend most of his free time doing odd jobs around the airport, and it was always without compensation. Money was not the issue for him ... keeping busy was. Besides, helping out at the airport accomplished more than what he had hoped. He frequently got to go up for a ride with several of the local pilots, and *that* put him in what he always referred to as "Seventh Heaven".

Larry Williams, a barnstormer for more years than he could remember, took Al up with him more times than all the other pilots combined. In addition to his admiration for the old timer, he felt that he owed it to the guy for all his hard work at the airport. He didn't like the fact that Al wasn't being paid, and after a few months he convinced the Airport Manager to create a maintenance / janitorial job slot. When the position was offered to Al, he was overjoyed and accepted it without even asking what the pay would be. It really didn't matter. He just wanted to do something more meaningful than play checkers all day long at the Senior Citizen's Center.

\* \* \*

Like a lot of people his age, Al had become set in his ways, and on the third Friday of each month he topped off the tank in his Ford Taurus for a trip to Lancaster, New Hampshire to visit his son. January was his least favorite month to make the journey. The weather during that time of year was so unpredictable, but Al's persnickety ways would not let minor inconveniences disrupt his missions in life.

Usually the ride to and from Lancaster was non-stop, but on his way back to Rangeley this particular trip he broke tradition. Al enjoyed an occasional drink, but before today he never remembered the need for one, and as he turned onto Main Street in Errol he decided to stop at the Black Bear Pub for a quick cordial.

There was a parking space right in front of the building along side a mud caked pickup that looked like it had been modified for Monster Truck competition. When Al stepped from the warmth of his Taurus, even at 5' 10" tall, he had to look up to see the door handle on the vehicle next to him. When he stepped through the door and into the same stale odor that filled every pub he had ever been in, his mind was still marveling at the fact that somebody could actually enjoy driving such a monstrosity.

\* \* \*

There were only two patrons in the establishment, and they were sitting at the far end of the "L" shaped bar, having what appeared to be a very serious conversation with the barkeep. Al took off his coat and slid onto a wooden stool at the opposite end. There was a huge Budweiser clock that hung from the ceiling half way down the bar, and Al became somewhat uncomfortable when he saw that it was 4:10 PM. Ever since his cataracts had become a problem, he liked to get back home before dark, and could not understand why he had the sudden urge to stop. Talking softly to himself, he said, "This is foolish!"

He started to put his coat on to leave, and almost as though he wasn't in charge of his own decisions, he changed his mind. A scowl formed on his forehead as he tried to figure out why it was so important to have a drink, and ultimately resolved that his subconscious must know more than he did.

When it became obvious that he was going to have to wait until the bartender finished his conversation with the customers, Al decided to scope out the joint. The place had a hometown atmosphere that was very much like a lot of the rural bars that he had frequented during his working years. Many of those places held fond memories for him. Especially the ones that had agreed to stock his favorite, Five Start Metaxa.

He learned early in his adult life that the camaraderie in a local pub was much more to his liking than the glamour of a fancy upscale establishment, which he patronized only when

necessary to schmooze with a potential buyer. As far as he was concerned, many of the patrons in those uppity joints were snobs, and he had no use for that type of an individual.

\* \* \*

Al's eyes drifted to the back and he could see that a small area had been set up for a three-piece band. The makeshift stage was bordered on two sides by a small wooden dance floor, and the management had surrounded the entire dance area with tables for four. The dance floor wasn't that big. Al guessed that it could comfortably accommodate five couples, and as many as ten if they danced in one spot, slightly shuffling their feet from side to side.

Off to the left of the dance floor, hugging the outside wall, there was a majestic looking shuffleboard that had obviously seen lots of use. And directly between it and the bar stood a newly restored pool table that had a huge Budweiser light hanging over it. Al liked the place. There was no doubt about it.

Glancing back up at the clock, he got somewhat irritated. Ten minutes had slipped by since he sat down, and the bartender didn't look like he was very close to ending his conversation. Patience was one of Al's virtues, but enough was enough. He did not want to leave without having a taste of the Metaxa that he had spotted on the top shelf behind the bar. Finally he cleared his throat as loud as he could, and it had the desired affect.

\* \* \*

The bartender was a big guy, maybe 6'4" tall, and it was apparent that cold weather did not faze him. He was wearing a short sleeve tee shirt that had a picture of a salt shaker on the right side, and somewhat lower on the left was a shot glass that had yellow liquid in it; and there was a saying in the middle that said, "I TAKE LIFE WITH A GRAIN OF SALT ... PLUS A SLICE OF LIME AND A SHOT OF TEQUILA!"

A pitch-black handlebar mustache adorned the man's upper lip, and the turned up ends were at least four inches long. He could see the guy's chest muscles rippling through his shirt as he walked down the length of the bar, and what impressed him most of all was the friendly look that he had on his weather beaten face. Any remaining anger totally vanished when the bartender greeted Al like he was a long lost friend.

The friendly giant picked up a towel and made a swipe at the glistening surface in front of Al, and then he looked him square in the eye. "Sorry about keeping you waitin'. I was so wrapped up in what Don was telling me that I didn't hear you come in. What'll it be?"

"I had wanted the Metaxa Five Star that you've got up on that shelf, but I'm gonna do something different for a change." Pointing at the big guy's shirt he said, "I'd like to try one of those."

The bartender flashed a big toothy smile and said, "Sure. What flavor?"

When the old gent just sat there with a very confused look on his face, the bartender added, "What kind of tequila?"

"Don't really know. I just got a sudden urge when I saw your shirt. What do you recommend?"

"Well ... I prefer to have a beer with my tequila, usually Tecate. As for the tequila, I like a smooth taste." Turning around he pointed to the top shelf behind him, just to the right of the register and said, "In my opinion that Jose Cuervo Tradicional is the best that we have."

A big smile flashed onto Al's face as he reached across the bar to shake the hand of his newly found friend. "SOLD! Name's Al Deyoe! What's yours?"

"Jack Grant. You have a camp around here?"

"No, I was visiting my son in Lancaster. I live about forty miles northeast of here, in Rangeley, Maine."

"I know Rangeley well. I fish Mooselookmeguntic and Rangeley Lakes at ice out, just about the time that the salmon are *really* hungry and up on top." He seemed to be deep in thought for a couple of seconds and then continued, "As a matter of fact, I do *all* my fishing in Maine."

\* \* \*

Jack set the Tecate and tequila on the bar and said, "No reason to sit here by yourself, unless you want to. You're welcome to come down and join us."

Al was just getting ready to accept the offer when Jack added, "Those two guys have been telling me a story that's pretty far out." He saw the questioning look develop on Al's face and said, "Listen, it's *really* got my attention because I know they're not bullshitters."

Al stood up, grabbed his drinks and said, "Love to join yah. Say Jack, how about getting me a glass?"

He took his time walking down to the end of the bar ... mostly because the Jose smelled really good to him and he did not want to spill a drop. A frosted mug was waiting for him when he got there, and he had everyone's undivided attention as he attempted to pour the beer without creating a large head. Once he had the beer glass filled to the brim he focused on the tequila.

Jack, Don and Kenny were mildly amused as they watched the old codger make a wet spot on the back of his left hand with the piece of lime. But try as they may, they couldn't hold back their laughter when he tried to pour the salt. It looked to them like he was trying to make sure not one tiny little grain hit the floor.

Being solidly good-natured, Al set the saltshaker down, reached out to the guy closest to him and said, "Name's Al."

Still laughing, but not quite as hard, he grabbed Al's hand and said, "Mine's Don, and that there's Kenny."

Al nodded to Kenny and said, "I understand that you've got a pretty interesting story to tell."

Kenny stood up and said, "I think it's a whole frigging lot more than just interestin' mister!"

Sensing that he had said something wrong, Al jumped to his own defense and said, "Sorry! I was just trying to let you know that I'd like to be in on it too."

Don put his hand on Al's shoulder and said, "Awe, don't let this big ape get you all shook up. He didn't mean nuthin'. That's just his way."

\* \* \*

Kenny loved to tell a story and started right at the very beginning. Don remained quiet the whole time, but when it came to the part when they went to investigate the object at the end of the pond, he jumped in saying, "Al, we stopped when we was about three quarters of the way to this thing. Yah see.... we saw these snowmobilers standing right next to the foggy air, and I wondered how that could be since me and Kenny never heard them machines."

Then Kenny cut in, "Yeah, it was real quiet that day ... you know ... no wind or nothin' like that."

Don shot Kenny a nasty look for butting in at the wrong time and said, "Right! We should've heard those machines, even if they was ten miles away. But we never heard nothin'!"

Kenny leaned closer to Al sort of like he was going to tell him something in confidence, and said, "Yeah, and that ain't all that's weird. We started to ride over to those guys to find out what the hell was goin' on, but we never got a chance. Those mothers just up and disappeared, and so did that friggin' whirling air."

Don took over again saying, "That ain't no bullshit neither, Al. But we rode our machines over there anyway to see if they left anything behind."

Getting more excited by the second, Kenny cut Don off and said, "Yeah, and guess what we found!"

Jack Grant was anxious for them to get to the point and said, "This ain't Jeopardy, Kenny. So why don't you just tell us!"

Don grabbed Kenny's arm to keep him quiet and said, "We saw a circular depression in the snow where that wavering air was. I mean it was like a humongous heavy ball had been set there. It was maybe twenty-five to thirty feet in diameter, and in the middle it looked like it could have been four, or five, or maybe even six feet deep. It was hard to tell for sure because of the way the sun was shinin'."

Kenny jerked his arm away from Don and said, "That's right! And we followed them snowmobile tracks to the southwest around the base of Black Mountain, and them tracks weren't just tracks, it was a hard packed trail that'd been ridden lots."

Al held up his hand and said, "Wait a minute! If you followed those tracks how come you didn't hear those machines?"

Don answered by saying, "Those sleds that we saw were pointed in the direction that the trail went, but we didn't see any tracks out on the pond, and that's where they should've come from. The tracks those machines made began right where they were sitting. There weren't no other new tracks around, 'ceptin' ours." Don paused for just a second before continuing. "I'll tell yah.... it was really weird. Those tracks began and ended right there. And I'm not just talkin' about the fresh ones."

A scowl formed on Al's face as he said, "What do you mean?"

"What I mean is this. Old or new, those tracks began and ended right there!"

Kenny tapped Don on the shoulder and said, "Don't forget about the boot and shoe tracks we saw."

Al looked at Don and said, "Shoe tracks?"

Don was shaking his head up and down as he said, "Yeah. Shoe tracks! Can you believe that? But that ain't all that don't add up. When we followed that snowmobile trail, I stopped several times. I wanted to see if I could find just one more fresh track, but there weren't none. Either those guys flew over the trail, or they came from that circle of air and went right back into it." Then he got a very serious look on his face as he leaned real close to Al and said, "And I'll tell you what! There ain't nuthin' else that makes any sense to me, and THAT don't make sense." His eyes dropped and a perplexed look appeared on his face. When he looked back up at Al he said, "But what I just said don't even make sense. Shit like that don't happen 'cept in movies!"

Al turned to Jack and said, "Could I have a pencil and paper please?"

A questioning look appeared on Don's face as he said, "What do you need them for?"

"Because what you're telling me is a lot like something that I've heard about before. I need to make some notes so I don't leave anything out when I tell all this to a friend of mine."

Kenny was just about to pick up where his buddy had left off, but stopped short when Al stood up and turned to Don saying, "Did you guys find out where that trail went?"

"Yeah. We followed it around to the back of the mountain, but we quit when it started to go up toward the top?"

Al got a surprised look on his face and said, "How come?"

Ken stood up and stepped directly in front of Al. His facial expression metamorphosed from friendly, to an unmistakable look of standoffish suspicion. "Look mister, I don't know what your game is, so why don't you get right down to the brass tacks and tell us why you're so interested?"

Al knew that he was not going to get any more information without coming clean. He let out a long sigh as he sat back down and told them everything he knew about the circle of air, including what had happened back in Rangeley, Stratton, and the townships in between. He even went so far as to tell them about his pilot friends that had flown into the wavering air in hopes of bringing their wives back.

By the time he had finished giving them every bit of background information that he could think of, Kenny was shaking his head from side to side. It seemed like he was in total disbelief. But he surprised Al when he said, "We didn't go up on that mountain because that's the only trail goin' up there. Besides, there ain't nuthin' up there worth seeing."

Al couldn't believe what he was hearing and said, "After all you saw, you weren't curious enough to go up there and take a look around?"

"Nah. We shut our machines down to see if we could hear any noises up there, but it was stone quiet. If there was anythin' goin' on up on that mountain, we'd have heard it."

Don put his hand on Al's shoulder as he said, "That's the real stumper Al. The tracks either began on top of that mountain, or they began at the pond. But no matter how I slice the pie, I can't prove how them sleds got there to begin with."

\* \* \*

The sun was long gone by the time Al Deyoe left the Black Bear Pub to begin the last leg of his trip back to Rangeley. Shortly after turning off of Main Street and onto Route 16, an

inner voice kept telling him not to wait to tell Larry Williams about what he had learned. He made a brief attempt to understand the reason for the sense of urgency that he felt, but the thought disappeared when he spotted a place to turn around.

Just up ahead the road widened enough to make a u-turn without having to back up, and that was an important consideration since the Ford's back window was completely frosted over. When Al reached Main Street he headed in the direction of the pub. On several occasions in the past, he had seen a pay phone, but he could not recall exactly where it had been.

He was doing a little over five miles an hour while he carefully checked each side of the street. Luck was with him and he didn't have to go very far before spotting a Ma Bell sign next to L.L. Cote Sporting Goods. He parked in front of the pay phone, and just before shutting off the engine he glanced at the clock on his dash. It was 6:02 PM ... Larry's supertime, and he was sure to be home.

The parking lot looked icy, and he was glad that he didn't have to walk more than a couple of feet to get to the phone. The noise from the rapidly cooling engine was the only sound that he could hear as he fished for the change in his pocket, but no matter how deep he dug, all he could find was a quarter. The sporting goods store was still open, but he was in no mood to take a chance on a fall.

The twenty-five cent piece made the normal ching-ching sound as it dropped through the internal mechanism, and then there was the final metallic thud as it landed into the coin box. Al thought to himself, "Wow! All the way to the coffer. I guess there's no refunds on *this* phone!" He punched the "0" and waited for the operator to answer.

"Yes, my name is Al Deyoe, and I need to place a collect call." Shortly after giving the operator all the information that she asked for, he heard the phone begin to ring. He was positive that Larry would not give him any grief for calling collect, especially when he learned that the call concerned the circle of air. The phone rang several times before Larry finally answered it, and when the operator began to ask him if he would accept a collect call, the line went dead. The operator tried to redial the number several times, but each time an automated message announced that the call could not be completed at this time.

To say that Al was very disappointed as he climbed back into his car was an understatement, and to boot a chill had set into his old bones. The temperature had dropped considerably since the afternoon, and Al figured that it had to be well below zero. His teeth began to chatter as he pushed the temperature control lever to the hottest position, cursing himself all the time for not leaving his car running while he tried to reach Larry.

\* \* \*

The hum of his tires changed pitch as he crossed the iron bridge that spanned Magalloway River, and that was always his first clue that he was about to enter Maine. The change in sound was also enough to bring him out of his lethargic state of mind. After he had gotten beyond trying to figure out what might have happened to the phone lines earlier, his brain went into limbo. The radio had quit working several months back, and he had a good reason not to get it fixed. Living in the boondocks meant limited access to the radio waves, and he couldn't pick up the kind of stations that he liked to listen to. But during times like this he would think that perhaps *any* kind of noise might be good, especially to disrupt the hypnotic sound generated by the engine and tires.

Al's attention was on anything but his driving, and sometimes on nothing at all. Suddenly he felt a need to know where he was, and that presented a problem. He didn't know how much time had passed since he crossed the state line into Maine, and that left him with no means to calculate his approximate location. Then fate handed him a break. While rounding a curve to the left his headlights lit up a string of camps that looked familiar to him, and when he started up one heck of a long steep hill, he had his fix. He also knew that there wouldn't be any signs of civilization until he got to Oquossoc.

The Taurus was about a quarter of a mile from the top of the hill when a brilliant flash of light blinded him. Al couldn't see a thing. Not his headlights, nor the lights in his dash. Fear began to take control when he pictured the Ford slamming into a snowbank, and panic was in full command when he put his foot on the brake. Unfortunately he stepped on it too hard. The

sound of screeching tires filled his ears as the car began its first phase of a four-wheel drift to the left.

Then a good thing happened. Al regained some of his composure and quickly released pressure on the brake pedal, while at the same time turning the steering wheel slightly to the left. It seemed like the car was going straight again, but he wasn't sure, and all he wanted to do was stop his forward movement as fast as possible.

He could feel the car rapidly losing speed, but he still couldn't see the road. Everywhere he looked was total darkness. Terror began to take over again when he remembered the flash of light that had to've been made by an oncoming vehicle. He should have heard it go by him by now. What if it was stopped on the road right in front of him!?

\* \* \*

The Ford rolled to a complete stop as some of his vision came back, but he still couldn't see much more than shadows here and there. An idea popped into his mind and he groped for the headlight switch. The moment that his fingers touched it, he twisted it left to the parking light position. Common sense told him that it would make it easier to see the other vehicle's headlights.

Al searched everywhere in front of him, but all he saw was darkness ... and then he thought he saw something that looked like a circle of fog. He leaned closer to the windshield to get a better look, rapidly blinking his eyes to see if the apparition would change. As the seconds ticked by he developed the feeling that there was something in front of him, and he didn't have to be a rocket scientist to know that it wasn't another vehicle.

\* \* \*

Al was totally engrossed on the phantom-like object before him when he heard his door handle click. It was the exact noise that he had heard just a little while ago in the L.L. Cote Sporting Goods parking lot. His hands were so cold when he tried to open the door to the Taurus that the release lever slipped off the ends of his fingers.

His hand shot to the ignition key and he killed the engine. He wanted complete quiet so he could hear the slightest sound. But as soon as the engine quit a feeling of trepidation set in, and he wondered if he had made a serious mistake. He didn't move a muscle, and within seconds his body began to tingle with dreaded anticipation.

More time went by and all he heard was the ticking of the engine as it rapidly cooled in the night's frigid air. He was focused on the circular foggy patch in front of him when it hit him right between the eyes ... he had his vision back! His confidence began to grow in leaps and bounds, but it was short lived. The nerve that he had gained began to rapidly unravel when he heard the door handle snap again. There was no mistake about it this time. He jerked his head to the left to see who was there, and then everything started to go black. Only his iron will kept him from passing out. Somewhere in the distance he heard his voice scream, "WHO's there!?"

The scream was still echoing in his mind when he felt pain in his hands, and it was then that he realized he had been holding the steering wheel in a death like grip. But the pain wasn't only in his hands ... it was shooting all the way up his arms. At first he couldn't make his fingers relax, and it took a concentrated effort to ease his grip on the wheel.

The hurting was slow to subside, but it was quickly forgotten when he felt another sensation ... his heart was racing like crazy. The initial panic that he had felt after being blinded while doing fifty-five miles an hour on a backcountry road, now began to surge throughout his body. All he could think of was the domino affect when pain began to ease its way into his chest. His mind started spinning and his head seemed like it was going to float right off his shoulders. Emotions reached a boiling point as he said, "Oh God no! Not here! Not like this!"

\* \* \*

Another door handle snapping sound took his mind off the pain in his chest. His bravado had left him and he was reluctant to look out his side window again, but he did. His eyes popped wide open with fear when he saw the outline of a man standing only a foot or so from his door. He tried to clear his head by shaking it from side to side ... all the while trying to convince himself that he was hallucinating. That man standing next to his car was dressed in a leisure suit! No one in their right mind would be standing on this road, in temperatures well

below freezing, dressed like that! Shortly after that thought hit home, new fear found its way into the depths of his soul.

Feeling like he was moving in slow motion, he forced himself to look out the window again. Realization set in and he knew that his imagination hadn't been at work. A perception of dread took over when he focused on the gun that this lunatic was pointing at him. Confusion was added to the mix when his subconscious told him that the object didn't look anything *like* a gun. Actually, it looked very much like a TV remote control. His hand landed on the ignition key as he yelled, "What in God's name do you want!?"

\* \* \*

The engine roared to life and everything began to happen very fast. He pulled the gearshift out of park, and in his rush it went right past drive into low, but it didn't matter. There was only one objective ... vacate the area as fast as possible.

The Taurus lurched forward and Al had to drag his attention away from the man next to him. As much as he wanted to know what the guy would do, he had to make sure that he was headed in the right direction. The moment that he looked out the front of his vehicle, his mind entered a new level of stress. Two men dressed just like the guy that had tried to open his door were directly in front of him, and so was the circle of mist. He pressed the gas pedal all the way to the floor and yelled, "You bastards best get out of my way!"

Just when the two antagonists were about to become hood ornaments, they disappeared. There was no resounding thump, and he did not see them being thrown into the air. He had to be sure of what happened and stepped on the brake. The moment that the Taurus came to a stop, he twisted around in his seat, and in the process made sure that he could make a quick getaway. The whole maneuver was a wasted effort. There was nothing behind him but blackness. Then he remembered the circle of foggy air and turned his attention back to the front. Relief spread through his body when he found himself alone in the black of the night. Then he realized the pain in his chest was gone, and that helped him to think much more clearly. Now that the men and the circle of fog were gone, he could actually feel his heart rate begin to slow. But that was not to last.

The moment his eyes drifted to the clock on the dash, he could feel his internal systems begin to fall apart. He remembered looking at the clock back in Errol as he slid the heater control to the max. It had been 6:15 PM, and now it was 8:08, almost two hours later! Al blurted out, "That's impossible!"

The pain in his chest began anew as his brain made the simple calculations. He felt like his mind was coming apart when he heard himself scream out, "My God! I'm only thirty minutes out of Errol! What happened to the time!? What's happening to me!?"

Al knew that he was a long way from help, and the pain in his chest was getting worse. He stomped on the gas pedal, jamming it all the way to the floor for the second time that night. The Ford shot forward and Al gripped the steering wheel as tight as he could. Thirty minutes to Rangeley. He hoped that he could make it.

Fourteen people were standing in the cramped space of a small cave, and each and every one of them was talking loudly. A few were boisterous in their efforts to talk over the others, while the rest were simply trying to mask their fear. Much of the conversation revolved around how to get back home, and the small amount of food that they had left.

The group had escaped from their captors shortly after midnight the night before. Their trek through wooded and open areas to find a place to hide had been in bitter cold. Just as the sun was starting to come up the next morning they came to a clearing that bordered a cliff. It looked like the ground that they had been walking on came to an end, right there. A couple of the men walked over toward the fringe, and when they looked over the side they got the surprise of their life. They were standing more than a mile above the surface below. After studying the distant terrain, they thought that it could be desert, but there was no way to be sure.

There was no doubt that everyone would welcome the warmth below, and good fortune was on their side. They found a trail that looked like it went all the way to the bottom, and the small cave that they were standing in had been the first shelter that the escapees encountered on their way down.

\* \* \*

It was midnight the night that they escaped, and when the group emerged from the warmth of the facility where they had been held captive, a blast of arctic like winter air greeted them. Most everyone was wearing warm clothing, but a few were clad in just their shirtsleeves. Their captors had locked all of them in one large room that had beds and lockers lining each of the walls. Those with military experience said that it reminded them of a barracks bay.

The traumatic ordeal that the escapees had endured during and after their abduction was the foundation for a strong bond that had developed between each and every individual in the group. The clothing that they had on depended upon what they were wearing at the time of their abduction. The second that the freezing temperatures began to steal their warmth, it was immediately resolved to share clothing, and there were no complaints from anyone.

\* \* \*

When the escapees stepped off the grated metal platform, which was the first thing that they had seen upon their arrival at this facility, they found that only a small area had been cleared in the deep snow around it. The region was new to them and they had no idea which direction would lead them to safety. Once away from the compound, the only available light was shed by the stars above, and by the three moons that hovered together in a near perfect triangular formation.

Their captors had not cleared a path in any direction away from the platform, but there was what appeared to be a snowmobile trail at the furthest end of the clearing. Dave and Leona Spencer took the initiative to test its firmness, cautiously taking one step at a time up the trail's gentle incline. After only a few paces, Dave checked the trail behind him to see how deep of an

impression his feet had left in the snow. There wasn't one bit of evidence to tell that he had walked across the surface. It was just like walking on a cement sidewalk.

Dave motioned for the group to follow, and once he saw that everyone had made their way onto the trail, he assumed the lead position. Leona fell in behind him, walking just a few paces back.

Staying on the hard packed snow proved to be quite difficult in several areas where the wind had blown hard enough to make the surface everywhere look the same. They all knew that they were in another world, or dimension, and that things could be very different here. They had no idea what inhabited the fields or forests, but they knew from the ungodly sounds that they heard from time to time, that *something* did.

Each time they entered very dense sections of the forest their progress slowed to a crawl. Illumination from the stars and moons was limited, which made it difficult to stay on the trail, plus they also had to be concerned about the possibility of stumbling onto an unfriendly denizen of the night.

Just as the first indication of dawn was appearing in the distant sky, they came to a large opening in the forest. Dave stopped at the edge of a snowbank that was at least twenty feet high, and peered down into an enormous area that had been cleared of the snow. With the exception of an open section where it looked like the world came to an end, walls of pure ice surrounded most of the clearing. The trail that he was standing on looked like it was the only way in or out. There wasn't any equipment to be seen anywhere, and his mind was working on how the area could have been cleared, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. It turned out to be Jason Foster, and when he was certain that he had Dave's attention, he said, "Let's go down. Shall we?"

\* \* \*

The surface in the clearing had about five inches of powdery snow on it, and when Jason brushed some of it away, he exposed something that looked like concrete, but not quite. No words were exchanged when Dave's eyes locked onto Jason's. Without asking, Foster knew exactly what Dave wanted. He shrugged his shoulders in a way that let his fellow escapee know that he had no idea what the surface was made of.

Dave reconnoitered the whole cleared area, and his eyes locked onto a spot about 500 feet from where they were standing. It was the break in the wall of ice that he had observed from above, and it spanned a distance of about 150 feet. The edge of that section was about 40 feet higher than where he was standing, and there was nothing but blue sky for as far as he could see. It looked like the world ended right there. Without saying a word, Dave started walking in that direction with Jason following close behind.

\* \* \*

Leona was bone weary, as were the rest of the people standing around her. When she squatted down to clear an area to sit in, everyone else joined in. It was like there had been an unspoken command. Without saying a word, the people all worked in unison to clear a circle that was large enough for everyone to huddle together to keep warm.

Once the area had been cleared, Leona made sure that she sat at the outside of the group, facing the direction in which her husband had gone. She watched as he and Jason explored the edge of what had to be a cliff, and it was plain that they were very engrossed in whatever they had found.

\* \* \*

When they got to the edge they could see some humongous mountains off in the distance, and Dave thought that they seemed vaguely familiar. Jason looked at his fellow escapee and said, "Right or left?"

Hesitating just a moment, trying to decide if they should split up, Dave said, "You go left."

They checked the entire fringe, from one end to the other. Every ten steps Dave stopped to look at the surface below. His Seal training helped him to calculate that the distance was about 8000 feet. The terrain down there reminded him of the desert, and he was in the process of trying to find something to confirm his assumption when Jason yelled out, "Dave! Come here!"

\* \* \*

Dave had taken an instant liking to Jason during their escape. The group happened upon one of their captors shortly after finding some food, and Foster made short work of silencing him. Dave helped him drag the unconscious body into the shadows underneath a stairway, and that is when he found out that Foster held a black belt in Karate. At five-foot six he was two inches shorter than Spencer, but he was athletic and wiry ... just like Dave, and together they made a formidable force to reckon with. As he approached Jason he said, "What's up?"

Pointing to a spot about thirty-five feet beyond where the snow had been cleared, right along the edge of the drop-off, Foster said, "That looks like a trail going down the side of the cliff, and it just might go all the way to the surface below."

Dave focused his attention to where Jason was pointing, and said, "That could be overly optimistic ... it's a long way down." He could see exactly what Foster had been talking about. The trail had a gentle grade to it, and looked like it was about six to seven feet wide for as far as he could see. Much later he would wonder why he missed the fact that the trail was almost barren. "Jason, go tell everyone to stay put, and then come back here. I have an idea."

\* \* \*

The 20-foot wall of ice that surrounded just about the entire area, made a nose dive about 15 feet from where he was standing. It ended almost at the level of the clearing, and Dave looked up and down the drop off several times, wondering why he had missed it before. He stepped up onto the top of the snowbank, fully expecting to sink a long way in, and he was surprised when his boot barely made an imprint. Before taking another step he glanced to his rear to look for Jason, and was glad to see that he was half way across the clearing, making his way back. Spencer decided to wait.

To kill time Dave checked out the area between him and where the trail went down over the edge. The forest was off to his left, about 75 feet, and he saw a path coming from an opening in the trees that looked as though it could have been made by snowmobiles. Dave's mind confirmed that assumption when he saw that it went directly to the trail heading down along the cliff wall. But once again his mind failed to register a very important fact. Their avenue to the surface below had very little snow on it, and most places were bare.

A scowl formed on his face as he tried to recall if he had seen any turns off the snowmobile trail that they had been walking all night long. His concentration was broken when he heard footsteps on the snowbank behind him. Without turning around he said, "Hey, Jason, there's a snowmobile trail about 25 feet out. Do you remember seeing any trails branching off the one that we were walking last night?"

"No, but we could've passed more than one without even realizing it, especially in the windblown areas."

"Yeah, you're probably right Jason. Who knows, we could have taken a turn off the trail that we started out on without even knowing it. I just kept going wherever I could find hard packed snow."

Without saying another word Spencer started down the other side of the snowbank, and within two steps he found himself standing right up to his waist in Mother Nature's wintry blanket. He took a quick glance behind him to make sure that Jason wasn't about to join him in his quagmire, and got somewhat irritated at what he saw. Foster was standing at the top of the snowbank with his hands on his hips, and a huge smirk on his face.

Jason knew that the expression on Dave's face didn't have any pleasant thoughts behind it, and did the best he could not to break out laughing. "How's the weather down there?"

Spencer ignored his newfound antagonist while he tried to figure out how to get out of his predicament with the least amount of difficulty. Perhaps walking on his knees would produce a snowshoe effect, and keep him closer to the surface. He leaned forward to give it a try, pulling up with his hands as he brought up each knee. The first few knee steps proved to be no better than normal walking, but then the snow firmed up and the going got much easier.

By the time he climbed up onto the hard packed trail, sweat was pouring off his brow and down his back. He turned around to see how far behind Jason might be, and was surprised to see him standing less than a foot away. There wasn't one bead of sweat to be found

anywhere on the guy's face, and Dave was nodding in a knowing way when he said, "You can break the next trail."

Foster looked up and down the hard packed trail that they were standing on and said, "I'll be happy to do that. By the way, this isn't a snowmobile trail. What do you suppose made it?"

Dave hunched his shoulders as he said, "Beats me. But whatever did, it was *really* big!"

\* \* \*

Dave and Jason stood at the edge of the drop off in contemplative silence for several minutes. Both of them were carefully studying the trail as it meandered its way down the side of the cliff. From their vantage point it certainly looked like it was possible that it could go all the way to the surface below. Jason was the first to speak, and said, "You know ... that trail doesn't look natural to me."

"Yeah, I agree. Did you take a close look at the wall alongside of it?"

Jason was nodding his head up and down as he said, "Yeah, I did. Whatever was used to construct this trail melted the rock along the way. Maybe it was a laser."

"Yeah. Maybe. Jason, look at the horizon off to your right and tell me what you see."

It took Jason just seconds to focus on what Spencer had to be referring to. "Spence, are you talking about those buildings and two pyramids?"

"You got it!" Then he turned to look at his companion with a questioning look on his face, and said, "Lots of people call me that. How did you know?"

Getting a bit of a grin, Jason said, "I didn't ... it just felt right. I think it's possible that there's a laser in the top of one of those pyramids, and that's what was used to cut this trail."

"That makes sense to me, and I'll tell you what else makes sense. I think that same laser cleared the area that our friends are waiting in. When you think about it, what else could have made that wall of ice?" He paused, like he was deep in thought, and then said, "It obvious that it's one hell of a lot warmer down there than up here, but there's something else."

Jason could not figure out why Dave left him hanging and said, "And what would that be?"

"The food that we took from that compound last night won't last very long, and we don't have any weapons to hunt game. But I'll guarantee you that there's food in that city down there."

Jason considered their options for a bit before answering. "Yeah, I think that's a given. But I think we'd be a lot better off finding a way to hunt it down."

\* \* \*

The fourteen escapees walked single file as they followed the trail down along the cliff wall, and it consistently remained the same width every step of the way. The slope was gentle, and the footing, which at first looked like it could be icy and treacherous, was excellent. But they still took their time. No one was in the mood for any nasty surprises.

Around noontime the group came upon a small cave, and although a couple of the escapees wanted to thoroughly check it out as a possible place for shelter, the majority decided to press on. The need for food was a priority, and for the time being the city below seemed to be the only sure source. By mid afternoon the trail emptied out onto a big plateau, and it was obvious that this was another creation that Mother Nature did not have anything to do with. The area was almost perfectly round, about one hundred feet in diameter, and just right for a badly needed break. Much to everyone's satisfaction the temperature had been spring like for the past couple of hours, and many of them had shed their heavy clothing.

The plateau was approximately 2000 feet above the desert terrain below, and it looked like it had been hollowed out with a giant ice cream scoop. Most of the group walked over to the drop off to see what the trail looked like as it continued its way down the side of the cliff wall, but Dave and Jason remained behind. They felt a little uneasy and took their time looking over every inch of the area, trying to understand a potential reason why it had been constructed, and why it was in the shape of an amphitheater. The inner wall of the plateau was shadowed, but it looked like there could be a humongous opening there. There was no way to be sure from where they were standing, and as though a "forward march" command had been given, they started advancing in unison to give it a look see.

\* \* \*

The two guys that remained behind earlier to check out the small cave had told Spencer that it went some distance back into the mountain. But they weren't sure how far. The floor was dry, and there was definitely enough space to fit everybody if they needed shelter in a pinch.

That information was first and foremost in Spencer's mind as they drew closer to the far wall. He didn't know why, but that cave felt like it might be a key to their survival. Each step that he and Jason took made it easier to distinguish a huge opening in the wall that began about 10 feet above the plateau. There was no doubt in Dave's mind that the cave was humongous, and the sight of it added fuel to his misgivings about this area. The opening was at least fifteen feet wide, and around twenty feet high.

Jason walked over to just below the mouth of the cave and made a sling with his hands to hoist Dave up to the ledge. The moment that Spencer's fingers hooked onto it, a new feeling of apprehension assaulted his senses, and he was a little reluctant to peer over the fringe. Normally he would have taken the time to think about why his internal alarms were going off, but he brushed it aside as being a figment of his imagination. He pulled himself up, and as soon as he was on the surface he checked every nook and cranny in his immediate surroundings. There was nothing to be concerned about, but the relief that he was looking for never surfaced.

He helped Jason up, and side-by-side they entered the cavern. Both were veterans of combat, and their eyes were darting everywhere as they walked into the interior. There was a faint odor near the entrance that smelled similar to sulfur, and as the pair walked cautiously into the bowels of the cave the aroma became much more pronounced. The hollow sound from each footstep as it scrunched on the gravel-covered floor, echoed back at them from the unknown depths of the cavern. They could no longer see where they were walking and came to a stop. Dave put his hand on Jason's shoulder and said, "I don't think it's a good idea to go any further. I'm pretty sure that this cave is man made, and it's probably an abandoned mine. If it is, it's likely that the miners sunk shafts at intervals along the whole length of this tunnel, and I'm not up for a long drop to oblivion."

"Yeah. Me neither! Let's take a look up on that shelf over there to the left. If the space up there is as large as I think it is, we may want to consider spending the night here."

Dave's eyes had completely adjusted to the dim light, and while walking over to the base of it he estimated that it was about 12 feet up to the ledge. Glancing at Jason he said, "Want me to give you a foot up?"

\* \* \*

Jason was up there all of ten seconds when he yelled down, "This is perfect Dave! There's plenty of room up here for all of us, and we have double the insulation. I think it's a given that we should consider staying here for the night."

Dave knew just what Foster meant. It was 10 feet up to the cave entrance from the plateau below, and then they had another 12-foot buffer up on the shelf. Considering that they had no weapons, this was the best defense that they could hope for against any predators that might be wandering the area. But Spencer still had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, and said, "Listen, Jason, we've still got at least two more hours of daylight. I think we should take advantage of it and press on."

Jason thought about that for a few seconds and said, "That *is* a consideration, but think about this. We may not find any other shelter before dark, and if we did, our luck would be more than incredible if it gave us the same advantages as this one."

"Yeah, that's true. But I still think it's important to press on, and don't ask my why. I don't know. It's just a feeling."

Jason gave a lot of thought to his answer before responding. "Dave, we don't know what kind of night life calls that desert down there home, and what does may not be to our liking."

The uncertainty in his voice was unmistakable as Spencer said, "Yeah, you could be right Jason." His resolve was weakening as he said, "Some of these people *are* showing the worse for wear. But something's not sitting right with me about this place, and I wish we could check it out better."

\* \* \*

Everyone had agreed with Spencer and Foster that staying the night was a good idea, and per Jason's recommendation, Dave initially kept his trepidations to himself. But his intuition kept hammering home the fact that the men in the group should take turns standing watch. Finally he walked over to Foster and tapped him on the shoulder. The moment that he had his attention, Dave motioned for him to follow. He didn't want to unnecessarily alarm anyone in the group, and as soon as they were out of hearing distance he said, "Be honest! Do you really think it's safe to go through the night without someone on guard?"

Jason thought for a bit before answering, and then said, "That's a tough call. We should be OK. It's 10 feet up to the mouth of this cave, and we didn't exactly have an easy time getting up on that shelf."

"That's right, Jason, and I'm sure that everyone else is thinking the same way. But take this into consideration. Do you really think those jokers that we escaped from forgot to send out a search party?"

Jason simply stared back at him without saying a word, and Dave continued, "Look, I'm not sure what the reason is that I feel so uneasy here. Maybe it's my concern that those idiots we escaped from could find us here, but I'm not sure that's what's really botherin' me."

Foster kept his eyes locked onto Dave's as he took a step back, sort of like he was trying to study him, and said, "So what are you trying to tell me?"

Spencer stared at his feet a bit before answering. "Let's try one more time to give this place a thorough going over. We need options if those schmucks from above show up. I've got an idea how we can do it with a margin of safety."

Jason cut in saying, "I'm all ears, Dave!"

"We can take off our belts and make a rope out of them. What do you think about that?"

"

Jason nodded his agreement, and without saying another word, started walking toward the interior of the cave. They followed the wall along the left side, and when they could no longer see, they slowed down to a crawl. Spencer wrapped one end of the makeshift rope around his hand, and gave the other end to Foster. At this point neither one of them could tell if the tunnel was getting any narrower, and within fifty feet the wall made a sharp curve to the left. Dave stopped and whispered, "I don't think we should wander away from this wall."

A frown had formed on Jason's face as he said, "Makes sense to me, but why are you whispering?"

"Got me! I just did. Habit from the old days I guess."

\* \* \*

With Spencer in the lead they guardedly inched their way around the curve. Dave kept his left hand sliding along the wall's smooth surface, hoping all the while to find a finger hold in case the floor in front disappeared. The temperature felt like it dropped measurably every few minutes as they worked their way into the depths of the cavern. There was one point when Dave's hand dragged across an extremely warm section in the wall, and he briefly wondered what might have caused it.

Each step that Spencer took was a small one, always leading with his right foot, and each time as he lowered it to the floor, he dragged it in a semicircle from his left to his right. Dave found the process of exploring the depths of the cave to be very tedious, and from time to time, wondered if the exercise was worth the effort. Neither one of them had any idea of how much time had passed, nor how far they had walked when one of Dave's worst fears came to fruition.

The mindless repetition of the exercise had eroded Spencer's defenses, and he had begun to sweep his foot along the floor less cautiously. Fate handed him a big surprise right at the wrong time. He was a little off balance and leaning somewhat away from the wall as he swung his foot along the floor to his right. Just when he was at the farthest point in the arc, the floor disappeared! His heart went into his throat and he felt his knees weaken as his body began to topple into a pit of darkness. Jason sensed that something had gone wrong and pulled back on the belt. That was just enough to help Dave regain his balance, and it also stifled the scream of panic that was about to explode from his throat.

Dave put his left hand back on the wall to regain his equilibrium, and then said, "If you hadn't pulled on that belt when you did, I'd probably be meetin' my maker right now. Man, I'll tell yah ... when I started to fall, I had totally forgotten about that thing."

Jason wasn't sure what he should say, if anything. "Think nothing of it Spence. I don't know about you, but I never trained for anything like this. We always had something for night vision. This crap is really scary, and I think we should turn back."

His heart had stopped racing and some of his confidence had been restored, and that helped him to put his focus back on their mission. "Jason, let's hug this wall and see if we can get past this shaft. I'm not ready to give up just yet."

His heart wasn't in it as he said, "Alright Dave, but don't lighten up on your guard again! That little ditty wasn't any easier on me than it was on you."

Further exploration was not to be. Within a step and a half they came to the end of the line. The second that Jason felt the belt go slack, he said, "What's up Dave?"

"I think that this shaft might stretch from wall to wall."

"Why's that?"

"The reason's pretty simple. I already found the opening again, and it's right up against this wall. Unless they sunk this thing off center, it's a good guess that it does the same thing on the other side." Dave hesitated before making his next comment, mostly because he wasn't sure that he should be a smart aleck with a guy that just saved his life, but then he figured, what the heck! "But if you don't want to take my word for it, I'll wait here while you check it out."

There was no hesitation in Jason's response. "Nope! You're the expert. Your word's as good as gold! I wonder how deep this thing is?"

The next sound to fill the darkness that surrounded them was Dave's foot scrapping loose gravel over the edge, but they never heard it hit bottom. What they did hear was an indescribable guttural sound that seemed like it emanated from where the gravel had fallen. Putting his left hand on Spencer's shoulder, Jason said, "What was that!"

"I don't know.... but whatever it was, I hope it doesn't have legs!" He paused for a second, and then added, "I'll tell you something else. I hope whatever made that noise isn't what's making me so uneasy about this place."

There was a short silence, and then Jason said, "Yeah. Me too."

"I'll tell you what, Jason, unless you've got any bright ideas, I think we should head back."

"Now that you mention it, I think *that's* a bright idea! I'll lead the way."

A smile played on Dave's lips as he said, "Yep! That figures! Now that the hard part is over, *you* want to take the lead!"

Jason didn't say a word, and he had no clue that Dave had made the statement in jest. But he made up his mind that Spencer would never get the best of him again.

Dave's worry for everyone's well being had climbed to new heights by the time daylight began melting the darkness around them. His mind had been examining all the unknowns that the group was dealing with, and as far as he was concerned their position was anything but secure. The noise that they heard come up from what could have been his early grave, was still grating on his nerves. As they made their way back, Jason didn't say out right that he was apprehensive, but he did say that he was going to sleep with one eye open.

\* \* \*

Contrary to Foster's advice, Dave decided to call a meeting and share his concerns. Every person in the group had been bordering on forty-eight hours without sleep, and when he asked for volunteers to stand watch, tempers started to flare. There was a loud and lengthy debate because no one wanted to offer to help, and most everyone became very testy when Spencer took it upon himself to pick people at random. Much to Dave's surprise, Jason sided with him. Maybe he was more concerned than he let on. No matter what they said, the majority in the group felt that the two of them were overstating the situation. As it turned out, Dave's uneasiness was not unfounded.

\* \* \*

Dave and Jason decided to take turns standing a one-hour watch until dawn. A few of the people in the group made it known that they were too hyped to fall asleep, and Leona asked

them if they would stand watch until the "Sandman" began knocking at their door. Both Spencer and Foster jumped at the chance to grab some badly needed shuteye, and Leona promised that she'd wake Dave before she went to sleep. When the conversation ended among the few diehards that remained awake, Leona felt drowsiness set in almost immediately. As promised, she went over to wake her husband, and much to her surprise, getting him up was like trying to revive the dead.

Dave listened as Leona crawled the few feet to her sleeping area, and then there was stone silence. He felt like he was in a tomb, and it was so dark that he could not see his hand in front of his face. Staying awake turned out to be a real challenge. Four of his senses were in limbo, no sound, nothing to see, nothing to taste, and nothing to smell. He tried to keep himself occupied by counting seconds. Somewhere along the way he got a brainstorm and decided to figure out how to keep track of each sixty-second series. It not only helped to keep him awake, it also gave him a handle on how much time was passing by.

By the time he decided to wake Jason, he was pretty sure that three hours had passed, and he had much more difficulty in bringing him out of his deep sleep than he expected. When Foster began to come around, he was completely disoriented. Not only didn't he recognize Dave's voice, he did not have a clue as to where he was. His awareness grew in bits and pieces as the seconds slowly ticked by, and then in a flash he had total recall. "Geez, Dave. I'm sorry. I feel like such an...."

"Forget it Jason. Listen. It's pretty difficult to stay awake in this darkness, and the silence doesn't help either. Let me tell you what I did to keep myself alert."

\* \* \*

Dave told him that he had gotten around four hours sleep, but his mind and body felt like he hadn't slept at all. No matter how hard he tried to keep his focus on the exercise that Spencer had suggested, it did not work. But that was OK because Dave's sleep was fitful. It wasn't that he didn't trust Foster, he did. The sleep that he had gotten earlier relieved most of his exhaustion, and the unknown fear that was still flipping around in the middle of his subconsciousness, kept all of his senses working overtime to detect any noise that didn't fit ... and finally it came.

An ungodly sound bellowed forth from the interior depths of the cave, and Spencer was instantly alert. He could hear that whatever had created the racket was coming in their direction. "Hey Foster, I guess I was right after all, huh?"

Jason's brain was going a hundred miles an hour, and only one cynical statement came to mind. "Yeah, how about that!"

Whatever was making that racket sounded awfully big, and suddenly the 12-foot shelf that they were camping on seemed more like a detriment than a deterrent. Dave made an executive decision to take charge. He yelled out a command, and to his surprise everyone heeded it. "If you want to survive, don't panic. Keep the noise down, and do exactly as I say!"

The mutterings of fear that surrounded him stopped immediately. The moment that Spencer sensed he had everyone's attention, he continued, "Get down on your hands and knees and crawl slowly toward the edge of the shelf. Once you're there, swing around on your belly and lower yourself over the lip as far as you can, you want to shorten the drop to the floor. Then crawl toward the entrance to the cave, and don't forget about that ten-foot drop there. Just do the same maneuver on your belly. Once you're on the plateau, head toward the trail that goes up along the cliff wall, and stay right there."

No one said a word, but the tell tale scuffing sounds told him that they had taken his advice. Dave knew his wife was near by and whispered, "You stay right behind me. I won't move forward until I feel you tap my leg, or shoe, or whatever. OK?"

She found his hand and squeezed it to let him know that she understood. The scrapping noises from the depths of the cavern went on non-stop, and it was grating on everyone's nerves. Spencer could just imagine what these people must be feeling. He started toward the lip of the shelf and almost immediately touched someone's foot. It didn't take him long to determine that they weren't moving, and he crawled to their right side to find out what was wrong. "Are you OK?"

He heard a female voice say, "I'm too scared to move! I can't see anything, and I don't want to fall over the edge!"

In addition to Leona, there were four other women in the group, and Dave was hoping like heck that they didn't have the same problem. In as calm a voice as he could muster, Spencer said, "Listen ma'am, put your shoulder up against mine, and we'll do this together. That work for you?"

He barely had those words out of his mouth when he felt two sensations ... her shoulder against his, and Leona's grip tightening on his left ankle. The moment that they began making their way to the lip of the shelf, another loud ungodly sound reverberated from the depths of the cave, and the woman next to Dave began to cry. Suddenly Spencer had the sensation that they were moving in slow motion. He felt like he was in a dream, and even though he tried to run as fast as he could, it had no effect. It seemed like the faster he tried to go, the slower his pace became, and every time he looked to his rear, the gruesome monster was getting closer and closer.

Neither Dave nor Jason felt any relief when they were standing outside of the cave. The two men and women walked in silence across the clearing to join the others, and the only sounds that filled the stillness of the night were the now muffled noises emanating from the mouth of the cave. Spencer knew that it must be a cloudless night. The light from the moons cast an eerie glow on the desert terrain below.

Just before they got to where the group that was waiting, Dave recognized the woman that he had helped, and said, "Are you OK now, Doris?"

"Yes, I'm fine, thank you." And with that she joined the others by the trail.

Leona leaned close to her husband and whispered in his ear, "So what are we going to do now?"

Dave gave her hand a gentle squeeze as he raised his voice to make sure that everyone could hear him. "Listen up! We're going to head up to that smaller cave that we saw on the way down here. Whatever is in that cavern behind us is huge. I don't know if it's hunting us, but if it is ... that smaller cave may be just the ticket that we need to save our hides."

There wasn't one person in the group that had anything to add, and without hesitation the band of escapees turned in unison to walk up the trail. Jason grabbed Spencer's arm, but in a way that no one would notice. Leaning real close Foster whispered, "What makes you think there's not going to be any surprises in *that* one!"

\* \* \*

By the time they reached the small cave, some of the apprehension had drained from most everyone. This cave, like the last one was pitch black inside, and there was no way to tell how far it went back into the cliff wall, but both Dave and Jason felt that it wouldn't be very far. The reason was simple. The sound that everyone was making did not echo anything like in the cavern they had just left.

Also, the floor in this cave was different. It had a sandy type feel to it, but it was dry and shouldn't have been. Mandy Sims, one of the more aggressive individuals in the group, bent over and picked up a handful of sand from the floor, and as she was letting the coarse material sift through her fingers, she said, "I can hear water running. How come this sand is dry?"

Moments later a light appeared in the cave. Mandy was only four-foot eleven-inches tall, but she was a body builder, and looked like she could out lift most every man in the group. She spun around to see where the light had come from, and blurted out, "Where in the hell was *that* when we needed it!?"

He could not believe that he had not thought of asking if anyone had a lighter or a match. But then again, why hadn't that jerk offered it? It was no secret that he and Jason couldn't see two inches in front of their face when they went beyond the turn in that last cave.

Spencer walked over toward the person holding what turned out to be a plastic butane lighter, and when he saw that it was Marlene Back, he got somewhat confused. From the get go she had been one of the most cooperative people in the group. By this time everyone had gathered in a circle around her, and each one of them asking the same thing ... where was this lighter before?

When Dave stepped in front of her he saw that she was on the verge of bursting into tears. He had intended to give her a good tongue lashing, but he never got the chance. Marlene exploded with what sounded like an agonized sob. It seemed like every bit of the stress that she had been holding in since her abduction came flowing out all at once. Everyone could hear the pain in her sobs, and Dave could not help but feel sorry for her. Leaning close to Marlene's right ear he said softly, "Listen Marlene, how come you didn't tell us before that you had this lighter?"

Between the hitches in her crying, she said, "Because I didn't *know* I had it. I put my coat back on a few seconds ago, and when I went to put my arm in the sleeve, I accidentally put my hand in one of the inside pockets. And there it was! I gave up smoking two months ago. I guess I forgot that it was there."

Dave still felt somewhat miffed, but he also felt compassion for the woman and said, "Listen, Marlene. We're all stressed. Is there anything else that you might find hidden in your coat that could be useful?"

She handed the lighter to Spencer and carefully checked the outside pockets, and then proceeded to those on the inside, and that was when her fingers struck something hard. She pulled it out and handed the object to Dave.

As soon as it hit his hand he knew what it was. Spencer put the item close to the butane flame for a few seconds, and then a smile of satisfaction quickly spread across his face. "Listen up everyone, we just caught a *big* break! Marlene had a knife in her pocket, and that's just part of the good news. It's got a saw blade, and that means we can make some weapons to hunt game and defend ourselves." Putting his hand on Marlene's shoulder he said, "Cheer up! OK? You've just saved our bacon, and I'm sure that everyone will agree with me that there's no hard feelings."

Jason tapped Dave on the shoulder and said, "I'm real curious about the gurgling water that everyone can hear. This floor should be wet, and I'd like to know why it's not!"

The two of them walked over to the wall where it seemed like the sound of running water was the loudest, and began to look for anything wet. The illumination from Marlene's lighter was meager, and the process was slow. After a couple of minutes the lighter was getting too hot to hold and Dave had to put it out. "Jason, did you see anything wet?"

"No, what about you?"

"Me neither. "What do you make of *that* my friend?"

Jason thought for a second and said, "We had to miss something." He moved closer to the wall and ran his hand up, down and along it, looking for any signs of dampness. In the process he felt something that caught his attention. "Hey Dave! Put your hand over here alongside of mine on the wall."

Spencer probed the dark for Jason's arm, and then slid his hand down to the wall. The moment that he touched the hard surface a scowl formed on his face. The wall was warm from bottom to top, in a space that was about a foot and a half wide, and then it hit him! When he and Jason were checking out the last cave, he felt the same thing. Without saying a word he lit the lighter and barged his way through the people standing behind him. He wanted to check out the other side of the cave. Everywhere his hands touched, the wall was stone cold. Raising his voice so that he could be heard over the murmuring of the group, he said, "Jason. There are no hot spots on this wall, but there's something funny here. I felt the same kind of a hot spot on the wall in the other cave. I don't know why I feel this way, but I think that the two are connected somehow."

\* \* \*

Everyone in the cave was fast asleep with the exception of Dave and Jason. Daylight began to pour through the mouth of the cavern more than thirty minutes ago, and at least an hour before that, the two men had started to discuss different strategies for the group to consider. Suddenly a loud boom filled the cave, but this time the disturbing noise came from outside. The sound was so loud that almost everyone in the group had sprung to a sitting position. Spencer and Foster could see heads turning this way and that, obviously trying to make sure that they weren't in any imminent danger.

When the echoing finally stopped reverberating in their ears, everyone stood up and filed out of the cave, but the way they walked didn't seem natural to Dave. He had a flashback to a movie that Gene Roddenbury had starred in, and then he remembered the name ... The Time Machine. His newly found acquaintances were walking like they were in a hypnotic trance, very similar to the way the people in The Time Machine appeared to be as they walked like drones into the morlocks cave.

It was the second time in less than twenty-four hours that something unknown had driven them from their shelter. And even though the cave had remained in tact, no one seemed like they were overly anxious to go back in. Dave took the opportunity to call an impromptu meeting. "Listen up people! We need to develop a strategy if we're going to survive, and we've got to figure out how we're going to get back home. I don't know about you guys, but I have no intention of making this godforsaken place *my* home!"

When no one objected he continued, "As the first order of business we should elect a leader. If nobody objects, I'll take the job, at least until we can figure a way out of this mess."

There was a low murmur among the group, but there were no objections. Then Dave said, "Good! Some of us have been here longer than others, but none of us for more than a week. We have no idea where we are, and we don't really know what dangers we could be facing. It is as plain as the nose on your face that we must work together as a cohesive unit if we're to have a fighting chance to survive. Does anyone disagree?"

There was another low murmur, but no one disagreed, and a genuine smile spread across Spencer's face as he said, "Great, we're off to a good start. I think our escape from those bastards up there was ninety-nine percent luck. I don't think they expected us to try anything, especially since there weren't any guards around. The biggest problem we had was getting the door to our quarters open."

Dan Bush, a logger from Jackman, Maine who was built like Paul Bunyan, stepped forward and stood toe to toe with Dave, looked him square in the eye and said, "Listen Spencer, I have no problem with you being the leader, in fact I like the thought. You always seem to come up with the ideas, just like when you wanted to have people take turns standing guard. I don't think anyone here could argue now that it wasn't the right thing to do. But I got a question that you need to answer *right* now ... where do you think we are?"

Thanks to this guy, Dave felt that he had the group on his side, and he did not want to blow it by making a wrong statement, so he chose his words carefully. "Dan thanks for your vote of confidence. I don't know the answer to your question. I can tell you this though. Each of us was taken through some kind of a portal. My gut and the moons over this place tell me that we're not on Earth, but I could be wrong. We could still be on Earth, but maybe in another dimension. I don't want anyone to take that statement to the bank just yet. The one thing that I know for sure ... the people that brought us here obviously control the mode of transportation."

Lester Bowman stepped between Bush and Spencer. He was another logger from Jackman, and built like Dan. Lester even looked like his logging buddy, but with one major exception ... he had a ZZ Top type beard. Lester put a huge calloused hand on each of them and said, "I can tell you somethin'. I got a good look at those people that kidnapped us, and I don't think any one of them could fight their way out of a wet paper bag." A smile that said 'I know that I'm right' worked its way onto his face, as he continued, "I'll bet *that's* why nobody tried to stop us."

Dave stepped back a half a step because the man's breath was enough to make a train take a dirt road, and he knew that his wasn't any better. Looking the man straight in the eye, he said, "What's your point Bowman?"

"I think we should go back up to them buildings we escaped from, wait until they're asleep and rush the place. We can find some rocks, clubs, anything that we can use as a weapon, and teach those pansies a lesson." He paused as a sneer formed on his face, and then he said, "After we kick some butt, THEN we'll make those twits send us back home."

Dave couldn't help himself as a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "Listen Dan, I learned a long time ago not to judge a book by its cover. You could be jumping to the wrong conclusions."

"Yeah? What makes you think so?"

Dave hesitated a moment to gather his thoughts, and said, "Listen closely everyone. These people are obviously very advanced, and we might have had an easy time escaping, but I wouldn't let that lull us into complacency. I'm one hundred percent convinced that they've taken measures to make sure that no one ever escapes again, and you can bet your bottom dollar that they're looking for us as we speak."

Jason jumped into the conversation and said, "Look, when we planned our escape we had no fear of the unknown, but we've also had a rude awakening. I don't know about anyone else, but right now I'm not ready to jump into anything without carefully weighing our options." He paused momentarily for effect and then continued, "We're in an environment that we know nothing about, and I for one think that we need to learn a lot *more* about it, including these people before we try to develop *any* kind of a strategy!"

Dave looked every individual directly in the eye before saying, "Both Jason and Lester make a good point. But let me tell you this, I think time is of the essence, and we need to make a decision soon. I think that we should use the tools that we have, thanks to Marlene, to make some weapons. We need food, and we need to get home, and I think that we're going to need weapons to do both."

The moment that Dave looked like he had said his piece, Jason took the conversation over. "That's a good idea, but I've got my own plan. I don't need any weapons to spy on those jokers, and I certainly don't need weapons to kick their ass! You guys stay here and do what you gotta do. In the meantime, I'm gonna to go back up to that compound and see what I can learn."

Lester and Dan jumped on the bandwagon and said that they would go with him. And none of them had a clue as to how important their timing would be for Eileen Day, Nancy King, and Thad Cook.